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Miracle, coincidence, and supernatural cause

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MIRACLE, COINCIDENCE, AND SUPERNATURAL CAUSE

Abstract. Some, or all, of the events that are usually taken to be miracles might be explained as falling under the scope of statistical laws, and thus be susceptible to natural explanation. Arguably, they would then be reduced to the status of mere coincidences. Is it reasonable (1) to consider such events as being caused by God, (2) to be divine interventions, or even (3) to consider them to be instances of divine agency at all? Finally, (4) would their status as miracles be undermined? In this paper I focus on the first three questions. I argue that it would not be reasonable to consider them as being caused by God; nevertheless, there is nothing standing in the way of our describing them as expressing divine agency or as divine interventions. In regard to (4), I offer considerations in favor of such events being accepted as miracles, but I do not attempt to give a decisive answer to this question here.

Keywords: miracle, coincidence, supernatural cause, divine action, basic action

1. Introduction. 2. Intervention and Statistical Law: A Problem for Miracles. 3. Solution 1: A Causal Account. 4. Problems with the Causal Account. 5. Solution 2: A Non-Causal Account. 6. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly thought that a miracle must be a violation of natural law, which means that it is not susceptible to natural explanation. This has traditionally been taken to mean that it is determined to occur, not by any natural cause, but by one that is supernatural in its origin. Parallel to this conception is the assumption that a miracle must be a divine intervention into the natural order.

One way of denying that a miracle must be a violation of natural law is to insist that a religiously significant coincidence might qualify as miraculous. My concern in this paper will be with the possibility that many events in nature are not determined to occur, yet can be given natural explanations by virtue of their falling under the scope of statistical generalizations. Some, or even all, of the events which we are inclined to think of as miracles might be just such events. If they are, then they are not violations of natural law; arguably, they would be reduced to the status of coincidences.

Can events such as these be reasonably attributed to divine agency? And in particular, is it reasonable to understand them as divine interventions? I will consider two ways in which we might answer both of these questions affirmatively; the first of these is what I will dub a “causal account;” according to this account, an event may fall under the scope of a statistical generalization, and still not occur naturally; rather, it occurs only as a result of God’s intervention, where this is understood in terms of God’s supernaturally causing the event to occur. Although I think there are a number of problems with this approach, I will focus on just one: That it implies an over-determination.

I will then, as an alternative, defend a non-causal account of divine intervention, by which God’s agency is understood as expressed in what has come to be called a *basic action*. This alternative does not suffer from the over-determination problem to which the causal account falls prey.

An additional concern arises in regard to the possibility that a purportedly miraculous event might fall under the scope of a statistical law: Is it appropriate to refer to such an event as a miracle? I believe that it is, but it would go beyond what I can do here to offer any more than a gloss on that issue.

2. INTERVENTION AND STATISTICAL LAW: A PROBLEM FOR MIRACLES

The conception of a miracle as a violation of natural law is perhaps most commonly associated with David Hume, who defined a miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.”¹ This definition has two criteria: A violation criterion, according to which a miracle must be a transgression (or a violation) of natural law; and secondly, an agency criterion, according to which it must express a particular intention – in the usual case, this would be an intention on the part of God. These two criteria codified the conception of a miracle as a *divine intervention*.

It is, as I have already noted, commonly thought that a miracle must be a divine intervention into the natural order. I will not examine the historical reasons for this in any detail here, though I would observe that one motivation is that, at least since the time of Hume, there has been an interest in the possibility of miracles playing a role in religious apologetic, serving as evidence for the existence of God or the authority of a particular revelation. This possibility was certainly Hume’s focus, when he argued that “no human testimony can have such a force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any (...) system of religion.”² Antony Flew noted the importance, for the apologist, of insisting that the universe is governed by natural laws, and of denying that it “is like ‘Hellzapoppin’, where »anything may happen and it probably will«”.³ The apologist needs the law, together with its violation; she wishes to show that one or more events have occurred that have no natural explanation, and so can only be explained as the result of divine intervention. But herein lies a problem for those who believe in miracles – or at least, for those who hope that the occur-

¹ D. Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1975, 115n.

² *Ibid.*, 127.

³ A. Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief*, Thoemmes Press, Bristol 1997, 202.

rence of a miracle might provide evidence for the existence of God. Our understanding of the natural universe has changed considerably since Hume's time, when the scientist thought of nature as operating like a clockwork, with every event determined to occur by antecedent circumstances. We are beginning to appreciate just how much of what happens in nature is not determined by antecedent events at all, but is instead predictable only to the extent that it falls under the scope of statistical generalizations. There are at least two areas in which we might find non-deterministic principles at work in modern physics. One is the movement of molecules in a liquid or a gas, and another would be those events that take place at the subatomic level, where the principles of quantum mechanics hold sway. It now appears that not every event in nature is determined to occur by some natural cause. This means that an event might have the appearance of being a miracle, and might seem to qualify since it has no natural cause, but then turn out to fall under the scope of some non-deterministic principle. In this case it would be an event that nature is capable of producing on its own, without any intervention from the supernatural. Our universe is, to some extent, precisely the sort of 'Hellzapoppin' universe that Flew thought hostile to the conception of miracles that Hume describes.

What if many, or perhaps even all, of the miracles of the Bible might be attributed to this sort of event? Moses' parting of the Red Sea immediately comes to mind. This might have occurred as described in the Book of Exodus, but have a natural explanation, being due to the random movement of water molecules – statistically improbable, but consistent with the natural order. Jesus' healings might be attributed to spontaneous remissions of disease that are highly unlikely but still physically possible. And here is a troubling point: The occurrence of *any* purported miracle is surely capable of some physical description or another, and it is difficult to rule out the possibility that any such event might, on close examination – perhaps at the quantum level – turn out to have a natural explanation by virtue of falling under the scope of non-deterministic principles. This would effectively sabotage any claim that

such an event was due to divine intervention, if such an intervention can only manifest itself as the effect of some supernatural cause.

Consider the parting of the Red Sea as a case in point. We are told, in Exodus 14:15, that Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the waters parted. Since the movement of water molecules is random, the occurrence of this event – while staggeringly unlikely – does not represent a violation of natural law. A natural explanation is possible here which has nothing to do with divine agency. So what shall we say of the fact that it parted as an apparent response to Moses' outstretching of his hand? There is no reason to suppose that Moses' gesture had anything to do with it. Indeed the parting of the waters, on the occasion of Moses' movement of his hand, is nothing more than coincidence. It is a striking coincidence, to say the least, but a coincidence nonetheless. The retreat, and subsequent advance, of the water gives the appearance of agency; it gives the impression of being something that Moses, with God's help, has *done*. But given that there is a natural explanation for the parting of the waters, no intervention – in the form of supernatural influence – has occurred; the skeptic will argue that there is no ground for invoking agency of any kind, on the part of Moses or of God.

Any purported miracle that could be explained as falling under the scope of a statistical law would thereby be reduced to the status of a coincidence: An occurrence of a natural event that just so happens, accidentally, as a matter of luck, one might say, to occur in a context that is religiously significant. Can such a coincidence properly be understood as a miracle?

Few modern philosophers have thought so. A well-known exception is R.F. Holland.⁴ Holland asks us to consider a case in which a child, who is riding in a toy motor-car, gets stuck on a railroad crossing. A train is approaching, and because the engineer cannot see the child, we have every reason to expect that he will be killed. However, by extraordinary coincidence, the engineer faints at exactly the right moment, releasing his grip on the control level, which causes the brakes to be automatically applied, thereby saving the child. Holland observes

⁴ R.F. Holland, *The Miraculous*, American Philosophical Quarterly (1965)2, 43–51.

that this is a coincidence that is significant because of its relation to human needs. For this reason, the event certainly *seems* to be an expression of divine agency.

We might speak of the stopping of Holland's train as being lucky, or fortunate, but Holland observes that in religious parlance we might refer to it as being due to the grace of God, or a miracle of God. The reference is the same – i.e. the same event might be described either as lucky, or miraculous; however “the meaning is different in that whatever happens by God's grace or by a miracle is something for which God is thanked or thankable, something which has been or could have been prayed for, something which can be regarded with awe and be taken as a sign or made the subject of a vow (e.g. to go on a pilgrimage), all of which can only take place against the background of a religious tradition.”⁵

Christopher Hughes provides a rare discussion of Holland's conception of the miraculous, and Hughes' commentary is of interest to me because he agrees with Holland that a miracle need not be a violation of natural law, and because his focus is specifically on the kind of event that might fall under the scope of a statistical law. Hughes does not think the stopping of Holland's train is miraculous, because it is not, on his view, a divine intervention: “If you see from the start,” he writes, “how an event can be explained without appeal to divine intervention, you're unlikely to believe that that event is miraculous, because you're unlikely to believe an explanation which involves more causes than seem explanatorily necessary.”⁶ Hughes' view implies that no event with a natural explanation can be a divine intervention. The problem for Holland, on Hughes' view, is one of over-determination; if we accept the natural explanation for the stopping of the train, then we have an account which fully determines the occurrence of this event. Adding God into it now gives us one more cause than is required.

⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁶ Ch. Hughes, *Miracles, Laws of Nature and Causation*, The Aristotelean Society, Supplementary Volume 66(1992), 190.

I want to emphasize this point. A miracle, according to Hughes, must have a supernatural cause.⁷ It is an event that immediately results from God's direct intervention into nature, where the notion of a direct intervention must be understood in terms of God directly *causing* the event in question. Speaking of Jesus' turning water into wine at Cana he says that "a particular event – the water's turning into wine – is directly caused by a supernatural event – namely, God's willing that this water turn into wine (...)." ⁸ Thus if there is any reason to suppose that a particular event has a natural cause, this precludes the possibility of its being directly caused by God, since to suppose that it is would imply an over-determination.⁹

3. SOLUTION 1: A CAUSAL ACCOUNT

So on Hughes' view, the stopping of Holland's train does not qualify as a miracle. Nevertheless, he concedes an important point to Holland, which is that miracles need not violate any law of nature. This possibility arises, according to Hughes, when the laws of a world are not deterministic; if this is the case, then "the truth of the laws will not preclude God's intervening to make the future go in a way it would not otherwise have gone."¹⁰ We may have the law in this case, together with an intervention.

He illustrates this possibility with an example. Suppose there is a prophet who is in jail awaiting execution. He prays to God to deliver him from his enemies, and in despair he throws himself against the wall of his cell. To his surprise, his body moves through the wall, and he makes good his escape. As it turns out, the laws of his world allow for one massive object to tunnel through another in this way, though

⁷ Ibid., 200.

⁸ Ibid., 201.

⁹ Hughes allows that God might be the *indirect* cause of such an event, by being the direct cause of some other event in its causal ancestry. But in his view, what is caused indirectly by God is not a miracle.

¹⁰ Ch. Hughes, op. cit., 193.

the phenomenon is extremely rare. Hughes observes that this might be the case with the actual world. I am supposing that, if such phenomena are not governed by deterministic laws, they fall instead under laws that are statistical, which is simply to say that modern physics asserts that there is some probability, however small, that such an event may occur. Its occurrence in this case is consistent with natural law.

Hughes gives the following analysis of this example: “The laws plus the past are consistent with the prophet’s interpenetrating the wall naturally – without any intervention on God’s part – and what happened when the prophet went through the wall looked exactly like a case of the prophet’s interpenetrating the wall naturally. But it wasn’t. The prophet had asked God for help; in response, God directly caused the interpenetration which led to the prophet’s escape. The prophet, we may suppose, believes afterward that God answered his prayer, and worked a miracle – viz. the interpenetration of the wall which allowed the prophet to escape. Is he right to believe that? I think so. If God intervened in the course of nature, directly causing the prophet to go through the wall, then the prophet’s going through the wall did not come about naturally, did not happen in the course of nature: it was a miracle.”¹¹

Let us refer to the interpenetration of the wall as ‘M’. The first thing to notice here is that Hughes has built in to his example circumstances which strongly suggest divine agency; the interpenetration of the wall appears to come as a response to the prophet’s prayer for divine deliverance. M is the sort of thing that can happen naturally, at least in the prophet’s world. Presumably it is because events like M can happen naturally that Hughes wants to say that the occurrence of M at this time (call it t) is not a violation of natural law. It *might* have happened naturally at t , but as it turns out, it *would not* have. Its occurrence at t therefore requires an intervention on the part of God to bring about something that might have occurred naturally, but in fact would not have.

It is Hughes’ intention to provide an example of an event that is consistent with the laws of nature, yet at the same time constitutes

¹¹ Ibid., 194.

a supernatural intervention. His hypothesis is that interpenetrations are non-deterministic phenomena – physically possible, though extremely rare. Let us consider what their non-determinism implies: Imagine that the prophet throws himself against the wall at time t . Now imagine two ways in which the future might proceed, i.e. two possible worlds, one in which the prophet passes through the wall, and one in which he bounces off. Since M is a non-deterministic event, it is important to notice that the state of the world up to time t is consistent with either outcome. So consider the two cases:

- (A) The prophet comes into contact with the wall at t and moves through it naturally, given that interpenetrations are consistent with the statistical laws of the prophet's world.
- (B) The prophet comes into contact with the wall at t and bounces off.

Notice that (A) omits any reference to any agent, such as God, who may have been involved in the prophet's interpenetration of the wall. In this case the interpenetration is a natural one, and therefore nothing more than a coincidence. The prophet *just happens*, as a matter of breathtaking accident, to move through the wall just after asking God to deliver him.

Now, if the history of the world up to time t is the same in both cases, and (A) and (B) are both possible, then the way in which the history of the world will continue as regards (A) or (B) is not determined prior to t . When I say that neither (A) nor (B) is determined to occur, I mean to say that neither of them is *causally* determined. If the prophet moves through the wall, as we imagine him doing in (A), this event has no natural cause.

But this means that the divergence of these cases at t cannot be accounted for in causal terms. Neither is causally determined to occur. Now it does not follow from this that we cannot give an explanation for (A). That explanation will consist in observing that the laws of the prophet's world allow for some very small probability that such an event may occur. It is important to notice, however, that this explana-

tion does not refer to any cause in accounting for the occurrence of the interpenetration. This interpenetration has no cause.

Of course there is another possibility – and I take it this is what Hughes has in mind – which is that the prophet would have bounced off the wall had God not intervened by willing him to pass through it, envisioning a third way in which events might unfold at t :

- C) The prophet comes into contact with the wall at t and moves through it, not naturally, but as a result of God’s intervention.
 (C) represents an interpenetration that, unlike (A), is no mere coincidence. It is not an accident at all. But how, precisely, are we to understand this? We might fill out the details in case (C) by saying:

(i) The prophet comes into contact with the wall at t and moves through it, where he would not have moved through it had God not *willed* for him to do so.

But we might also say:

(ii) The prophet comes into contact with the wall at t and moves through it, where he would not have moved through it had God not *directly caused* him to do so.

I think Hughes would say that both (i) and (ii) are appropriate descriptions for what happens in case (C); it seems to me that he might take these two issues to be the same, since he thinks of God’s willing that the prophet move through the wall to be the *cause* of his doing so. Let us observe as well that (C), in representing an intervention, enables a counterfactual, having the following form: The prophet would not have moved through the wall had God not willed for him to do so, where Hughes would surely say that God’s willing him to pass through the wall means that God *directly causes* him to move through it.

Here is one way, then, that an event might be consistent with a statistical law and still be a divine intervention: It is the sort of event that *might have* occurred naturally, as described in (A) above, but does not;

instead, it occurs only because God intervenes in nature, as described in (C), with emphasis on the fact that God has intervened by *causing* it to occur, as described in (ii). Let us refer to this as a *causal* account of divine intervention.

4. PROBLEMS WITH THE CAUSAL ACCOUNT

I have attempted elsewhere to articulate some of the problems with attributing any event in nature to a supernatural cause, which are analogous to those encountered by the substance dualist in trying to account for the interaction of mind and body; I will not recount those here.¹² I will focus here on the over-determination problem. We saw that the prophet's interpenetration of the wall in (A) is possible *without* God's assistance. If there is some statistical probability that the prophet might interpenetrate the wall, then *any* such interpenetration may be given a natural explanation simply by pointing to this fact; it may be explained, that is, simply by observing that the laws of nature allow for such interpenetrations to occur. But if this is true, then to postulate God as the cause of the prophet's interpenetration in case (C) implies an over-determination; we are attempting to understand God as causing, in case (C), a phenomenon which, as we see from case (A), requires no cause. Introducing God as an explanatory factor in this kind of case will therefore be redundant. So in saying that God caused the prophet to move through the wall, Hughes is committed to the same sort of over-determination that he finds in Holland's account of the train. We will recall that in his criticism of Holland's account of a miracle as religiously significant coincidence, he argues that the stopping of the train ought not to be taken as miraculous because it has a natural explanation, and any reference to God – and specifically, I take it, to God's *willing* that the train stop – involves more causes than are explanatorily necessary.¹³

Of course Hughes wants to say that M would not have taken place at *t* without God's intervention; I take him as suggesting that this is

¹² D. Corner, *The Philosophy of Miracles*, Continuum, London 2007; see esp. Chapter 2.

¹³ Ch. Hughes, *op. cit.*, 190.

not a naturally occurring interpenetration because it would not have occurred without the involvement of a supernatural cause. But what grounds can there be for this assertion – for claiming that the prophet would not have interpenetrated the wall naturally? We can only look to the circumstances leading up to (C), and observe that they did not provide for the prophet's interpenetration of the wall, and for this reason, it would not have happened but for God's intervention. But the very same thing can be said of (A); the circumstances in this case similarly fail to provide for the prophet's interpenetration of the wall, yet by hypothesis, this happens naturally. This is because interpenetrations, as we understand them here, are non-deterministic phenomena. There can be no *observable* criteria for distinguishing a natural interpenetration, as in (A) above, from one that is directly caused by God.

But if there are no observable criteria for making this distinction, then there are no criteria at all. The determination of what lies within nature's power lies solely within the domain of observation. There is nothing in the circumstances of case (C) to distinguish it from those we find in (A). My conclusion, then, is that there is no ground for ever describing an interpenetration as a divine intervention, *where that intervention is understood in causal terms*, that is, where it is understood as God's causing something to occur that would not have occurred naturally.

I want to consider two objections to the argument I have just given.

(1) I have said that the prophet's interpenetration of the wall requires no cause, but the critic will insist that this is only true for interpenetrations that take place naturally. But it was not a feature of the prophet's world that he would pass through the wall at t naturally. Even though the laws of his world allow for a tiny probability that he might have interpenetrated the wall, it so happens that on this occasion, this probability did not manifest itself. Thus, without God's intervention, he would have bounced off. Accordingly, his passage through the wall *does* require a cause; we need an explanation for why he was able to pass through the wall when otherwise he would have bounced off. Surely, the objection goes, it is possible for God to exercise his direct

causal power to bring about an interpenetration that might have occurred naturally but in fact did not. And I take it this is what Hughes has in mind.

This objection fails to recognize that the criteria by which an event is judged as being consistent with physical law are *empirical* criteria. Since our case (A) above, in which the prophet moves through the wall naturally, and case (C), in which he is understood to move through the wall by God's direct causal activity, are empirically indistinguishable, there are no grounds for counting (A) as having a natural explanation but excluding (C) from the same assessment. If the criteria for whether an event has a natural explanation are empirical criteria, then one cannot dismiss a natural explanation by pointing to non-empirical factors – to supposed supernatural events, or to what God wills. The question of whether an interpenetration has occurred naturally is to be settled by the physical sciences, and the physical scientist would never accept the possibility of a supposed supernatural intervention as affecting her judgment about the lawfulness of such a phenomenon. The occurrence of *any* particular interpenetration can be explained by noting that such events fall under the scope of a statistical law – God simply plays no role in this judgment.

(2) A second objection might proceed by allowing that it was possible that the prophet would have moved through the wall naturally. This is, presumably, why we should not take this event to be a violation of natural law. However, this is exceedingly unlikely to occur naturally. After all, he might have thrown himself against the wall a trillion times without ever passing through it. Why should he pass through at *this* particular moment, when that is precisely what he needs in order to make good his escape? And after all, it seems as though there is an explanation to be given that goes beyond merely noticing that such an event falls under the scope of a statistical law. This is highly unlikely to be mere coincidence, my critic will argue. That this is no coincidence is something my critic might take to imply that the event has a cause, and a supernatural one at that – that is much more likely to be the result of God's direct causal activity.

It is interesting to notice that the very same argument could be given in a case like (A) above, which, by hypothesis, is not an instance of divine intervention. So the objection here cannot rely on any empirical contrast between the interpenetration, considered as mere coincidence, in (A), and the interpenetration, conceived as being due to God's will, in (C). Both interpenetrations occur in religiously significant circumstances and both show the same evidence of divine agency. Indeed, what I wish to argue here is that no real contrast between these two cases is possible; any interpenetration that might happen is a *naturally occurring* one.

This second objection works by positing two distinct explanations for the occurrence of M. One is a natural explanation, by which M is seen as falling under a non-deterministic law. The other, by contrast, is an appeal to supernatural intervention, where this means taking M to be the result of a supernatural cause, namely, God's willing that it occur. The objection supposes that this second explanation is the more likely one. But there are three problems with this second objection. (1) It fails to note, just as the first objection did, that M has a natural explanation simply by virtue of its being consistent with a statistical law, even though the probability of its occurrence is very low. Also (2), we have no ground for assessing the likelihood of divine intervention, in such a manner as to enable us to say that M is more likely to occur as a result of divine intervention than it is to occur naturally. Finally, (3) since the empirical circumstances of (A) and (C) are the same, there is no ground for saying that (C) is likely to be the result of divine intervention that does not work equally well to attribute (A) to divine intervention. Our conclusion here ought to be that *any* interpenetration, in circumstances that suggest divine agency as strongly as these do, ought to be taken as an expression of God's will, regardless of whether the event is taken to have a natural cause.

5. SOLUTION 2: A NON-CAUSAL ACCOUNT

While I think this second objection fails, it has two features that I find interesting. First, it would appear to be motivated by observing that the circumstances of M strongly suggest that divine agency is at

work. Secondly, it posits two explanations for M which it assumes to be mutually exclusive; either the event occurred naturally, i.e. it has a natural explanation, or it occurred because God willed for it to occur. These explanations are taken as competing with one another. But why should they be taken as competing? Perhaps it is because we fear that adding divine agency into an account of why M occurred represents an over-determination. But it is only an over-determination if we suppose that God's agency must express itself as a causal factor in the production of M. I wish to argue that attributing M to divine agency does *not* imply that it has a supernatural cause, and therefore does *not* require us to deny that M has a natural explanation. An account of M as occurring naturally, and an account of M as expressing divine agency, need not be understood as competing with one another.

Let us return for a moment to Hughes' analysis of M, which I think is well motivated; he says that "the prophet's interpenetration of the wall is a miracle, because it is directly caused by God's willing that the prophet go through the wall. A miracle is a point of contact between God's will and the world."¹⁴ But is it really necessary to speak of God's will in causal terms? To say that this event occurs because it is directly caused by God seems to offer us little more than saying that it occurs *because God wills it*. While the "because" here seems to imply causation, it is important to realize that not everything that expresses God's will is something that God causes to occur. This is because some of God's actions are *basic* actions.

The distinction between a basic action, and one that is mediated, originates with Arthur Danto¹⁵, but has been explored by Donald Davidson and many others. Suppose, for example, that I turn on a light by flipping a switch.¹⁶ This is a case of mediated action; we perform a mediated action when we do (x) by doing (y), where (y) stands to (x) as cause to effect. In this example, turning on the light is something I do,

¹⁴ Ibid., 202.

¹⁵ A. Danto, *Basic Actions*, *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1965)2, 141–148.

¹⁶ The example is Davidson's. D. Davidson, *Essays on Action and Events*, Oxford University Press, New York 1982, 53.

but is also something that I cause to occur. The turning on of the light is attributed to my agency only by means of a causal analysis, and so represents a mediated action. Note that by “cause” here we mean *event causation*, for the event of the light’s being turned on is caused by the event of the switch’s being flipped.

But not everything we do is something that we cause to occur. I cause the switch to flip by moving my finger, but I do not cause my finger to move; by this I mean that I do not do anything else to bring it about that my finger moves. I just *do* it – ‘directly,’ one might say, or immediately.¹⁷ While the attribution of my agency to the turning on of the light requires a causal analysis, attributing agency to my moving of my finger is basic or primitive. As Davidson puts it: “Not every event we attribute to an agent can be explained as caused by another event of which he is agent: some acts must be primitive in the sense that they cannot be analysed in terms of their causal relations to acts of the same agent. But then *event causality cannot in this way be used to explain the relation between an agent and a primitive action*. Event causality can spread responsibility for an action to the consequences of the action, but it cannot help explicate the first attribution of agency on which the rest depend.”¹⁸

The language of action presumes the possibility of making primitive assignments of agency which do not depend on any causal analysis. For example, my moving of my finger may be a basic action. I have no doubt that there is a complete natural explanation for the movement of my finger, considered as mere event rather than as an action of mine. No doubt this explanation would point to a series of neural firings and muscular contractions. When I say that I moved my finger, I do not bar the possibility that the movement of my finger has a physical explana-

¹⁷ The language I am using here sounds very similar to that of Hughes, who speaks of God’s direct causal activity as opposed to his indirect activity. This distinction closely mirrors the distinction between basic and non-basic, or mediated, actions, the latter being associated with events that are caused to occur by their agents. It is my contention that Hughes’ description of God’s direct causal agency should be abandoned in favor of speaking in terms of God’s basic actions.

¹⁸ D. Davidson., *op. cit.*, 49 [emphasis mine – D.C.].

tion. By the same token, there is no reason to deny that I acted in moving my finger, on the grounds that any reference to my agency implies an over-determination. An over-determination is implied only if I say that I caused it to move. But if my moving my finger is a basic action, then I do not cause it to move – and saying that I moved it implies no over-determination.

Thus if M is a divine basic action, we can attribute it to God's agency without saying that God caused it to occur. Saying that God moved the prophet through the wall does not imply an over-determination, if we understand this to be a basic action on God's part. But also – importantly – this means that we can describe M as an expression of divine agency even though it has a natural explanation.

In seeing how attributions of basic agency are compatible with natural explanations, it is helpful to notice the relation between an act description and an event description.¹⁹ Thus for example, the description of me as *moving my finger* is an act description, and it introduces an event description, namely, *my finger's moving*. (Note that I cannot move my finger without its also being the case that my finger moves.) Let us refer to this latter description as a "companion event." When we say that the movement of my finger has a natural explanation, having been caused by neural firings and the like, it is the occurrence of the companion event that we are explaining; this explanation is consistent with the (act) description of me as moving my finger. I think what we ought to say in this case is that my action, in moving my finger, is realized in a physical event, namely, my finger's moving.

Similarly, then, we might say that God *moved the prophet through the wall*. This is an act description, which introduces the event description, *the prophet moved through the wall*. The prophet's moving through the wall is the companion event in this case. This companion event is explained by observing that the prophet's moving through the wall falls under the scope of a statistical law. What we might say here is that God's agency is *realized* in an event that is susceptible to a natural

¹⁹ This observation is due to Hornsby. J. Hornsby, *Actions*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1980, 70.

explanation. As far as I can tell, this may be true of everything that God does in the natural world, though in some cases, the natural explanation might imply that the event in which God's will is realized might be exceedingly improbable.

I have argued that it is not reasonable to say that God intervenes *causally* to produce an event which falls under the scope of a statistical law. Such a claim implies an over-determination. I have argued as well that having a physical explanation for an event, viewed qua event, does not interfere with our attributing that event to divine agency, where what has occurred is viewed instead as an action on the part of God. This is how it is with human actions: Instances of human agency imply the occurrence of events that may be viewed merely as events, and described using event descriptions that omit any reference to agency. Viewed in this way, they may have natural explanations. Yet the occurrence of such an event may also provide an occasion for an act description, under which what was formerly viewed as mere event is now understood as an action. The same possibility arises in regard to divine agency; one and the same thing may be viewed now as an event, capable of physical explanation, and then as a realization of divine agency.

But what remains of the claim that an event like M might be a miracle? Hughes tells us that an event can be a miracle only if it is a divine intervention. I suspect the consensus of philosophers and theologians is on his side in this matter. Is it possible to understand the prophet's interpenetration of the wall not just as an expression of divine agency, but also as a divine intervention, if we are at the same time forced to admit that it occurred naturally? I think it is.

The occurrence of an intervention, understood in its broadest terms, implies that things have gone differently from the way they would have gone, were it not for the activity of some agent. The occurrence of an intervention thus seems to imply a counterfactual: Event E would not have occurred had person P not performed action A. Thus for example, suppose that a prisoner has been sentenced to a long jail term, but the Governor commutes his sentence, thereby setting him free. We can describe the intervention as follows: The prisoner would not have been

freed (E) had the Governor (P) not commuted his sentence (A). This particular example seems to involve a causal relation; that is, the Governor no doubt *causes* the prisoner to be freed by commuting his sentence. But I have argued that God's activity in cases like the prophet's interpenetration of the wall are not instances of any kind of causal activity on God's part – that they are, instead, basic actions. Is there any sense in which a basic action might represent an intervention?

Suppose I lay my hand on the table, and then, as a basic action, I raise my finger. An event has occurred, namely, the rising of my finger, that would not have occurred had I not acted in raising it. In fact there seems nothing wrong in saying that my finger would not have risen had I not *willed* to raise it. And so my action conforms to the counterfactual structure I have outlined above. I have no doubt that there is a physical explanation for the rising of my finger, considered as a mere event. Yet this does not stand in the way of saying that *my finger would not have risen had I not willed to raise it*. Admittedly, as it stands, this is not a very impressive example of an intervention; we might imagine that my raising of my finger causes other, more interesting, things to happen, so that e.g. I might raise my finger as a signal to a jailer, thereby intervening to free a prisoner. But I see no reason to suppose that my basic actions cannot be said to be interventions even though they do not function causally in the production of some further event. All that follows from this is that my powers of intervention, in regard to my basic actions, are very limited, because the domain of my basic actions is restricted to my own body.

Suppose, on the other hand, that in addition to being able to move my body in a basic sort of way, I could move other things as well. If I could turn the handle on the door of a jail cell in the same way in which I normally lift my finger, that is, without having to do anything else to bring this about, this action would surely count as an intervention. I might also intervene by simply moving the prisoner through the wall of his cell. Of course I do not have the ability to do this, but according to the usual theistic picture, God does. In terms of his basic actions, God has the same relation to the entire natural world that I have to my body.

I see no reason why we could not say that had God not willed for the prophet to move through the wall, he would not have moved through it, even though his moving through it, viewed as mere event, has a natural explanation. I also see no reason for denying that this represents an *intervention* on God's part. Thus, considering once more the alternative ways in which we might describe M as more than a mere coincidence, it seems we might reasonably assert

(i) The prophet comes into contact with the wall at t and moves through it, where he would not have moved through it had God not *willed* for him to do so,

but not

(ii) The prophet comes into contact with the wall at t and moves through it, where he would not have moved through it had God not *directly caused* him to do so,

particularly where God's directly causing the prophet to move through the wall is suggested as an alternative to his moving through it naturally. In saying that it was no coincidence that the prophet moved through the wall when he did, we are saying that this was an expression of divine agency; it is no mere accident, but something that occurred because God *willed* for it to occur. Here, our saying that the prophet's moving through the wall was no mere coincidence implies only that it expresses agency, not that it has a supernatural cause. The contrast here is not between what is a coincidence and what is caused to occur; it is between what is coincidence, in the sense of being a mere accident, and what expresses agency, or reveals purpose. The prophet's moving through the wall is no coincidence because it expresses agency – a fact that seems very strongly suggested by the religiously significant circumstances in which it occurs. To say this does not require us to suppose that it has a supernatural cause, nor does it require us to deny that it has a natural explanation.

6. CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that there is a meaningful way in which we can say that the occurrence of an event with a natural explanation still counts as a divine intervention. The concept of an intervention that I have offered here is best captured, not by the attempt to distinguish between an event that has a natural explanation and one that does not, but by the contrast between an event that happens by accident, and one that expresses a divine purpose. Sometimes the movement of an observable object, like a finger, or the body of a prophet, is an event that, *qua* event, is consistent with the laws of nature. Yet some of these can also be described as actions on the part of some agent, and understood not merely as accidental occurrences, but as expressions of that agent's intentions. The case of the prophet cries out for such a description.

It is possible that a critic might accept my description of this as an intervention, and still insist that it cannot be a *miraculous* intervention if it can be given a scientific explanation. Such a critic might insist that an event like the prophet's interpenetration of the wall, or Moses' parting of the Red Sea, is not a miracle if it has a natural explanation.

I have argued that if an event falls under the scope of a statistical generalization, and is therefore consistent with natural law, we must think of it as having a natural explanation. If it is true that no event can qualify as a miracle if it has a natural explanation, then no event that falls under the scope of a statistical generalization can be a miracle. There is no way around this fact: If a miracle must be an event which cannot occur naturally, then there is little hope for miracles in a universe in which the most extraordinary events might fall under the scope of statistical laws. I do not accept this view of the miraculous, which I take to be the relic of an apologetic concern, but I will not offer any thorough criticism of that view here. I will, however, offer two considerations that I believe count against it.

Firstly, an event of the kind we are talking about here is an event, the occurrence of which is so improbable, that no one could ever reasonably expect it to occur, despite the fact that it is consistent with natural law. Surely the occurrence of such an event is a real wonder. It

is certainly every bit as extraordinary – if this means “out of the ordinary” – as any purported violation of natural law.

Secondly, it strikes me as wrong to dismiss, in particular, the parting of the Red Sea as a miracle in virtue of its being consistent with the statistical laws that govern the movement of fluids. Christian theology should not start with an abstract conception of the miraculous, and then proceed from that to asking whether the events that are *reported* as miraculous in Christian scripture really are miracles after all. Those events are properly taken as paradigms for the miraculous; the theologian ought to insist that they retain this status regardless of what might be discovered, centuries later, about the laws of nature.

The conception of an intervention that I have offered here may not be useful to the apologist. But with the natural sciences constantly increasing their power to explain even the most extraordinary events, it may be time for the theologian to look beyond the needs of apologetic.

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