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ON THE RATIONAL CONCEIVABILITY OF MIRACLES

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ON THE RATIONAL CONCEIVABILITY OF MIRACLES

For the everyday Christian, the question of the conceivability of miracles does not arise, or, if it should be asked, it is easily put aside by pious cant that God may do whatever He will, even so far as to "violate natural law" (whatever one defines such to be). However, for the serious thinker who wishes to plumb the depths of his faith and integrate it fully and coherently into his life, this concept of miracle may indeed raise serious questions and difficulties, even if the question of whether or not a particular event is a miracle never arises.

The main difficulty with miracles is not a matter of simple belief. Rather, it is whether or not it is reasonable for the Christian theist to believe that miracles are possible, without rejecting his everyday understanding of how the world works (i.e., his "scientific" understanding). Both sides - that it is reasonable to believe in miracles and that it is not - have been argued. Those who assert the latter usually do so from a position which sets theism and science at odds, and which sees the scientific or empirical side as being most reasonable.

Those who assert the former position have usually accepted their opponents' distinction between theism and science and gone on to say for theistic reasons that miracles "violate" the natural or scientific rules of operation. Another tactic employed by some writers is to reduce miracle to less than what the religious believer usually means by the term, removing or dismissing the notion that a miracle is a special action of God. Instead, these writers define "miracle" as an event which is of special importance to the believer. This, in effect, takes miracles out of the range of God's action and places them as terms of value-judgment in the hands of the individual believer.

I wish to argue that it is indeed reasonable for the theist to believe in miracles, but not in a sense that denies his scientific understanding of the world - as when miracles are defined as violations of that understanding - and not in a sense which reduces the concept of miracle as a divine action - as when miracles are defined as a value-judgment by the believer. In order to show the compatibility of the theist's position with his respect for "scientific explanation," it is necessary to clarify the essential concepts of theism and the view of divine action that such concepts entail. It is also necessary to clarify the role of scientific understanding as it relates to theism. From these points it will be

possible to proceed to a discussion of miracles and an understanding of them that is both reasonable within the context of theism and consistent with scientific modes of explanation.

An excellent groundwork in theism has been laid by the contemporary philosopher-theologian, Austin M. Farrer. Brian Hebblethwaite, writing on Farrer, notes that Farrer's books provide "the most direct, sustained and searching treatment" of theistic concepts "that modern theology has to offer." ¹

Although there are many philosophical theologians whose views are close to, and in places enlarge upon, Farrer's, such as C.S. Lewis, H.H. Farmer, Alasdair MacIntyre, Frederic Platt, Robert W. Gleason, and others, there are none who provide such an extensive exposition of theism as does Farrer. C.S. Lewis only briefly discusses his theistic basis in the first chapters of his book, Miracles, in order to proceed directly to the topic from which the title takes its name. MacIntyre, Farmer, and Gleason do much the same, bringing up basic points of theism only insofar as they relate to a particular point which they are trying to make. Platt, in his small volume on miracles, goes into some detail as to his theistic ground, but does not devote himself so entirely to the task as Farrer does. Unfortunately, Farrer's task is so basic and he takes such care with it that

he does not ever take up the point of miracles to the extent to which some of the aforementioned writers do.

Nevertheless, I have chosen Farrer's theistic understanding as the basis of my thesis on miracles for several reasons. First of all, Farrer speaks from within the fold of orthodoxy insofar as orthodoxy makes claims concerning God's existence and activity; Farrer does not, however, limit himself to "orthodox" (read "old") grounds for establishing these claims.² Yet he "abandons all pretence to novelty,"³ and seeks a middle way which establishes the reasons for existing beliefs without restricting himself to old methods.

Secondly, Farrer is very careful to remain within the basic theistic understanding that God, and whatever relation he bears to the world, is unique. Farrer never allows himself to slip into taking analogous references to this uniqueness in a literal way. Instead, he painstakingly delineates his analogies - where they succeed and where they fail - after the manner of a surgeon who carefully clears his operating field to expose the heart.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Farrer does not ignore the "practical" or empirical side of the question. He makes no attempt to dismiss the question about theism's "meaningfulness". Theism is meaningful, according to Farrer, so long as it

informs or inspires action. "We can know nothing of God unless we can do something about him."⁴ What we do depends largely, if not completely, "upon the experience of his action, however that experience is obtained."⁵ This is a direct response to the strict empirical claim that, as God is un-verifiable, theism holds no empirical meaning. For it is clear that, insofar as the theist somehow experiences God's action and acts in relation to it in his own finite way, theism holds some sort of empirical meaning.

In this paper, it is not my intent to "prove" theism or even to "prove" miracles in any particular sense. Theism will be assumed as meaningful, as it is the most common world view which includes miracles (or better, which tries to allow for such). Whether and how the idea of miracles fits with the theistic understanding of the world, taking into account the natural (empirical, scientific) understanding of the way the world works, is the question which this paper attempts to resolve.

Before taking up Farrer's work, it should be made clear why it is that one should speak from within this context of theism. The examination of the rationality of believing in miracles (not of whether some particular event is a miracle) will be, by its very nature, neither an empirical nor an historical investigation, as is pointed out by the popular theologian, C.S. Lewis in the first pages of his book, Miracles.

The examination cannot be empirical, for one cannot "experiment" with belief and "test" its rationality by the senses, and anyhow, as Lewis says, "our senses are not infallible." ⁶ The historical approach is premature; one cannot examine alleged "miracles" until the possibility of such events is established. Lewis admits: " For if they (miracles) are impossible, then no amount of historical evidence will convince us." ⁷ The examination, then, must proceed based upon the assumption of a world-view, and with regard to miracles, theism is the most obvious choice.

Austin Farrer would agree with Lewis that the examination is neither strictly empirical nor historical and that theism is the ground for discussion; however, he does realize that a sort of empiricism, which he calls a "scientific attitude," is necessary to keep one within the scope of rational inquiry. He makes it clear that a "scientific attitude" does not equal "dogmatic materialism," that is, it does not confine one to the limitations of the senses, but allows a general attitude or attention to fact which permits systematic thinking. ⁸ And he finds difficulties with the strict empirical method, as does Lewis. In Finite and Infinite, he argues that one cannot "prove" God's existence (even if one wanted to) in any empirically-conclusive sense.

He goes on to show how each of the usual genres of proof fail in this endeavor: a priori proofs are impossible "since ex hypothesi" nothing can precede God in existence. A posteriori proofs, by the treatment of created things as "effects" beg the question of the "Effective Agency," God, and the famous "First Cause" argument fails in two respects: first, it "assumes the validity of a divine causality" which is what the proof is intended to show, and secondly, it makes God the first instance of the genre "cause," which can only be a valid assumption if one can view divine causality independently of natural causality, which, at least for humans, is hardly possible.⁹

If, then, God is not "proveable," one cannot hope to found an empirical system concerning his activity in the world. Thus it is that to examine miracles in a rational way, one must have already assumed that there is a God upon whom all finite beings depend, who might be found to perform them, which task is to be taken up herein. The question of the justification of this assumption of the theistic understanding of reality, which Farrer calls understanding in terms of the "cosmological idea," is a task unto itself and must be left to other discussions. In this paper, the meaningfulness and truth of the belief that there is a God who creates and sustains the world will be taken for granted.

Although Farrer never treats of miracles to any great extent, he does discuss the nature of God's "creative and sustaining action" throughout his works, often in relation to the particular concepts of revelation, providence, and the workings of nature or creation. Farrer is always careful to remain within the limits of rational theology in constructing his views, even so far as to use the positions of his opponents to keep him within bounds. This is a useful tactic, and it is well to employ it in a paper on miracles, as there have been numerous treatises upon the impossibility and/or irrationality of the miraculous. Such notable adversaries as the Eighteenth Century empiricist David Hume and his modern counterpart, Patrick Nowell-Smith, may prove helpful in rejecting views of miracles which are not rational, theistically or otherwise, and restricting the discussion to what can reasonably be said about miracles, always speaking from a theistic standpoint, of course.

The task, then, somewhat simplified, is to see what one can say about miracles and remain rational, given the structure of orthodox theism which Farrer presents. The strategy which will be employed involves, first, an in-depth examination of Farrer's concept of divine action under the theistic assumption, followed by a look at the arguments for a type of "miraculous" which is inappropriate, in light of the

arguments against the miraculous. Finally, I will construct an understanding of miracles which is appropriate to orthodox theism, employing "hints" gleaned from Farrer's works as well as others', such as Frederic Platt, Robert W. Gleason and C.S. Lewis.

It is by no means an easy task, however, nor a new one; theists have struggled with the problem of miracles for centuries in an effort to establish their possibility in a manner which is reasonable enough to fit both their basic religious understanding of the world and their empirical experiences in it. Though Farrer does not take up the problem directly, he does leave several clues which aid in establishing an understanding of miracles which is both orthodox and rational.

The very nature of this effort precludes any appeal to revelation or to statements of dogma. Farrer calls people who are content to rest upon such a "pre-scientific approach" "short-sighted." Rational theology alone speaks to the need for rational justification for belief; however, its conclusions "are severely limited."¹⁰ We cannot predict miracles on the basis of such a justification, or even say for certain if some particular event were a miracle.

This does not reduce the importance of rational inquiry. Its proper role is to establish the rational essentials of theism - to winnow the wheat from the

chaff, so to speak, to argue for its truth, and to discuss the possibility of certain traditional religious ideas, such as providence, revelation, and miracles. It cannot argue for the actuality of such forms as divine action may take; this, according to Farrer, belongs to the realm of "practice, and of day to day religion." 11

I. FARRER'S UNDERSTANDING OF DIVINE ACTION

Our first task in the examination of miracles is to examine exactly what is entailed in the assumption of theism, which Farrer explains in terms of the "cosmological idea." This explanation gives us an analysis of what Farrer understands to be the essentials of orthodox theism. These essentials include (1) a God who "acts," (2) a contingent (or finite) world, and (3) finite agents having some degree of independence with respect to their action, yet (4) retaining a dependence upon their Creator for their continued existence.

The idea of a God who acts is already implied in the cosmological idea itself; this is essential to showing the intelligibility of miracles which are, after all, believed to be some sort of action on God's part. With respect to this first point, understanding God to be the Infinite Creator or source of all existents means that God must somehow act, at least to create. To understand the world as the collection of the created finite or contingent existents means that it is conceivable that any or all of these existents should fail to exist.

It is basic to theism that these finite existents should have some degree of independence with respect to their own activity. It denies the view that God

particularly manipulates each creature and event, and asserts that God somehow "makes the world make itself."¹ Further, by recognizing the independence of finite creatures, the propriety or reasonableness of scientific understanding is established; the creatures may be understood to an extent by themselves, without calling into account the divine action which sustains them. This point is vital for my thesis, for it shows that Farrer's theism, in its most basic assertions, acknowledges the validity of natural understanding.

Finally, there is understood to be a relationship of "existential dependence" of the creatures upon their Creator. This means that wherever finite things are, so also is the action of the Infinite present in the mere fact of their existence.

These essential concepts imply that God is unique, by the idea that he alone creates, and also that his relationship to the world is unique, for it is upon him alone that the finite creatures depend for existence. We have already seen, in the introduction, that God cannot be "proven." However, we have the tool of rational theology to help us establish the "classical system of theistic ideas" and our "reasons for supposing that these ideas are (as they pretend to be) representative of what is." ²

So it is that Farrer does not end all discussion

with these few essential concepts, but fills them out with reasonable arguments for God's action in the world beyond a mere "life-support system." The cosmological idea necessarily involves an active God, as we have seen, and it is Farrer's idea that this action can be characterized; as creatures we can have no experience of God apart from his activity, which activity we are bound to express in creaturely terms.

It is important to understand exactly what Farrer means by activity that we might see how to talk about God's activity outside of creation, if theism in fact allows for such activity. For Farrer, activity characterizes existence.³ Everything that is participates in some sort of activity, as an actor, or an effect of an action, or as a relation between actions. Existence is inseparable from activity.⁴

The principles of existence or being are the modes of relation holding among activities or existents and their constituents, interior effects, and external effects. These relations are necessary, for they define the existence of particular things. Farrer recognizes three of these "metaphysical relations" as holding between finite creatures. They state that an activity cannot exist apart from its constituents, interior effects, and exterior effects; neither can these exist apart from the activity.

In addition to the finite metaphysical relations, there is the theistic metaphysical relation of infinite to finite substance. It holds its place among the others by virtue of the concept of theism, that it too is required for the existence of finite things, that they (the finite things) cannot exist apart from the infinite. "This is the relation of creativity proper," says Farrer.⁵ Since the infinite is not reducible to the finite "there can be no question of defining such a relation" as it is possible with the other relations.⁶

However, Farrer asserts that each of the three finite metaphysical relations are applicable to the finite/infinite relation in an analogical, though not an absolute, sense. That they are only analogous and not absolute brings us back to the uniqueness of the relation between God and his creation. Each relation falls short (as do all analogies) at some point. But they are all we have to work with in trying to describe God's action. Thus we must "oscillate" between "the negation of (each) image (as absolute) and its parabolic (or analogic) use."⁷

The uniqueness of God's relation to the world makes it reasonable (or at least, possible) for theism to allow other action to God which other systems may not. If God did not act outside of the relation of existential dependency (or creation), that

is, if he acted only "constitutively," the assumption of theism would be too much; mere deism would suffice. God could have created the world and left it to its own devices after somehow "winding it up" like a clock by creating it. God would not "interfere" in his creation. "But," says Farrer, "God ...continually interrupts his own composition."⁸ Theism, unlike deism, leaves sufficient room to God for this further action.

Also, if God's activity were completely constitutive, that is, if his action constituted every event in its entirety, no creature could be spoken of as having any individuality or independence from God. This would deny the possibility of free will, not to mention the validity of natural or scientific understanding, which was discussed earlier. But theism does not find creaturely independence incompatible with God's creative action; in fact, as we have seen, it is an essential concept. If one wishes to retain the natural understanding that creatures act out of some independence or will of their own, it is necessary to have an active God, who acts in ways beyond the constitutive, and who shapes his creation in ways which are beyond its mere existence.

With this point established, it becomes reasonable to speak of God's action besides his creative activity. Farrer describes four characteristics

of divine action which are of vital importance to the discussion of miracles: God's action in the world is particular, personal, unique, and invisible. He bases his arguments for these characteristics upon the cosmological idea and upon the essential concepts which have been unpacked from it.

Farrer puts it succinctly: "If God acts in the world, he acts particularly."⁹ Whenever a theist views a certain event in the world as the work of God, he reasons "direct from the divine handiwork to the divine maker."¹⁰ Man sees particular effects, and sees them as the results of particular actions; however, reference to "particular action" must not be taken univocally: A particular action of God is not the same thing as a finite action. He is in no way limited by the particularizing characteristic.

Further, the finite agents are not puppets; "God's agency must actually be such as to work omnipotently on, in, or through creaturely agencies without either forcing them or competing with them."¹¹ Neither can we reduce God to the "creaturely level.... The result can only be monstrosity and confusion."¹²

Those who attempt this reduction are seeking to predict God in terms of "spiritual laws," a higher analogue of "natural laws"; these include the "Spiritual Scientist" whom Farrer addresses in Faith and Speculation.¹³ In response, Farrer uses the analogy

of friends, saying "The absence of flat predictability from our friends' responses does not entail that there can be no art of friendship,"¹⁴ and that any "empirical verification" of God's action must be general (like that of our friends' - we cannot know for certain what they will do in a particular event), even though the action itself is not general.¹⁵ He also says elsewhere that God's actions are not and cannot be under "exact logical control."¹⁶

That God's action is not under the control of laws, whether "spiritual" or logical, leads one to the understanding of God's action in a personal and not a physical way. In God is Not Dead, Farrer supports the thought of God as personal in another way; "In his personal dealings with us, God's action is personal, and not only personal, but human."¹⁷ Man must interact with God in human terms, being unable to meet God "on his own ground" so to speak. Further, man sees God's action in Nature as "equally human."¹⁸ To say this is to walk a thin line, for to humanize God too much is dangerous: "To localize infinite God ...is a gross metaphysical error."¹⁹

However, Farrer quarrels with those (regardless of their good intentions) who would de-personalize God altogether, by formulating a scientific, physical relationship between God and man - the "spiritual scientist" referred to earlier. Farrer's first objection

to this approach is that "Experience of the physical type can never tell us anything about (God)."²⁰

However, true to form, Farrer allows proponents of the physical theory to make their case, by introducing the hypothetical "Spiritual Scientist" into his discussion. The "Spiritual Scientist" admits that the accuracy of spiritual science, which claims to establish regular principles ("spiritual laws") upon which "spiritual forces" are played out,²¹ does not obtain the high degree of precision found in the physical sciences, but that the "effective value of spiritual precepts" supports the science.²² That is, the "fact" that prayer obtains grace can be formulated into a scientific-like rule, or "law". Farrer denies this support; "to say that God deals personally with us is not to say that he acts by caprice."²³ God as personal may well be as constant as the "law" formulated by the spiritual scientist; constant regularities support Farrer's view as well as his opponents'.

Farrer yet allows the spiritual scientist to go as far as he might, even to saying that the relationship to God might be on the order of a "natural (physical) relation to a person."²⁴ Here is Farrer's coup de grace: If this relationship does in fact obtain, it is reducible to a relationship with "gracious forces...lodged in our own being."²⁵ If

the spiritual scientist feels uncomfortable in giving awe and reverence to "the highest or the deepest in himself,"²⁶ he has no recourse but to accept the "otherness" of God and so join ranks with Farrer. For God's "otherness for us lies in this; that his life is personal to him, it is not ours (my emphasis)."²⁷

Farrer does not wish to claim, however, that the personal relation is absolute. To apply one's own finite understanding of "personality" to God "straight" is to run the risk of limiting God. In order to understand Farrer's description of "personality" with regard to God's activity, it is important to remember what he means by "activity". It is necessarily linked to existence. Recall that God's action in the world is a unique relation to finite creatures; it is his personal action with respect to us. It should be noted, however, that this word "personal" is applicable in an analogical sense only; it must not be taken straight.

The reasonable question to ask, then, is why the personal analogy instead of the physical, or some other analogy? After all, every analogy must have its shortcomings, and the personal analogy's seems to be that of sheer anthropomorphism. Farrer asserts, counter to this, that the personal analogy is a "privileged" one. There is a clue to the personal idea of God which is to be found in one's own being.

It is important to our overall purpose to digress somewhat to examine this "clue". Farrer presents a very strong argument to the effect that our own being gives us a clue to what existence is in a general sense and which leads us to extrapolate to the idea of a Perfect Will (a personal trait!) which is God.

God is "all he wills to be and wills to be all that he is,"²⁸ and our own voluntaristic action provides the sole clue to God as will.²⁹ Farrer says that "within our own life, there is a scale (of activity) and the ascent through the scale is not only logical or metaphorical...it is an actual movement (which) increasingly realises the forms of apprehension, rationality, and will."³⁰ Farrer asserts that to think of the idea of God requires only that one think of the limitations of the scale and of the aspiration to an indefinitely upward extrapolation.³¹

Certainly the analogy of God as will is somewhat strained, infinite will being inconceivable in itself, but the analogy has real value because of our interior scale which evidences that our "voluntary powers" are not "fixed to a single level of performance."³² This is not to say that the scale should have a determinable maximum in God, for the "Supreme Existence in himself" may be "outside and above the series of finites rising towards him."³³

Against the objection that this characterization of God's activity is arbitrarily anthropomorphic, Farrer explains that personality is not the only modality of action which God may adopt, but that God may "clothe" his action with "no form but the form (he) freely chooses."³⁴ It is only that "we cannot talk about God save in natural (or, more specifically, personal) concepts" because they are the only concepts which convey any real meaning to us.³⁵

Farrer proposes three methods for possibly defining God without recourse to analogy, but shows that each one fails. The first is by proper definition, but this is impossible with respect to God; man cannot experience God as Infinite Being, and so cannot define him in non-finite terms. The second method is by ostensive indication or "pointing"; this will not work, however, because one cannot point to the divine act as divine, but only as occurring within finite beings. The third method is by performance; one can try to do what God does, by conforming to the divine will.³⁶

And this in fact, obtains! It is within man's sliding scale of activity, in his aspiration to yet higher, more rational and personal activity, that he perceives God. Yet even this action of performance does not correspond precisely to the divine performance, and analogy remains inescapable. Even in conforming

to the Infinite Will, we conform as finite human beings, and so our performance is correspondingly finite. "There is, then, no thought of God without analogy."³⁷

Nevertheless, for the believer, there is a personal dealing with God from within the context of his own action which involves no appeal to analogy (but is still not directly or objectively observable - "how could it be?").³⁸ But in such dealings, the attention is focused, not on the analogical clause "God wills that..." but on the non-analogical part, "the part which expresses what we have to do."³⁹ Thus it is that here, and only here, the analogy has no real significance; it is important to the believer only that he know what it is he must do, and that he do it.

By the clue of the scale of activity, God's absoluteness of being is intrinsically tied to his activity. This "activity" is applied to our own existence (since we understand God in his dealings with us), and so God is, by his activity as our creator, grasped as "'the absolute Being, archetype of human spirit' - neither of these without the other."⁴⁰ But though we see God as our archetype, it is not necessarily the only attribute of the divine, Farrer admits. Still, whatever other aspects his activity may have cannot dilute his personality, or archetypicality, or humanness.

The interior scale of human activity is justified, according to Farrer, on two counts: it is relevant to ordinary theological thinking (for example, the personality of God exemplified in the Trinity), and it is genuine.⁴¹ The scale is not artificial; we actually experience different levels of activity in ourselves. Any denial of it is purely verbal. But, although the scale is our only real clue to God, it does not make God simply human "to the Nth degree. His infinity cannot be finitized into super-humanness."⁴²

To be sure, then, the personal image is ambivalent, "but the basic personal category remains inescapable so long as God is a real Other to us."⁴³ It is important that we understand God's "otherness" as a distinction of free individual action and not as an exclusion of God from us in the finite-finite sense. But the analogy is justified by orthodoxy: "The doctrine of a life of God in God...can be thought, and by Christians commonly is thought, in purely personal terms: It is the fellowship of the Blessed Trinity."⁴⁴

God's "otherness" points to a third characteristic of his action in the world, which has already been discussed somewhat, that of uniqueness. A personal God is not necessarily particularized by the personal understanding; "God is not, indeed, out there in space beside us, like one of our neighbors."⁴⁵ Yet God can only be understood in terms which proceed from

our finite experiences, since we cannot directly experience in our finite selves the infinite God (at least not rationally. Farrer makes no claims against mystical experience, save that it is beyond rational enquiry). Therefore, all we have to examine are the (finite) "experiential grounds of belief."⁴⁶

Farrer makes a point that this experiential reference in no way validates science's claim to paradigm rationality over religion or theology. That is, God, because he is unique, cannot be understood by the "experimental method" of science; one is "looking in the wrong place" when he tries to see the human experience of God in this light. The primary rationality is, for Farrer, interpersonal, an engagement of wills. And, in the engagement of a finite, rational will (as in humans) with the Infinite Will, one finds a singular case; one can look to no experimental test for verification of this engagement.

It is because there is no way for man to know what divine or infinite will is, that he cannot "test" for it. It is only in the actual conformity to God's will - the relationship or engagement itself - that man's mind is made capable of understanding God in the "experiential sense" to which Farrer refers.⁴⁷ Man may say with Farrer, "Yes indeed, God must be all unlike what I suppose him to be. But," continues

Farrer, "my suppositions about him arise out of my active relation to him."⁴⁸

If one thinks theistically, then one is to understand God's will to mean "God's voluntary action" and not "that which God intends."⁴⁹ The latter mistaken view may be a slip in the direction of deism, a mapped-out universe. The proper understanding of God's will emphasizes the otherness, the uniqueness, of God, even while retaining the primary rationality of the engagement of our wills with the divine. According to Farrer, we can still infer God's work in the world without knowing his "purposes." "Only by shifting our centre from ourselves to him...could we know the work of God through nature, insofar as it transcends (my emphasis) the purposes of nature as nature; or rather of nature as what we can apprehend nature to be."⁵⁰

Farrer asserts that nature is inexplicable in and of itself, or at least, that a complete understanding is impossible by such limited means as sensory data provide; there is always a tendency to seek beyond nature for answers. The theist invokes God as a reasonable inclusion in the system to help provide answers, yet even He is explicable for man only in natural terms.⁵¹ Man cannot get outside the finite system to view God in his infinity. He must see God in the world order. "The description we give

ourselves of him cannot be independent of the ground on which we propose to believe in him, viz, the function he performs for all the finites," which is, sustaining them in existence.⁵²

However, God is not to be identified with the world's pattern (a caution against pantheism). "There is, of course, this difference," says Farrer, "the pattern is scattered piecemeal over the forces or events which make up the world; it is drawn together and enjoyed as one in the mind of God," and uniquely so.⁵³

So man must describe God's actions solely in natural or finite terms. Traditionally, "we believe that God's way of acting is the infinitely higher analogue of our own way, but we cannot conceive it otherwise than in terms of our own."⁵⁴ Farrer finds this "painfully negative";⁵⁵ nevertheless, such belief is not worthless, so long as one does not try to apply the analogies "as they stand to a transcendent God."⁵⁶ A relation or way of acting does not necessarily hold when one moves from the finite sphere to the infinite. For, "it is by no means clear that the finite excludes the infinite in the sense in which one finite excludes another."⁵⁷

This is not to disparage the use of analogy and metaphor in any way: "When a man speaks metaphorically

without being aware of it, he is always attending to what the metaphor means, never to the metaphor...but that does not make the role of the metaphor any less vital."⁵⁸ If we are to determine the divine activity of God "we have to assign it a content, and as that content is not to be found in the finites, it must presumably be found in some analogy with them."⁵⁹

The necessity of analogy to describe God's activity brings us to the fourth characteristic of that activity, and quite probably the most problematic of all, that of its invisibility. We never "see" God per se. What we see is the activity of finite beings which, in the recognition of them as finite, calls for "something beyond" to fully explain them. This "something beyond" is, for the theist, God.

But this does not make God some sort of metaphysical problem to be solved in order to explain the world. God is rather a mystery and "mysteries are not to be solved but (always inadequately) to be described."⁶⁰

These descriptions, in the form of finite (and therefore, "inadequate") analogies, cannot be put aside in order to grasp in an absolutely-direct sense that reality to which they refer, for, "by hypothesis we have not got the reality except in the form" of the analogous references themselves.⁶¹ Thus,

the analogies cannot be rejected, except for the "casual and fantastic" ones; there can be analogies between God and finite things which are "illuminating and natural" and these must be retained.⁶²

Again, it should be emphasized that Farrer in no way rejects the mystical and revelatory experiences which religion sometimes claims. It is only that, rationally speaking, one "cannot point away from his analogically-expressed thoughts about (God) to some non-analogical thoughts....He has not got any such non-analogical thoughts; analogy is the proper form of metaphysical thought; in the realm of thought (Farrer's emphasis) there is no getting behind it."⁶³ Again he stresses the importance of analogy in knowing God: "we cannot name him until an analogical act of mind has taken place; it is only in being aware of something finite as an analogy of God that we begin to be aware of God at all."⁶⁴

The necessary invisibility of God is best described by Farrer in his discussion of the possibility of a "causal joint" between infinite and finite. "The causal joint (could there be said to be one) between God's action and ours is of no concern in the activity of religion."⁶⁵ This is because religion concerns itself with conforming our wills to the divine, which, if such conformity obtains, any such joint must disappear.

However, the possibility of a "causal joint" is of concern here, for it involves the possibility of ever "seeing" a divine intervention in the finite world. According to Farrer, "God acts through his creatures";⁶⁶ not as puppets, however, do they act, as though they were divinely-led somnambulists. They depend upon God's action, but (as we experience ourselves) act freely also, to degrees within or without the divine will. The believer takes for granted this relation to the infinite, and therefore need not address the question of the "causal joint."⁶⁷

Though he cannot point out God's action in him or in other creatures as separate from those creatures (in principle), the believer nonethelss has "phenomenal evidences" for such action.⁶⁸ Though he cannot feel God act or see him do so voluntarily, he can have "an immediate and inescapable supposition" of an action as the voluntary act of God.⁶⁹ But as to the actual "mechanism of divine control," it can only be found in the personal relationship to God; "the openness of men's thoughts to pressures of which they are unaware."⁷⁰

In The Glass of Vision, Farrer discusses the natural/supernatural distinction, which may help to clarify this matter of the "causal joint." If indeed the supernatural were completely other than natural,

it could not possibly interact in the natural sphere.⁷¹
For such interaction to take place, the supernatural must be continuous with natural activity, though not absolutely.

For Farrer, the idea of "unaided supernatural action" is "almost a contradiction".⁷² The "nature" of a being cannot exceed itself so completely, by the very definition of itself by that nature! "Supernatural" is rather the exceeding of the natural power of a finite agent by the aid of some higher agent.⁷³

There is no "punctuation" to be found between God and his creatures. When he reveals himself and man recognizes that revelation, both actions are accomplished by both God and man.⁷⁴ Those who would take issue with this, saying there is indeed a "psychological" type of punctuation at least, Farrer refutes by saying that there is no experience which must be revelatory, that all experience may be revelatory, so that the individual need not intuit a particular point as revelatory and the surrounding points as "supervenient."⁷⁵

To those who would posit an epistemological point, Farrer replies that "it is conceived by analogy with the quest for pure sense data in the field of sensory perception" to hold such a view, except that there is no such thing as pure sense data, and anyhow, our experience of God "begins with a

mental recognition (not pure sense data) of a super-human action in that same creaturely existence which sense forces upon our attention."⁷⁶ In other words, we recognize something beyond the senses as active in finite existences, and we cannot put our "finger" (in its most sensory connotation!) on the point where creature ends and God begins. The "causal joint" is, then, inconceivable in any terms.⁷⁷

This is what is often referred to by Farrer as the Paradox of Double Agency. That is, the supernatural must be continuous with the natural, but not absolutely, as mentioned earlier. If it were absolutely continuous, it would be natural, yet if it were absolutely discontinuous, it would be imperceptible by natural or rational means.⁷⁸ Farrer admits that "the paradox defeats me,"⁷⁹ but asserts that it must be worked through somehow. In the end, the theist must "swallow" the paradox.

Objections from the unbeliever arise here: Why bother with the paradox at all? For it would be much more reasonable and comfortable, he asserts, to accept the world on its own ("natural") terms, without recourse to a supernatural agent so vague as to prevent objective understanding. Farrer asks the objector in reply, "How are we to swallow the world's achievements of pattern as results due to no influence and proceeding from no cause?"⁸⁰ For, as Farrer says, to throw out

the paradox is to deny the theistic assumption of an infinite creator of finites altogether.

But Farrer does allow that the supernatural cannot be tested for, as the unbeliever might hope. We recognize God in his effects in the world, but we cannot ask how he does what he does. "The technical question cannot arise" according to Farrer because God is absolute.⁸¹ No strictly empirical or scientific arguments can conclusively prove or disprove nature needing divine assistance.⁸²

Yet, there is something "in religion resembling experiment...only the person who does the experiment is God. It is not, however, God's experiment; its experimental value is for us."⁸³ The sense of "experimental" here is not of the pure scientific type, insofar as an hypothesis is experientially verified, but it is rather in the sense of "experimental art," where a new creative style is tried by the artist, that Farrer speaks. Here, the artist is God, "not that he needs, like the artist, to find out what he can do by doing it; but that what he does is constantly new, and as we say, creative."⁸⁴

The point which Farrer insists upon is this: that even when nature is regarded as most mechanistic, "perhaps especially when so regarded," it cannot be fully explained in and of itself.⁸⁵ The Paradox of Double Agency must be swallowed whole; man can

only enter into divine action (and an understanding thereof) by acting, and receive divine assistance to his finitude by trusting.⁸⁶ God "shows his hand with a plainness that (only) the enlightened eye cannot mistake."⁸⁷ Therefore, for the believer in theism, the paradox is easily "digested" and the "causal joint" between the finite world and God becomes a meaningless question.

What has been shown is that, given the assumption of the reasonableness of theism, God's action is best understood as particular, personal, unique, and invisible. The proper language to use in this understanding is, at bottom, analogical, owing to the gulf between the Infinite God and finite understanding. God's relation to his world is not reducible to any finite-finite relation, although these relations do provide valuable analogical material with reference to the finite-infinite relation. And the Paradox of Double Agency ceases to be a stumbling-block when one speaks from the context of theism, which, really, is the only context from which the enquiry into miracles can speak. This point will be discussed further in forthcoming discussion.

II. WHAT CANNOT BE SAID ABOUT MIRACLES

In this section, as the heading implies, I will investigate some important problems about the possibility of miracles. These problems come from two quarters: first, there are those raised by the non-theists, of which David Hume and Patrick Nowell-Smith are the best examples, and second, there are those which arise from certain theistic efforts to explain and justify miracles. These efforts include those by Arnold Lunn, Paul Dietl, Richard Purtill, Richard Swinburne, Homer H. Dubs, and Paul Tillich.

The two categories are not unrelated. The criticisms of each side towards the other are sometimes mutually illuminating, helping to clarify what can and cannot reasonably be said about theism in general and miracles in particular. It is unnecessary to take up each thinker's arguments in turn. It will be more useful to proceed by examining particular points in relation to which the most common problems arise; for example, the need of empirical grounds for miracles, or the lack of such grounds, the idea that miracles "violate" natural law, the use of miracles as proofs of the theistic system which they presuppose, and the risk of so emptying out the concept of miracles that it loses its meaning for the believer.

Thus, I will examine particular philosophers' ideas and arguments concerning miracles, but only at those points which I have found to be critical to the understanding of theism which has been established and to the conceivability of miracles within that understanding.

Before criticizing any of these points, it is necessary to set down some minimal requirements for the use of the word miracle. In common religious usage, a miracle is a special action of God in the world, possibly a spectacular one. It is an experience which is somehow different from the ordinary course of events. Further, as established at the beginning, miracles must be discussed from within a world-view, namely theism; they cannot be seen in a purely objective light.

The description I have provided is vague, and purposely so. It is only after the discussion of what cannot be said about miracles is completed that the limits of what can be said about miracles become clear. By first establishing clearly where the pitfalls lie, it becomes easier to maneuver among them without falling into any. By dispensing with the negative points concerning the possibility of miracles, the way is cleared to say something more positive.

First I will consider Hume's classic refutation of miracles and then proceed to Nowell-Smith and his

recent adaptation of a Humean argument. Since Nowell-Smith's argument arises in part as a response to Arnold Lunn's problematic defense of miracles, it is well to note how much of Nowell-Smith's criticism is warranted in response to Lunn's view.

Then I will proceed to an examination of other views of miracles that do not square with theism as we have taken it in the first section. When this task is completed, I will be prepared to establish a more reasonable view of the miraculous, in the third and final section of this paper.

They are few, even among the most casual of inquirers into the problem of miracles, who would doubt that Hume's critique of miracles is the classic argument against their possibility. Ineed, Hume is quite likely the most important critic of theism as a whole because of his strict empirical philosophy..

Hume's empiricism has been discussed and effectively criticized and refuted by hosts of philosophers including such recent contributors as C.D. Broad, John King-Farlow, and C.S. Lewis. Old ground need not be passed over again, especially when it would take us too far afield. It is sufficient to note that, were Hume's empiricism correct, theism would be barred from having any sort of meaningfulness or sense at all. This is because empiricism, as Hume

saw it, preached a causal interpretation of experience which was simply "the codification of recurrent uniformities in the pattern of our sense-data,"¹ and nothing more. Theism and theistic ideas of course are not subsumable under such a system.

I do not wish to argue for theism's "cognitive meaningfulness," which is what many empiricists clamor for. This has already been ably done by Farrer and others, including C.S. Lewis, and Richard Swinburne. A digression in order to present those arguments is sufficiently removed from the point of this thesis to warrant its omission. Besides, by our earlier assumption of theism as reasonable and meaningful, and by the development of that theism which Farrer provides and was put forward in the first section, Hume's entire system is ruled out-of-court from the first. Thus the need for the broad refutation of his empiricism dissolves altogether with regard to this study, and is rightly left to other discussions.

Still, it would be most unseemly to dismiss the miracle-believing theist's most formidable opponent so abruptly, without addressing his particular argument against miracles provided in Section X of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding. Briefly, Hume's main argument is that experience shows that nature is uniform and that miracles, which disrupt this uniformity, go against the grain of experience, and so are

extremely improbable. For Hume, a miracle is only believable where the evidence against its occurrence is more improbable (i.e. is less supported by our experience of uniformity in nature), and hence, is more miraculous than the alleged "miracle": "...no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of argument."²

Hume also attacks the view that miracles provide a rational proof for a particular religious system. First of all, he has already discounted the probability of miracles, based on the empirical evidence. Now he says, "Upon the whole, then, it appears that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof."³ Further, "Our most holy religion is founded on faith, not on reason."⁴ He is on the right track to assert that miracles cannot serve as a proof for God. After all, as we saw in the first section, no argument conclusively proves God for the non-believer.

However, it is easy to see that Hume's argument lacks strength for the theist, who has already assumed the rational validity of theism and therefore does not need to treat of miracles as though they proved or disproved his system. As Dr. Norman K.

Smith puts it: "...evidently, Hume's treatment of miracles has a premiss to which he has not in this section referred - namely, that we have, and can have, no grounds either in reason or in experience for postulating the kind of God to whom alone the Scriptural or other miracles can fittingly be ascribed. This, and not the sheerly logical considerations bearing on belief, testimony, and evidence generally (of which Hume treats), is the context within which the issues regarding miracles properly arise."⁵ This context is theism, which, as we have said, Hume rejects out of hand.

C.S. Lewis ably refutes Hume's treatment of miracles in the chapter of Miracles titled "On Probability". The main problem, as Lewis sees it, is that Hume's arguments rest upon a nature whose entire history is but a system of cause and effect. Lewis does not wish to quarrel with the idea of a uniform nature, but he distinguishes between matters within such a "framework of an assumed uniformity of Nature," which quite properly belong to empirical enquiry, and the "validity or perfection of the frame (in) itself," which is the question which miracles ask.⁶

So, says Lewis, "if we stick to Hume's method, far from getting what he hoped (that miracles are infinitely improbable), we get a complete deadlock."

Hume's probability only holds within a uniform nature. "When uniformity is itself in question (and it is in question the moment we ask whether miracles occur) this kind of probability is suspended. And Hume knows no other! (my emphasis)"⁷ Hume's argument against miracles only works within the context of his entire system: it is only if empiricism is the primary rationality under which all things must be subsumed that the question of miracles cannot arise. If one accepts theism, one can question the validity of the natural order in itself, and the idea of miracles does not obviously conflict with one's natural understanding of the world.

Having put aside Hume's argument against miracles as irrelevant to the theist, we turn now to a more contemporary objector, Patrick Nowell-Smith. Nowell-Smith has "sharpened the objections of Hume," and in doing so, has dealt telling blows to the common view that has persisted from medieval times that miracles are "the prime proofs of Christianity" with a "far greater adequacy" than did Hume.⁸

The purpose of examining Nowell-Smith's arguments is twofold: first, it is to know his objections and refute or disqualify them (as with Hume's), and second, it is to see what prompted his criticisms and what makes them useful to this study. We shall find that his arguments, like Hume's, do not count

against the theist, who acknowledges theism without the "proof" of it by miracles, but who nevertheless leaves room in his system for the possibility of miracles. However, Nowell-Smith's attacks most certainly do count against a popular, but problematic, view of the miraculous, exemplified in part in the arguments of Sir Arnold Lunn. That view is that miracles are over and above (i.e. they "violate") the natural order, and so are beyond scientific explanation altogether. Further, miracles, under this view, provide proofs for a religious system, for both the believer and the unbeliever.

Nowell-Smith's main criticism of miracles is a modification of Hume's point that natural laws, formulated from uniform experience, disallow the description of an event as a miracle, or a "violation" of any such laws. Nowell-Smith does not tie empirical science down to such laws; instead he sees science as a method, whose accompanying laws and concepts may change over time. Thus, just because events are not subsumable under present laws (or "violate" them), there is no cause to call such events "miracles". There must be some natural explanation which takes this apparently contrary event into account under a new or reformulated concept or law. There is no justification for Lunn's point that miracles "violate" natural law.

To Nowell-Smith, to call a strange event a miracle is not to explain it. This is because Nowell-Smith sees scientific rationality as the only method for determining the truth about natural occurrences; only natural causes are empirically verifiable. Nowell-Smith says "If any scientist has said that a certain phenomena 'is inexplicable as the effect of natural agents and must therefore be ascribed to supernatural agents' he is not speaking as a scientist."⁹ Nowell-Smith asserts that such "supernatural agents" cannot be verified or falsified and so it is much more reasonable to look for a natural explanation.

This is a strong argument, but like Hume's, it can only win the day if one has already allowed that only science and the experiences which establish it are valid to "explain" new events. Nowell-Smith obviously assumes this by the fact that he "tacks on (to his above argument) two more questionable assertions" which also imply the assumption. These are: "that the very meaning of 'supernatural' in such an alleged explanation (as a miracle) is unfathomable; that...genuine explanations must have serious predictive fertility."¹⁰ This second assertion is brought low by the intuitive counterassertion that not even all scientific explanations are predictive (and thus "scientific" in Nowell-Smith's understanding), much less those regarding single, non-experimental events.

As for the former assertion, the introduction of the supernatural is "unfathomable" for Nowell-Smith because he does not speak from "within the framework of certain presuppositions."¹¹ These presuppositions, which Lunn does hold and which John King-Farlow elucidates, include: the existence of God, the "maker of all", material things which have some intelligibility of their own (can be grasped through science), and human wills which can determine what sort of "explanation" is called for with respect to particular events. In short, Lunn's view, contrary to Nowell-Smith's, requires the theistic presuppositions which we have already outlined and accepted, and from which an intelligible (or "fathomable") discussion of the possibility of miracles must proceed! This disallows any attempt to use miracles as "proofs" of religion, which Lunn does not explicitly attempt, but which is attempted by other theists, and which Lunn implies.

King-Farlow is quick to follow his elucidation of Lunn's theistic presuppositions with a strong qualification, that "None of this vindicates Lunn, however (his emphasis)."¹² Lunn seems to have a view towards expressing miracles in terms which will be compelling both for the believer and for the unbeliever. But Lunn is "outdated" in his approach to science as establishing regularities according to "essences", although he (correctly) claims to need support for

his view from science (i.e. there must be some regularity of nature to serve as a contrasting backdrop for miracles). Even his development of the supernatural presuppositions is not held by all members of the same religious system. As King-Farlow rightly sums it up: "Within a framework of belief, (miracles) may psychologically strengthen Faith. But that is very different from logically strengthening the claims of the framework." He continues, "We must move away from the interpretation that treats them as proofs of a system for someone outside the system."¹³

With these points in mind, that miracles (and the theism from within which their discussion proceeds) cannot be divorced from or put beyond the scope of empirical or scientific methods of enquiry, as when they are defined as "violations", and that miracles cannot be held as "proofs" of theism (since theism provides the concepts necessary for any events to be regarded as miracles), it is now possible to critically examine this very common point of view, which is held by several theists. The most outspoken in this vein among those I have examined is Richard Purtill in his article, "Proofs of Miracles and Miracles as Proofs."¹⁴ He is joined, in part or in whole, by Richard Swinburne, and Paul Dietl.

Purtill's argument runs as follows: miracles are "exception(s) to the natural order of things caused by God,"¹⁵ and this exception is meaningful only in the context of an order created by God (theism). That miracles are meaningful only within theism has already been accepted; it is the idea of miracles as "exceptions" which must be addressed.

Purtill makes an implausible analogy between miracles and President Ford's pardon of Nixon. He says that "The scientist...as a scientist, ignores the possibility of miracles, just as the lawyer, as a lawyer, must ignore the possibility of a presidential pardon for his client, since there is nothing he can do as a lawyer which will ensure a presidential pardon."¹⁶

It is unclear as to why the lawyer qua lawyer "must" ignore such a possibility; presidential pardons are not illegal - they are built into the legal system as a distinct and legal possibility among other legal possibilities. And although Purtill acknowledges this a bit further on, he nevertheless holds that the pardon is "an individual exception...made to the law."¹⁷ He goes on to say that miracles do not violate or suspend natural laws, but only except certain individual cases from them.

If Purtill makes some distinction between an exception and a violation, he never makes it plain.

In fact, in summing up his argument, he returns to his first point that the pardon is of no legal interest, and similarly, miracles are of no scientific interest.¹⁸ "A miracle is supernatural, and therefore of no scientific interest."¹⁹ Certainly he is mistaken! The scientist has every right to explore seeming exceptions; he does not turn a blind eye to them. If indeed he did so, no scientific progress could ever be made.

Purtill's mistaken view here calls to mind the "old" critics of the supernatural as Farrer describes them, who found the bounds of nature so fixed as to refuse to admit of "exceptions" which therefore were ignored.²⁰ But just because an event does not seem to fit the "legality" of natural processes is no cause to ignore it. Science's domain is the natural world in its entirety, "exceptions" included. Further, as we have seen in the first section, finite or natural creatures experience infinite or supernature only in natural terms; it is the role of science to investigate all occurrences in nature.

A final objection to Purtill's point about miracles is that the reasonableness of human "exceptions" to laws notwithstanding, it is not reasonable to suppose that God "excepts" certain cases from the rule of laws just because "we can often see that not making exceptions to rules would be unreasonable or unkind."²¹ As Farrer puts it, "Maybe there were

things that Divine Love would not do, because God loves the order of the world as well as the happiness of men."²²

Paul Dietl joins Purtill's ranks when he asserts in his article "On Miracles"²³ that "what is needed here is not a law but an understanding that can grasp the request and then bring it about that a physical law be broken."²⁴ Further, this "physical law breaker is a supernatural being and that is why if a new department is set up (to examine miracles) it will not be with the science faculties at all."²⁵ He discounts the role of science in miracles, just as Purtill does, and this is as far as he goes in his article. But Farrer's idea of a supernatural being is that of a being who "works through second causes."²⁶ These second causes are God's finite creatures, and they are indeed in the finite realm, the domain of science. So Dietl's view can find no place in our understanding of theism, with its respect for science.

Certainly "That all intelligible actions are subsumable under laws is even less credible than that all events are."²⁷ Nevertheless, God, as the being who established the order of nature, has a care to its maintenance as well as to ours. It is sheer vanity to think otherwise, and most certainly unreasonable.

A short digression here is appropriate in order to clearly establish the sense in which these writers use the term "natural law". Purtilt prefers the term "natural order of things," but nevertheless treats of miracles in the "stricter and narrower sense" which implies the invocation of definitive natural laws.²⁸ One gets the impression that he is merely using a semantic camouflage in order to promote his traditional understanding of miracles in quarters where the terms "law" and "violation" would, in a prejudicial sense, be a dead giveaway.

Dietl does not give an explanation of what he sees a natural law to be, outside of calling it "only descriptive."²⁹ Yet he treats of miracles in terms of natural law in much the same way as does Purtilt.

Richard Swinburne, whose arguments parallel both Dietl's and Purtilt's in this respect (concerning natural law), makes strong statements about miracles as violations of natural laws, but like the others, he refrains from explicitly saying what he considers such laws to be. He does discuss, however, two views of natural law which are conducive to Hume's arguments, which are (1) that "a law of nature is a conjunction of events which has always obtained, in a hundred per cent of the observed cases,"³⁰ and (2) that "we mean by 'laws of nature' those regularities discovered in the course of events as science

advances."³¹ In addition to this, Swinburne elsewhere asserts that "my definition of a miracle is...approximately the same as Hume's," from which we can easily and quite reasonably extrapolate that his understanding of "natural law" is similar also.

What these writers do not seem to realize is that such fixed laws of nature commit them to a view of the miraculous which hardly fits with theism as we have expressed it: God is known in natural terms (though analogically expressed, to be sure), and there is never so clean a break in the "grid of causal uniformity" as Farrer puts it, as to allow us to point to such a violation and exclaim "Aha! A miracle!"

Furthermore, a little reflection shows that this dramatic idea of miracle fails to provide the devastatingly clear-cut proof of miracle that these thinkers desire. Rather, the common ideas of natural laws which they espouse actually admit of infringement from without, in and of themselves. C.S. Lewis presents this most clearly in a chapter of Miracles appropriately titled "Miracles and the Laws of Nature."

Firstly, if the laws are brute facts, then there is "no reason why (they) should not be otherwise," and miracles are easily allowed in, with no fanfare. Secondly, if they are "applications of the law of

averages" then the same rule applies - unless, of course, one is dealing with a loaded coin, in which case the law of averages cannot be applied anyway. And in either case, miracles are not seen as mere instances of the law of averages; they question if indeed "Nature is ever doctored."³⁵

Thirdly, if laws of nature are "necessary truths" (the strongest assertion), Lewis says that "no miracle can break them: but no miracle needs to break them." What he means is that "other things being equal" the laws will invariably hold. But there may be introduced a new factor with which the investigator had not reckoned.³⁶ This is a point which will prove vital in a definition of the miraculous which will be presented later; for the moment it is important to note only that, unlike what Dietl, Swinburne, and Purtill assert, even this understanding of natural law need not admit of violations. The drama of such an understanding is without support in reason and falls flat. Obviously, then, miracles as violations of natural law cannot be accepted.

Now we turn to an examination of miracles as proofs of a religious system. However, as this is not nearly as difficult a point as the former, it can be passed over rather quickly, especially as it has already been discussed with respect to Arnold Lunn's argument.

Purtill tries explicitly to establish miracles as proofs of Christianity. He uses two basic arguments: (1) The "miracles" of other religions "reveal their kinship to legend and myth" while Christian miracles are enhanced by "real details that only an eyewitness or a skilled realistic novelist can give,"³⁸ and (2) that "a wise and loving God " would not "permit people to be misled by permitting some lesser being to work apparent miracles."³⁹ With respect to this point, that miracles prove Christianity, Purtill places himself in direct opposition to Hume, going so far as to say "I think that certain miracles...can be proved so as to be the foundation of a certain system of religion, Christianity."⁴⁰

Swinburne, for his part, simply tosses out some bland assertions concerning Hume's point that miracles cannot prove particular systems, since rival systems might produce similar proofs in opposition and so destroy the credulity of both. For example, if in Elijah's contest with the priests of Baal, fire had appeared to consume both sacrifices, neither God would have carried the day.

Swinburne merely says, "It is hard to think of pairs of alleged miracles of this type,"⁴¹ and that one can "see that most alleged miracles do not give rise to conflicts of this kind,"⁴² He does make a stronger assertion in his book, however: "The

literal truth of a Christianity...depends (in part) on the truth of the eschatological beliefs of which the mighty acts which Jesus Christ has already performed are the ground."⁴³ This statement exposes clearly the problem with the view it propounds: miracles cannot possibly prove the system which must be assumed in order for them to have any credibility or meaning whatsoever.

Swinburne and Purtill are arguing in a circle. The "wise and loving God" of whom Purtill speaks is part of the Christian system and cannot be set outside it in order to assert that He would not dupe us. And the "mighty acts of Jesus Christ" rest upon the prior acceptance of theism as reasonable and so cannot be turned around to make that theism "more" reasonable.

Having put aside the most extreme descriptions of miracles as inappropriate, it is important to turn towards a newer threat to a proper understanding of miracles. It is what I call the "minimizing threat". In the face of pressures exerted by empiricists and the traditional idea of "miracle," such writers as Homer H. Dubs and Paul Tillich beat what can only be called a hasty retreat, making miracles to be something a good deal less than the term ordinarily connotes, that is, a special action of God. Their stance resembles that of the first point criticized, that

science need have nothing to do with miracles. But their method seems to be one of making miracles inconspicuous to science by redefinig them so as to avoid the criticisms it might make.

Out of deference to his stature, we should take up Paul Tillich first. He speaks of miracles as "sign-events."⁴⁴ Certainly the "rationalistic periods" do "make the negation of natural laws the main point in miracle stories," which is "still a burden for the life of the church and for theology,"⁴⁵ but this does not seem to justify chucking the burden altogether by redefining the terms one uses!

Tillich says, "Miracles cannot be interpreted in terms of a supranatural interference in natural processes," otherwise, "God would be split within himself."⁴⁶ This can be understood only in terms of Tillich's understanding of God, whom he asserts elsewhere to be totally beyond the world (the "God beyond God"). It is easy to see that he falls into the trap of emphasizing the otherness of God at the expense of asserting that we do experience God in our finite natures and describe that experience in finite terms.

Tillich wishes to say that miracles do not contradict "the rational structure of reality," but also that "objective miracles...are a contradiction in terms."⁴⁷ He cannot have it both ways. If miracles

are simply astonishing events received "in an ecstatic experience,"⁴⁸ yet are within the natural order, then it is possible, in principle, to understand them in some objective sense, which we have seen is not possible: one must speak from within a system which already has some room for the possibility of miracles. Furthermore, if miracles are simply "received in ecstatic experience," they may be psychologically reducible, and thus they lose most, if not all, of their value in the sense in which they are ordinarily understood.

Dubs is more direct in his attempt to evade the empirical claim laid on miracles by Hume and others. He says, "Anciently, miracles were thought of as unusual and divinely cause events" and that "Today the conceptions bids fair to return to the ancient" understanding.⁴⁹

According to Dubs, the increasing codification of natural uniformities made miracles "merely less frequent, but still natural events."⁵⁰ Miracles caused no difficulties until they became understood as violations of natural law instead of just aberrations in natural regularities. When the "scientific presupposition" of fixed natural laws disappeared, so did the "Eighteenth Century conception of miracle," says Dubs.⁵¹ Now we are less sure of what can and cannot happen in nature. "As long as we recognise that all scientific laws are not yet known, it remains

impossible to determine positively when all scientific laws are violated."⁵²

To be sure, we do not wish to make the claim that miracles violate natural laws, and Dubs' point that there is no "absolute evidential power" in miracles is a good one.⁵³ But it is hard to see how the term "miracles" can retain its force when, as Dubs puts it, "life is full of miracles. They are not unusual, but common events," and that "a miracle is any act of God."⁵⁴

It is easy to see that this understanding robs miracles of their impact for the believer and renders the term nearly worthless except in some platitudinous sense. This seems hardly the sense in which Farrer would understand miracles, for Farrer does admit of distinctions "between facts whose revelatory message is plain and those which are opaque to us."⁵⁵ God may do things both visibly by "showing his hand," or "invisibly."⁵⁶ Under this, Dubs' argument for "common miracles" seems to be a contradiction in terms, no less than that of a "violation of natural laws" as Lewis has shown us.

Having put aside the most important objections and the most common erroneous views of miracles in the few chosen examples, we can now proceed to establish a view of miracles which might avoid most or all of these pitfalls. From the foregoing it is obvious

that such an understanding must (1) remain within the limits of theism as it has been presented, (2) take into account modern empirical or scientific thought and means of understanding, (3) not present miracles as violations of natural laws, (4) not try to prove the theism which is already assumed, and (5) not reduce miracles to something far less than the usual definition implies.

III. WHAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT MIRACLES

Having now established a firm theistic understanding in the first section and taken into account several important problems regarding the idea of miracles in the second section, we are prepared to say something more positive about miracles, how it is that one can view them from within the theistic context. Since Farrer does not ever give to us a ready-made definition of miracles, it will be my task to establish a definition consistent with theism as he presents it. However, I will not make the attempt unaided; several theists have discussed miracles in ways which prove, in several respects, to be compatible with Farrer's theistic understanding. These include Frederic Platt, Robert W. Gleason, C.S. Lewis, and others. Also, Farrer himself does not ignore the problem of miracles altogether, though his references to it are scattered and fragmentary.

Before proceeding directly to the definition, it will be useful to see how particular types or descriptions of divine action which Farrer does discuss, including creation, revelation, and providence, figure in theism. These three are the genres of divine action which seem to have the strongest bearing on the question of miracles. Farrer's intent in discussing these concepts of creation, revelation and providence is not unlike my intent

with regard to miracles: to discover how the idea may be understood theistically, without negating the processes of the world as they are ordinarily experienced. Farrer offers a caution, however: "The habit of dividing the divine governance into departments is at the best a convenience, and at the worst a nuisance of human speech."¹ The invaluable light cast upon the problem of what can reasonably be said about miracles by these genres happily tends towards the better.

In discussing the various forms of divine action in the world, Farrer "fills out" the theistic framework presented in the first section. The attributes of personality, particularity, invisibility and uniqueness may be "something of vast importance....But," continues Farrer, "the practical significance of the attributes lies in the particular actions they imply."²

One of these particular actions is that of God in creation or nature. It is my purpose here to discuss how Farrer interprets this action in a way which avoids a "simple old-fashioned piety, a petty providentialism."³ It is not that "we have...to distinguish between God's action and ours, but between two phases of God's action - his supernatural action (revelation) and his action by way of nature."⁴

For the theist, says Farrer, "nature is not a machine operated by divine controls; it is a multitude of interplaying forces, sustained in being by the Father of Life."⁵ Although such a definition seems simple and straightforward, it faces the difficulty of passing "through the straits of philosophical danger."⁶ On one side, one risks naturalism: if the assertion of God adds nothing to nature qua nature, then theism itself is vacuous. On the other hand, to say that God "makes nature more than natural,"⁷ then it is impossible to verify the claim. But there is a "middle course."⁸ "Wherever the eye of faith looks in the created world it perceives two levels of action. There is the creature making itself, and there is God making it make itself."⁹

This middle course involves several points that not only present a reasonable view of creation, but, as we shall see, bear directly on the reasonableness of miracles also.. These points are firstly, that science alone cannot "cast (light) on our ontological question,"¹⁰ that is, verify nature's dependence on a Creator, and secondly, that man can comprehend this action of God in creation only through the "eye of faith" or the active personal relation of himself to God. Thirdly, the question of how God acts in the world can be answered on the speculative level in

analogical terms alone, taking full account of both levels of action.

Science cannot render God; it is simply a process of formulating "uniformities of natural action" to do science.¹¹ This tells us nothing about the source of the uniformities. It would only be "If we knew either that natural agencies left to themselves would act chaotically or that natural agencies divinely overruled would act whimsically, then the orderliness we observe in nature would vote for or against divine assistance."¹²

The first possibility is not tenable; if there were no order, there would be none with which to compare chaos. The second possibility is untenable for the theist who believes that God does "everywhere ...effectively and wisely what is best."¹³ "Mere whim" seems hardly reasonable, let alone "best".

The inability to "prove" God in nature is what Farrer refers to when he says "To tell us that what we call nature can be called God achieving his ends by way of nature, really alters nothing."¹⁴ The bald assertion adds nothing to our understanding of nature or of God. Farrer continues "What we mean is that God is not to be known by us unless he reveals himself personally."¹⁵ It is only in active personal relation to God that the theistic understanding of nature, or creation, and of the God of nature, or the

Creator becomes clear.

Farrer takes the tough stance of asserting the necessity of the personal relationship of man to God in understanding God as the Creator. He rejects the arguments of those who would dilute the idea of creation so far as to make it meaningless. Their appeals to the "illusions of projection and contextual encouragement"¹⁶ fail in that they make no existential claim of God; such concepts are too easy to interpret psychologically. Farrer has no desire to make the idea of creation so inconspicuous as to avoid the difficulties mentioned above.

As mentioned in the first section, the theist views the "divine handiwork" as the work of a "divine maker."¹⁷ This means that he views the effects, and works backwards to the agent. Recall that the finite effects do not limit God to finitude. Neither do the effects, when reviewed collectively, divulge "spiritual laws."¹⁸

The theist, insofar as he is a practical believer, does not ask the question of how or where God does what he does, (except in the speculative sense which follows) but only what he does. "God's agency does not strike us in the springing-point of causes, but in the finished effect."¹⁹ The believer seeks to conform his actions to God's will: "We enter into his action simply by acting."²⁰ On the practical side

(as in the practice of "day to day religion"),²¹ the question of a causal joint (as discussed earlier) does not arise.

However, on the speculative side, there is room for the question in discussing creation. "There is room for it (the divine hand) to act" in nature, but "What sense is there in demanding an exact account of an action which, by hypothesis, is outside our knowledge?"²² An exact account of how the Infinite acts in the finite world is not forthcoming; yet there is an account of some sort to be given, using analogy, as discussed earlier in the first section.

The recognition of God's hand in nature is compared to an amateur recognizing a painting as the work of Rembrandt.²³ He does not know technique, brush-strokes and styles, yet "he may be talking good sense when he says 'This is a Rembrandt'."²⁴ The expert in art-history might be able to tell for sure, but with the action of God there is no expert to be found. We do not know and cannot study the modes of divine action; we have only our own to illuminate it. "The very idea of it (a causal joint) arises simply as a by-product of the analogical imagination."²⁵

Farrer remarks that "the hand of God is perfectly hidden in the achievement of his effect...in the development of natural forms...we look for natural causes. The divine leading which draws them upwards

is an invisible persuasion (my emphasis)."²⁶ One need only recall the Paradox of Double Agency (section I) for this to be intelligible.

This point has immense significance for the problem of miracles, and Farrer precedes his remark by saying "God makes things make themselves; his creatures are not visibly overruled."²⁷ This will be further developed in the fuller discussion of miracles following those of revelation and providence. For now it is enough to notice that "the grid of causal uniformity does not (to my evidence), fit so tight upon natural processes as to bar the influence of an overriding divine persuasion."²⁸ But we must remember that "persuasion" is analogical. "We can never put our finger on a point at which natural agencies without divine assistance must fail of their observed effects."²⁹

One can but point to what was established earlier: that God's action is unique. God acts particularly in creation, but so uniquely that we can garner an empirical verification of that action that is "no more than general."³⁰

In the forgoing discussion of creation it has been established that science qua science cannot "discover" God in the natural world, that practically speaking, the joint of finite and infinite is of no concern, but that speculatively the joint arises out

of the necessarily-analogical description of divine action in the world.

Now I shall turn to the concept of revelation as a form of divine action. The important points here are that revelation is not reducible to history, biography, psychology, or epistemology, and that this irreducibility depends strongly on the unbroken line between the revealing moment and the reactive; without either component, revelation fails to occur. "There is no sort of experience that may not be" revelatory.³¹

In The Glass of Vision, Farrer speaks of "supernatural action" as a type of divine action as contrasted to God's "action by way of nature."³² But Farrer also acknowledges, "We cannot commonly discern in God's providential government (of nature or of history) achievements so simply divine that a line of purpose leading to them stands out like a thread of gold."³³

Farrer rather sees revelation as God acting "humanly in mankind" as he acts "naturally in nature."³⁴ Revelation is not biographical, as some might argue; it always requires a response or an interpretation.³⁵ Neither is it historical in the strict sense: The form God's action takes "is exhausted by what he causes his creatures...to do," and "taking history as the name of a human science (and not as an "event-series"), we shall say that it

treats of the things God does, but not of his doing them."³⁶ It is the old problem of the causal joint inserting itself anew into our ideas of God's action; we must not succumb to it.

While the causal joint must again be denied by the fact that the form of God's action is always seen in creaturely terms, it is not to deny revelation its special place, that is, of recognizing God's activity in human affairs. "The God of revelation ...continually interrupts his own composition and talks to his characters; not that his interventions are really interruptions, for it is through them that he steers the characters and makes the plot."³⁷ (A secular parallel to this point can be found in Thornton Wilder's play, Our Town, in which the narrator interacts with the actors in the play as an actor himself. More religiously, Christ's life is seen by orthodox Christians to be the supreme intervention or revelation.)

This point cannot be overstated: These interventions do not constitute a breakage between human or creaturely action and divine action.. The causal joint, or "point of punctuation" between the revealing and the reactive is not fixed; it "moves forwards or backwards as the spotlight of voluntary (or creaturely) decision moves."³⁸ The only way to apprehend a "point of punctuation" is to enter into

a voluntary relationship with God which is modulated by obedience to the divine will.

Two other arguments are leveled against this understanding of revelation as involving an unbroken line between the revealing and the reactive. The first is psychological and seeks to show that there are distinct revelatory moments, like diamonds embedded in base rock. But, as mentioned earlier, "there is no sort of experience which must be revelatory."³⁹ The second argument is epistemological: there is a "pure awareness" of God in some event and this constitutes a revelatory moment, according to this view. But, says Farrer, this view is an analogical product of "the quest of pure sense data," which, as was shown earlier, is not forthcoming.⁴⁰

Farrer acknowledges that "there are imperfections in the media of revelation"⁴¹ but that the believer who truly seeks to enter into relation with the divine will does not, in fact, defeat the purpose of the revelation, which is to enlighten and to evoke a response from the believer. The revealing and the reactive are intrinsically related in the concept of revelation. Neither can be discarded or discounted.

Now we turn to a third description or type of divine action in the topic of providence. Though he admits that "no sound reason for a belief in

Providence is deducible (my emphasis)" from theism,⁴²
Farrer insists that "theism of the Christian type...
implies belief in Providence";⁴³ God may attend
with "foreseeing care"⁴⁴ to each of his creatures,
"giving them the undivided attention of his heart."⁴⁵
That is not to say that he "will forget his other
creatures; that he will be ready to disregard their
interests, or the very laws of their being, while he
arranges little providences for you."⁴⁶

There seem to be two senses in which the word
"providence" is used by Farrer, and it is well to
distinguish them here. The first sense is most
general; all divine action is providential - including
creation and revelation. In God is Not Dead, Farrer
speaks of a "God of nature (creation)" and a "God of
Gospel (revelation)" as expressions of "different
actions of God whose character is to act approp-
riately in every field of his activity,"⁴⁷ that is,
providentially. Brian Hebblethwaite's article on
Farrer, "Providence and Divine Action," treats of
this sense of providence in Farrer's work. He des-
cribes providence in terms of an ordering of "each
active element...into the whole providential pattern
by the hidden hand of God."⁴⁸

This general sense of providence is not the last
word for Farrer. There is a "special" type of provi-
dence which Farrer allows for, but which Hebblethwaite

largely ignores. God is "the infinite source of innovation"; God "will endlessly surprise us."⁴⁹ God is not "self-limited" to "indirect methods" of providential action as Hebblethwaite would have it.⁵⁰ "Properly speaking," says Farrer, "there are no problems or difficulties for God."⁵¹ But Farrer rejects the "old wives' view of providence" as Hebblethwaite remarks in another article.⁵² God does not calculate accidents "with a view to the resultant good" but he "draws some good" out of those accidents that do occur.⁵²

Farrer describes our understanding of providence in the specialized sense as a circle: seeing an imperfect world, "we fall back on God" as its perfect support and "come forward again" armed with "God's saving providence to better his imperfect world."⁵⁴ Any question to the effect that a perfect God need not have made an imperfect world is ruled out of court: "We have no business with defending God for having made this world rather than another."⁵⁵

Special providence is God's "care for all the detail of our lives."⁵⁶ This care is more than just an underlying reason for a mapped-out universe.- one should be cautioned against slipping into deism here.- but it is rather that "God, knowing each of his creatures from within its action...cares for

such mutual harmonisations of natural agents as are necessary to the existence or the development of the creatures he creates."⁵⁷ This means that God takes particular care and attention to each creature and its individual needs.

Providence, in the special sense, operates under creation as an "aspect"⁵⁸ or a "function"⁵⁹ of it. That is, special providences act in creation: "God's supreme skill lies...in drawing some new thing out of existent states of affairs."⁶⁰

Hebblethwaite offers a significant observation concerning providence as Farrer sees it. "There are plenty of passages where he (Farrer) says that the workings of particular providence may be thwarted by the conditions of creaturely existence."⁶¹ This means that, with providence as with revelation, creaturely cooperation is required in some sense.

Providence is, in fact, as much a function of revelation as it is of creation. Insofar as man's mind is capable of thought, love, and apprehension of the divine, "it was never the purpose of God to let such a mind perish unless it were through its invincible perversity."⁶² Special providences are revelatory through minds; God works to save men through them.

Concerning providence we have seen that, in a general sense, it contains creation and revelation as aspects of itself, while in a specialized sense, it

is the particular, undivided attention and aid given to individual creatures, particularly those capable of aspiring to union with divinity, namely, man. Again, the relational aspect of divine action in the world is expressed.

It is easy to see how the discussion of special providence leads us directly to miracles, which are sometimes seen as instances of that genre of divine action. But notice must be taken of all the points made in discussing creation and revelation as well as providence: science cannot verify the dependence of nature on God; there is a practical relation involved in apprehending God's action in creation and in revelation, and that there are always two levels of action involved, creaturely and divine, which precludes reduction to simple creaturely action.

The definition of miracles which I believe fits best with Farrer's theism as expounded in this paper and with our understanding of how the world works is as follows: A miracle is an unusual or extraordinary event which involves a supernatural assistance to a finite agent, and which reveals to the believer an action of God that is in keeping with the divine will insofar as he perceives and enters into it. Although the possibility of miracles does not depend on the believer's experience of it, it nevertheless is crucial to the decision of whether or not to

apply the term "miracle" to particular events. This thought will be discussed in detail later.

For the remainder of this discussion, I shall show that this definition is in keeping with Farrer's system, that it is supported by other theists (at least in part), and that it avoids for the most part the difficulties discussed in the second section of this paper.

First I shall turn to Farrer's own treatment of miracles, to which references are fairly scattered throughout his works. In Saving Belief he gives a short, but valuable, discussion of miracles with respect to providence. Farrer asserts that "God makes his creature make itself in its own way, he does not violate or force it."⁶³ But he admits that the idea of miracle runs counter to this "in a sense." A miracle is not commonplace, and "exceptions presuppose rules," but that is not to say that "God violates (Farrer's emphasis) the natural working of the created order by a dislocating interference."⁶⁴ To say such a thing would be to discount both the creature's own role and the regular action of God in creation in favor of a mere flippancy, or arbitrariness on God's part, which the theist, understandably, would refuse to do.

Farrer speaks rather of an "enhancement" of the creaturely action by God so that the creature's action

goes beyond what it can commonly do. This recalls the idea of the supernatural which Farrer gives in The Glass of Vision, as "a finite agent exceeding his natural power by higher assistance."⁶⁵ Farrer strengthens this idea by relating it to the scale of being or activity, discussed in the first section.⁶⁶

As God does not "violate" nature or creation, neither does he "overrule" it. "What would happen to the system of nature if God did habitually overrule it is too terrible to contemplate."⁶⁷ It is rather that God "in some mysterious way persuades."⁶⁸ This echoes what was said in the discussion of creation concerning God's "invisible persuasion."

God's mysterious persuasion is a mystery which is lodged in the Paradox of Double Agency. Recall that in theism there are always two levels of agency, creaturely and divine. This is as inescapably true of miracles as it is of anything else. God's action to raise a finite being to levels of action beyond its everyday capabilities is only efficacious insofar as the creaturely action is malleable under the influence of the divine will (i.e. able to be "persuaded"), and even the "exceeding" itself does not transform the creature from finite to infinite; even the miraculous excess is bounded by finitude. "God respects the action or organization of nature's elements," and everywhere he allows these elements "to retain

their rights, and go on being themselves in their own way at every level."⁶⁹

Obviously then, both the creaturely and the divine levels of action are involved in the miraculous as well as with other types of divine action. Now we must turn to the point made in the other discussions concerning the failure of science to empirically and objectively "find" God in the natural order, or in the "gaps" of that order. It is necessary here to merely point back to the first section, where the inescapability of analogy is expressed, and where the personal analogy is given precedence over the physical. God's action is not reducible to laws, but neither does he act by sheer caprice.

Nevertheless, Farrer points out that empirical investigation does hold an important place in the overall investigation of the miraculous. Although "no scientific arguments...tell either for or against" the usual providential (in the general sense) action of God in nature, in the case of miracles, such arguments "are not indeed conclusive in proving a miracle, but neither are they irrelevant."⁷⁰

It is very obviously necessary to have some idea of how nature regularly goes before an aberration can be distinguished. Such an idea of the regularity of nature comes, as is to be expected, from experience, and the codifications of experience which science

provides. This makes science relevant to miracles, for miracles, as they occur within the natural world, fall within the domain of science, although science qua science does not comprehend them fully.

Finally there is the third point of the necessity of a practical relation in order to apprehend the action of God. Nowhere is this more readily seen than with miracles. To be sure, the observer, no matter how devout and faithful he may be, does not create the miracle in what he observes (otherwise, one might psychologically-reduce the concept); however, "there is always a will of God to be sought in any situation."⁷¹ When God acts in miracles, as elsewhere, it is "with a plainness that the enlightened eye cannot mistake."⁷²

Farrer insists that religion is concerned not with distinguishing between events that reveal God and those that do not, but rather "between facts whose revelatory message is plain (as in miracles) and those which are opaque to us."⁷³ The opacity of most events lies in their regularity; in a sermon Farrer says that we refer to this regularity and the invisibility of God as "natural law," but when the events plainly show God, the believer asks no questions about such "laws". They become irrelevant.⁷⁴

The "regularity" of events which contributes to the opacity of God's hand in them recalls the point

that was made a page or two earlier, that scientific arguments do have relevancy in recognizing a miracle. It is empirical science which codifies the regularities we observe such that when the regularities are not obtained - as in a miracle - that the extraordinary character of the event is made clear. This does not prove that the event is a miracle, but it does give the believer a clue towards apprehending it as such.

Miracles sometimes seem to occur in response to prayer. But, says Farrer, "if ever we pray to see whether prayer will work, it won't, because it won't be prayer anyhow. Prayer is a sincere seeking of the divine will."⁷⁵ The miraculous event is perceived by the believer as it reveals God's will to him. That is not to say the petitioner caused the miracle, but rather that his seeking to conform to the divine will enabled him to recognize the unusual event as a miracle and not just a "fluke" of nature.

Now that we have seen how the idea of miracles functions in theism according to Farrer himself, it is useful to turn to other theists for support of the definition which I have proposed. By examining several other theists' views insofar as they conform to the theistic understanding which has been developed herein, I hope to show that my definition of miracles is neither unorthodox or unusual.

John Bailie speaks of God interrupting the uniformity of nature such that "there is an exceptional revelatory quality in these occasional variations."⁷⁶ Note that he does not wish to say it "violates" that uniformity. Notice also that there is a revelatory quality in the event as it is apprehended.

C. S. Lewis speaks of "events of which it would not be true to say, 'This is simply the working out of the general character which He (God) gave to Nature as a whole in creating her!'"⁷⁷

We have already seen (in the second section) that Lewis, like Farrer, discards the notion of miracle as a violation of natural law, although Lewis does so from a slightly different stance, by showing how the concept of natural law in any sense does not disallow miracles. Farrer shows that the concept of God as Creator does not disallow miracles, but both approaches are valid and necessary. In fact, Lewis does use Farrer's approach also, but his reasoning is not nearly so tight as Farrer's.

Frederic Platt, in 1913, produced a work that neatly parallels much of what has been said in this work. He asserts that miracles are "essentially religious,"⁷⁸ that is, theism is the basis for any talk about miracles (see Section I.) Further "miracle" is not reducible to a "subjective phase of religious emotion"; it involves "definite relations to both the

spiritual and the physical order, (it) must ultimately be harmoniously related to both."⁷⁹ We are reminded of Farrer's two levels of agency here. Both must be operative in any event, including a miracle.

Platt's succinct definition distinctly resembles the one I have propounded for Farrer; "Miracle is a new beginning not truly accounted for by its known natural antecedents, in which man is conscious of receiving new knowledge and a fuller life from God."⁸⁰ This "new beginning" is the extraordinary, character of the miracle as an event which differs from what came before it--its "known natural antecedents." Platt continues "Such a definition leaves room for a fuller recognition of the relation of God (to nature and human history) without suggesting that His activity is limited or is a violation of the natural order."⁸¹

Platt further on states that miracles "are new beginnings, supplementing things behind and opening up fuller interpretations of things before."⁸² We see here Farrer's description of the supernatural as a finite agent exceeding its usual capacities by a higher assistance.

H. H. Farmer, like Platt, also asserts that miracle is "fundamentally a religious category and... the proper place to begin is within the sphere of living religion itself."⁸³ Again, the relational aspect is stressed; "a miraculous event always

enters the religious man's experience as a revelation of God."⁸⁴ Farmer forthrightly says, "What is a miracle to one is not to another."⁸⁵

Farmer, in his chapter on "Miracle and the Laws of Nature" makes a statement which again echoes Farrer. To assert a miracle "is not to abrogate...the causal principle....It is merely to affirm that into (an event's) causation there has entered the will of God acting relevantly to a human situation."⁸⁶ There is again the idea of an exceeding of finite powers by an assistance from the infinite, and not a violation of natural causal principles or laws.

Alasdair MacIntyre offers a definition of miracles in a short chapter in his book, Difficulties in Christian Belief. He states: "It is an extraordinary event" which makes it "possible to see a special sign of God's care."⁸⁷ It is not a violation, and insofar as it is apprehended by and meant for us, is based on a relation of man to God. However, MacIntyre does not go on to develop his idea in detail "because," he says, "I do not know how to continue it."⁸⁸ Happily, we have other writers who, as we have seen, do develop the idea.

The last of these to whom I shall turn for support is Robert W. Gleason. In his article, "Miracles and Contemporary Theology," he cautions strongly against overemphasizing the physical side of

miracles in terms of natural laws. "As a result" of this overemphasis, says Gleason, "it often seemed that one had only to consider the preternatural aspect of the event to decide whether or not it was miraculous."⁸⁹ But as has already been shown, such gaps in natural causation do not prove an event to be miraculous.

Neither, says Gleason, should the idea of miracle as a sign from God be overemphasized, with the result that the extraordinary nature of the event is overlooked. One must always take note of the "double element, an observable fact and the religious meaning inherent in this fact."⁹⁰ Gleason makes an appeal to the First Vatican Council's statement on miracles, and his statement is the strongest support I have found yet for the orthodoxy of my definition: "When the Vatican Council declared that miracles are most certain signs of revelation which manifest God's power and goodness, it harmonized two aspects of tradition: the fact that a miraculous event has an exceptional character, which the ordinary and normal course of nature does not explain, and the fact that it occurs in a religious context."⁹¹

Gleason goes on to state that miracles do not depend "on the recognition of a strict exception to any verifiable physical law"⁹² and further, "In

these events God appears to work beyond the order of secondary causes or if secondary causes are used the effect seems to be beyond their ordinary capacity" (my emphasis).⁹³ The parallel with Farrer is again clear.

Now that the orthodoxy of my position with respect to miracles has been fairly established, it is necessary to turn to the criticisms which were leveled against other understandings of miracle in Section II, in order to establish the avoidance of the pitfalls described there.

First of all, it seems clear that we have remained within the bounds of theism, by asserting that miracles as they are apprehended, are apprehended only by the believer insofar as he understands and conforms to divine will. This is the practical point.

Speculatively, we have taken into account the claims of science in our understanding of the miraculous. Such claims, while not conclusive, are indeed relevant to our understanding of what constitutes the ordinary course of nature. Without such a regularity established, there is no backdrop against which the extraordinariness of miracles would show.

Thirdly, it is patently clear that we have not espoused a view of miracles which sees them as violations of natural laws. Neither have we tried to establish miracles so conclusively as to "prove"

theism. Theism was assumed at the beginning as a necessary underpinning for belief in miracles and the circular argument was carefully avoided. Just as there is no event which may not reveal God, there is no event which, given an extraordinary nature, may not be a miracle.

The clause "given an extraordinary nature" is crucial in avoiding the last pitfall, that of reducing miracle to something so vague and widespread that the very idea loses its force. The observer must take into account the event's unusual nature, that the regularities he has heretofore observed have not held. He must stringently avoid the assertion that "all things are miracles" in the sense that God sustains all things in existence. That is creation, and we have no wish to deny the term "miracle" the special quality it connotes.

It should be evident from the foregoing that a miracle can never be objectively proven. God does not throw nature over in caprice to make himself clear to theist and atheist alike. The theistic context is inescapable. God's "concern for his creatures is for them to be themselves, or more than themselves, not for them to act as pawns in some specifically supernatural game which any divine hand is bound to play. A man's concern...must be a strait-jacket compared with the openness of God's concern for the world."⁹⁴

So it is that we shall never escape the analogy of the finite and the clue of our own existence as applicable to God. Miracles must be seen as extraordinary events involving the action of God in a special way, which reveal to the believer some facet of God's will, always remembering that "action" and "will" are applied analogically, and never straight. Were miracles to be so explicitly defined and proven as to establish God for ever, it would only be insofar as they finitized God to a position in the world (and so broke away from theism) or totally escaped into infinity to perceive God on his own ground. The latter possibility, insofar as we make no appeal to life after death or any other tenet of revealed theology here, is inconceivable to us as finite beings. And this limitation, to borrow Farrer's words once more, "is neither an obstacle to religion, nor a scandal to reason."⁹⁵

"May he who is so near to our being and so far from our conceiving forgive our belittling speech concerning his inviolable majesty and assist us rather to praise, in words he has himself revealed, the One God in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: to Whom be therefore ascribed as is most justly due all might, dominion, majesty and power, henceforth and for ever."⁹⁶

FOOTNOTES

Introduction

¹Brian Hebblethwaite, "Austin Farrer's Concept of Divine Providence," Theology, 73 (1970), p.541.

²Austin Farrer, Finite and Infinite, (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1964), p.4.

³Ibid., p.3.

⁴Austin Farrer, Faith and Speculation, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1967), p.22.

⁵Ibid., p.32.

⁶C.S. Lewis, Miracles, (New York: MacMillan, 1960), p.3.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Austin Farrer, God is Not Dead, (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1966), p.13.

⁹Farrer, Finite and Infinite, p.7.

¹⁰Ibid., p.1.

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