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A MORAL ARGUMENT AGAINST MIRACLES

James A. Keller

Those who believe that miracles (temporary suspensions of some law of nature accomplished by divine power) have occurred typically hold that they are rare and that only a small percentage of all people have been eyewitnesses to them or been direct beneficiaries of them. Although a claim that they occur far more frequently would be empirically highly implausible, I argue that the claim that God performs miracles in such a pattern unavoidably implies that God is guilty of unfairness. I articulate a criterion of fairness, discuss various types of miracles, and defend my conclusion against a variety of possible rejoinders.

In the literature of the philosophy of religion in the Judeo-Christian tradition, miracles have generally been understood to be temporary suspensions of one or more laws of nature accomplished by divine power. That is, in a miracle, God causes the occurrence of some process which, apart from the exercise of divine power, would have been impossible in that situation— impossible because that occurrence is not within the natural capacities of the creaturely entities involved. It is important to note that there is no term in the Old Testament or in the New which is equivalent to *miracle* in this sense.¹ Thus, our concern in this paper is with a concept which originated after biblical times, though one whose development was probably stimulated by reflection on certain biblical narratives. Hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, the term *miracle* will refer to the post-biblical concept indicated in the first sentence.²

The question of whether or not miracles in this sense occur or are even possible has generated a vast literature, as has the question of whether one could ever be justified in believing that a miracle had occurred. However, my concern in this paper is not with any of these issues (though I shall at one point touch lightly on one of them). Instead, I want to focus on what I shall call a moral argument against miracles. It attempts to show that today's believers in the actual occurrence of miracles typically must imply that God is guilty of a kind of unfairness—a quality which seems morally problematic and thus one which, I assume, believers would not want to attribute to God.³ My argument does not claim that all miracles, no matter when or in what pattern they occur, must involve unfairness on God's part; rather, it is an argument against a certain complex view of their purpose, location, and obviousness, a view which is rather common today among those who hold that miracles have occurred. However, because it is difficult to formulate another empirically plausible view of the purpose, location, and obviousness



of miracles, problems with the view I discuss pose a challenge for anyone who believes that miracles have actually occurred. Thus, it is an argument for the conclusion that even theists should not claim that God has actually worked miracles, lest they imply that God is unfair or be driven to claims about the occurrence of miracles which are empirically false or at least implausible.

The claim that the view of miracles to be discussed implies that God is unfair might suggest that my moral argument against miracles is simply another aspect of the problem of evil. In a way that suggestion is correct. But I believe that the claim that God has performed miracles raises problems with which some of today's most popular theodicies seem inadequate to deal. For example, many theodicies today treat natural evils as unavoidable results of the operation of a system of laws of nature. Humans suffer natural evils because of the joint operation of these laws and the choices humans make; e.g., a tornado touches down (because of the operation of certain laws of nature) on the spot where a person has chosen (for reasons that have nothing to do with that tornado) to locate his home, and the person is killed. People who advance such theodicies usually are not theological determinists, and they would not say that God intended to cause the death of that person while sparing his neighbor who lives a block away.⁴ But those who claim that God has miraculously saved someone's life must claim that God intended to save precisely that person's life and by not miraculously intervening did not intend to save the life of the person who died. Thus, the claim that God has worked a miracle implies that God has singled out certain persons for some benefit which many others do not receive; this is central to my claim that it implies that God is unfair.⁵ The balance of my paper consists of an articulation and defense of this claim.

No event would be categorized as a miracle unless it is unexpected and thought to have some good purpose; it would not be categorized as a violation of some law of nature unless it were unexpected, and it would not be attributed to divine agency unless its purpose were believed to be good.⁶ Among events which might be categorized as miracles, I find it helpful to distinguish two types, which I shall term *obvious miracles* and *inferred miracles*. When someone who categorizes an event as a miracle (thinks she) knows enough about the processes involved in the event and the relevant accepted laws of nature to determine that the former could not happen unless the latter were suspended, it is an obvious miracle. For example, if a person understands the account in Judges of the sun's standing still in response to Joshua's command to involve the Earth's instantaneously ceasing to rotate on its axis and that person also accepts the principle of inertia, she could determine that the former could not happen unless the latter were suspended. But if the categorizer does not have detailed enough information about the processes

involved in the event or the relevant laws of nature to determine that the event must have involved a suspension of some law of nature, it is an inferred miracle. In inferred miracles the categorizer infers that the event involved a suspension of some law of nature because the outcome is both unusual in comparison to the outcome of many apparently similar situations and better than the usual outcome (e.g., a person's recovering from an illness from whom few recover or walking away with virtually no injuries from a crash at 60 miles per hour). In other words the difference is this: in an obvious miracle there is a logical inconsistency between statements describing the event and statements describing some accepted laws of nature; however, in an inferred miracle one lacks a sufficiently detailed set of statements about the event or about relevant accepted laws of nature to yield a logical inconsistency, but one infers that there would be an inconsistency if both types of statements were sufficiently detailed.⁷

It is important to realize that justifying the claim that the latter are miracles involves a problem not faced by analogous claims about the former. In obvious miracles, there is a direct inconsistency between the belief that some process occurred in the world and the acceptance of some law of nature, but in inferred miracles that there is an inconsistency between some process and some law of nature is inferred on the basis of the unlikelihood of the outcome.⁸ Thus, someone who believes that an inferred miracle has occurred is usually relying on what might be termed "statistical evidence." The event deemed a miracle might be the "miraculous" recovery of someone diagnosed as having incurable terminal cancer; sometimes in such cases believers had prayed for the life of the individual. Or the event might be the emergence unhurt of a person involved in a terrible accident of a sort which is usually instantly fatal. In neither case does any human know both the relevant laws of nature and the initial conditions well enough to say that such an event violated any laws of nature. But both events are sufficiently unusual and unexpected (statistically unlikely) and sufficiently in line with what believers think a loving and merciful God might do that some believers may call them miracles. And some who call them that might mean the term not just in the sense of a wonderful and surprising event, but in the strong sense of the temporary suspension of a law of nature accomplished by the power of God.

Just as part of the reason for thinking that an event is an inferred miracle typically depends on comparing it with similar events, so does the reason for my charge that attributing this sort of miracle to God implies that God is unfair. The basis for my objection to this sort of miracle is the total absence of any pattern in the alleged miracles. For example, of all the people with what doctors believe to be terminal cancer, some "miraculously" (i.e., unexpectedly) recover; most do not. Those who recover are not confined to believers, nor even to believers and those who will eventually become believers.

Nor are those who recover confined to people for whom prayers were offered; nor does everyone for whom prayers were offered recover. Nor is there any other discernible pattern among those who recover, and certainly not any discernible pattern related to what believers hold to be important to God. Moreover, the problem is not merely the lack of any discernible overall pattern. More specifically, there may be two cases which are similar in all ways that seem relevant, yet in one case there will be a recovery (which some deem a miracle) and in the other case no recovery. The same is true for other allegedly miraculous events (of the inferred type): they fit no discernible pattern, and apparently similar cases have different outcomes. Several believers pray for highly unlikely outcomes; some receive what they prayed for in ways that seem sufficiently strange and unexpected that some people will claim that the outcome involved a miracle, but others do not receive what they prayed for.

My objection is based on this lack of any discernible pattern and the fact of different outcomes in similar cases, both of which suggest the unfairness of what God is alleged to have done. We should note that these two factors also suggest another possibility: that what are taken to be miracles are not, that instead they are the result of the operation of creaturely factors as yet not known or understood. Here the believer in miracles faces a dilemma. *Ex hypothesi*, he is speaking of events which are not clearly impossible in light of accepted laws of nature; rather, his reasons for regarding them as miracles are their unusualness and their conformity to what he takes to be divine purposes. But believers typically do not categorize all such events as miracles. Why not? Not doing so seems arbitrary and unjustified on their part. Note that my point is not the claim that God would be arbitrary to perform miracles in this fashion but that the believer is being arbitrary in identifying only a proper subset of events of this type as miracles. Note too that my point is not that raised with such force by Hume: the qualities used to identify the alleged miracle are not sufficient to justify the conclusion that the event truly involved a suspension of a law of nature (rather than an error on the observer's part or a mistaken belief about what the laws of nature are). Instead it is that even if these qualities are adequate to identify miracles, it is arbitrary to call only some events possessing these qualities miracles. However, the only way for a person to avoid this arbitrariness about which events are miracles and which are not is to say that all events with these features are miracles—e.g., all events in which a patient recovers after doctors had said that the situation is hopeless. Few believers in miracles have made a claim like this, but it is arbitrary to claim a miracle in relation to any proper subset of such events.

This difficulty would not arise in connection with events which are what I termed obvious miracles. Presumably any event which was believed to in-

volve a clear-cut inconsistency with some accepted law of nature and have an outcome of the sort believed to be consistent with God's purposes would be called a miracle by those believe that miracles occur. But believers are not inclined to label as miracles all events which meet the criteria on the basis of which they label some events miracles of what I termed the inferred type. Thus they seem to be guilty of arbitrariness in their own judgments.

Miracles as Involving Unfairness by God

Moreover, even if they eliminate this arbitrariness by identifying as miracles all the events which meet their precise criteria (whatever those be), the resulting view would still imply that God is guilty of unfairness. So too would a view which identifies as miracles all events which involve an apparent inconsistency between what is believed to have occurred and accepted laws of nature. In what sense do these views imply that God is unfair? They do so in the sense that they imply that God takes the initiative in doing for one person something qualitatively different from what God does for others in a similar condition. The phrase *takes the initiative* is intended to exclude God's acting in response to a person's doing something to which God had a policy of acting in a certain way. For example, suppose that God had promised to perform a requested miracle *for anyone* who included in the request the words "God, please do this miracle for me" (or their equivalent in other languages). Then if God performed the requested miracle in response to some person's properly phrased request, God would not be "taking the initiative."⁹ But if God chose someone for no reason at all and performed a miracle for that person, God would be taking the initiative. I assume that performing a miracle is qualitatively different from God's doing something which does not involve the temporary suspension of some law of nature. In light of the explanation of *takes the initiative*, the phrase about others in a similar condition may be redundant, but it serves as a reminder that the charge of unfairness is not leveled simply when it is alleged that God does something for one person that God does not do for another; the two people must be similar in respect to the quality which is the reason for the divine action. If there is no such quality, then it is unfair because God is arbitrarily (*ex hypothesi*, there is no reason) bestowing a benefit on one person which God does not bestow on another.

To this account of unfairness, at least two rejoinders might be offered. It might be claimed that God has reasons for selecting some people and not others; we shall explore that possibility later in the paper. The other rejoinder is that even if God does confer benefits on some people and not on others, this would not be unfair because God is not under any obligation to give humans something.¹⁰ I think the alleged reason is questionable. Although God was under no obligation to create us, God's own nature might preclude

God's treating us in certain ways once we had been created; for example, it would seem to deeply violate any concept of divine goodness if God were to create us or any sentient creatures with the intention that they should experience nothing but great suffering for their entire existence. But even if this consideration is not decisive, the Christian has an even stronger reason to resist implying that God treats people in such a way as to confer benefits on some and not on similar others. Christians assert that God loves humans; and if two similar people are in similar situations, it is not loving to treat them differently. So if it seems inappropriate to some Christians to apply concepts like *fair* and *unfair* to God, they may instead think of what is loving and unloving.

But this claim that it is not loving to treat similar people differently may be challenged: I may love both my children equally, yet give them different but equal goods. Yes, but this would be treating them similarly, for the goods are equal. I am assuming that the goods which believers have seen as conferred in a miracle on one person are typically not matched by an equal good conferred on another who is not the recipient of a miraculous benefit. (This assumption will be defended later when we consider the kinds of goods thought to be conferred in miracles.) If the two people are in other ways similar, then giving one and not the other a miraculous benefit is not treating them similarly. Another challenge might be that I would not be unfair to give a gift to one person I love and not to another whom I love equally. Perhaps not, provided what is given is a gift and not something needed. (But even in this case, how will one child feel if a parent gives a gift to a sibling and not to the first child even though there is no reason in the situation for the distinction—i.e., it was not either's birthday, neither had suffered any hurt, etc.?) However, when what is given is needed (e.g., restoration to health or even the knowledge of God) and when it lies within the resources of the giver to give what is needed to both people he loves, then it does seem to me unfair (or unloving) to give it to only one.¹¹

According to the argument thus far, it is unfair for God to perform miracles for some people and not for others, because in so doing God takes the initiative in conferring benefits upon some people involved in the miracle which others do not obtain. We have two remaining possible responses to this argument to be considered: (1) God has reasons for performing miracles for some people and not others, reasons adequate to undermine the charge of unfairness, and (2) there are no benefits given to some which are not given to others. To deal with these objections, we need to consider with greater specificity the goods which God allegedly confers in miracles.

In the Christian tradition two kinds of goods have been mentioned. One has to do with enhancing the recipient's knowledge of God or faith in God; the other has to do with various temporal goods, such as life, health, and other

goods which are needed or desired (financial help, offspring, etc.). I shall term a miracle which provides the first sort of good an epistemic miracle, and one which provides the second sort of good a practical miracle. Of course, a miracle could provide both sorts of goods; for example, a healing miracle performed by Jesus would be a practical miracle and could also highlight Jesus' role as a revealer of God and thus be an epistemic miracle.

Most Christian theologians and philosophers have stressed the epistemic function of miracles. They have held that miracles are intended to certify, to confirm, or in some way to reinforce or call attention to some divine revelation in order to increase the likelihood that the events (or the message¹²) be accepted as revelation.¹³ Though this view of the purpose of miracles is common in the post-biblical Christian tradition, it is not at all clear that most of the events in the Bible which the later tradition took to be miracles have exactly this purpose. Some clearly do—e.g., some demonstrations by Moses in his conflict with the Egyptian magicians (Ex. 7:8-13); Gideon's use of a fleece (Judges 6:36-40); Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:20-40); Jesus' healing of the paralytic (Mk. 2:10-12); and the claim that Jesus was attested by God "with mighty works and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). Most of the other events later seen as miracles do not seem intended to confirm the revelatory status of some *different* event or some person or some message. Instead, they are themselves revelatory of God (perhaps more specifically of God's power, concern, intentions, etc.). But if they are themselves revelatory rather than confirming something else as revelation, I would still classify them as having an epistemic purpose.

Theologians and philosophers have been most concerned with the epistemic benefits of miracles, but popular piety has been at least as concerned with practical miracles. Believers tell stories of healings (those at Lourdes are famous examples) and of other sorts of non-epistemic benefits conferred through miracles.

Could there be other purposes of miracles? I know of no way to rule out the possibility of there being other purposes, but there are problems with articulating this possibility. The purposes I suggested are those which have been advanced by believers in the occurrence of miracles who have reflected on them over the centuries. Alternative suggestions would have a burden of proof to show their congruity with some religious tradition. Moreover, the two purposes I have discussed encompass the primary purposes which believers think God has in actions toward humans: to bring them to a knowledge of and faith in God (the epistemic purpose) and to graciously restore them to wholeness.

Nor would it be a useful strategy for a believer in miracles to suggest that their purpose is unknown (or unknowable) by humans or that they have no purpose. For this would make miracles impossible in principle to identify.

For a miracle is not just an event which seems impossible given known laws of nature; it is an event of this sort brought about by divine power. But how can we recognize that the power is *divine* without identifying the purpose of the event and linking it to what we believe to be the sort of purposes God has? For we can identify a nonbodied agent like God only by the purposes we see manifested in God's activity. So we cannot be ignorant of the purpose of an event and rationally attribute it to divine agency.¹⁴ Therefore, those who believe that miracles have occurred would seem well advised to claim that they were performed for an epistemic or practical purpose or both.

Epistemic Miracles

According to the view of miracles being discussed, epistemic miracles are concentrated in, or perhaps even confined exclusively to, periods of time which might be called revelatory periods. In Christianity such periods were, e.g., the times of the Exodus, of the Old Testament prophets, and of Jesus and the beginnings of the church. In times other than these, epistemic miracles are believed to occur either not at all or rarely.¹⁵

Before examining this view in detail, it is important to recognize that there are strong reasons for a believer in the actual occurrence of miracles with this primary purpose to hold a view like this of their temporal location. For many Christians and most non-Christians would say that they had never observed any miracles. Of course, those who do not believe that there exists a God who can work miracles would certainly say they had never observed any; but such people typically do not even admit that they have observed any events which seem impossible to explain in light of accepted laws of nature (which we might call *candidate events*).¹⁶ Therefore, today either miracles do not occur at all, or they occur in such a way that many people do not believe that they or even candidate events occur. But there would be no point to a miracle with an epistemic purpose which was not such as to be thought a miracle (or at least a candidate event) by virtually all observers.¹⁷ Thus, claiming that miracles with this purpose are confined to (or at least concentrated in) revelatory periods not including the present is an understandable strategy to explain the paucity of such miracles today.

Moreover, we must exercise care in evaluating the claims of those who say that they have observed such miracles. We must first be sure that they are using *miracle* in the sense of this paper. For as we noted earlier, sometimes people will apply the term *miracle* to an event simply because it is unexpected and constitutes or accomplishes some important good, without any serious consideration of whether the event involves the suspension of accepted laws of nature (as opposed, say, to involving processes for which we have not established specific enough laws of nature to determine whether the processes require suspensions of any of them). Many such events would not be obvious

miracles and might not be miracles at all in the sense that term has in this paper.

However, if after this clarification there remain some who would claim that obvious miracles with an epistemic purpose occur today, that would not constitute a serious problem for my argument. For my objection to the claim that epistemic miracles occur is that God's performing epistemic miracles for some people and not for others would involve unfairness on God's part. So even if God does perform obvious epistemic miracles for some people today, the large number of people for whom no obvious miracles (or candidate events) are performed would still constitute an adequate ground for my objection.¹⁸

The problem with this understanding of the purpose and location of epistemic miracles is that it implies that the eyewitnesses of the miracles had a decided advantage which many other people did not have. For they would have experienced an event designed to enhance the development of faith in them but others would not have. If it would have been unreasonable to expect them to believe that certain events were revelatory without the confirmation provided by an obvious miracle, it is unreasonable to expect other people to believe that the events were revelatory unless they see miracles confirming the revelatory status of those events or have grounds as strong as the eyewitnesses had to believe that the miraculous events occurred as described. A similar conclusion follows if the miraculous events are held to be revelatory rather than to be confirmation of the revelatory status of something else: if it would not be reasonable to expect eyewitnesses to believe that certain events were revelations of God unless they involved an obvious miracle, then it would not be reasonable to expect non-eyewitnesses to believe that they were revelations of God unless they had grounds as strong as the eyewitnesses to believe that the miraculous events occurred as described. In order for others to have equally strong grounds, either they would have to see events which are as clearly miraculous and which confirm a message endorsing the earlier events,¹⁹ or they would have to have extremely well documented eyewitness accounts of the events which the eyewitnesses saw.²⁰ For God to fail to provide other people with such grounds is for God to treat those people unfairly: God gave the eyewitnesses an epistemic advantage denied to other (potential) believers.

To the claim that performing epistemic miracles for some people and not for others is unfair, it might be objected that not every giving of an epistemic advantage entails unfairness. I may tell a secret to one person and not to another without being unfair to the other. True, but not if (1) the secret concerns a matter about which the people have an equal, very great need for the information and (2) there are no grounds for me to treat the first differently from the second, particularly if I claim to love them both. And Chris-

tians typically hold that what was revealed in (or confirmed by) epistemic miracles is very important for a person's knowledge of God and faith relation to God, which are matters of the greatest import for everyone. But, an objector might continue, even if both people do desperately need the information, telling something to one person and not to another need not entail unfairness if I know that the second person will soon come to believe or at least hear what I told the first without my telling her. True again, but we are speaking of matters which many people never even hear about. Moreover, the objector's suggestion overlooks something crucial: the difference under discussion is not just between those who are told something and those who are not; it is between those who are told something accompanied by a miracle and those who, if they hear it at all, do not receive an accompanying miracle or equivalently clear divine confirmation. Perhaps an important reason why many hear without believing is that they do not have the clear confirmation given by epistemic miracles; in any event, if the religious message to some people is accompanied by obvious miracles and to others it is not, the latter have been placed at a disadvantage. Thus, none of the objections considered in this paragraph provides a way to save God from the charge of unfairness in giving certain people an epistemic advantage.

My response in the previous paragraph assumes that what is confirmed in an epistemic miracle is information which everyone needs equally—e.g., information on such matters as what one must do to be saved or to be rightly related to God. This is what traditionally has been said to be confirmed.²¹ But an objector might try to undercut the charge of unfairness against God by claiming that not everyone needs equally the information conveyed in epistemic miracles. For example, one might claim that people experience epistemic miracles because God wishes them to do special tasks. The information might be that God wishes them to do the task. Here a classic example would be the fleece of Gideon; the account in Judges 6:36-40 might well be interpreted as indicating that God performed two miracles to confirm for Gideon that God wanted him to lead the army of Israel against its enemies. Or it may be generally available information which is specially confirmed because God wishes the person to do some extraordinarily difficult task; perhaps the first disciples were permitted to see the risen Jesus because they were to be the first leaders of the church.

This response does offer promise of undercutting the charge of unfairness by providing a reason why God works epistemic miracles for the direct benefit of only some people. But it faces at least two serious difficulties: (1) the information confirmed by what are traditionally thought to be central epistemic miracles (e.g., those done by Jesus to confirm his status) has traditionally not been held to be generally available nor discoverable without special revelation and (2) many of what seem to be epistemic miracles do not

seem to fit this pattern. For example, Elijah's victory over the priests of Baal (I Kings 18:20-40)—one of the most dramatic epistemic miracles in the Bible—was done for the benefit of ordinary Israelites, of whom there is no reason to think that a special task was required. Some of the miracles done by Jesus, which have traditionally been seen as having revelatory (epistemic) purposes, were done to and in the presence of people of whom no special task was required.²² The presence of these two difficulties shows that this response will require significant work if it is to have any hope of providing a defense of the fairness of God in relation to what have been traditionally regarded as epistemic miracles.

Another sort of difficulty for this proposal is created by the fact that many believers who faced tasks of great difficulty were not granted any confirmation through epistemic miracles—or at least they never claimed to have witnessed any. This difficulty does not provide a counterexample to the thesis, for the thesis at most claims that all epistemic miracles were done for those who had some extraordinary task, not the converse. But it does raise the issue of fairness in another way: is it fair that God grant a confirmatory miracle to some on whom an extraordinarily difficult task is laid and not to others? Nor can it be said that God knew that a confirmatory miracle would not be needed in all those cases in which none was given, for not all believers faced with tasks of great difficulty actually undertake them.

Sometimes it is said that though later (potential) believers lack the advantage of experiencing epistemic miracles, they have a different, compensating advantage: they have seen the spread of the Church. The spread of the Church is alleged to be confirmation of the truth of its proclamation. But it would provide no confirmation for potential believers at times and places when the Church is not known to have spread—e.g., during the second century and in those mission fields where the potential believers are not acquainted with facts about the growth of the Church. Thus, in relation to these potential believers even if not in relation to us, the growth of the Church would not provide an alternative to miracles as grounds to consider the Christian proclamation true. Moreover, there are other religious groups which have also spread widely and which have considerably different views from those of Christians. Thus this alleged advantage affords the potential believer no grounds for becoming a Christian rather than an adherent of one of these other religions.

Moreover, sociologists and psychologists can provide a wide variety of other reasons for the growth of various religious groups including the Christian community. These reasons involve such things as the power of deeply held beliefs to influence one's own behavior and the beliefs of others, tribal and national loyalties, financial considerations, the example of esteemed others, etc. I do not know of any way to show that such reasons do not (nor

that they do) completely explain the growth of the Christian community. But such reasons do provide grounds to doubt the claim that the growth of the Church provides rational confirmation of the truth of its proclamation, and they probably make it not irrational to believe that the growth of the Church can be explained without assuming the truth of its doctrines. Thus, I conclude that if the purpose of miracles is to provide rational grounds for believing that revelation occurred, then God treated the eyewitnesses to these miracles in a specially favored way which is not duplicated or equalled for later potential believers.

But perhaps it is wrong to construe the purpose of miracles as being the provision of rational grounds to believe that a revelation occurred; it might be claimed that the intended force of miracles is emotional or psychological rather than rational.²³ That is, perhaps miracles occurred not in order to rationally certify the revelation, but in order to provide a powerful, though ultimately non-rational, inducement to accept something as revelation. This alternative, however, fares no better than the previous one. If God could not expect many (any?) eyewitnesses of a prophet or Jesus to accept the revelation without the motivation provided by a miracle, then why should God expect anyone today to do so without similar motivation? Again, the suggestion that the success of the Christian community provides an alternative motivation fails for the same reasons as it failed earlier in relation to the thesis that miracles were intended to provide rational confirmation for the revelation.

We should not be surprised that the problems with saying that miracles are intended to provide rational grounds for accepting a revelation also occur when it is said that miracles are intended to provide a psychological, but non-rational, inducement to accept the revelation. For those problems had to do not with the adequacy of miracles as rational grounds (or as emotional inducement), but with what I claimed was the unfairness of God's providing some people and not other people with these grounds. Thus, the problems would hold no matter how miracles are said to promote acceptance of the revelation.

It might, however, seem that there is a way miracles could play a role in bringing people to accept the revelation without being liable to this criticism. Suppose that miracles during revelatory periods are intended to motivate not the *acceptance* of the revelation but only its *serious consideration*. Once again, it might seem legitimate to raise the same objection: why should God expect us today to seriously consider something when God would not expect contemporaries of the event to seriously consider it without a miracle? But if miracles are intended to motivate only the serious consideration of the revelation, then the growth of the Church might provide something of an alternative. As long as there are not too many successful religious commu-

nities, that a particular community is known to have been successful might provide some reason for seriously considering what it proclaims, along with what is proclaimed by other communities known to have been successful. But this alternative would still face the problem of there being some potential believers for whom this could not be expected to provide a motivation—*viz.*, those who do not know about the success of the Church; and even for those who know of the Church's growth, the motivating power of that knowledge could still be legitimately weakened by knowledge of sociological and psychological factors which contributed to the growth of the Church. Moreover, if the growth of the Church is to replace miracles as something which motivates a person to seriously consider Christian claims about revelation (or if that growth is itself a miracle which is intended to do this), then the splintering of the Christian community into different groups with different views about the alleged revelation will confuse the person about exactly what is to be seriously considered.

There are other problems with any view which makes the purpose of epistemic miracles to be the provision of anything less than rational grounds for accepting the revelation. If their purpose is to provide emotional inducement to accept the revelation, then God is tricking or conning people into belief. Of course, the belief is (on this view) true, but people are nevertheless being brought to believe in a way which we would ordinarily condemn or at least question. While some thinkers (e.g., William James) might contend that the use of emotional inducements is legitimate on matters on which adequate rational evidence cannot be obtained, *ex hypothesi* this is not true in the present case. For the view under discussion assumes that obvious miracles have occurred. And if they have occurred, there is no reason why they could not provide rational grounds and not merely emotional inducement. The variation that takes the purpose of miracles to be to motivate the serious consideration of the revelation faces the additional problem that once one has given the revelation serious consideration, one still must decide on some other grounds whether or not to accept it. Since *ex hypothesi* the miracle is not these other grounds, they must be available even without the miracle.

Indeed, if miracles do not provide rational grounds for accepting a revelation, then if there are any rational grounds, they must be something other than the miracles. Presumably the grounds would be something like the inherent plausibility of what is proclaimed or its plausibility in light of certain other factors.²⁴ But whatever they are, they are available without the miracles.

Thus, I conclude that if miracles are intended to play any role in rationally grounding faith or in inducing one either to have faith or to give Christianity serious consideration, then potential believers who observed the miracles are in a favored position in relation to other potential believers. Therefore, I hold that God has treated some people unfairly unless for all people (1) God causes

events whose status as miracles is equally clear or (2) God gives grounds for believing that the miracles occurred which are as strong as those possessed by the original eyewitnesses. I take it that there is universal agreement that condition (1) is not met; and I also take it that later believers do not have grounds to believe that miracles have occurred which are as strong as those of the eyewitnesses. While there is disagreement about how strong the evidence provided by the Bible is, no one would contend that it is as strong as that which the eyewitnesses had.

Perhaps it will be objected that no evidence about the occurrence of an event could be as strong as that provided by eyewitness observation, so God could not possibly provide later potential believers with evidence as strong as that provided to eyewitnesses. But this will not save God from the charge of unfairness, for if it is so, then God could have continued to perform miracles. If God did not do so, at least God could have made the documentary evidence regarding the occurrence of the event strong enough that obvious historiographical objections would be precluded. For example, God could have caused there to be eyewitness accounts written immediately after the alleged events, perhaps even accounts by hostile witnesses, such as Pharaoh for the events in Moses' time and the Jewish leaders for events in Jesus' time. If God caused miracles for the sake of potential believers at the time of the revelations, then God could and should have done more for later potential believers. If God did not do more, then God does seem guilty of unfairness.

This concludes my discussion of the theory that God performs epistemic miracles for only certain people. I have argued that this theory puts the eyewitnesses of the miracles in a greatly favored position. Note that I have not argued that it is unfair for God to make certain events revelatory even though only certain people can directly experience those events. Rather, my argument is that (1) accompanying these events with obvious, often dramatic miracles (or having such miracles as constituents of revelatory events) for the purpose of rationally certifying them or inducing faith or inducing consideration of them puts the eyewitnesses in a specially favored position, (2) putting people in such a position is unfair unless God performs equally clear miracles for later potential believers or gives them something of equal evidential or motivational value, and (3) God has done neither.

Before ending this section, however, perhaps I should expand on my claim that I have not argued that it is unfair for God to make certain events revelatory even though only certain people can experience them. Though I have not argued for this thesis, it might seem difficult for me to avoid holding it as well as my thesis about miracles. But whether or not I can avoid it depends on God's role in the revelatory events. So that they do not fall under the strictures of my thesis about miracles, we shall have to assume that the revelatory events neither are themselves miracles nor are confirmed by mir-

acles. Then their occurrence is the result of natural processes, yet *ex hypothesi* they also manifest God. Why? If our theory is that God's being manifested depends on an additional divine activity of some sort in relation to this event which God does not exercise in relation to other qualitatively similar events, then this understanding would seem to imply that God is unfair. On the other hand, suppose our theory is that whenever events have certain properties, God is manifest in them. This theory would not involve God's being unfair, for it would not involve God's taking the initiative to treat some people differently from others who are qualitatively similar.

But it might be objected that even this latter theory suggests a kind of unfairness, for not everyone has heard about these revelatory events, so some people are specially privileged. But the fact that some people have not heard about these revelatory events would show that God is unfair only if the fact that some people had heard and others had not heard depended on some divine initiative in which God treats qualitatively similar people differently, and there is no reason to think that there has been such an initiative. That some people have access to these revelatory events and others do not is the result of the normal operation of creaturely processes. Nevertheless, it might be objected, some people have access to saving divine revelation and others do not. This situation may not be the result of unfairness in the sense defined in this paper, but it still does not seem right in some important sense. I sympathize with the sentiment underlying this objection. But it seems not right only if others do not have access to some saving divine revelation, not necessarily the one recognized by Christians. Whether or not they do is disputed, and we cannot pursue the issue here. But enough has been said to distinguish my thesis about miracles from the issue raised by the claim that revelation is given in historical events.

Practical Miracles

Practical miracles is my term for miracles which are intended to confer some benefit not directly related to the knowledge of God or faith in God. The benefit could be, e.g., healing, preserving lives, or meeting other human needs and desires. Since these need not have any epistemic purpose, their being miracles need not be obvious to anyone. However, as with epistemic miracles, the claim that God performs such miracles implies that God is unfair, for God is taking the initiative in conferring benefits on some people which God does not confer on other similar people in similar circumstances. Now we need to deal with two possible lines of response to this problem with claiming that God performs practical miracles.

The first response is that there is no unfairness because there are no benefits given in miracles to one person which are not given to others. Taken at face value this claim seems just plain false. As we noted earlier, for everyone on

whom it is claimed that God bestowed benefits through a miracle, there are apparently similar people in similar situations on whom no similar benefit is bestowed, either in a miracle or in the ordinary course of events. Not everyone who is terminally ill unexpectedly recovers, not everyone who is hungry receives food (or the means to obtain food), etc.

So perhaps it will be claimed not that similar benefits are given, but that appropriate benefits are given. One terminally ill person is miraculously healed; another very similar person is not because God knows that she would suffer even more or she would become wicked if she were healed. Thus God is doing for each what is most beneficial for each. Because this response makes claims about humanly unknowable hypotheticals, I do not think there is any way to conclusively disprove it, but certain considerations make it extremely implausible. We know of too many cases in which human lives are shattered by some natural or moral evil to think it likely that the most loving thing for God to do in most situations of this sort is to let the creaturely world run its course in these cases without divine intervention.²⁵ For example, a baby suffers from some disease which leaves it a near vegetable or suffers from some abuse which leaves it severely brain-damaged and physically crippled. Such tragedies may well leave the baby without the capacity ever to develop a genuinely human spirituality. And it surely is not true that in all such cases the child develops in some way which is more wonderful than any of the ways the child would likely have developed if it had not suffered from the disease or abuse; nor is it always (or even nearly always) the case that humans around the abused child respond in loving ways and grow spiritually to a degree unlikely without the tragedy. Sometimes such things happen, but far from always.

Nor is it plausible to say that God allows the tragedy to happen to the child because God knows that otherwise the child will grow up and do great evil. If this were the reason for God to allow the tragedy, then why did God not allow or cause some similar tragedy to happen to people who did in fact grow up and do great evil—e.g., to people like Hitler? I believe that any proposed justification for God's not intervening miraculously will similarly fall prey to the objection that it opens God to the charge of unfairness, of treating relevantly similar cases dissimilarly.

The appearance of unfairness is only strengthened if God sometimes intervenes miraculously in response to prayer, as some people believe. Again, the problem is that God sometimes does so and sometimes does not do so in situations which are apparently similar. That these are situations involving a request by one whom God loves only compounds the problem, for it is not loving to refuse the reasonable requests of someone whom one loves. But what if the requests are not reasonable? Then God should not have granted the requests in other similar situations. If the cases are similar, it is hard to

see that one request is reasonable and another is not. Thus, belief that miracles occur in this way involves attributing an unfairness to God's activities, which is inconsistent with the claim that God loves humans.

At this point the second line of response might be advanced: it might be claimed that cases which appear similar to us might not be similar. Two people might utter the same words in a prayer, but one mean them and the other not. And two outcomes might not appear similar to us but might be similar in their significance in the lives of those in whom they occur. I freely grant that we may sometimes be in error in our judgments about similarities. The question is whether it is likely that we are wrong about similarities as often as it appears that similar prayers are responded to in very dissimilar ways. Moreover, recovering and not recovering from an illness appear so dissimilar that the lives and personalities of the people involved would have to be very different for these outcomes to be no less similar. So I find it very implausible to think that we are often wrong in our judgments about similarities on these matters.

Suppose, however, it is suggested not that we are usually wrong in our judgments of similarities which we can discern, but that there is some other underlying consistency which we do not discern but which some day (say, in heaven) we will understand. We have no evidence that there is such an underlying consistency, though I know of no way to give a conclusive proof that there is not. But there is a moral argument against this suggestion too. For it would seriously handicap believers if God were to leave them ignorant of the principles of God's actions in matters which so deeply affect both them and others in the world in which they are to embody God's will. If there is some kind of a situation in which God will do something miraculous, then for believers not to know this makes it impossible for them to act appropriately in this situation. Thus God should inform them, and clearly God has not done so. (The postulated underlying consistency is *ex hypothesi* one of whose basis we are ignorant.) But perhaps God does not inform us of the reason because it is too complex for us to understand. We shall consider this possibility in the final section of the paper.

Miracles and Religious Ambiguity

There is one other line of defense which might be offered by those who claim that God has performed some miracles, either epistemic or practical. A person might argue that only in what John Hick has termed a "religiously ambiguous" context can people choose freely whether or not to serve God. In such a context suffering must be more or less randomly distributed; in a world in which certain human qualities were regularly connected with miraculous divine interventions, many people would be motivated to turn to God by desire for those benefits rather than by genuine love for God.²⁶ Because

people's freely turning to God out of love is an overriding value, providing the context needed to make this possible is also of great value. Since the existence of a regular connection between certain creaturely qualities and miraculous divine actions would be inconsistent with that value, God should not provide it. Therefore, either miracles must occur in what seems to be a random fashion, or they should not occur at all. And perhaps there are good reasons for God to perform some miracles.

I will grant, for the sake of argument, the claim about the sort of context required for a free human response to God. But why should God perform any miracles at all? Many people do come to faith apart from miracles, and many people (at least seem to) go through life without any direct benefit from practical miracles. Why should God perform miracles for anyone? We have looked at the reasons which have been proposed and found them inadequate. To suggest that God might have good reasons which we do not know is an appeal to our possible ignorance; it can never be decisively refuted, but several points in this paper make it implausible. First, if the context of religious ambiguity is to be maintained, any miracles God performs cannot be obvious ones. If a defender of miracles has appealed to religious ambiguity as necessary to achieving a good of overriding value, he would be guilty of a serious inconsistency if he affirmed that God performed obvious miracles for anyone.²⁷ Yet some who make this appeal do believe that narratives in the Bible accurately describe obvious miracles performed by God. For example, if accepted in all their details, the narratives of Elijah's dramatic confrontation with the high priests of Baal and of the resurrection appearances of Jesus would be obvious miracles which destroy religious ambiguity. Defenders of the importance of a religiously ambiguous context should be concerned about such accounts, particularly the latter.²⁸ Stress on the importance of religious ambiguity does not imply that there cannot be any events which manifest God, but it does imply that their manifesting God cannot be the consequence of an obvious divine involvement; it must be discernible only to the eye of faith.

What about inferred miracles? These are not obvious miracles, so they would not necessarily destroy the religious ambiguity of the context. But why should God miraculously intervene? If two people are in qualitatively similar situations, there would be no relevant difference in their situations on the basis of which God might decide to miraculously benefit one rather than the other. If we say that there might be differences unknown to us on which God bases the decision, we must ask whether or not these differences involve matters generally thought to be of concern to God (e.g., the moral qualities of the persons, or their potentialities for contributing positively to their communities). If they do, then it seems empirically unlikely that God bases decisions about miraculous help on such qualities; as we have noted earlier,

people who are qualitatively similar in ways we think important to God do not regularly have similar unlikely things happen to them. Indeed, if similar unlikely things happened to them, our situation would not be religiously ambiguous. On the other hand, if the differences do not involve matters generally thought to be of concern to God, then either God is helping people because they have qualities which God does not particularly value (which is a rather strange activity to be attributed to God) or God values qualities in humans which God has not told us about. This last possibility is also somewhat strange. It suggests that in addition to the qualities God has told us to develop, there are other valued qualities God has not told us about. But why should God keep us in ignorance if these qualities are important to God?

Perhaps it might be objected that my line of argument in the previous paragraph assumes that people's possessing certain qualities is a sufficient condition for God to help them. Instead, it might be claimed that people's possessing certain qualities provides a reason for God to help some people, but God does not help all with such qualities (perhaps to help preserve religious ambiguity). But then the decision about whom to help among those who possess that quality is arbitrary. For either there are sufficient reasons, or the decision about whom to help among the group in question is arbitrary.²⁹ Perhaps it will be replied that God arbitrarily chooses some people to help in order to provide a revelatory foretaste of the future overcoming of the evils which afflict people. But this suggestion attributes to God the motive not of helping the particular people aided but of using the help to reveal God. However, we have already seen that on the assumption of the importance of religious ambiguity, this revelation cannot involve obvious miracles but instead must be discernible only to the eye of faith. But the eye of faith can discern God even in non-miraculous creaturely events. So God's helping people by non-obvious miracles seems unnecessary; it involves arbitrarily choosing people to receive a miraculous benefit which is not necessary for any known purpose of God. And this does seem to meet my criteria for unfairness without proposing any compensating value.

Perhaps the problem with understanding the basis on which God decides whom to help is not that the properties themselves are too complex for us to grasp, but rather that the connection between the miraculous event and the occurrence of the later event with the desired properties is too complex for us to see. For example, perhaps God miraculously helped someone fifty years ago so that there would occur some recognizable good today; we today may see the good, but we do not see the connection between the two events.³⁰ Since this proposal appeals to unknown connections, I know of no decisive counterargument, but I can explain why I find it implausible. Christians generally believe that (one of) God's most important goal(s) for humans is that they respond in faith to God, and it seems implausible to think that any particular miracle or indeed all miracles together are necessary to make such

a response possible. They certainly are not needed as an evidential basis for faith, for people come to faith without this basis.³¹ Nor does it seem plausible to think that they are needed to maintain a physical and/or social environment in which people can come to faith; surely ordinary laws of nature and people operating within them are adequate to do that. And if it is said that they are needed to bring about certain particular events (e.g., certain events in the lives of particular individuals or a certain state of a society), one must wonder why these events are deemed important enough to merit a miraculous intervention by God when other terrible events were allowed to happen (e.g., the Holocaust, mass starvations, etc.). It seems implausible to think that events of the sort which are said to be practical miracles (healing a particular individual or meeting some other need or desire of an individual) are the only or best way to prevent greater evils (or promote greater goods) than the evils which God has permitted (and it would be strange for God to permit greater evils and prevent lesser ones). Of course, the implausibility is relative to what we know or have reason to believe, and perhaps we are just too ignorant on such matters to be able to reach a conclusion in which we can place any justified confidence. So let us consider finally the defense based on our ignorance.

For the defender of miracles always has this as a fall-back position: God chooses people to receive miraculous benefits for reasons known to God and not to us humans, or God chooses people arbitrarily because doing so makes possible the achieving of some divine goals unknown to us. As I said earlier, I know of no way to disprove this suggestion conclusively. But I would ask the defender of miracles to consider why she is so sure that miracles have in fact occurred. If she cannot give a coherent account of miracles without making claims about our ignorance central, perhaps that indicates not the limitations on her understanding of God but rather the incorrectness of her belief that God has performed miracles. In addition to all the much discussed evidential problems involved in justifying the claim that God has performed miracles, I have tried to show that there are serious moral problems involved in trying to give an empirically plausible account of when and why God has performed miracles. If we knew for certain that God had in fact performed miracles, then we would have to assume that there is some solution to the problems even if we are ignorant of it. But if the claim that God has performed miracles is itself regarded as defeasible, then the problems I have raised may make it seem more justified simply to abandon the claim.³²

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NOTES

1. The nearest terms in the New Testament are "sign," "wonder," and "mighty deed" (in Greek, *semeia*, *teras*, and *dynamis*, respectively). Each of these terms refers to an

event, often unexpected and/or wonderful, in which God is (believed to be) manifested without implying that the event involves a suspension of laws of nature as we understand them today. However, some of the events to which they refer, if certain details happened as they are described, do seem to have aspects which involve such suspensions. (The information about New Testament concepts is taken from Bernard W. Anderson, "Signs and Wonders," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Buttrick, *et al.* [New York: Abingdon Press, 1962], Vol. IV, pp. 348-51.)

2. Since in the New Testament there is no exact equivalent to *miracle* in our sense of the term, some might contend that I should not build into the concept of a miracle the requirement that it involve a temporary suspension of some law of nature. But it was not I who built it in; that was done by numerous philosophers and theologians in our Western tradition. And this requirement is central to the problem I am discussing in this paper: a miracle in this sense implies a type of divine activity qualitatively different from the sort of divine activity present in most events; I will argue that such activity would constitute a kind of unfairness by God. My criticism would not apply if *miracle* is understood to be simply an event which some person takes as manifesting God but in which God does not suspend any laws of nature.

3. Because this moral argument does hinge on the assumption that we should not attribute morally problematic qualities to God, it will have no force against those who believe that God transcends morality or that God follows moral principles which transcend our grasp. I will not try to defend my assumption in this paper, for to do so would take me too far afield. I shall, however, note that I think that most of those who believe that God performs miracles would agree with my assumption.

4. I admit that the problem I am raising about miracles is just one aspect of the problem of evil for theological determinists and anyone else who would claim that God intends everything that happens to every person. For them, miracles raise no special problem. However, many theists today would not claim this; I shall argue that for those theists miracles pose a distinct problem of evil.

5. It is clear that the charge of implying that God is unfair in this sense cannot justly be leveled at theodicies of the sort mentioned above. For they imply that a person's suffering or not suffering evil is the result of the operation of creaturely forces and is not specifically intended by God. At certain points in the paper I will indicate in more detail the way the unfairness which I am discussing differs from certain other sorts of apparent evil which may seem similar.

6. Of course, the attribution of any of these properties is relative to the beliefs of the attributer. If an event did involve a suspension of some law of nature but an observer were ignorant of the law and of the sorts of processes which occur in accordance with it, she would not recognize that the event involved a suspension of a law of nature and might not find the event unexpected. Likewise, if the observer did not see the purpose of the event as good, she would not attribute it to God. This is presumably why the Pharisees in the New Testament are represented as saying of certain wondrous deeds of Jesus that they were done by the power of Beelzebub.

7. In drawing the distinction this way, I do not wish to imply that there are not any inferences involved in the thoughts which lead one to the conclusion that an obvious miracle occurred. In particular, there may be inferences involved in arriving at the reconstruction of the process which constitutes the event and in arriving at the laws of

nature which one accepts. But once these two intellectual tasks have been completed, then if there is a logical inconsistency between the statements describing the event and those describing some accepted law of nature and if the event is categorized as a miracle (rather than, e.g., an occasion to rethink some law of nature), then the event is an obvious miracle; if not and the event is categorized as a miracle, then it is an inferred miracle.

8. Of course, no such inference need be made if one means by *miracle* simply an unexpected event which a person interprets as manifesting God, but which need not involve any suspension of a law of nature. But not even an atheist need deny that miracles in this sense occur.

9. I am using this purely as a simple illustration to explicate “taking the initiative;” I do not mean to suggest that I think God does or should follow such a policy. If God were to adopt a policy of responding with a miracle to anyone who met a certain condition, the condition would presumably involve the religious commitment of the person and probably the content of the request etc.

10. A third possible rejoinder is that moral terms are not applied to God and humans in a sufficiently univocal sense to make possible judgments such as that God is unfair. I cannot pursue this complex issue, but I will reply that the burden of proof seems to me to fall heavily on the one who makes this rejoinder. For I take it that Christians have applied moral terms to God and have thought it important to believe that God is good (and just etc.) in a sense similar to that in which humans are. Even in primary religious material such as the Bible, writers wonder how God can be just, and the observations which evoke this question are similar to those which would raise this question about humans—e.g., how it can be just for God to permit the good to suffer and the wicked to prosper. This issue is raised in many psalms, and why a good man suffers is the question which underlies the Book of Job.

11. The concern expressed abstractly in this paragraph was voiced with far more feeling by Lewis B. Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary:

My problem was a nagging anxiety I felt about touting miraculous healings of assorted bearable ailments as signals of God’s power and God’s desire to heal our suffering in a world of chock-full of suffering that never comes close to getting healed. It was a feeling I could not shake . . . a stubborn, uneasy feeling about the fittingness, even the decency, of celebrating far and wide the miraculous healing of a relatively few ailments within a world endemically infected by enormous, intractable, unalleviated suffering. It felt to me like proclaiming that God is alive and well in the world because you survived an airplane crash in which everyone else perished. (*The Reformed Journal*, February 1989, p.14 [the entire article occupies pp. 14-21].)

Although Smedes’ concern seems to focus on the alleged inappropriateness of touting and celebrating healings, and mine on the alleged unfairness of God’s healing some and not others, it seems to me that the concerns are similar. (I am indebted to George Mavrodes for bringing this article to my attention.)

12. I will not continue to mention this alternative explicitly, but I intend it to apply in the following discussion.

13. Various important Christian authors have claimed that God causes miracles for this purpose. For example, Thomas Aquinas says that God does miracles “for the profit of

mankind” in two ways: “one for the confirmation of the truth preached, another to demonstrate the holiness of someone whom God wishes to propose to men as an example of virtuous living” (*Summa Theologiae* [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company], 2a2ae, q. 187, art. 2). John Calvin holds that miracles are done in order to confirm the divine authority of certain people and the divinity of Christ (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960] I, viii, 5.). He also says that they are sometimes done to strengthen the faith of some people (*ibid.*, IV, xiv, 18). According to Richard Swinburne, one very important reason for accepting an alleged prophet as genuine and the prophet’s message as a revelation from God is that the giving of the message is accompanied by miracles and that the prophet accurately predicts events whose occurrence requires a miracle (*Faith and Reason* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], pp. 185, 189f.). Though Swinburne does not think that these are the only reasons for accepting the prophet and the message, he does think them very important in the overall case for such acceptance. (The other reasons are given on 183f.) But only the ways which involve miracles could give one reason to think that the prophet has knowledge of matters beyond ordinary human ken. The import Swinburne gives to miracles is well conveyed by the following quotation: “For another revelation to be more probable than the Christian revelation, it would have to be backed by a more evident miracle, or be backed by a miracle no less evident but containing more evidently true and deep teaching, or perhaps, be backed by a miracle somewhat less evident but containing teaching far more evidently true and deep” (pp. 192f.). Thus, Swinburne does suggest that a central purpose for miracles is to rationally certify the occurrence of revelation.

14. It might be suggested that perhaps we could know the immediate purpose of God’s doing something (e.g., to help someone) but not know God’s further purpose (e.g., why God helped this person rather than someone else). I shall deal with this suggestion at greater length near the end of the paper. Here I will simply note that the only immediate purposes in terms of which some event has been seen as a miracle are what I termed epistemic or practical.

15. The account of miracles given by Thomas Aquinas suggests that they might occur at times other than during these revelatory periods, for he says they occur “for the confirmation of the truth preached . . . [and] to demonstrate the holiness of someone whom God wishes to propose to men as an example of virtuous living” (*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q. 187, art. 2). Calvin implies that miracles done to confirm the divine authority of people and the divinity of Christ have ceased; he writes:

It was fitting that the new preaching of the gospel and the new Kingdom of Christ should be illumined and magnified by unheard-of and extraordinary miracles. When the Lord ceased from these, he did not utterly forsake his church, but declared that the magnificence of his Kingdom and the dignity of his word had been excellently enough disclosed. (*Institutes*, IV, xix, 6.)

I could find no explicit comment on whether miracles done to strengthen the faith of some people also have ceased, though Calvin’s great stress on the sufficiency of the miracles to confirm the revelation that culminated in Christ might suggest that he would think that no miracles were needed thereafter for this second purpose. I think that Swinburne’s view suggests that miracles will occur with greatest frequency in revelatory times, though I do not think it implies that they will occur only then.

16. I am overlooking events observed by scientists which occasion questions about whether the accepted laws of nature are adequate, but which no one is tempted to term miracles—e.g., the observation of traces on photographic plates which led to the discovery of radioactivity.

17. If the event were designed so as to be thought a miracle (or candidate event) by only a small subset of the observers, then the question of fairness would arise in relation to those for whom it is not designed to be seen as a miracle (or candidate event).

18. It certainly is logically possible that obvious miracles (or at least candidate events) occur today if they occurred in the past. They could even be highly public. They could occur annually: e.g., each New Year's Day one well-known saintly person who had died during the previous year and whose death was very well documented could return to life. Or God could cause the same audible message to be heard by every person in the world in his or her own native language at the same time and with no detectible source for the message. Such public miracles do not occur today. Nor do most people experience more private events which are obvious miracles or candidate events.

19. Alternatively, they could observe miraculous events which made no reference to the earlier events but which conveyed to them a content or message equivalent to that of the earlier events. This would not confirm the revelatory status of the earlier events, but it would be a way of treating them no worse than the eyewitnesses of the earlier events.

20. The documentation would have to be extremely strong because the events are contrary to laws of nature. Even those who believe that miracles occur usually agree that stronger documentary evidence is needed to justify belief in their occurrence than would be needed for non-miraculous events.

21. Some evidence to support this can be gained from the texts quoted in note 13.

22. Examples include Jesus' changing the water into wine (John 2:1-11) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:17-44).

23. I know of no one who has proposed this theory, but it seems to me to be a possible line of response which I want to evaluate. Moreover, a defense for this theory might be constructed by reflecting on the fact that some people label as miracles events of the sort I termed inferred miracles. It seems that in deciding what events to label with this term, the psychological impact of the event on the observer and the observer's feelings about the event play an important role.

24. Some thinkers might say that no rational grounds are available: the most that can be done is to give psychological motivation. I would reply that even if that is so, it is unfair to provide miracles as a motivation for some and not for others. Suppose it is claimed that not only are there no rational grounds for accepting the revelation, but the revelation is absurd and faith is the gift of God. If all this is claimed, then it would seem that serious consideration would not be a useful way to bring one to accept the revelation and that miracles have no epistemic function. Some Christians might hold this position, but it falls outside the view under discussion in this paper. I will, however, pose this question for those who hold this view: if you believe that God works miracles, with what purpose (do you believe) God does this? If an epistemic purpose is rejected, I think it will be difficult to identify any plausible purpose other than what I have termed *practical*, and we shall see that this latter purpose also has problems. We have also seen that the

claim that we humans cannot know the purpose of miracles or that they have no purpose raises grave problems for those who want to affirm that miracles have occurred.

25. It is important to note that I am discussing a view which claims that God does sometimes intervene to perform practical miracles. The comments which follow in the text would not apply to a view which said that God absolutely never intervenes miraculously, for then there would be no unfairness to anyone. But there would also be no true claims that God works miracles.

26. John Hick (*Evil and the God of Love* [New York: Harper & Row, 1966]) is one of many who have made this claim.

27. The only possible exception I can think of is a person so thoroughly committed to God that maintaining religious ambiguity for her would no longer be important. But few people today or at any time meet that criterion, nor do all the events in the Bible which seem to be obvious miracles meet it, as I illustrate in the text.

28. It is hard to see how a defender of the importance of religious ambiguity could admit that there could be exceptions. If genuine faith can sometimes be born in non-ambiguous contexts, why could it not generally be born in such contexts?

29. It is true that humans decide to help some and not to help others who are equally needy, yet we do not usually call such decisions arbitrary. But humans must make a choice because their resources are limited; if they had the resources, they presumably would help everyone. God does not face this limitation. God's reason for limiting those whom God helps is supposedly the maintenance of a religiously ambiguous context. If that is so important, then why should God help anyone?

30. For this proposal to be viable God must have a detailed knowledge of all possible future events and of which ones will become actual if God does certain things. And for this to be possible, either compatibilism must be true or God must have something like middle knowledge. I have doubts about both, but I cannot pursue them here.

31. And if they are said to be necessary for some people to come to faith, then if God performs a miracle for them in order to bring them to faith, God is being unfair unless God performs a miracle for everyone whom a miracle would bring to faith. The claim that God performs a miracle for every such person implies that all persons who do not become people of faith would not become people of faith even if God performed a miracle for them. And this seems to me highly implausible, despite the statement attributed to Abraham in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:31).

32. I wish to thank two anonymous referees of this journal for their comments on an earlier version of this paper and George Mavrodes for his comments on a still earlier version, which was read at the 1990 meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion.