

Luck and miracles

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Abstract: In another paper published here, I criticized Stephen Mumford's causation-based analysis of miracles on the grounds of its failure to produce results that are consistent with ordinary intuitions. In a response to me, intended as a defence of Mumford's position, Morgan Luck finds fault with my rival approach to miracles on three grounds. In this response to Luck I argue that all three of his criticisms miss their mark. My response to Luck's final line of criticism helps shed light on the difference between my approach to the definition of miracles and that due to Mumford. While my approach is driven by both metaphysical and epistemological considerations, Mumford's approach appears to be driven exclusively by metaphysical considerations.

According to Stephen Mumford, a miracle is a natural event with a supernatural cause.¹ This account is too broad to be intuitively appealing. Supernatural agents (or their natural proxies) *perform* miracles, and performances are intentional activities. I offer a more restrictive definition of a miracle: 'an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent'.² In my 'Response to Mumford and another definition of miracles',³ I proceed by examining three sorts of cases that count as miracles on Mumford's definition, but not on my narrower definition. In each example of the three sorts of cases, that I provide, I find that Mumford's definition fails to accord with ordinary intuitions. In his response to me, in defence of Mumford, Morgan Luck does not appear to dispute the charge that Mumford's approach fails to deliver results that accord with ordinary intuitions. Instead, adopting the attitude that 'the best defence is a good offence', Luck alleges the existence of three deficiencies in my account of miracles.⁴ In what follows I will argue that none of Luck's criticisms withstand serious scrutiny.

Luck's first criticism is that my definition of miracles delivers the wrong result in the biblical example of Mark 1. 24–27. In this passage, Jesus commands an evil spirit to vacate possession of a man's body, and the evil spirit is compelled to

obey the command. The biblical Jesus is invariably described as a miracle worker and not a magician. If we accept that Jesus really did expel the evil spirit, then we will want to say that Jesus performed a miracle. According to Luck though, given my definition, Jesus comes out as a magician rather than a miracle worker in the example – the wrong result. However, Luck misinterprets the case. Jesus is, most plausibly, a supernatural agent. If Jesus is a supernatural agent, then a supernatural agent intends that the evil spirit be driven from the man's body and succeeds in driving it out, a clear instance of the miraculous on my definition.

Suppose though, that we resist the view that the living Jesus was a supernatural agent and take him to be a natural agent who will be transmogrified into a supernatural agent at the end of his natural life. Now how are we to interpret the case? To answer this question we need to know about the chain of events linking Jesus' command to the driving out of the evil spirit. I suggest that the most plausible interpretation would now be something like this – Jesus requests of God that He intervenes in the world to drive the evil spirit from the man's body and God fulfils Jesus' request. On this interpretation, the event is an intended outcome of a supernatural agent's intervention in the natural world, again a miracle on my view.

It is of course possible that we could interpret the sequence of events without involving supernatural agency. We might suppose – to make the case analogous with my 'Beelzebub' example⁵ – that there are supernatural laws governing the behaviour of evil supernatural beings and that Jesus, having knowledge of these, utilizes this knowledge to control the evil spirit. However, there is little or no textual evidence to support this interpretation of the Bible. The biblical Jesus is not known to have knowledge of 'black magic', or to have any inclination to use such knowledge, even if he did possess it. Whether or not we regard Jesus as a supernatural agent, the most plausible interpretations of the passage involve a supernatural agent intervening in the natural world to produce an intended outcome so, *contra* Luck, it is a miracle on my account.

The second complaint Luck has is that my definition is not religiously neutral, because it fails to allow the possibility of miracles for those religions that lack supernatural agents whereas, he tells us, Mumford's definition 'clearly is' religiously neutral.⁶ But it is not at all clear that Mumford's definition is religiously neutral. Mumford defines a miracle as a particular form of the causal relation. On his definition then, religious groups that deny that causation actually occurs cannot consistently utilize the concept 'miracle'. One such group are the Mādhyamika (middle path) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, for whom 'causation is empty'.⁷ Unlike Mumford's definition, my definition enables the concept 'miracle' to be used by religious causal anti-realists.⁸ While religious causal anti-realists may want to posit the occurrence of miracles, as far as I can see only those religions that invoke supernatural agents will have any use for the concept 'miracle'. Religions that lack supernatural beings will lack suitable agents to

perform miracles, so their adherents will have no need of the concept 'miracle'. My definition of miracles appears to be available to a wider range of those religious groups that may actually have a use for the concept than Mumford's alternative.

Luck's third complaint concerns my use of the term 'religious significance'. Luck favours a metaphysical account of religious significance, stipulating that 'religious significance is intrinsic to any natural event with a supernatural cause'.⁹ He formulates his complaint against me in a number of ways. The most dramatic of these formulations is that I am 'confusing epistemology with metaphysics with dire theological repercussions', in virtue of my views having the consequence that the creation of the universe was not religiously significant at the time it occurred, because there were no humans around to give it religious significance.¹⁰ It seems to me the phrase 'religious significance' is used in at least two rather different senses. Sometimes it is used *metaphysically*,¹¹ to describe events themselves, and sometimes it is used *epistemically*,¹² to describe the interpretations of events of concern to particular religious groups. I don't deny the utility of the first sense, which Luck favours.¹³ However, I don't believe that we could do without the second sense of the notion of religious significance. Without it we could not make sense of the, apparently very sensible, claim that different religions can be justified in finding the exact same events to have greater or lesser degrees of religious significance. So Luck's account of religious significance simply cannot be the whole story. The creation of the universe is religiously significant (metaphysical sense), and also not religiously significant from some points of view (epistemic sense).

In my response to Mumford I used the phrase 'religious significance' twice. I asserted that miracles 'have religious significance because they are instrumental to the plans of supernatural agents, as interpreted by natural agents'.¹⁴ Later I described the 'two-krill' case as 'an unplanned event that lacks any religious significance whatsoever'.¹⁵ In both cases, I related religious significance to the concept of a supernatural plan. It is apparent, from this context, that I have been using the phrase 'religious significance' in an epistemic sense, consistent with my general approach to the definition of miracles, which is informed by epistemic considerations.¹⁶ I am definitely not introducing a last minute 'proviso' to my definition, as Luck suggests.¹⁷ In my 'When to believe in miracles', I specify five criteria that are sufficient to make it rational to accept that a miracle has occurred.¹⁸ The third of these is the stipulation that in order to be identifiable as a miracle an event should be explicable within the context of a 'theological framework'.¹⁹ To identify an event as having religious significance (epistemic sense) is to identify it as a candidate to be situated in a theological framework, typically by making sense of its occurrence within the context of the plans of a supernatural being. To identify certain events within a religious framework is to identify them as candidate miracles.

Like many other philosophical definitions, the definition of miracles that I favour draws on both metaphysical and epistemological considerations. Mumford's definition appears to be based solely on considerations of metaphysics, an area where he has made substantial contributions.²⁰ Mumford describes his theory as 'essentially metaphysical' and he has no stated views about the epistemology of the miraculous.²¹ The gist of my criticism of his definition of miracles is that it is overly broad, allowing several classes of events, which intuitively seem not to be miracles, to count as miracles. I suspect that this is a result of Mumford's failure to apply an epistemic brake to the metaphysical engine that drives his views. Had Mumford availed himself of epistemic considerations in defining miracles his views might have accorded more closely with ordinary intuitions.

Notes

1. Stephen Mumford 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 191–202, 192.
2. Steve Clarke 'Hume's definition of miracles revised', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1999), 49–57, 54.
3. Steve Clarke 'Response to Mumford and another definition of miracles', *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), 459–463.
4. Morgan Luck 'In defence of Mumford's definition of a miracle', *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), 465–469, 468–469.
5. Clarke 'Response to Mumford', 461.
6. Luck 'In defence of Mumford's definition', 468.
7. Jay L. Garfield 'Dependent arising and the emptiness of emptiness: why did Nāgārjuna start with causation?', *Philosophy East and West*, 44 (1994), 219–250.
8. Neither my definition nor Mumford's definition will allow the possibility of miracles to pantheists who typically deny the reality of a natural/supernatural distinction.
9. Luck 'In defence of Mumford's definition', 469.
10. *Ibid.*, 468.
11. For consistency, I will follow Luck's terminology, but 'ontologically' might be better here.
12. And 'hermeneutically' might be better here.
13. Although I fail to understand why Luck would want to include randomly generated unintended natural events with a supernatural cause in the class of the 'religiously significant'.
14. Clarke 'Response to Mumford', 460.
15. *Ibid.*, 461.
16. My reasons for insisting on a distinction between miracles and magic are purely epistemic. See Clarke 'Hume's definition of miracles revised', 55–56.
17. Luck 'In defence of Mumford's definition', 469.
18. Steve Clarke 'When to believe in miracles', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (1997), 95–102.
19. *Ibid.*, 99.
20. See, for example, Stephen Mumford *Dispositions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
21. Stephen Mumford, both points made in personal correspondence, 29 July 2002.