

## Response to Mumford and another definition of miracles

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**Abstract:** Stephen Mumford concludes a recent paper in *Religious Studies*, in which he advances a new causation-based analysis of miracles, by stating that the onus is ‘on rival accounts of miracles to produce something that matches it’.<sup>1</sup> I take up Mumford’s challenge, defending an intention-based definition of miracles, which I developed earlier, that he criticizes. I argue that this definition of miracles is more consistent with ordinary intuitions about miracles than Mumford’s causation-based alternative. I further argue that Mumford has failed to demonstrate any advantages that his approach to miracles has over an intention-based approach.

### Introduction

In contemporary analytic philosophy most commentators on the miraculous give a central place to supernatural agency when conceptualizing miracles. According to Dietl: ‘To call an event a miracle is to attribute it to the will of a supernatural agent and to claim that if the supernatural agent had not intervened that event would not have taken place.’<sup>2</sup> According to Hughes, ‘a miracle is a point of contact between God’s will and the world’.<sup>3</sup> I make a place for supernatural agency in the definition of miracles that I favour, by reference to intention: ‘A miracle is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent.’<sup>4</sup> All of the above authors follow the lead of Hume, who referred to the ‘particular volition of the Deity or the interposition of some invisible agent’, in one of his two definitions of miracles.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent paper in this journal, Stephen Mumford bucks this trend and defines miracles without any reference to supernatural agency. On Mumford’s causation-based definition:

(D) A miracle =<sub>df</sub> a natural event E with a supernatural cause E<sub>s</sub>.<sup>6</sup>

Anticipating the criticism that this definition will be thought of as too broad to capture some restrictive uses of the term miracle, because it allows any and

every event that has a supernatural event in its causal history to count as a miracle – *every* natural event if there is a single act of supernatural creation of the natural world – Mumford defines a second sense of miracles. This is D\*, a variant of D:

- (D\*) A miracle\* =<sub>df</sub> a natural event E with a supernatural cause E<sub>s</sub> and there are no further natural causes, E<sub>1</sub>, E<sub>2</sub>, ... E<sub>n</sub>, in the causal chain between E<sub>s</sub> and E.<sup>7</sup>

Both D and D\* will include, as miracles, cases of supernatural causation of natural events that do not involve the intentions of supernatural agents. This means that they include, as miracles, the following three sorts of cases:

- (1) Cases where supernatural agents accidentally cause natural events.
- (2) Cases where supernatural agents do not intend to cause natural events, but cause them nevertheless, having their wills overridden by natural agents.
- (3) Cases where the supernatural causes of natural events are not agents at all.

On my earlier definition of miracles,<sup>8</sup> [hereafter C], all of these sorts of cases, though remarkable, are definitely not miraculous. On C, an event must be caused by a supernatural agent who specifically intends that that event occurs, in order for it to qualify as a miracle. Mere supernatural causation of natural events is not enough. Intuitively this seems right. Miracles are usually thought to be acts that have religious significance. They have religious significance because they are instrumental to the plans of supernatural agents, as interpreted by natural agents. The parting of the Red Sea, if it happened, was a miracle because it enabled the Israelites to act on God's plan for them to return to the Promised Land. The stigmata of statues of Christ, if this occurs, occurs as part of God's plan to strengthen the faith of natural agents in the Christian religion. Intuitively, the following cases seem not to be miracles. This is, I think, because they fail to exhibit evidence of supernatural intention in their causal history.

### **Cases where supernatural agents accidentally cause natural events**

Imagine that Isis, the ancient Egyptian deity, intends to cause the Red Sea to flood in order to drown the Israelite slaves, who happen to be gathered on its banks. However, Isis is not very good at intervening in the natural world and accidentally causes the Red Sea to part, inadvertently enabling the Israelite slaves to escape from Egypt. Under these conditions, would we say that the parting of the Red Sea was a miracle? Surely not. It was due to luck rather than divine planning. If we did want to say that it was a miracle, this would presumably be because we suspected that Isis' interference in the natural world was not merely

an accident, but was in fact an outcome intended by a more powerful supernatural agent, who was manipulating Isis. However, on Mumford's definitions of miracles, it counts as a miracle even if it is simply an accident.

**Cases where supernatural agents do not intend to cause natural events, but cause them nevertheless, having their wills overridden by natural agents**

Suppose that Moses decides to enable the Israelites to escape from Egypt, even though he knows that God does not wish this to happen. Suppose further that Moses engages a necromancer to cause Beelzebub, an evil supernatural being, to part the Red Sea. Beelzebub is no friend of the Israelites and wishes that they remain as slaves in Egypt. However, when the necromancer utters the relevant incantation, Beelzebub is compelled by the necromancer's incantation, together with the supernatural laws governing the behaviour of evil supernatural beings, to utilize his supernatural abilities to cause the Red Sea to part and the Israelites duly cross the Red Sea. A remarkable event has occurred that involves supernatural causation and fits Mumford's definition of miracles. Intuitively, though, it seems not to be miracle. It is an event that occurs in the natural world that is not intended by any supernatural agent.<sup>9</sup>

**Cases where the supernatural causes of natural events are not agents at all**

Mumford contemplates the possibility of a natural event being caused by a supernatural machine and considers it an advantage of his view of miracles that it accommodates such a possibility.<sup>10</sup> Suppose that a supernatural machine has randomly interfered in the natural world and swapped the locations of two krill living in the Antarctic Ocean. Suppose also that this supernatural intervention had no further significance consequences for anything other than the two krill. For Mumford, this is a clear case of the miraculous. Intuitively though, it seems not to be a miracle. It is an unplanned event that lacks any religious significance whatsoever. Despite what Mumford asserts, it is not an advantage of his definition of miracles that it accommodates such cases.

**Mumford refuted**

Because Mumford's definitions D and D\* include no qualification that restricts the class of miracles to those supernatural causes of natural events that are intended by a supernatural being, they seem not to accord with our intuitions in the above cases. Mumford might agree that this is unfortunate, but argue that this failure is a price worth paying for the benefits that his definitions deliver, which an intention-based definition would fail to deliver. Mumford does not

consider the issue of the place of supernatural intention in the definition of miracles, other than to note, without explanation, that he disagrees with my emphasis on it.<sup>11</sup> However, there are two places in Mumford's article where arguments for the superiority of his definitions over an intention-based definition, such as C, can be discerned. I will consider both of these and argue that both are unsuccessful.

First, according to Mumford, D and its special case D\* are 'the best account so far in combining a realist account of laws with the logical possibility of miraculous exceptions to them'.<sup>12</sup> He goes on to claim that the onus is now 'on rival accounts of miracles to produce something that matches it'.<sup>13</sup> As he explicitly identifies the account of miracles that I developed as one of his competitors,<sup>14</sup> it seems reasonable to assume that he takes his definitions to be superior to C on grounds of the specified virtues.

The bulk of Mumford's paper is devoted to the task of showing that the ability of a theory of the miraculous to combine a realist account of laws with the logical possibility of miraculous exception to them is an appropriate test of that theory. He does this by teasing out the connections between miracles and modal intuitions. I have no argument with this aspect Mumford's work, which I find very convincing. The onus is really upon those who want to put forward definitions of miracles that are incompatible with realist accounts of laws and wish to deny the logical possibility of miraculous exceptions to laws, to do better than Mumford. However, there is an obvious reason why rival definitions of miracles, including C, cannot be embedded within a theory that contains a realist account of laws and allows for the logical possibility of miraculous exceptions to laws. Mumford has done nothing to show why his definitions are superior to C, and other alternatives, by these criteria of acceptability. If rival definitions really are incapable of being embedded within a theory that combines a realist account of laws with the logical possibility of miraculous exceptions to these laws, then surely the onus is upon Mumford to demonstrate that this is so.<sup>15</sup>

The second place in which Mumford appears to argue for the superiority of his definitions of miracles over C is in the articulation of D\*, when he considers a possible case that I take to be a miracle, but which D\* rules out as non-miraculous. This is the Old Testament case of the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land. As this is a consequence of the earlier miraculous parting of the Red Sea, it is a miracle on D. But it is not a miracle on D\*. On C, it is a miracle, as it is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent. Taking issue with my interpretation of the case, Mumford holds that the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land should not be literally construed as a miracle. Instead, it is an event that occurred *owing* to an earlier miracle, the parting of the Red Sea.<sup>16</sup> Suppose we go along with Mumford on this issue. Will we be rejecting all intention-based accounts of miracles in favour of a causation-based one in doing so? Surely not. Mumford produced a special case of D that

excluded the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land from counting as a miracle, and we can just as easily produce a special case of C that plays the same role. This is C\*:

C\* A miracle is the *initial* intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent.

God intends both that the Red Sea is parted and that the Israelites arrive in the Promised Land as a consequence of the parting of the Red Sea. The former is the initial intended outcome of God's intervention in the natural world so it is a miracle on C\*, whereas the latter is not. The arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land is a miracle on both D and C, and it is not a miracle on both D\* and C\*.

C, and its special case C\*, have all of the advantages mentioned earlier that intention-based definitions of miracles have over Mumford's causation-based definitions of miracles. Furthermore, the combination of C and C\* is not deficient, in comparison with the combination of D and D\*, in any way that Mumford has identified. The onus has been returned.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

1. Stephen Mumford 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 191–202, 201.
2. Paul Dietl 'On miracles', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 5 (1968), 130–134, 131.
3. Christopher Hughes 'Miracles, laws of nature and causation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 46 (1992), 179–205, 202.
4. Steve Clarke 'Hume's definition of miracles revised', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1999), 49–57, 54.
5. David Hume *Of Miracles*, A. Flew (ed.) (La Salle IL: Open Court, 1986), 148.
6. Mumford, 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', 192.
7. *Ibid.*, 200.
8. Clarke 'Hume's definition of miracles revised', 54.
9. In *ibid.*, 55–56, I describe such an event as an instance of magic. Mumford takes issue with me regarding the applicability of the term magic, in this case (Mumford 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', 201, n. 5). Whether or not such events ought to be described as magic is debatable. The important point is that they do seem logically possible and they fit Mumford's definition of miracles, but intuitively they seem not to be miracles.
10. Mumford 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', 192.
11. *Ibid.*, 202, n. 24.
12. *Ibid.*, 201.
13. *Ibid.*, 201.
14. *Ibid.*, 191.
15. Mumford also recognizes Hume's ('Of miracles') and Hughes's ('Miracles, laws of nature and causation') definitions of miracles as rivals. There is no apparent reason why either of these could not be embedded within a theory which contains a realist account of laws and allows for the logical possibility of miraculous exceptions to laws. To some this will seem to be a controversial claim to make on behalf of Hume. For an argument to the effect that Hume's account of miracles allows for both the logical and evidential possibility of miracles see Steve Clarke 'When to believe in miracles', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (1997), 95–102. For an interpretation of Hume as a realist about laws see Galen Strawson *The Secret Connection* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
16. Mumford 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', 200.
17. Thanks to Roy Perrett and Stephen Mumford for helpful discussion of the ideas in this paper.