

Supernatural Miracles and Religious Inclusiveness

Morgan Luck

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Abstract In this paper I shall assess Clarke's assertion that all definitions of miracles that purport to satisfy the criterion of religious inclusiveness should substitute the term 'supernatural' for 'non-natural'. In addition, I shall attempt to strengthen Clarke's conception of the supernatural by offering an analysis of what it means for something to be 'above' nature. Lastly, I shall offer a new argument as to why Clarke's intention-based definition of miracles is necessarily less religiously inclusive than Mumford's causation-based definition.

Keywords Miracle · Supernatural · Divine action

Introduction

In his paper *The Supernatural and the Miraculous*,¹ Clarke teases out an interesting and important distinction between the non-natural and the supernatural. Clarke claims that the supernatural is both non-natural,² and 'above' nature in some significant sense.³ If Clarke is correct, then, although everything supernatural will be non-natural, it is not the case that everything non-natural will be supernatural. Such a distinction draws out the category of the *merely non-natural*, that is, something that is non-natural but in no sense 'above' nature. By identifying such a category, Clarke

¹Clarke, S. (2007) The supernatural and the miraculous. DOI [10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7).

²We shall here consider the natural to be that which exists spatio-temporally and the non-natural to be that which does not.

³Clarke (2007).

M. Luck (✉)
School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Locked Bag 588, Wagga Wagga,
New South Wales 2678, Australia
e-mail: moluck@csu.edu.au

is able to focus our attention upon the following question: could a miracle be the result of something merely non-natural? This question is especially important to those of us committed to a religiously inclusive definition of miracles.

To understand the relationship between religious inclusiveness, miracles, and the supernatural/non-natural distinction, it is helpful to outline the debate between proponents of Clarke's intention-based definition of miracles⁴ and Mumford's causation-based definition.⁵ In this paper I shall provide such an outline and add to the debate in three respects. Firstly, I shall assess Clarke's assertion that those definitions which are motivated by religious inclusiveness should relinquish the term 'supernatural' in favour of the term 'non-natural'. Secondly, I shall attempt to strengthen Clarke's analysis of the supernatural by offering an explanation of what it means for something to be 'above' nature. Lastly, I shall offer a new argument as to why intention-based definitions of miracles are necessarily less religiously inclusive than causation-based definitions.

Religious Inclusiveness and the Supernatural/Non-natural distinction

To appreciate why Clarke has drawn attention to the supernatural/non-natural distinction, it is important to understand how the criterion of religious inclusiveness has influenced the debate between proponents of causation and intention-based definitions of miracles. To this end let us consider Clarke's and Mumford's (unrevised) definitions.

- *Mumford's causation-based miracle*: A miracle is a natural event with a supernatural cause.
- *Clarke's intention-based miracle*: A miracle is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent.

Proponents of Mumford's definition take it to be an advantage that it does not refer to intentions. This is because, in the interests of religious inclusiveness, it seems best to make 'as few claims as possible about the nature of the supernatural causes.'⁶ However, Clarke's inclusion of the qualification of intent immediately subscribes his definition to a particular religious standpoint,

...one that assumes the supernatural realm contains agents who share the human trait of intent. In the interests of religious neutrality one should posit as little as possible about the supernatural. For example, some Hindus may not be willing to define their major God Brahman in relation to intention as It is *nirguna*, that is, 'without attributes'.⁷

⁴ Clarke, S. (1999) Hume's definition of miracles revised. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36, 49–57.

⁵ Mumford, S. (2001) Miracles: metaphysics and modality. *Religious Studies*, 37/2, 191–202.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁷ Luck, M. (2003) In defense of Mumford's definition of a miracle. *Religious Studies*, 39, 467.

In other words, as Clarke's definition entails intentional states, it is less accessible to those religions that are unwilling to anthropomorphise the source of a miracle.

Clarke is 'on the record as advertising the religious neutrality of his position',⁸ stating that he is 'motivated to be maximally inclusive of different religious positions.'⁹ However, he does not take his definition to be any less religiously inclusive than Mumford's. This is because,

Mumford defines a miracle as a particular form of the causal relation. On his definition, then, religious groups that deny that causation actually occurs cannot consistently utilise the concept 'miracle'.¹⁰

So, as Clarke states, 'it is not at all clear that Mumford's definition is religiously neutral.'¹¹ Given that both Mumford and Clarke's definitions exclude¹² certain religious traditions from utilizing the term 'miracle',¹³ it seems both definitions are equally religiously inclusive. However, to maintain this equilibrium, Clarke must maintain that his definition does not necessarily entail causation. Later (in '[A Gettier-style Counter-example to Clarke's Definition of a Miracle](#)') I shall demonstrate why Clarke's denial of causation proves problematic. However, for the present, I would like to focus your attention upon the relationship between religious inclusiveness and the supernatural/non-natural distinction.

In his most recent paper, Clarke draws our attention to the distinction between the supernatural and the non-natural.¹⁴ Given this distinction, Clarke argues that, as the criterion of religious inclusiveness demands we say as little as possible about the worlds beyond our own, we should allow for the possibility that miracles might result from any non-natural activity—be it supernatural or merely non-natural.¹⁵ If Clarke is correct, both his and Mumford's definitions require the following revisions:

- *Mumford's causation-based miracle*: A miracle is a natural event with a non-natural cause.
- *Clarke's intention-based miracle*: A miracle is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a non-natural agent.

As Mumford mistakenly uses the term 'supernatural' to refer to entities which are 'outside space and time',¹⁶ rather than 'above' nature in any sense, I believe he

⁸ Clarke (2007); Clarke (2003, 472–473).

⁹ Clarke, S. (2007) The supernatural and the miraculous. DOI [10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7).

¹⁰ Clarke, S. (2003) Luck and miracles. *Religious Studies*, 39, 471.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Presumably their exclusiveness differs only in type, by not in degree.

¹³ Clarke's definition excludes those religions that hold that miracle need not be the result of agents, whilst Mumford's definition excludes those religion that hold that miracles need not involve causation.

¹⁴ Clarke, S. (2007) The supernatural and the miraculous. DOI [10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7).

¹⁵ Although Clarke equates the term 'merely non-natural' with that which is both non-supernatural and non-natural, such a classification overlooks the category of the sub-natural—something that is both non-natural and 'below' nature. Given this category, the term 'merely non-natural' may be understood as that which is non-natural but neither supernatural nor sub-natural.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 193.

would welcome Clarke's revision as an accurate rewording of his account. Indeed, Mumford's revised causation-based definition is identical to my own definition of miracles.¹⁷ However, although Clarke has made significant progress in establishing a religiously inclusive definition of miracles,¹⁸ I do not believe that he has made the same headway in defining the supernatural.

Defining the Supernatural

Clarke rightly asserts that the supernatural is 'supposed to be 'above' nature in some significant sense',¹⁹ yet he does not explicitly state what this sense may be. Consequently, his assertion that we are now 'able to ascribe a reasonably clear meaning to the term supernatural'²⁰ is perhaps premature. To add to Clarke's analysis of the supernatural, I will now offer a possible explanation of what it may mean for something to be 'above' nature; an explanation which frames two established, but opposed, conceptions of miracles.

I propose that an event is supernatural if it is 'above' the causal power of nature. This conception of the supernatural is evident in the work of Keller and Keller, who claim that if no natural event could have caused Jesus to walk on water, and yet,

walking on water has actually occurred, then other forces must have been at work; and if these cannot have been the forces of nature...then the forces must be superior to nature, i.e., supernatural forces.²¹

We can attach the property 'supernatural' to a variety of entities, such as events, powers/forces, or agents. A supernatural event is an event which cannot be caused naturally, a supernatural power is a power that is able to cause a supernatural event, and a supernatural agent is an agent who is exercising, or perhaps simply able to exercise, supernatural power.

Supernatural events are usually regarded as being non-naturally caused. However, this is not a necessary condition of the supernatural. A supernatural event may be uncaused and yet still be an event above the causal power of nature. For example, a materialist might hold that the first natural event was supernatural, as no causally

¹⁷ Luck, M. The metaphysical relationship between magic and miracles. *The Journal for the Academic Study of Magic*, 2 (2004). Here, miracles are defined as a natural effect with a non-natural cause. Luck, M. Against the possibility of historical evidence for a miracle. *Sophia*, 44/1 (2005). Here, I state that what specially identifies miracles is causal interaction between the natural and non-natural.

¹⁸ The religiously inclusive nature of Clarke's, Mumford's and my own accounts of miracles leaves each of us open to a criticism I refer to as the *soul objection*. This objection draws attention to the fact that, if each of our physical actions were the result of our own non-natural will, then events as trivial as brushing ones own teeth would be deemed miraculous. This outcome seems counter-intuitive *because* human actions seem largely mundane. For my part, I am prepared to bite this bullet.

¹⁹ Clarke, S. (2007) The supernatural and the miraculous. DOI [10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-007-0030-7).

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Keller, E., & Keller, M. (1984) *Miracles in dispute: A continuing debate*. London: SCM, p. 16.

prior natural event could have caused it.²² Also, although it is necessarily the case that supernatural agents must be non-natural in kind, supernatural events themselves may be either natural or non-natural. So, whilst the natural event of a man walking unaided on water may be considered supernatural, so too may the non-natural event of the creation of an angel. All that is required is that the event in question could not be naturally caused.

It may also be useful at this point to distinguish between permanently and circumstantially supernatural events. A permanently supernatural event is an event that no natural event could ever cause. For example, nature might never be able to cause a signal to travel beyond the speed of light, yet a non-natural, and consequently supernatural, agent such as God may. A circumstantially supernatural event is an event that may be naturally possible in certain circumstances; however, at the time in question, such circumstances are not present. A popular example of a circumstantially supernatural event is the Virginal Conception. As whilst it is naturally possible for a virgin to become pregnant given such techniques as artificial insemination, at the time of the Virginal Conception, this was not a possibility.²³

Proponents of supernatural miracles claim that what is especially marvellous about miracles is that they involve natural effects that cannot be naturally replicated. These accounts can generally be formulated as follows:

- *Supernatural miracle*: A natural effect with a non-natural cause, where this natural effect could not have been caused naturally

Note that this definition makes no direct claims about the character of the non-natural cause. This conception of the miraculous is maintained by Ward,²⁴ Dietl,²⁵ Larmer,²⁶ Young²⁷ and Geisler,²⁸ who claim that a miracle is an event that ‘would not have occurred otherwise’²⁹ or ‘is beyond the ability of an unaided nature to produce’.³⁰ Aquinas also stated that ‘a thing is called a miracle by comparison with the power of nature which it surpasses’,³¹ and elsewhere that it is something ‘which nature could never do’.³² Clarke’s departure from the supernatural aligns him with those who allow for the possibility of merely non-natural miracles.

²² Cyclic cosmologies are no obstacle to this argument, as they do not contain a first natural event.

²³ One might perceive a tension between my formulation of a supernatural event, as an event which *cannot* be caused naturally, and circumstantially supernatural events, which *can* be caused naturally given certain conditions. However, it is important to note that such conditions are not present on those occasions circumstantially supernatural events occur. In which case, it remains the fact that these events could not have been caused naturally.

²⁴ Ward, K. (2002) Believing in miracles. *Zygon*, 37/3, 741–750.

²⁵ Dietl, P. (1968) On Miracles. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 5.

²⁶ Larmer, R. (1998) *Water into wine: An investigation of the concept of miracle*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

²⁷ Young, R. (1972) Miracles and epistemology. *Religious Studies*, 8, 123.

²⁸ Geisler, N. (1990) *When skeptics ask*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 76.

³⁰ Larmer, p. 5.

³¹ Aquinas, T. (1955) *Summa Theologica*. Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, c1270, p.1, q.105, q.7.

³² Aquinas, T. (1905) *Summa Contra Gentiles*. London: Burns and Oates, c1260, b.3, s.101.

Clarke abandons the supernatural tradition in the interests of religious inclusiveness. Miracles, he argues, might result from any non-natural activity, be it supernatural or merely non-natural. Following on from the account of the supernatural that I have presented, a merely non-natural miracle would be formulated as follows:

- *Merely non-natural miracle*: A natural effect with a non-natural cause, where this natural effect could have been caused naturally

Merely non-natural miracles can be divided into two further categories: preemptive miracles and miracles via natural indeterminacy. Miracles via preemption occur when a natural effect, which *would* have occurred naturally, is instead non-naturally caused. Miracles via natural indeterminacy occur when a natural effect, which *could* have occurred naturally, is non-naturally caused, where this natural effect is different from that which would have occurred had it not been non-naturally caused. Miracles via natural indeterminacy have, with the onset of quantum mechanics, gained some popularity. This is because, some argue, if nature (at least on the sub-atomic level) is indeterminate, then God could intervene on this level without causing a supernatural event. It is this type of miracle that is suggested by Polkinghorne when he stated that ‘the causal joint of divine action is located in those regimes where what we call chance has a role to play.’³³ Other proponents of miracles via natural indeterminacy include Basinger³⁴ and Murphy, who proposes ‘that by tampering with initial conditions at the quantum level, God can bring about extraordinary events, events out of keeping with the general regularities we observe.’³⁵

Although the definitions of the supernatural and merely non-natural I have offered provide a clear distinction between two well-established, but opposed, conceptions of the miraculous, it may be problematic for Clarke to adopt them. This is because, as I outlined in the ‘[Religious Inclusiveness and the Supernatural/Non-natural Distinction](#)’ section, in order for Clarke to claim that his taxonomy is as religiously inclusive as Mumford’s, he must deny that causation plays any necessary role. In which case, as the definitions I have offered are wholly causal in character, Clarke is unable to adopt them.

A Gettier-style Counter-example to Clarke’s Definition of a Miracle

As I outlined in the ‘[Religious Inclusiveness and the Supernatural/Non-natural Distinction](#)’ section, Clarke claims that his definition of miracles does not entail causation. This claim is important if Clarke is to maintain that his definition is as religiously inclusive as Mumford’s. I will now present an argument as to why Clarke’s definition either entails a sense of causation or fails to capture our intuitions regarding miracles.

³³ Polkinghorne, J. (1989) *Science and providence: God’s interaction with the world*. London: SPCK, p.44.

³⁴ Basinger, D. (1984) Miracles as violations: Some clarifications. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 22, 7.

³⁵ Murphy, N. (1995) Divine action and the natural order. In N. Murphy & A. Peacocke (Eds.), *Chaos and complexity: Scientific perspectives on divine action* (p. 112). Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications.

Before I outline my argument proper, let us first reconsider Clarke's revised definition:

- *Clarke's intention-based miracle*: A miracle is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a non-natural agent.

At this point it should be emphasised that, because Clarke's definition contains the terms 'outcome' and 'intervention', I fail to see how it is any more utilisable for those 'religious groups that deny that causation actually occurs'.³⁶ How can these terms operate meaningfully in the absence of a sense of causality? However, even if Clarke can define 'outcome' and 'intervention' without reference to causation, a second objection remains. This objection is similar in form to a Gettier counter-example.

To illustrate this objection, consider the following case: A god intervenes (somehow non-casually) in the natural world by creating a lightning bolt above an infidel. The intended outcome of this intervention is for the bolt to strike the infidel. However, the god's lightning bolt fails to strike him. Yet at that exact moment a natural build up of static electricity creates a second lightning bolt that does strike the infidel. According to Clarke's definition, the striking of the infidel may qualify as miraculous. This is because it was the intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a non-natural agent. However, this result seems intuitively unsatisfying as the striking of the infidel was the result of a perfectly natural build up of static electricity, and is in no way linked to the god's intervention. Clarke's definition therefore, seems to deliver the wrong results.

Clarke may argue that, because the god actually intended the infidel to be struck by the bolt he created, the infidel's death is not miraculous. However, such a response demands that we recognise the absence of a causal chain linking the intervention to outcome. Yet such an option is not available if we deny causation. This response therefore, fails to detract from my overall argument. Clarke can avoid this intuitively unsatisfying result by simply stating that the non-natural agent's intervention and its intended outcome must be causally connected. Yet he cannot make this revision without conceding his definition is also causation-based and, therefore, due to the additional inclusion of intentions, necessarily less religiously inclusive than Mumford's.

Conclusion

Clarke's distinction between the supernatural and the non-natural is a valuable contribution to the field. The application of this distinction to Mumford's definition correctly demonstrates how the term 'supernatural' has been mistreated, and I fully advocate Clarke's revisions. However, I do not believe such a distinction diminishes the strength of causation-based definitions. In fact, I have given evidence to the contrary. Not only is there a strong tradition of miracles being defined in relation to the causal powers of nature, but also, as demonstrated by way of a Gettier-style counter-example, it seems that Clarke's own definition is causal in nature.

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³⁶ Clarke (2003) p. 472.