

Miracles: Providing Validation for the Christian Faith— Part Two

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Identifiability. Antony Flew claims to be willing to allow in principle for the possibility of miracles. In practice, he argues that the problem of *identifying* a miracle is serious, if not insurmountable.

The argument against miracles from unidentifiability may be summarized:

1. A miracle must be identified (distinguished) before it can be known to have occurred.
2. A miracle can be distinguished in one of two ways: in terms of nature or in terms of the supernatural.
3. To identify it by reference to the supernatural as an act of God begs the question.
4. To identify it in reference to the natural event robs it of its supernatural quality.
5. Therefore, miracles cannot be known to have occurred, since there is no way to identify them.

Flew insists, against Augustine (see Augustine, 21.8), that if a miracle is merely “a portent [which] is not contrary to nature, but contrary to our knowledge of nature” (Flew, 348), then it has no real apologetic value. For, argues Flew, if an event is merely a miracle in relation *to us at present*, then it provides no proof that a revelation it alleges to support is *really* beyond the power of nature. Whereas Augustine’s notion of a miracle would assure the dependence of creation on God, it does so at the cost of subverting the apologetic value of miracle (ibid.). For if a miracle is only contrary to our *knowledge* of nature, then a miracle is nothing but a natural event. In any event, we could not know that a miracle has *really* occurred, only that it *seems* to us that one did.

Flew’s point can be stated another way. In order to identify a miracle within nature, the identification of that miracle must be in terms of what is independent of nature. But there is no way to identify a miracle as independent of the natural except by appealing to a supernatural realm, which begs the question. It argues in effect: “I know this is a miraculous event in the natural world, because I know (on some independent basis) that there is a supernatural cause beyond the natural world.”

On the other hand, there is no natural way to identify a miracle. For unless it is already known (on independent grounds) that the event is miraculous, then it must be considered to be another natural event. From the scientific point of view, it is just “odd” or inconsistent with previously known events. Such an event should occasion *research* for a broader scientific law, not worship.

From this, it would follow that no alleged miraculous event can be used to prove that a religious system is true. That is to say, miracles can have no apologetic value. We cannot argue that God exists because an event is an act of God. For unless we know that there is a God who can act, we cannot know that an occurrence is an act of God. The latter cannot prove the former (ibid., 348-49).

If miracles are not identifiable, because there is no way to define them without begging the question, the reasoning proceeds:

1. A miracle must be identifiable before it can be identified.

2. A miracle is identified in only one of two ways—either as an unusual event in nature, or as an exception to nature.
3. But an unusual event in nature is simply a natural event, not a miracle.
4. An exception to nature cannot be known (i.e., identified) from within nature alone.
5. Therefore, a miracle is not identifiable.

And, of course, what is not identifiable has no evidential value. It cannot be used to prove the truth of Christianity.

Response to Flew's Argument. Flew's first premise is solid. We must know what we are looking for before we can know we have found it. If we cannot define it, then we cannot be sure we have discovered it. But if we can define an event in terms of nature, miracles can be reduced to natural events. However, to define them in terms of a supernatural cause (God) is to presuppose that God exists. Therefore, miracles cannot be used as an evidence of God's existence. The supernaturalist argues in a circle.

Presupposing God's Existence. One way to reply to Flew is to claim that arguing in a circle is not unique to supernaturalists. Naturalists do the same thing. Antisupernaturalist arguments presuppose naturalism. Thus, it is necessary to argue in a circle, because all reason is circular (Van Til, 118). In the final analysis, all thought is grounded in faith.

If a supernaturalist chooses to go this route, the grounds (or lack of grounds) are just as good as those of the antisupernaturalist. Certainly naturalists who rule out miracles on the basis of a faith commitment to naturalism are in no position to forbid theists from simply believing that God exists and, hence, that miracles are possible and identifiable. Once the naturalists accept the privilege of a mere belief basis for naturalism for which they have no rational or scientific proof, they must allow alternative worldviews the same opportunity.

Evidence for God's Existence. There is, however, another avenue: Theists may first offer rational justification for belief in God through the cosmological or teleological arguments. If successful, then they can have earned the right to define (show the identifiability of) miracles in terms of the supernatural realm they have reason to think exists. To the degree that one can give a rational argument for God's existence, it is not difficult to circumvent Flew's criticism that miracles have no identifiable apologetic value.

(to be continued)

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