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How Not to Think About Miracles

A critique is made of C.S. Lewis' book Miracles. It is argued that Lewis' definition of miracle in terms of invasion of Nature by Supernatural power is mistaken, as is his view that rational thought is itself a 'miracle'. Lewis' notion of what a mechanistic view of nature entails is also questioned, as is his assumption, without supporting argument, of a Platonistic point of view. While the book does have valuable insights, the weakness of the principal arguments cannot be overlooked.

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Few books about miracles stay in print for more than forty years, but *Miracles: a preliminary study* by C.S. Lewis has done just that. One of the main arguments of the book was vigorously criticized by G.E.M. Anscombe in a famous meeting of the Socratic Club,¹ and Lewis rewrote the third chapter as a result. But the difficulties with the book were by no means eliminated. Let me say at the outset that it seems to me that the argument of the book rests on four plausible but unsound foundations. First, an un-Biblical definition of miracle in terms of Nature and Supernature; second, a presupposition that rational thought must be independent of physical events in the brain; third, a curiously limited view of what belief in a mechanistic world entails and lastly a Platonism that few, if I am any judge, will find convincing. Quotations are from the original version of the book published by Bles in 1947.

Lewis defines *miracle* as 'an interference with Nature by supernatural power' (p.15). Nature is 'what happens "of itself" or "of its own accord"' (p.16). This definition of miracle owes much more to the Greeks than to the Bible, which does not recognize Nature as a cosmic power at all. Indeed, it was precisely because it escaped the notion of Nature as a cosmic power that the early scientists found the idea of *mechanism* so attractive. For the Biblical Christian, there is no Nature with a capital 'N', for the Creator Himself upholds all things by His word of power. (There is, of course, a cosmic power other than God which Christians certainly take seriously, namely Satan, the prince of this world. But to try to argue for the autonomy of Nature as Satan's domain involves the obvious difficulty that one can hardly imagine Satan as the author of the regularity and consistency of the natural world.) Lewis is of course not granting Nature the sort of autonomy that she had for the Greeks: no-one knows better than he that 'heaven and earth (may) flee away at His glance', (p.113) but nevertheless the Greek idea

1 See C. S. Lewis: A biography, by A. N. Wilson, Collins, 1990.

of Nature as a cosmic power subject in general to her Creator, but practically autonomous, pervades the whole book.

Although I think we will go astray if we follow Lewis in his capitalizing 'Nature', this is not to say that what he has to say about naturalism is not valuable. As always, Lewis has a marvellous ability to reveal and pithily summarize presuppositions: 'What the Naturalist believes is that the ultimate Fact, the thing you can't go behind, is a vast process in space and time which is going on of its own accord.' (p.16, Lewis' emphasis)

Lewis goes on to argue that any thoroughgoing naturalistic view of the world is self-contradictory: 'No thought is valid if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes . . . Now it would clearly be preposterous to apply this rule to each particular thought as we come to it and yet not to apply it to all thoughts taken collectively, that is, to human reason as a whole.' (pp.27-28) Lewis quotes with approval the argument of J.B.S. Haldane that 'If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.' (pp.28-29) The difficulty with this superficially attractive argument is well known to those who are acquainted with Professor MacKay's writings on this subject. For those who are not I suggest the discussion of 'Nothing-buttery' in chapter four of *The Clockwork Image*, IVP, 1974, or in chapter two of *Human Science and Human Dignity*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1979. MacKay argues that an explanation of our actions in terms of the physical activity in our brains need not undermine the validity of an explanation in terms of our rational decision-making, in rather the same way that the physicist's explanation of the activity of a computer in terms of electron-flow need not undermine the mathematician's explanation in terms of the calculation he has programmed it to perform (although it may do so if the hardware is malfunctioning, of course). Thus it is not at all clear that Lewis can support his assertion that the particular part of the physical world that is our brain is necessarily invaded by a non-natural agency, Reason. If Lewis is mistaken on this point then one of his most important arguments fails as a consequence. Lewis argues that it is irrational to disbelieve in miracles because the everyday business of thinking rationally involves the 'miracle' of Reason invading the part of the natural world that is one's brain. What Lewis would have been correct to say is that explanations in terms of the rational activity of human agents are not debunked by stories about the mechanism of their brains. But the application of this point to the topic in question—miracles—is not by any means the one that Lewis makes. Mechanistic accounts of events in my brain do not preclude my making rational choices, and miracles may be God's signs to us whether or not they have a naturalistic explanation.

A further difficulty with the book is that Lewis tries to argue (in the chapter 'Miracle and the laws of nature') that miracles do not break the laws of nature because the laws of nature only specify connections between events, given that the events have already happened: 'Thus in one sense the

laws of Nature cover the whole field of space and time; in another, what they leave out is precisely the whole real universe—the incessant torrent of actual events which make up true history. That must come from somewhere else. To think the laws can produce it is like thinking that you can create real money by simply doing sums. For every law, in the last resort, says 'If you have A, then you will get B.' But first catch your A: the laws won't do it for you.' (pp.71–72) This is just a muddle. It is of course true that laws (being abstractions) do not create anything, but that is to miss the point. The normal pattern of events is certainly disrupted when an unprecedented event occurs because, in Lewis' terms a certain 'A' just prior to the unprecedented event will fail to be followed by the normal 'B'.

The fourth weakness in the argument of 'Miracles' is Lewis' more or less explicit Platonism: 'Now it is clear that my reason has grown up gradually since my birth and is interrupted for several hours each night. It therefore cannot be that eternal self-existent Reason which neither slumbers or sleeps. Yet if any thought is valid, such a Reason must exist and must be the source of my own imperfect and intermittent rationality.' (p.36) Or again: 'If we are to continue to make moral judgements (and whatever we say we shall in fact continue) then we must believe that the conscience of man is not a product of Nature. It can be valid only if it is an offshoot of some absolute moral wisdom, a moral wisdom which exists absolutely "on its own" and is not a product of non-moral, non-rational Nature.' (pp.47–48) What Lewis is alluding to here is Plato's famous and problematic Theory of 'Forms' or 'Ideas': roughly speaking that what we experience are but the distorted shadows of realities (the Ideas or Forms) that are perfect and unchanging. What is extraordinary is that Lewis feels it unnecessary to enter even into a discussion of the very great difficulties surrounding the notion. Plato himself drew attention to considerable difficulties with the Theory and others (beginning with Aristotle) have been more sceptical still. I think that the best that can be said about such arguments is that the logic is inverted. If the universe is created by a rational and moral Creator then it will not surprise us to find Him rejoicing to make rational and moral creatures in His image. One could therefore say that the rationality and morality of at least one of the species in the universe follows from the Creator's characteristics, but the converse is not (to me at least) a convincing argument.

Lewis has some valuable things to say on 'The propriety of miracles' where he follows Dorothy Sayers in arguing that 'If you are writing a story, miracles or abnormal events may be bad art, or they may not. If, for example, you are writing an ordinary realistic novel and have got your characters into a hopeless muddle, it would be quite intolerable if you suddenly cut the knot and secured a happy ending by having the hero left a fortune from an unexpected quarter. On the other hand there is nothing against taking as your subject from the outset the adventures of a man who inherits an unexpected fortune . . . Some people probably think of the Resurrection as a desperate last moment expedient to save the Hero from a situation which had got out of the Author's control . . . (but) Death and

Resurrection are what the story is about; and had we but eyes to see it, this has been hinted on every page, met us, in some disguise, at every turn, and has even been muttered in conversations between such minor characters (if they are minor characters) as the vegetables.' (pp.118–119)

In a chapter on 'The grand miracle' (the Incarnation), Lewis uses the analogy of discovering a manuscript which purports to be a long lost and crucial part of a classic text. The main criterion for assessing its validity is how well it fits the known text. Lewis maintains that the Incarnation fits in with 'the composite nature of man, the pattern of descent and reascension, Selectiveness, and Vicariousness' in Nature. (p.143) Whilst I do not completely discount some of his insights, I think that most scientists will feel very uneasy about the looseness of the argument here, and rather inclined to give the whole chapter a verdict of 'not proven'.

Lewis distinguishes Christ's 'miracles of the old creation' (ones resembling what God had already done in creation) from 'miracles of the new creation' of which the resurrected Christ is the forerunner. On the former he says: 'I contend that in all these miracles (of Christ) alike the incarnate God does suddenly and locally something that God has done or will do in general. Each miracle writes for us in small letters something that God has already written, or will write, in letters almost too large to be noticed, across the whole canvas of Nature . . . Their authenticity is attested by the style.' (p.162) On the primary miracle of the new creation, the Resurrection, Lewis is splendidly clear: 'The Resurrection, and its consequences, were the 'gospel' or good news which the Christians brought: what we call the 'gospels', the narratives of Our Lord's life and death, were composed later for the benefit of those who had already accepted the gospel. They were in no sense the basis of Christianity: they were written for those already converted. The miracle of the Resurrection, and the theology of that miracle, comes first: the biography comes later as a comment upon it.' (p.172) 'The next point to notice is that the Resurrection was not regarded simply or chiefly as evidence for the immortality of the soul. It is, of course, often so regarded today: I have heard a man maintain that 'the importance of the Resurrection is that it proves survival.' . . . But there is not in Scripture the faintest suggestion that the Resurrection was new evidence for something that had in fact been always happening. The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. . . This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened.' (p.173)

On more general apologetic grounds Lewis is magnificent, exposing the implicit pantheism underlying much opposition to Christianity: 'Speak about beauty, truth and goodness, or about a God who is simply the indwelling principle of these three, speak about a great spiritual force pervading all things, a common mind of which we are all parts, a pool of generalised spirituality to which we can flow, and you will command

friendly interest. But the temperature drops as soon as you mention a God who has purposes and performs particular actions, who does one thing and not another, a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God with a determinate character. People become embarrassed or angry. Such a conception seems to them primitive and crude and even irrelevant. The popular 'religion' excludes miracles because it excludes the 'living God' of Christianity and believes instead in a kind of God who obviously would not do miracles, or indeed anything else. This popular 'religion' may roughly be called Pantheism'. (pp.99–100) 'Men are reluctant to pass over from the notion of an abstract and negative deity to the living God. I do not wonder. Here lies the deepest tap-root of Pantheism and of the objection to traditional imagery. It was hated not, at bottom, because it pictured Him as man but because it pictured Him as king, or even as warrior. The Pantheist's God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven and earth should flee away at His glance.' (p.113)

Lewis is adept at disposing of red herrings, such as that people 'in olden times' believed in miracles 'because they didn't know the laws of nature'. Lewis takes as an example the Virgin Birth: 'When St. Joseph discovered that his fiancée was going to have a baby, he not unnaturally decided to repudiate her. Why? Because he knew as well as any modern gynaecologist that in the ordinary course of nature women do not have babies unless they have lain with men'. (p.57) Or the red herring that 'They could believe in miracles in olden times because they had a false conception of the universe. They thought that Earth was the largest thing in it and Man the most important creature. It therefore seemed reasonable to suppose that the Creator was specially interested in man and might even interrupt the course of Nature for his benefit.' (p.59) To which Lewis replies, 'Whatever its value may be as an argument, it may be stated at once that this view is quite wrong about the facts. The immensity of the universe is not a recent discovery. More than seventeen hundred years ago Ptolemy taught that in relation to the distance of the fixed stars the whole Earth must be regarded as a point without magnitude. His astronomical system was universally accepted in the Dark and Middle Ages. The insignificance of Earth was as much a commonplace to Boethius, King Alfred, Dante and Chaucer as it is to Mr H.G. Wells or Professor (J.B.S.) Haldane.' (pp.59–60)

There is much else well worth reading, though of marginal relevance to the subject of miracles. Lewis' chapter 'Horrid red things' could stand as an independent essay on the role of imagery in Christian thinking, expounding the dictum that 'thinking may be sound in certain respects where it is accompanied not only by false images but by false images mistaken for true ones.' (p.87) The analogy of 'The Erudite Limpet' (pp.108–109) is a telling criticism of the idea that mysticism undermines orthodoxy.

To summarize then, Lewis' arguments against a trenchant materialism (what he calls naturalism) are well taken, but do not get us very far. There is

indeed something special about the relationship between brain and rational thought but the relationship does not seem to be one of an independent entity invading another, and so certainly does not establish a test case for Lewis' definition of miracle. Nevertheless, the issue is relevant, because it does establish the principle of duality of explanatory schemes. This is useful in thinking about miracles because the Bible never tells us that what we would ordinarily call a miracle need necessarily involve a departure from the usual pattern of God's upholding of the world. This is of course not to say that some miracles (certainly the resurrection) do not involve a radical departure from the usual pattern. But it does not seem impossible that the crossing of the Red sea, or perhaps even the burning of the sacrifice on Mt. Carmel, happened without a discontinuity in the pattern of natural events. They are none the less properly miracles because they find their significance in God's special purpose at the time.

It is much to be regretted that Lewis did not centre his examination of the concept of miracle on the ground he crosses but briefly in his chapter on 'The propriety of miracles': namely the Biblical doctrine of creation, and all that follows from it about the relationship between our Creator and his creation.

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