

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2006

Is Finding Your Keys a Miracle?

For the Christian community as a whole, the matter of miracles cannot be ignored. What are miracles? Do they happen? How do they happen? But in certain segments of the Christian community, miracles play a particularly important role. I am thinking of those who, upon losing their keys, pray to God that they will be found and pronounce it a miracle when they are. My question is whether such a moment is properly named a "miracle."

I have both reaped the spiritual benefits of this sort of pious mindset and seen the damage it can do by making Christians look silly. But the consequences of such pronouncements are insufficient evidence toward answering this question. Rather, we must proceed from a proper definition of a miracle to ascertain its appropriateness to this case.

What is a miracle?

One common answer is that a miracle is a **divine action that suspends the laws of nature**. This is the kind of definition one finds in David Hume, and I suspect is the most common view of miracles "on the street" today. The strength of such a view is that it acknowledges the "specialness" of miracles. If miracles aren't special, then they are irrelevant. To matter, miracles must be unique. The weakness of such a view is that divine action is linked to an idea of divine intervention that implies the absence of divine agency in non-miraculous situations. In other words, God is only acting when he acts miraculously. God and nature are in an irreconcilable opposition.

On the other extreme, one might define a miracle as **any divine action** whatsoever. This view is particularly common among Christians of an evangelical temper (to use an archaic phrase). But it also finds its way into a new age forms of spirituality. The benefit of this view is that it sees God at work in everything. All we have to do is open our eyes to see what God is doing. The problem with such a

About Me



Name:
JohnLDrury
Location:
Doylestown,
Pennsylvania, US

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view is that the designation "miracle" becomes meaningless. If everything is a miracle, then nothing is a miracle. Miracle simply becomes synonymous with divine agency, and is thus emptied of any relevant content.

Is there a third option? Is there a way to affirm the special uniqueness of miracles without slipping into an interventionist model? I believe there is, but in order to uncover it, let us return to the question of finding your keys after praying about it. The crucial aspect in such a story is the act of prayer. If you hadn't prayed, you would not have called it a miracle if you found your keys. So the defining feature of a miracle (at least in this case) is human perception, not divine action.

The significance of perception leads us to the third view: a miracle is a **divine action intended for revelation**. Of course God is at work throughout the world. God is not only the creator of the universe, but its providential governor. So in some sense all actions can be attributed to God (the ancients called this primary causality, but the terms are not important). But there are some actions within the created order that God has specifically ordained to reveal himself to us. These revelatory actions are called miracles. The Johannine term "miraculous signs" is helpful here, because it indicates the revelatory purpose of miracles.

According to this view, the power of God is behind the rotation of the planets, but the power of God is revealed in the healing of the paralytic. Both are actions of God in some sense. Both are based on the power of God. But we take for granted the former, whereas the latter catches us by surprise. Either one might prompt us to worship God, but the latter is specifically ordained by God to do so because he knows that we tend to forget him without jolting reminders.

Thus, if you prayed that God would help you find your keys, and you find them, God may have intended such a providential action to reveal his power to you. If finding your keys encourages your faith in him, then it is likely that God intended such an action as a revelation. So it is appropriate to call it a miracle, not because it was a divine intervention, and not because everything is a miracle, but because of God's intention to reveal himself.

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:56 PM

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At [4:21 PM, February 22, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

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Here's part of the main post that I cut for length reasons. I thought some of you might enjoy reading my discussion of how the first two views would treat the finding your keys scenerio. I hope this clarifies why I think the third option gleaned from Augustine is the best:

Under the first view [divine intervention], one could say that finding your keys was a divine suspension of the laws of nature. For instance, you could claim that the keys were not in your purse before you prayed, but after you prayed God intervened by moving the keys from the dresser to your purse. This may be what many people think when they call this moment a miracle, but it is precisely such a claim that is so incredible. What a silly thing to believe, especially without evidence! Such a pronouncement is at best a conjecture, and at worst pious self-deception. So on further thought, one armed with this definition is better off denying that finding your keys is a miracle.

Under the second view [everything is a miracle], one would certainly say that finding your keys is a miracle, because God is at work everywhere doing good things for his children. By defining a miracle as any action of God, one need not make the incredible claim that God moved the keys to your purse. Rather, you had a hard time finding them, then God helped you find them, and as a believer in the providence of God you pronounce it a miracle. The problem here is not (as with the first view) the incredibility of the claim, but its utter absence of meaning. It is a miracle; so what? It doesn't prove anything, it doesn't do anything, it doesn't claim anything. At best it makes you feel good. But if miracles are just for making us feel better, then we are caught in the same trap of self-delusion. Religious belief is a drug.

At [9:27 PM, February 22, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I have never been able to get myself out of the natural-supernatural paradigm, although the way it turns out for me is not too far from Augustine. Starting with ex nihilo creation and affirming that the creation is distinct from God rather than an extension, I define a miracle as an action by God that involves "extra-causality," a cause that is not within the cause-effect chain of the creation.

What I do not know is whether this really works. Is God at work in innumerable quantum events all the time? I would hold back from Augustine because I'm not sure that all such extra-causes would be for the purpose of revelation.

On the other hand, this system allows me not to hold God directly (a key word) responsible for every bout of cancer or every car accident. Sometimes an object on trajectory x crosses object on trajectory y

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and metal gets crunched. God allows and doesn't intervene, and someone goes to the hospital.

Not an answer, but a predilection.

At [1:30 AM, February 23, 2006](#), [pk](#) said...

Thanks for this John. I find myself getting cynically upset with Christians who see everything as a miracle. And then in the very next moment I get upset at myself for getting upset at these other Christians. And then I just don't want to think about it anymore.

You have given me a new path of thinking.

At [7:32 AM, February 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Ken,

Extra-causality is a more thoughtful version of the first view. God is not bullying nature, so that's good. However, it is still within the first paradigm because it focuses on the **mode** of divine action. The alternative view I am proposing focusing on the **intent** of divine action.

You questioned the revelatory character of all extra-causal actions, a question which presupposes a hybrid of these two views. Now there may be an overlap, but I am unconcerned with mode. Did God work extra-causally in a particular case? Who knows? Who cares? Was God reveal in a particular case? If so, then it is a miracle, whatever the mode. That's the kind of refocusing I am trying to do.

As for God's direct involvement or non-involvement in suffering, that is a whole other (though related conversation). For the time being, we can stick to the agency of all *good* actions for the sake of argument. God is behind them all; only some function to reveal.

At [7:36 AM, February 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

pk,

I am glad it helped you. That is exactly have I've felt. It was my oscillation between those two views that drove me toward seeking this third option. I was surprised to find it was right there in Augustine. (Shame on me for being surprised - he somewhere treats about every possible theological problem, and usually quite satisfactorily)

jld

At [8:35 AM, February 23, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

If God was going to reveal himself to me I would hope it was through something better than finding my keys. God covering up for my ineptitude doesn't exactly move me to worship. To me the notion that God helps me find my keys is no more meaningful than the "everything is a miracle" view.

I guess I would tend to view a miracle as something that cannot be explained by the natural progression of events. I think the Gospel writers certainly saw the miracles of Jesus as out of the ordinary. Stuff like healing the sick and raising the dead. I think if you went straight from the gospels you could make a case for miracles being a direct act of God that overcomes the effects of the fall. It's a stretch and there are a few other miracles you would have to explain but most of them would fall under that view. Did Jesus heal people before He let the messianic cat out of the bag? How does that affect the revelation view? Once we get what a miracle is categorically I'd love to discuss who decides what was a miracle in any particular case.

At [8:56 AM, February 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

AJ,

Good call on keys being pretty lame revelatory miracle. It was more a thought experiment than anything. But if the case is distracting, please dump it. You have turned us to the role of miracles in Scripture, which is a much better place from which to work.

As for the miracles as revelation, it seems that most of Jesus' miracles are *intended* as revelatory. The fact that the people don't get it and that it remains mysterious doesn't remove the revelatory intent. Actually, Jesus scolds people for not believing on the basis of signs, hence his occasional refuse to perform them. In the book of John, miracles as signs is abundantly clear. But even in Mark 2 (still under the messianic secrecy) Jesus first forgives the paralytic *then* heals him expressly as a sign that the son of man can forgive. So it seems like generally speaking Jesus' miracles are intended to reveal his identity. Thus the mode of agency (natural, supranatural, supernatural, nonnatural, etc) is really a secondary concern. A miracle is more teleologically defined. In other words, what makes a divine action a miracle is its purpose, not its mode of agency.

As for your last question, that's the rub, but the rub is the point. As long as we focus on mode of agency, we must seek a naturalistic criterion to declare an action miraculous. Although I am not opposed to modest naturalism per se, it is clearly not the mindset inhabited

by the biblical stories and will therefore be of no use hermeneutically.

However, if we define miracles as signs, then identifying them becomes a little easier because we can presuppose that if people do come to faith in Christ by means of a divine action, that such an action was most likely miraculous. We still can't say for sure (who knows the mind of God?), but it seems logical that if the Holy Spirit arouses faith in a person through a creaturely medium that God intended to do so (aka it wasn't an accident).

At [9:28 AM, February 23, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Yes, I would agree that I basically take a first category view (although without Hume's circular pessimism). If I understand the third category (and I'm not 100% sure I do), then it is in a sense not really addressing the same question the first two views ask but tweaking the issue a little. We define a miracle as anything revelatory and consign issues of "within" or "without" to mystery-- "whereof one cannot speak one must be silent." Is that right?

At [10:14 AM, February 23, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Ken,

You are correct. I am comparing apples to oranges. In my mind, that's the only way to find a true "third way" that is not merely a balancing middle position on a spectrum of extremes. I am intentionally reframing the issue to ascertain a more apt definition. My task may fail, but I will stand by my procedure: when stuck between a rock and hard place, go fishing.

At [4:06 PM, February 23, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

finding your keys may be "lame" as mentioned above, but you could argue that so is turning water into wine. it possibly helped some people get MORE drunk than they already were? so what?

but there were many layers to it. and God is very good at knowing what will hit a particular person. you might say He's all-knowing ;-)

I also have a hard time not getting annoyed with the "all-miracles-all-day" people. I shouldn't, but I do. I guess it makes me feel that the legitimate miracles are somehow made less important because finding a jacket on sale is just as good of a miracle as raising the dead in some people's mindset.

but... as Lewis put it, "A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word "darkness" on the walls of his cell."

so i guess you could say NOTHING we do can diminish the miracle God ordains.

I don't know, I am thinking out loud...

At [8:38 PM, February 23, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

How did my sons turn out smarter than me?

Wish I'd written that!

At [8:21 AM, February 24, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

Thanks for your clarification on this stuff John. It does seem to make sense that the miracles in scripture were given as a sign. I'm still not ready to give up on the whole outside the normalness of miracles but I think if we take the view that they are a sign then it only makes sense that many/most/all would be things outside of the realm of the "normal" simply because that is what would get our attention so then in that view miracles might tend to be out of the normal but they don't need to be. In this view mode becomes a function of intent. You might say God's miracles are Purpose Driven™. (joking)

At [1:16 PM, February 24, 2006](#), [Nathan Elliot-Doucet](#) said...

"So it seems like generally speaking Jesus' miracles are intended to reveal his identity. Thus the mode of agency (natural, supranatural, supernatural, nonnatural, etc) is really a secondary concern. A miracle is more teleologically defined. In other words, what makes a divine action a miracle is its purpose, not its mode of agency."

This quote in particular catches me the wrong way. Jesus may have been trying to reveal his identity, but wasn't it the agency of his miracles that showed who he truly was? If Jesus had found someone's keys when they asked him, surely that wouldn't have been all that miraculous, or revealing of his identity in any way.

If this is true, then so many things are miracles, and not miracles according to any miracle that is depicted by the bibe.

My question is: Isn't it the miracle that supercedes the laws of nature that reveals the character of God? If a miracle were something that

could be explained through other means, or were something that didn't at all exceed the laws of nature, like the finding of the keys, or (this might get me into trouble) the person who beats cancer through medical attention, then it seems that not only does this not categorize as a miracle, but if it were, it would be subjective only to those that perceived the apparent miracle, and not outsiders who may say that it happened by other natural means.

The one who is cured of cancer by medicine might thank God for medicine, but that could be an example of God simply using natural means to achieve an end, which is great, but not miraculous.

By making miracles about intention, instead of about God exceeding the laws of nature, then miracles become subjective, instead of something to be viewed and unexplained by natural occurrence, which isn't miraculous.

If miracles are only about God revealing himself to us, then nature is itself a miracle to some, but nature itself is full of contingent factors that are not miraculous, but rather the works of nature. They may be guided by God, but in this instance God surely cannot be operating outside of nature.

I'm just thinking "out loud" so to speak.

At [1:43 PM, February 24, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

I am on page with Nathan's thoughts and a line from A.J.

It becomes a debate of "Who gets to decide the criteria?"

Nathan--"By making miracles about intention, instead of about God exceeding the laws of nature, then miracles become subjective, instead of something to be viewed and unexplained by natural occurrence, which isn't miraculous."

Me-- Yet, if God is truly communicated and revealed through this action, regardless of mode (and our doubts), does it really matter if it is subjective? I see a power struggle emerging. If "we" can't tell whether something was a "miracle" in someone else's life, it can be somewhat frightening and powerless. But I guess the question to ask is: "Is this necessarily a bad thing?"

At [4:25 PM, February 24, 2006](#), [millinerd](#) said...

Very helpful post. Maybe every bush *is* burning.

At [2:10 PM, February 26, 2006](#), [u2canpray](#) said...

keith,
Would that be a miracle? :)

At [10:44 AM, February 27, 2006](#), [Mike Langford](#) said...

Good stuff.

I've always had a small beef with Hume's refutation of miracles when seen within the context of his refutation of the actuality of causation. If the chain of causality is inferred and not detectably actual, then who are we to say what is naturally "caused" and what is not? Just because something contradicts the history of perception (e.g., whenever I push a rock, it falls over) does not mean that causation has failed, it just means that my inference of it has failed. But this is a whole other topic.

Regarding your "third way," John (and if you keep using titles like that, you will truly become George), I like it. I appreciate understanding miracles as having a telos for revealing God. I think we can safely say that was the intention of Biblical miracles.

But I don't think that you can completely ignore mode. Lots of stuff reveals God to me, but I doubt you could define some of those things as miracles. Is the grandeur of my little cilantro plant miraculous if it reveals God to me?

Hmm. And now we're getting into a question of the "orthodoxy" of revelation. What if the miracle of my cilantro plant reveals to me that God is pantheistic? Of course, we can get around this by using Christ as the standard for all revelation. If something reveals God to be a God of love, grace, and judgment as revealed in Christ, then we can safely say it is truly revelatory.

[Side note here: If something merely defines God as powerful because he can violate the "laws" of nature does not necessarily reveal God as God in Christ. It merely reveals God as a powerful God who can author causes, qua Aristotle.]

But, as I said, to call something revelatory is not to call it miraculous, even if calling something miraculous is to call it revelatory. I think if we call something miraculous, we do have to think about mode at some point.

Where that point is, I'm not sure...

-m.

At [1:14 PM, February 27, 2006](#), [jul](#) said...

Finding your keys, (or your wedding ring, or your new digital camera...) is an answer to prayer. Miraculous? Maybe not, but faith building? Yes.

At [10:41 AM, February 28, 2006](#), [ap](#) said...

John, the reason I most like your proposal is also raises my greatest concern.

The reason I like it is your connection with John and the importance of miracles being signs. Of course, connected with signs is significance. Just as parables tell the story of the kingdom--but only for those with ears to hear, so do signs become significant for those with eyes to see and openness to believe. So, your proposal emphasizes the interactive relationship that both is necessary for miracles to happen and for them to be interpreted as miracles.

Here is my concern: Does this equation possibly take God from the picture? It seems to me that one could legitimately admit that something is a miracle for someone else, but not themselves. So, the same act of Jesus could both be a sign and a very neat trick depending on who is seeing--and Jesus' opinion would be irrelevant.

This would draw us to some kind of Hickian eschatological epistemic suspension of miracles... Perhaps this is why Saint John structures his greatest miracle as the raising of Lazarus--because it points best to the eschatological raising of Jesus which points to the final eschatological raising of the rest (which confirms those who had ears to hear).

At [10:24 PM, June 10, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Anonymous asks: As to finding keys after prayer discussion please comment on the miracle when the woman with the issue of blood touched the hem of his garment? This was a miracle to her...did others around her know about her condition? How did Christ reveal Himself to the crowd? Was it specifically a personal revelation simply to the woman? And what about "according to your faith be it done unto you..."? I am a lay person without your wonderful education and experience--so reading intrigues me and opens my mind to things I never thought about. Keep up the good work! ea

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