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LOCKE ON COMPETING MIRACLES

Travis Dumsday

It is typically thought that miracles, if they occur, can provide evidence for the truth of religious doctrine. But what if different miracles occur attesting to the truth of different and incompatible religions? How is one to decide between the truth of the supposed revelations? Much of Locke's short work, *A Discourse of Miracles*, is concerned with this question. Here I summarize and evaluate Locke's answer.

In his short work, *A Discourse of Miracles*,¹ Locke's overarching concern is with the proper definition of 'miracle.' But the bulk of the actual text is devoted to the issue of how to decide between competing miracles. If prophet A proclaims some new sacred doctrine, and as evidence of its truthfulness performs a miracle, while prophet B proclaims an incompatible sacred doctrine, and also performs a supporting miracle, how is one to decide which revelation to accept? In what follows I will explain and evaluate Locke's answer, coming to the conclusion that his account is of considerable use, particularly if one accepts his high view of natural theology. And even if one has a lesser view of the achievements of that field, it must be granted that Locke's solution is plausibly viable for application in his own time and cultural milieu.

Section I: Locke's Account

First a bit of additional context. Again, Locke's principal goal is to state and defend a certain definition of 'miracle,' specifically that it is a "sensible operation, which being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his opinion contrary to the established course of nature, is taken by him to be divine."² He proceeds to consider two objections. The first is that this definition makes it difficult to discern what is and is not a miracle, since that designation depends on the opinion of the witness. Locke counters that any definition of miracle will run into the same problem, since all are agreed that a miracle must be something surpassing the laws of nature. And since people may be more or less thoroughly acquainted with nature's laws, it is unavoidable that cases might arise in which a miracle for one person will not be a miracle for another.

A second, similar objection states that this definition enlarges the notion of miracle to such an extent that it encompasses events which have no supernatural aspect. So miracles would be useless for establishing the *bona fides* of an apparent revelation. It is in the course of answering this objection that Locke comes to discuss the problem of competing miracles. He



begins by noting that in order to know whether some supposed revelation is from God, one must know that the messenger proclaiming it is sent by God. And this can only be known if God gives the prophet credentials. Locke believes miracles are such credentials, and that only miracles which directly attest to the truth of a revelation are relevant for deciding whether that revelation is divine. Whatever other miracles may take place in the world, only those miracles which occur in a certain context, namely that of providing a prophet with credentials, can be relevant to the truth of revelation. And "cases wherein there has been, or can be need of miracles for the confirmation of revelation are fewer than perhaps is imagined."³ The pagans had no miracles in this sense; no miracles wrought for the sake of attesting some revelation by a pagan deity. That would have been out of place in the pagan world. "Those owners of many Gods were at liberty in their worship; and no one of their Divinities pretending to be the one only true God, no one of them could be supposed in the Pagan scheme to make use of miracles to establish his worship alone, or to abolish that of the others; much less was there any use of miracles to confirm any articles of faith, since no one of them had any such to propose as necessary to be believ'd by their votaries."⁴ Locke bolsters this theoretical point with the empirical observation that, to the best of his knowledge, no Greek or Roman author records a miracle being performed for the sake of confirming someone's message and doctrine.

So Locke thinks that, first off, the problem of competing miracles is not as much of a problem as it is sometimes made out to be. The sphere of genuinely competing miracles is actually fairly small. If miracles were done in the pre-Christian classical world, they were nonetheless not done for the sake of promoting some religious doctrine, and the only miracles which can be said to enter the competition are those which are done for that reason. Likewise, one might infer, even if miracles take place in Muslim or Hindu cultures, they do not compete with Christian miracles unless they take place for the express purpose of confirming some Muslim or Hindu doctrine.

Locke concludes from this that "miracles as the credentials of a messenger delivering a divine religion, have no place but upon a supposition of one only true God."⁵ That is, it is only in monotheistic faiths that one can find alleged miracles of this type. And historically there have been very few religions founded on a supposed revelation from the one true God. Locke thinks there are only three serious contenders: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (he dismisses Zoroastrianism as unworthy of consideration). Islam can be ruled out of court because Mohammad did not even claim to perform miracles,⁶ and so the only two left are Judaism and Christianity. Since these are mutually supportive, with the miracles of one confirming those of the other, there is really only one contender in the field, and as a matter of fact there is no problem of competing miracles.

However, Locke recognizes that "since the speculative and learned will be putting of cases which never were, and it may be presumed never will be,"⁷ he must provide some account of how, if there were competing miracles, one might go about deciding between them. To this question he notes first that if a prophet claims to have a message from the one true God, and vouches for it with a miracle, we cannot refuse to assent to his

revelation, as "his credentials have a right to it."⁸ But how can one be sure that it is really a miracle from God? In some cases we might not be sure, and in those cases assent is not required. Depending on the sophistication of one's knowledge of nature and such, the amount of evidence required in evaluating the supposed miracle might differ, such that one person may require more evidence than another. Yet there may be such a clear body of evidence that even a hardened sceptic with a decent knowledge of nature must admit that something divine has taken place. He takes Jesus' miracles as the paradigm here:

For example, Jesus of Nazareth professes himself sent from God: He with a word calms a tempest at sea: this one looks on as a miracle, and consequently cannot but receive his doctrine: another thinks this might be the effect of chance, or skill in the weather, and no miracle, and so stands out; but afterwards seeing him walk on the sea, owns that for a miracle, and believes: which yet upon another has not that force, who suspects it may possibly be done by the assistance of a spirit: but yet the same person seeing afterwards our Saviour curing an inveterate palsy by a word, admits that for a miracle, and becomes a convert: another overlooking it in this instance, afterwards finds a miracle in his giving sight to one born blind, or in raising the dead, or in raising himself from the dead.⁹

So for Locke there is an objective rule for deciding when some event is miraculous, namely when one reckons that it cannot be accounted for by reference to a natural or supernatural but sub-divine explanation. The subjectivity enters in with the consideration that different people will be more or less skilled at looking for these sub-divine explanations.

Locke grants that there are supernatural forces other than God, and that these forces can perform miracles. What if some demonic agent sends out a false prophet and attests to the counterfeit revelation by a convincing miracle? Moreover, what of an exceedingly skillful charlatan, who, aided by no demon, nonetheless does a capital job of faking a miracle, such that it fools even the educated? Will we be bound to accept that revelation? Even if it conflicts with the revelation of Jesus, attested to by his miracles? How does one decide between them?

Locke's answer is that we are to go with the greater miracle. When two miracles are opposed to one another, in the sense that they constitute the credentials of two incompatible revelations, the revelation attested to by the more powerful miracle is to be taken as the revelation from God:

For since God's power is paramount to all, and no opposition can be made against him with an equal force to his; and since his honour and goodness can never be supposed to suffer his messenger and his truth to be born down by the appearance of a greater power on the side of an impostor, and in favour of a lie; wherever there is an opposition, and two pretending to be sent from heaven clash, the signs which carry with them the evident marks of a greater power, will always be a certain and unquestionable evidence that the truth and divine mission is on that side on which they appear.¹⁰

God would never allow an impostor to present wondrous signs greater than those put forward by Himself. Since God is omnipotent, it is guaranteed that He will win out every time, and since He is omnibenevolent he will not allow His people to be deceived by a counterfeit miracle. If we are confronted by such a wonder, God will ensure that we are not obliged to accept a false revelation on account of it. As a historical example of just such an occurrence, Locke cites the competing wonders put forward by Moses and the Egyptian magicians. Moses, by God's power, performed miracles which the Egyptians could not duplicate. And though Locke does not spell out exactly what makes one miracle greater than another, it is not difficult to imagine other instances of the distinction. If prophet A cures someone of the common cold, and prophet B cures someone of AIDS, then unless prophet A can produce a similar cure or a greater miracle of a different kind, one may assume that God is on the side of prophet B.¹¹ And as for the revelation of Jesus, Locke notes that we need not be troubled by any competing revelation unless that revelation be vouchsafed by even greater miracles than Jesus and his apostles performed.

One of the upshots of all of this is that even though people cannot determine precisely what is and is not beyond the power of nature and the angelic/demonic realm, since as weak and finite humans our knowledge does not extend very far, we can determine what is and is not a miracle from God because we can be sure that God would not allow illegitimate wonders to be accepted, unchallenged by Himself. The same will apply even more for uncontested revelation. If a miracle occurs attesting some revelation, we can be sure that it is from God so long as no greater miracle attesting an incompatible revelation takes place (assuming the proviso below). And so Locke's aim of defending his definition of miracle against the second objection has been carried through.

Locke goes on to provide a few additional criteria by which apparent miracles can be judged, criteria by which one can judge even an uncontested miracle. If a miracle supports a revelation proclaiming something contrary to reason or morality, that revelation can be rejected, even if no greater competing miracle comes along. Further, we are safe in supposing that God would only deign to reveal to us important truths that cannot be discovered by our own lights.

So that, briefly summarized, is Locke's case. Before moving on to an evaluation, I should note that what Locke says regarding competing miracles can be accepted or rejected independently of whether one accepts his particular definition of miracle, even though the discussion takes place in the context of defending his particular definition. The same arguments, made with respect to most other definitions (Aquinas' for instance)¹² would, I believe, stand or fall just the same.¹³ Certainly the problem of how to judge between contradictory revelations vouched for by competing miracles is one which must be faced by any definition.

Section II: Evaluating Locke's Account

On then to some potential difficulties. The first point to consider is whether Locke is correct in restricting the scope of competing miracles. Is he right in thinking that only miracles explicitly attached to apparent revelations

can be considered competing? I believe so, but one must be clear on what this involves. Consider a Hindu mother who fervently prays to Ganesha to cure her child of some fatal disease. The child is cured, and in such a way that it cannot be explained by natural means. On Locke's definition this is undoubtedly a miracle. Is it a miracle which competes with the miracles of the Christian revelation? Not according to him, since it does not occur in the context of a prophet's claim to revelation. This is simply a mother praying for her child, and one can easily imagine God granting this prayer by a miracle, even though the mother has an inadequate conception of the divine.

It would, however, be a competing miracle if a Hindu prophet said to the distraught mother, "In order to prove that Ganesha is real and is the son of the goddess Parvati, I will, by Ganesha's power, cure your child," and the child is indeed miraculously cured.

So what would Locke say if confronted by good evidence of such a Hindu healing? Presumably that though it conflicts with the Christian revelation, it does not win out; for Jesus did even greater healings than this, as well as a variety of other types of miracles displaying far more power than that allegedly displayed by Ganesha through the Hindu prophet. But is this an adequate response? One might grant that Jesus is alleged to have performed greater miracles. But imagine that Locke actually witnesses first-hand this Hindu healing. Here he has, right in front of his eyes, a miraculous event supportive of Hinduism. By contrast, his support for the miracles of Jesus comes from documents more than fifteen hundred years old. Given the conflict, would he not be more justified in trusting what he can see for himself, over and against the testimony of others from a long time ago?

Well, one must be careful to specify just what Locke would be affirming or denying. He grants that what he has seen is a miracle. Does this force him to give up the competing Christian claim? Presumably he could give up that competing claim in one of two ways. First, he could believe that the Bible accurately records Jesus' miracles, and then despite this accept the Hindu revelation. But this seems just irrational; Jesus did more and greater miracles, and so by Locke's theory the Christian revelation stands strong, at least until the Hindu prophet does even greater miracles. Second, he could take the Hindu miracle as evidence that the Bible does not in fact accurately record the miracles of Jesus. He could take the competing miracle as evidence that the accounts he originally accepted are false. But this too seems unjustified. Assuming that one has a good knowledge of the historical evidence, such that one believes that these accounts are accurate, why would that belief be overthrown by a single competing miracle? It seems the only thing that can overthrow historical testimony is conflicting data which speaks directly to that testimony. But the Hindu miracle is not an instance of such data; it does nothing to show that the archaeological evidence supporting the New Testament is bogus, or that a new inscription has turned up in which Matthew admits to faking the resurrection. Assuming that there was sufficiently good evidence to accept the Christian revelation in the first place, the new competing miracle does not speak against that evidence.

This is an important point for Locke's account; for he does not want to affirm that God must step in and do a new miracle every time a demon or

charlatan does a wonder beyond someone's understanding. That would necessitate fairly regular interventions on God's behalf, which Locke would not want to grant. On the Christian view, God has given humanity a central revelation, well-attested, which can act as a benchmark against which to judge future claims to revelation. This eliminates the need for God to constantly upstage hucksters.

These last points seem correct to me; I do not think that a single Hindu miracle would cast doubt on the New Testament accounts, provided there is good evidence that they are trustworthy. However, there may be limits beyond which the evidence would start to shift. For instance, were it the case that loads of well-attested and impressive contemporary miracles occurred, but *only* in a Hindu context; and lots of religious visions and other experiences, but *only* of Krishna; and accurate prophecies, *all* made on Krishna's apparent urging; I think it reasonable to suppose that this would constitute evidence for the truth of Hinduism over and against Christianity. Not necessarily overriding evidence, but evidence nonetheless. I believe that Locke would agree,¹⁴ and would say that such a scenario is not possible given Christianity's truth; or that if it were possible, the fraudulent miracles would eventually be refuted by God with a new set of even greater miracles. All this is worth noting, because I believe that the evidence for the historical Christian revelation can be bolstered by contemporary miracles testifying to the same doctrine. If that is the case, it seems one must grant that the opposite could in theory occur, and that the evidence for the revelation could be weakened by miracles taking place within contradictory religious contexts, at least when performed in such a way as to clearly imply the truth of the religion's distinctive claims.¹⁵

Another objection might be leveled against Locke, perhaps a more telling one. He has already made the point that historically, polytheistic faiths lack miracles that support a messenger's claim to a divine revelation. He may have been right about Greece and Rome, but Hinduism is often claimed by its adherents to be a revealed faith attested to by miracle. And in response to the apologetics of Christians, Hindus sometimes reply that, well, maybe Jesus was an incarnation of Vishnu, one of many. As to Jesus' claims to exclusive worship, perhaps that was a corrupt interpretation foisted on his words by early Christians. Or, maybe Jesus was a renegade lower divinity, one who greedily wanted exclusive worship (though I have never heard a Hindu suggest this). Or one can imagine a polytheistic scenario in which most of the relevant divinities are just not interested in these competing miracles. Perhaps the various other gods simply have no desire to engage in a competition of miracles to outdo this renegade god, with the end result that Christianity has accumulated an unparalleled record of miracles.

Or to take another scenario, imagine that Theravada Buddhism is true, and that some of their thinkers are correct in their belief that miracles really do not count for much. They grant that divinities of various kinds may exist, and may perform wonders, all of which is small potatoes: the real essence of religion is the attainment of enlightenment through discipline and meditation. The deities and miracles and such are ultimately just distractions. Truth must be sought in individual mystical experience, not through prophets and divine revelation. The question of whether or

not some religion has a lock on impressive miracles is not just unimportant, but a pernicious distraction.

How might Locke respond to these charges? His account can answer the Hindu polytheist, because the Hindu is committed to a view of the gods whereby at least some of them are benevolent and concerned for human welfare. If that were the case, it is not unreasonable to think that such gods would feel obliged to put a stop to the miraculous displays of their renegade incarnation of Vishnu, and follow Locke's advice in doing greater wonders to re-establish the supremacy of Hindu teachings, contra the pernicious deceptions of Christianity. So if Hinduism were true, one would expect that the Christian miracles should have been surpassed by now.

But if one supposes a sort of Epicurean polytheism, whereby the gods are distant and could not care less what happens to human beings, then it is not hard to imagine some god doing miracles and promulgating doctrines on a whim and the other gods not doing anything to stop him. How does one respond to the Epicurean polytheist? I believe by reference to the additional criteria Locke provides towards the end of the *Discourse*, one of which is reason. Locke can begin by pointing out that Epicurean polytheism is unsophisticated and lacking in both philosophical justification and historical evidence. Moreover, he is firmly convinced that by unaided natural reason we can prove the existence of God. He is so firmly convinced of this that he is willing to rule out a priori any claim to revelation which is not monotheistic in content, "because God having discovered to men the unity and majesty of his eternal Godhead, and the truths of natural religion and morality by the light of reason, he cannot be supposed to back the contrary by revelation."¹⁶

The same response from natural theology can be directed against the charges of the Theravadan Buddhist. For Locke, if Buddhism rejects belief in God, so much the worse for Buddhism. And he would not be at all impressed with the claim that private mystical experience is to be trusted over public miracles attesting a revelation. Locke was notoriously suspicious of such experiences, maintaining that they are not self-authenticating but require evidence in order to be trusted.¹⁷

So the resources for answering these charges are available in the *Discourse*. Of course, the persuasiveness of the latter answers depends on whether natural theology is as trustworthy as Locke believes, especially when not only the existence of God but His concern for mankind must be shown.¹⁸ If one holds that natural theology can give us most of what Locke needs here, then his account stands as providing a workable solution to the problem of competing miracles. If not, then its force will be diminished accordingly, though of course not entirely eliminated.

However, while this is a concern for us, such that the usefulness of Locke's account for our own religiously pluralistic society is potentially lessened, it does not constitute a great mark against the *Discourse* itself, given Locke's goals. He dismisses early on the notion that polytheistic religions would make claims to revelation, and declares that his interest is in deciding between the conflicting claims of those purporting to represent the one true God. Locke is concerned at least partly with the *pragmatics* of the competing miracles issue, and in his day this would be the pragmatic worry; false prophets in seventeenth century England would be preaching

messages purportedly received from the sort of God Locke believes in, not the Hindu pantheon. And it seems to me that his method can plausibly be thought to address that early modern context.¹⁹

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NOTES

1. John Locke, *A Discourse of Miracles, in The Reasonableness of Christianity with A Discourse of Miracles and part of A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), pp. 78–87. Note that the work has elsewhere been published under the title *A Treatise of Miracles*.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 81. This seems to me too strong. One can imagine an unknown member of a pantheon of deities revealing himself to prospective worshipers by way of a miracle, and that would constitute an article of faith, of sorts.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Muslims of course have declared that the production of the Koran was itself a miracle, given its literary beauty. Locke is either unaware of this claim, or perhaps is not impressed by it. MacIntosh points out that Locke's contemporary, Robert Boyle, was aware of this Islamic argument and found it wanting. See J. J. MacIntosh, "Locke and Boyle on Miracles and God's Existence," in *Robert Boyle Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 193–214. The relevant passage in Boyle may be found in his "Style of the Scriptures," *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Hunter and Davis, vol 2 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000), p. 298.

7. Locke, 81.

8. *Ibid.*, 82.

9. *Ibid.* The example of a person seeing Jesus walking on water and rejecting it because it may have been done by a demon (or perhaps some other finite spirit-being) seems to present us with an ambiguity. What exactly is this person rejecting? The event's status as a miracle, or its status as divinely originated? For Locke the two are linked. Recall that part of his definition of 'miracle' is that the observer takes it to be divine, since it is above the laws of nature. Locke is committed to the position that a wonder done by a demon, when it is recognized by the spectator as demonic, cannot be termed a miracle. But when demonic in origin but *thought* by the spectator to be divine, it *can* be termed a miracle.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.

11. I suspect Locke would be in substantial agreement with Aquinas' rather more systematic treatment of the concept of greater and lesser miracles; according to him, a greater miracle is one which is further removed from the capacities of nature. In this case, curing AIDS is further removed from what nature is normally capable of than curing a cold. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Book III, chap. 101. Given these points, it seems to me that Mooney and Imbrosiano have misunderstood Locke's case when they write: "Christ's miracles, in other words, confirm the superiority of Christianity, and it is on the basis of this superiority that we are to dismiss *a priori* any counter claims of the performance of miracles in any other religion. When expressed this way, the circularity of Locke's position becomes vividly transparent. On top of this, surely the assertion that the miracles performed by Christ are inherently supe-

rior to any others already requires the very faith they are designed to induce." T. Brian Mooney and Anthony Imbrosiano, "The Curious Case of Mr. Locke's Miracles," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 57 (2005), pp. 147–68. Locke's case is not an *a priori* one, for, as we shall see in more detail shortly, the possibility that other religions possess greater miracles is left open. And given Locke's understanding of what makes one miracle greater than another, it is clear that one need not be a Christian to be able to affirm the superiority (in the relevant sense) of his miracles, assuming for the sake of argument that they took place. The question of whether other religions exhibit superior miracles is an empirical one, and Locke says nothing that would contradict this.

12. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Book III, chaps. 101–02.

13. Consequently, since my concern is with the issue of competing miracles, I will refrain from evaluating Locke's definition here. But for a concise and helpful discussion, see Hendrik van der Breggen, "Miracle Reports, Moral Philosophy, and Contemporary Science" (Ph.D. diss., University of Waterloo, 2004), pp. 40–42.

14. At least, prescindng from natural theology, which Locke would say provides other grounds for rejecting Hinduism; I will discuss this shortly.

15. Phillip Wiebe has written on the idea that modern miracles lend further credence to accounts of historical miracles. "If events similar to those reported in the miracle stories in the Bible were to be found at the present time, the credibility of those ancient documents would be enhanced. Accounts that had been dismissed as fictitious or merely mythological would again come under scrutiny." Wiebe, Phillip, "Authenticating Biblical Reports of Miracles," in *Questions of Miracle*, ed. Robert Larmer (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), pp. 101–20. See also his *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

16. Locke, p. 84.

17. See his discussion in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Book IV, chap. 19.

18. This is MacIntosh's central criticism of Locke's account, in his "Locke and Boyle on Miracles and God's Existence."

19. A version of this paper was presented at the 2007 conference of the Canadian Society of Christian Philosophers, and I would like to thank those in attendance for their remarks, especially the commentator, Hendrik van der Breggen. My thanks also to J. J. MacIntosh for his comments on an earlier draft.