

## Miracles and laws of nature

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue that miracles should not be defined as involving violations of natural laws. They should be defined as signs of particular volitions of the deity or of other supernatural agents. I suggest that one may, without any prior belief in the existence of such supernatural agents, reasonably come to believe that one has witnessed miracles.

### Introduction

‘Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature’.<sup>1</sup> In a footnote following this comment, Hume famously defined a miracle as ‘a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent’. Someone’s testimony being false is not an uncommon feature of our lives whilst, Hume maintained, ‘firm and unalterable’<sup>2</sup> experience establishes laws of nature. Given then that wise people proportion their belief according to their evidence, i.e. their experiences to date, Hume argued that it could never be reasonable to believe that a miracle had occurred as the result of considering testimony to that effect. That Hume then assured his readers that true friends of religion, such as he, were only denying reason in order to make room for faith – a faith which he went on to describe as subverting all the principles of understanding – was as comforting as he hoped it would be. With friends like Hume, any need for enemies which defenders of religion might have felt seemed likely to be quickly satisfied.

All aspects of Hume’s definition have attracted commentary and criticism. In this paper, I shall focus on the claim that miracles ought to be defined in part as transgressions of laws of nature or, as I shall sometimes put it, as violations of natural laws. The most basic issue in this context is thus the coherence or otherwise of the conception of laws of nature that a Humean must hold – yet this paper will not address this directly. Rather, it will examine arguments which suggest that, even if one allows the Humean that the concept of laws of nature makes sense in

the way he or she needs it to, allowing sense to be made of natural laws being violated, miracles ought not to be understood as violations of natural laws.

### **Holland**

Holland argues that events that might properly be called miracles need not violate natural laws.<sup>3</sup> He asks us to imagine a train which, having been observed by a mother to be travelling toward her child who is playing on the track, comes to a halt before it hits him. The driver had not stopped the train because he had seen the child; natural factors (a heavy lunch) caused him to faint and the brakes thus automatically engaged. Nevertheless, the mother considers the stopping of the train to be a miracle and thanks God for it in those terms. Holland suggests that it would be 'unduly restrictive'<sup>4</sup> to adopt a conception of the miraculous such as Hume's which required of us that we condemn her reaction as 'incorrect'. Whilst Hume's definition is a coherent one, a more inclusive definition – which allows that some naturally explicable events be granted the status of miracles – should be accepted. Although I agree with Holland's conclusion that some naturally explicable events deserve to be called miracles, I do not think his example supports it. However, his discussion does introduce points that will be of assistance to us later as we argue for his conclusion on different grounds. Let us then consider in more detail Holland's example and the use to which he puts it.

Holland is not merely wishing to advance a conception of the miraculous as that which looks like a Humean miracle at the time of the event even if does not do so later. Therefore, although he does not explicitly say so, the mother must be interpreted as being prepared to hold not only that the event in question is worthy of being called a miracle, but also, roughly speaking, that it has as naturalistic an explanation as other events. (If the mother had, in the light of her discoveries about the fainting, simply moved the time at which she supposed a divine intervention of a nature violating sort to lunchtime that day, rather than the moment the brakes were applied, the example would be of no use to Holland in making his case that to categorize an event as a miracle does not require a supposition of divine violation of the natural order.)

If the mother simultaneously thinks that the train's stopping has a naturalistic explanation yet nevertheless deserves to be called a miracle, the Humean may argue that this can then *only be* because it is extraordinarily serendipitous. The mother would be overtly transgressing the norms of ordinary language if, in more than a metaphorical way, she was in the habit of describing the sun's rising in the morning or the continued operation of the law of gravity from moment to moment as miracles. Given then that it seems unlikely that Holland is recommending we use the word 'miracle' to refer to any happy circumstance, however predictable and mundane, we must assume that he thinks it proper to use the term 'miraculous' as synonymous with either the extraordinary *per se* or the extraordi-

nary which is also fortuitous. Of these, for reasons of charity, we seem compelled to grant to Holland the latter opinion, as had the train usually stopped just prior to the place where the child was playing but on this day, due to the driver's heavy lunch, gone beyond, resulting in the child's being unexpectedly killed, no mother would – it seems safe to assume – have categorized her son's death as a miracle. The only interesting difference between this example and the example that Holland gives is the fortuitous outcome of the lunch with regard to the boy's survival. Thus Holland is right to foresee that the chief objection to his account will come from those who cannot see any advantage in doing all that it seems he can be doing, equating the miraculous with the surprisingly fortunate. Holland's opponent may make two points at this stage. Firstly, there seems to be nothing in the case of a train's naturally failing to kill a child which requires, in order to avoid transgressing the rules of ordinary language or rationality, that we call it a miracle. It does not seem obvious that most people in the mother's position would persist in hailing the train's stopping as a miracle upon learning of the naturalistic explanation; indeed, it may seem obvious that they would not. Secondly, words such as 'good luck' and 'serendipity' will be far more useful if we avoid extending 'miracle' to cover their instances and so will the word 'miracle' itself. Thus, the Humean may argue, the mother in the situation Holland describes should not call the train's stopping a miracle; she should call it mere good fortune.

Against referring to the train's stopping as mere good fortune, Holland says that:

... the coincidence of the child's presence on the line with the arrival and then the stopping of the train is impressive, significant; not because it is very unusual for trains to be halted in the way this one was, but because the life of a child was imperilled and then, against expectation, preserved.

He goes on as follows:

The significance of some coincidences as opposed to others arises from their relation to human needs and hopes and fears, their effects for good or ill upon our lives. So we speak of our luck (fortune, fate, etc.). And the kind of thing which, outside religion, we call luck is in religious parlance the grace of God or a miracle of God. But while the reference here is the same, the meaning is different. The meaning is different in that whatever happens by God's grace or by a miracle is something for which God is thanked or thankable, something which has been or could have been prayed for, something which can be regarded with awe and be taken as a sign or made the subject of a vow (e.g. to go on a pilgrimage), all of which can only take place against the background of a religious tradition. Whereas what happens by a stroke of luck is something in regard to which one just seizes one's opportunity or feels glad about or feels relieved about, something for which one thanks one's lucky stars. To say that one thanks one's lucky stars is simply to express one's relief or to emphasise the intensity of the relief: if it signifies anything more than this it signifies a superstition (*cf.* touching wood).<sup>5</sup>

It seems fair to push Holland on a number of points. Firstly, whilst no doubt

right in his account of what makes some coincidences significant and others not, ‘miraculous’ is not simply the religious person’s term for good luck, nor even good luck for which God is to be thanked. Perhaps the word ‘providential’ fulfils this role, perhaps not; ‘miraculous’ certainly does not. Secondly, anything *could* have been prayed for, so the fact that the child’s survival could have been prayed for cannot be relevant to its being a miracle. (I shall later argue that had the child *actually* been prayed for, *this* could have been relevant.) Similarly, anything *could* be treated with awe or made the subject of (reason for taking?) a vow (e.g. to go on a pilgrimage), so again the fact that the child’s survival *could* be taken in this way does nothing to show that it is reasonable to take it in this way or that it is reasonable to take the child’s survival as a miracle. Thirdly, to ‘thank one’s lucky stars’ certainly may be merely an expression of relief to most people. However, for those who believe in astrology, presumably it can be much more than this. No doubt Holland would dismiss a serious belief in astrology under the derogatory heading of ‘superstition’. However, that we must dismiss as ‘superstition’ a belief in other agents or entities to be credited alerts us to a rather crucial flaw with the putatively more inclusive definition of the miraculous which he is trying to advance, namely that on a Hollandian understanding there seems to be no principled way of deciding which agent or entity should get the credit for a particular miracle. That is to say there is no way of deciding without recourse to one’s own metaphysical or religious prejudices.

As a matter of fact, the mother could very well have credited all sorts of entities and agents for her son’s survival – her lucky stars, the spirit of her great-grandfather, the back end of the moon. The problem for Holland, if he wishes to rule out some of these sorts of reactions as superstitious, is not just that doing so will inevitably open him up to the charge that he is being as ‘unduly restrictive’ as he accused the Humean of being, but also that, even if he were to justify a preference for accrediting the miracle to God – say because only He sustains the laws of nature which have led to this outcome – then spirits, good angels and the like will be squeezed out as even potentially able to perform miracles a priori. One of the strengths of the Humean definition is that it allows that miracles may be performed by beings other than God (although on Hume’s definition they are all still agents), which is surely allowed as a logical possibility by common usage of the term. It does seem that miracles need to be attributed to agents, not mere entities, a fact which Holland and Hume agree over. It would be very odd to describe a fortuitous event which one credited to an alignment of stars or to a four-leaf clover as a miracle, and this is perhaps linked to the fact that miracles are something for which those affected characteristically express gratitude, and stars and clovers are simply not the sorts of things to which one can express gratitude. However, even allowing for this, many supernatural agents seem potentially available for the mother to thank. If Holland were to allow that the mother would have been equally correct in thanking whomever of these she chose for the train’s stopping, he would

start to sound unduly *unrestrictive*. Any event would then be capable of being a miracle just if someone called it that, and one and the same event might be a miracle correctly accredited to God by one person, to a passing angel by another, to a good ghost by a third, and so on.

This, I suggest, is the main difficulty with Holland's example of the mother viewing the train's stopping as a miracle. The train's stopping is not a sign which points in any particular direction, and thus as an event it belongs to the category of simple good fortune. To be a miracle, an event must be a sign of particular supernatural agency and this event is not such a sign, as witnessed to by the practically infinite number of interpretations (including those which attribute it to entities that are not agents) it lends itself to equally well. The 'correctness' of the mother in thanking God consists merely in this reaction being one that we can empathize with and, if religious, perhaps even share. However, other conflicting sentiments are equally 'correct' in this sense and thus hers cannot be said to be grounded in the nature of the event itself: the mother is incorrect in her reflections on the train's stopping resulting in her categorizing it as a miracle.

One point which our discussion of Holland's example has brought out, and which Hume's definition can be seen to obscure, is that there would be something odd about calling an event a miracle if one did not think it was for the good. It would be extraordinary to describe a train naturally but unexpectedly killing a child as a miracle; it would be considerably less extraordinary to describe a train naturally but unexpectedly failing to kill a child as one. To follow the Humean in thinking equally erroneous those who would classify either event as a miracle fails to do justice to the fact that the mistake, if it be one, of classifying natural but unexpected fortuitous events as miracles is nowhere near as glaring as that of classifying natural but unexpected calamitous ones as such. Further, it is a notable fact that, on Hume's understanding, if God intervened in nature by moving an atom on a distant and uninhabited planet one inch to the side (when it had no natural tendency to so move) and then moved it back again a moment later, eliminating any macroscopic effects that such a temporary change might otherwise have resulted in, He would have performed at least one miracle and quite possibly, depending on how one individuates miracles, several. However, surely a miracle that nobody wonders at is no miracle at all. Miracles are first and foremost signs which point to God. A bad event cannot point towards a good God and an unseen sign cannot point anywhere at all. To accept these claims would be to make an event's status as a miracle a 'soft fact', dependent in part on what consequences it brings and how people react to it.

Several considerations might be brought against this 'softening' of the status of miracles. If we allow that God or other miracle-workers may have a limited knowledge of the future, then we might posit the following sort of case. A supernatural agent Humean-miraculously intervenes in nature to bring about a particular outcome. The agent knows that it is extremely likely that someone will wonder at the

intervention and intends, in part, to produce this wonderment. However, something extremely unlikely happens: those who witness the event do not wonder at it at all. If nothing is a miracle unless wondered at, then in such a case the agent would have tried but failed to perform a miracle. One might argue that it would be as natural to say that the agent had worked a miracle, but that this miracle had not achieved one aspect of its intended result. The objectors might press their point by turning to consider another case. They might argue that we may suppose that God or some other supernatural agent could have good reason for wanting to work a 'secret miracle'. We may suppose a situation in which everyone, including X, thought that X was not seriously sick, and would feel fine in the morning. God knowing that X was at death's door, might Humean-miraculously cure X and yet never let X or anybody else know what He had done, so nobody wondered at it. The difficulty in imagining what reason God could have for keeping His intervention secret cannot be pertinent to defending the logical impossibility of such an intervention's being a miracle. Would it not be natural to say that X's recovery in this case was a miracle at which nobody wondered?

On the contrary, I incline to think that it would *not* be as natural to say in the first case that the agent had performed an unintentionally unnoticed miracle and in the second that He had performed an intentionally unnoticed one. Wonderment is, I contend, an essential feature of an event's being miraculous: to say that an event, if it were to occur, would be a miracle is to place on it a religious and ethical interpretation, and is to suggest that there would be people witnessing it who did likewise. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines a miracle as a 'marvellous event due to some supposed supernatural agency; remarkable occurrence'. 'Marvellous' is in turn defined as 'astonishing'. An event cannot be marvellous or astonishing unless someone marvels at or is astonished by it; it cannot be due to some supposed supernatural agency unless someone supposes such an agency; it cannot be a remarkable occurrence unless people have a tendency to remark on it. I take it that *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* reflects what usage of terms strikes native speakers as most natural. Therefore, it would be most natural in the first case to say that the agent had tried and failed to perform a miracle and in the second that a secret miracle is an oxymoron. 'Secret miracles' are like 'secret publicity'; it is not just that God could have no reason to do anything which satisfied the description; there could not *be* anything that satisfied the description. If this is right, then the original Humean definition ignores facts about common usage in a way that no definition of miracle, adequately reflective of ordinary language, can afford to do. Must we then reject it outright or can it be modified to accommodate these objections?

An addition to the Humean definition suggests itself: a miracle must be defined in part as an event which is given a particular sort of religious interpretation. The existence of the concept of providential events shows us, *pace* Holland, that any religious interpretation will not do. Perhaps then a miracle may more accurately

be defined in the Humean tradition as ‘a transgression of a natural law by a particular volition of the deity or some invisible agent, *which is perceived as being the result of such an agency*’. Note that this additional clause does not require that miracles must be perceived to transgress natural laws, as this is unnecessary to meet the difficulties canvassed earlier, and would be to assume on the part of the person hailing the event as a miracle a particular answer to the question to which this paper addresses itself; (it would be to start requiring that a miracle be given a particular sort of philosophical interpretation, not merely a particular sort of religious one). To see an event as the result of a particular volition of the deity or of some invisible agent does not – without argument – entail that one sees it as a transgression of a natural law.

Finally, in this context, we should consider how to explain the apparent oddity of calling an event a miracle if one did not think it was for the good. Let us consider again a train stopping just before it hits a child on a railway crossing, and let us alter the example slightly so as to provide some indication as to the identities of the characters concerned and also so as to leave open the possibility that it be either a Humean miracle or a Hollandian one.

The scene is a provincial railway in Austria in 1896. A seven-year-old boy is playing on the railway crossing near his home, oblivious to the express train which hurtles towards him. His mother says goodbye to her husband, a local customs official, as she emerges from the house and turns to see her boy on the track with the train approaching. She runs to warn him, waving and shouting, but he does not see her. He is engrossed in a game he is fond of, playing with his toy figures: he is making his soldiers herd people into model vans he has built specially for the purpose. As the train approaches, the driver faints at a crucial moment and the brakes engage. The train comes to a halt a few feet from the boy. The mother praises God for the miracle of her son’s life having been saved. So it is that the boy is able to grow up to lead a successful political career, so successful indeed that forty years later *Time Magazine* declares him ‘Man of the Year’, and shortly after that millions of men are prepared to dedicate themselves to following his plans for a new world order.

Only on an understanding which does not see miracles necessarily being for the good will we be free to posit either that the train’s stopping was a Humean miracle or that it was a Hollandian one. However, it could be argued that we would wish to say that a child’s being saved in this way could have been a miracle (had God or another invisible agent violated a law to bring about this effect, if one is a Humean, or in any case, if one is a Hollandian). This example could thus be used to support the contention that we cannot leave the status of an event as a miracle as a hostage to future contingencies, and therefore that the oddity we feel in calling a calamitous event a miracle cannot arise from its being built into the concept of miracle that miracles are for the good. This example could even be used to support the point that there appears to be conceptual room for a notion of a well-intended

but ‘bodged’ miracle, that is, an event which it would have been reasonable for a supernatural agent to suppose at the time to have been for the good, and thus brought to pass, yet which in fact resulted in bad consequences. Is the oddity of thinking of a child’s being unexpectedly crushed by a train as a miracle simply a result of the rarity of children who grow up to be like Adolf Hitler? The answer I shall suggest is ‘yes’, but I shall argue that this ‘yes’ has implications for an adequate understanding of miracle.

Swinburne would be happy to call the young Hitler’s being saved, in the appropriate way, from a train, a miracle, as he thinks that it is the short-term good of a child’s being saved that is crucial. He points to the putative fact that it would not be described as a botched good deed if a human agent had whisked the young child off the track just in time. However, it seems to me that we would say of the human agent that, however praiseworthy he or she was, it would have been better had he or she not whisked the young Hitler off the track and thus that the child’s being saved was not good, or not as good, as the alternative. A young Hitler’s being saved would have been a botched good deed, although it would not have been recognized as such for many years. It would not seem unreasonable to argue that common usage of the term ‘miracle’ would dictate that we do *not* say without qualification that the young Adolf Hitler being saved from death in the way described above would have been a miracle *precisely because* of the bad consequences which would have followed from it. (I ignore the possibility that at least equally bad consequences would have followed from Hitler’s dying young as did follow from his surviving, i.e. I assume that a view such as Tolstoy’s that history would have provided a substitute Führer had the actual one been killed prematurely is false.) We may plausibly suggest then that just as the word ‘luck’ would be taken to mean good luck unless one prefaced it with the word ‘bad’, so the word ‘miracle’ carries with it the conversational implicature that it is for the good – an implicature which would need to be counteracted explicitly by the preface ‘bad’ for us to make sense of a particular unfortunate event as a miracle. The example of a young Adolf Hitler being saved from being crushed by a train shows us then that an event’s being correctly perceived to be for the good is not a necessary condition of its being a miracle. However, I suggest that it also shows us that such bad (or bodged, should we allow them as possibilities) miracles are conceptually derivative and deviant cases. Thus, a clause should be added to the modified Humean definition stating a criterial relationship between an event’s being a miracle and its being for the good. An event’s being a miracle neither logically entails that it is good, nor does it provide contingently good evidence that it is good: it provides necessarily good evidence. Necessarily, most miracles are not bad or bodged.

Now it might be argued that, although it would be odd to call the unexpected killing of a child a miracle, this does not show what I have argued it shows – that necessarily most miracles are for the good. One might consider the following sort

of case. A particular supernatural agent intervenes Humean-miraculously on 1,000 occasions in history. On each occasion, she is unsure that the intervention will be for the good – because she cannot know future contingents. As it happens, the fates are cruel to this agent, things very often going as they were unlikely to, and only 499 of her interventions are for the good. Might we not further suppose that this agent is the only one who miraculously intervenes in this world and thus that more than half the miracles in this world are for the bad? It would seem odd, were we to posit – as we are free to – that the 499 good interventions occur first, that none of them would be miraculous although they would have been had one of the remaining ones been good. Can an event's status as a miracle really be a soft fact in this way too? Granted that our concept of miracles allows for bad-or-bodged miracles, how could it exclude it being a contingent matter whether or not more than half are bad or bodged?

This appears to be a strong argument against making an event's being for the good even a criterion for its being a miracle. However, its appearance of strength in this regard may be weakened by a number of considerations. Firstly, there is no oddity in concepts which, whilst allowing of any particular instance of Y that it may be X, disallow that every or most instances of Y be X. Our concept of being less than average height allows for people to be of less than average height, yet necessitates that most people cannot be of less than average height. Secondly then, we must ask whether we can equally well imagine a world in which the fates are cruel to the only agent Humean-miraculously intervening in it. A similar question would be whether God might have created an unruly world – a world in which, having allowed that bad angels might perform bad miracles, things got out of hand with the bad angels running amok and performing more than half the miracles. With regard to this latter putative possibility, our discussion of the definition of miracles would depend on what we thought was entailed by the divine properties. It seems reasonable to suppose that God's benevolence and omnipotence/omniscience entail that an unruly world could not be created; unfortunately, with regard to the former putative possibility, we cannot – without more contentious assumptions – say that necessarily this sort of world has not been instantiated. Equally however, I think that the assumption that ours is not a world of this sort is built into our everyday thought. Thus, although a world interfered with only by an inveterate bodger is a logical possibility, part of our conceptual background is that our world is not like this. We may imagine a world in which the fates are this cruel, but we cannot imagine that *ours* is a world in which they are this cruel. I conclude that there is a connection between an event's being thought of by us to be a miracle and its being good, a connection which Holland's example successfully alerts us to and which, being part of our conceptual background, we may call criterial and build into the definition of miracle in the way hitherto described so that it is true for us that in our world necessarily most miracles are for the good.

Our discussion of Holland's example has shown us that any adequate definition

of ‘miracle’ must make mention of the following facts. Miracles are necessarily events that are imbued with particular religious significance, in the sense of being perceived to be the result of particular supernatural agency. This will entail usually seeing them as brought about by particular volitions of God (or perhaps an adept good angel/spirit) and thus as being for the good; occasionally they may be thought of as being brought about by the particular volitions of another invisible agent, an inept or bad angel/spirit, in which case they may be for the bad. (I have here ignored the ‘possibility’ of bodged miracles brought about by God.) We shall draw on these findings later as we expound our own definition of miracle. At this stage though, we may observe that Holland’s example, whilst encouraging us to at least amend the original Humean definition of miracles to incorporate these facts, does not present us with any reason to reject that aspect of it which requires of miracles that they transgress natural laws.

Let us now turn to a consideration of another example from the literature, an example which, I shall argue, does present us with such a reason.

### **Hughes**

Hughes presents the following as an example of an event that would merit the appellation ‘miracle’, yet would not break a law of nature.<sup>6</sup>

Suppose a prophet is in jail, awaiting execution. He looks around, trying to find an avenue of escape; but there don’t appear to be any. He prays, asking God to deliver him from his enemies, and in desperation throws himself against the wall of the cell. To his amazement, he goes straight through it, coming out on the other side, and leaving it perfectly intact. Once outside the jail, he makes his escape.<sup>7</sup>

If we further suppose, as we are free to, that the prophet inhabits a world where such an occurrence would not contravene the laws of nature – the laws of nature in his world being statistical and allowing that things such as this, whilst exceptionally unlikely, may yet happen – we may say that the ‘laws plus the past are consistent with the prophet’s interpenetrating the wall naturally – without any intervention on God’s part’.<sup>8</sup> Of course, they would also have been consistent with his not interpenetrating it: that they are consistent with more than one outcome is just one manifestation of the indeterminism in this universe. This time however, Hughes tells us, the interpenetration was not uncaused; it was caused by God. Thus ‘when the prophet went through the wall [it] looked exactly like a case of the prophet’s interpenetrating the wall naturally. But it wasn’t... it was a miracle’.<sup>9</sup> So, ‘there are miracles which violate no law of nature’<sup>10</sup> in the prophet’s world. Should the laws of nature in our universe be fundamentally statistical, there could similarly be miracles which violate no laws of nature in our universe. Hughes is therefore of the opinion that one ought not to consider it essential to the concept of the miraculous that miracles transgress natural laws. Only if determinism is true will they necessarily do so; if it is not, they may not.

Swinburne had previously considered the type of case Hughes has in mind. ‘Such an event is... not unnaturally described as an exception to a statistical law.’<sup>11</sup> This sort of ‘exception’ he later describes as a ‘quasi-violation’: ‘to be a quasi-violation the event has to be “very, very improbable” on a law’.<sup>12</sup> Here the behaviour that Swinburne describes as not unnatural strikes me as rather unnatural. I would prefer not to describe as an ‘exception’ to a statistical law an event that is merely extremely unlikely on it, or to call such an event a ‘quasi-violation of the law’. I would prefer to call such unlikely events exceptions to or violations of quasi-laws whereby ‘quasi-laws’ was meant laws generally true of the sorts of macroscopic medium-sized dry goods which we talk about in day-to-day discourse as they undergo the sorts of changes and interactions which we ordinarily see them undergoing. Roughly speaking then, the quasi-laws for our universe are Newton’s laws. This is merely a difference in terminology. The substantial issue, over which Hughes, Swinburne and I agree, is that if the laws of nature are fundamentally statistical, then events which we would wish to describe as miracles and yet which would not (strictly speaking) violate the laws of nature may occur. This is because, if one can give a description of an event which were it to occur would deserve to be called a miracle, then this event must be consistent with – even if extremely improbable on – the laws of nature, if those laws are fundamentally statistical. In an indeterministic universe, anything can happen, in the sense that the occurrence of any event is logically compatible with the natural laws, given the initial state of the universe. If no event occurring in such a universe could thus (strictly speaking) violate natural laws, then obviously miracles cannot be understood as necessarily violations of them. Thus, this part of the traditional Humean definition is to be rejected. Those adherents to determinism who see their belief in it as a belief in a regulative principle for ordering experience may well be able to resist this conclusion if it is derived thus. Those who believe determinism to be a theory about the sorts of natural laws there are, a theory which experience could give us evidence to suppose was false, may well feel compelled to accept it. Is the Humean who thus cedes the ground of the *apriority* of determinism effectively defeated?

On any account, the example of the prophet who passes through the prison wall unharmed is an example of an extremely unlikely event. Whilst not a violation of a natural law, it could certainly be described as a violation of the quasi-law that solid bodies over a certain mass do not interpenetrate, in the sense of pass straight through one another without appreciable side-effects. If this quasi-law did not generally operate in the prophet’s universe, there could not be such things as prisons, nor indeed prophets, in the first place. If the event had not violated this quasi-law, it would not have been so startling in nature as to be to the prophet’s ‘amazement’.

A last-ditch defence by the Humean then might be to claim that Hughes’s example is not so much a refutation of the modified Humean definition as an argument for a particular interpretation of it. It might be argued that any violation

of a law which was unusual enough to merit and receive the sort of wonder which we argued earlier was essential to being a miracle, would also violate a quasi-law. It may thus be suggested that the modified Humean definition should be interpreted as meaning quasi-law when it uses the term 'law of nature'. Hume's main point was that one could not perceive as the consequence of a particular volition of the deity anything which occurred in the common course of nature, and thus that miracles must be understood as contravening this common course, but 'common course' can reasonably be taken in the weaker (quasi-law-governed) way. Parenthetically, one might note that Hume himself never distinguished between natural laws and quasi-laws; he never considered the possibility that the laws generally true of our experience of medium-sized objects might not be those true of smaller objects simply writ large. Thus it is not unreasonable to interpret him as only wishing to commit himself to this weaker understanding. A miracle could be understood as an event which violates what we expect of the natural order, in the sense that it contravenes at least a quasi-law, and it contravenes it in a way which is imbued with religious/ethical significance in the manner previously described. Then, whether or not a miracle violates any objective law of nature we need neither know nor suppose. If this is a victory for the Humean, it is difficult to see what distinctively Humean ground has been secured by it. Once these modifications have been made, not much seems to remain of the original Humean position, except perhaps the notion that a miracle must be caused by a particular volition of God or by the 'interpositioning' of some invisible agent in the natural order. This is what Hughes sees as central to his conception of the miraculous as it emerges from his discussion.

Given the possibility of the falsity of determinism (which we have been assuming the Humean is prepared to grant), it is not necessarily true that neither God nor any other invisible agent would intervene to make happen something which would have happened anyway, assuming there is a truth-value here. For example, in an indeterministic universe, a particular event  $e$  may actually be going to occur at a particular time  $t$  whether or not a particular supernatural agent  $a$  interposes himself or herself at  $t-\delta$ , yet at  $t-\delta$  it be only twenty-five per cent physically probable that  $e$  will occur at  $t$ . In such circumstances,  $a$  might, if he or she wished to ensure that  $e$  happened at  $t$ , thus interpose himself or herself at  $t-\delta$  and directly cause it. Arguably this depends less on the indeterminacy of the universe and more on  $a$ 's lack of knowledge. It could be argued that God would never be in  $a$ 's position as, being omniscient, He would know in advance that although only twenty-five per cent physically probable at  $t-\delta$ ,  $e$  would actually occur at  $t$  even if He were not to interpose Himself. On the other hand, those with differing understandings of what is required of God's omniscience in this regard may think that even God might interpose Himself in this manner. We do not need to decide on this issue as, on either understanding – given that we wish to allow that miracles might be performed by invisible agents other than God or given

simply that, on theism, without God nothing would happen at all – we should not think of the causation involved in miraculous interposition simply as a making something happen which would not otherwise have happened. Accordingly, we find Hughes telling us that the crucial difference between a miraculous interpenetration of a wall by a prophet and a non-miraculous one is not that one is caused and the other is not, but that they are caused *in different ways*. The former is ‘directly caused’ by God (Hughes confines himself to considering miracles wrought by God) and the latter is not.

Clearly, nothing can be a miracle unless it has supernatural causes.... The intuitive idea of a miracle...is that of an event (immediately) resulting from God’s direct intervention in nature. The notion of direct intervention should, I think, be understood in terms of direct causation. Suppose that at Cana a certain amount of water is miraculously transformed into wine. A particular event – the water’s turning into wine – is directly caused by a supernatural event – namely, God’s willing that this water turn into wine. The act of will causes the water to become wine, and not by causing any other event which causes the water to become wine. Compare this to God’s creating the world. God’s creating the world is a cause of the water’s turning into wine, but only because it is a cause of some event which is a cause of some event...which is a cause of the water’s turning into wine. It is different with God’s willing that the water turns into wine: there is, as it were, direct causal contact between God’s willing that the water turn into wine, and its turning into wine. And it is in virtue of this causal contact that the event is a miracle. The same holds for non-law-violating miracles. The prophet’s interpenetration of the wall is a miracle, because it is directly caused by God’s willing that the prophet go through the wall. A miracle is a point of contact between God’s will and the world.<sup>13</sup>

Direct causation is analogous to direct action: an event that God brings about without first bringing about something else will satisfy this condition for being a miracle. Later we hear that, though necessary, this condition is not in itself sufficient, for,

...not every event directly caused by God will be a miracle. The world’s coming into existence is caused directly by God...but...is not a miracle.... We can get round these problems by saying that a miracle is an event occurring in (an up and running) nature which is directly caused by God.<sup>14</sup>

The Hughesian definition of a miracle is then an event brought about by God’s direct action after the universe has been created.

A Thomist objection might be that Hughes’s account of direct action seems to suppose that natural laws mediate between God’s will and substances for ordinary events. If one were to think in terms of powers and liabilities, as Aquinas did, then God would be thought of as directly acting at each moment to keep the powers and liabilities of objects operative. Further, it could be argued that drawing the distinction between naturally occurring interpenetrations and non-naturally occurring ones in terms of indirect and direct causation within an already existing

universe, relies on a rather deistic picture of the relationship God holds to the world when He is not miraculously intervening. It could be argued that theism requires us to think that every event is directly caused by a God who sustains the universe now just as much and just as immediately as He created it in the past: all points are 'points of contact between God's will and the world'. If one thinks like this, an appeal to direct causation within 'an up and running nature' will not enable the distinction between natural and supernatural wall interpenetrations to be drawn. On this interpretation of theism, God does not do something first, sustain a law of nature, in virtue of which natural wall interpenetrations occur, a something which He does not do first before 'directly' generating miraculous wall interpenetrations.

Hughes foresees the objection that on theism we should say that every event is directly caused by God, and associates it with the name of Jonathan Edwards. Another name which might suggest itself is Nicolas Malebranche; we shall, however, follow Hughes in referring to the theory as 'Edwardianism'. Hughes tells us that 'Edwardian worlds' – i.e. worlds in which the theory is true – are 'very remote'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, he tells us that anyone who suggests Edwardianism is badly mistaken. Had they been right, Hughes concludes, then every event would have been a miracle. 'So, one might say, an Edwardian world is crammed with miracles; it's just that in such a world (unlike our own) *being a miracle* is not a distinctive or interesting property.'<sup>16</sup> That, on the Hughesian understanding, one might say this shows us that Hughes's definition, as it stands, suffers from one of the same weaknesses as the original Humean definition: it makes no mention of a miracle's being witnessed and thought of as the result of a particular volition of the deity or of another invisible agent. How could an event be a miracle, a wondrous sign of a particular volition, and yet *not* be distinctive or interesting? The answer is that none could, and thus that necessarily not every event, or even most events, can be miraculous. There might be a world, occupied by very religious people, in which most events were wondrous signs of supernatural volitions, but they could not be wondrous signs of particular – as opposed to general – supernatural volitions. As we observed earlier, anyone who was in the habit of greeting the sun's rising each morning as a miracle, rather than perhaps as a sign of God's general steadfastness, would have transgressed the laws of ordinary language. On a modified Hughesian definition, incorporating the clause to the effect that miracles must be attributed to particular volitions of God or other invisible agents, necessarily a minority of events will be miracles, i.e. distinctive and interesting in the particular way miracles must be. Thus we must say that a modified Hughesian is committed to thinking that the worlds in which Edwardianism is correct are so remote that it does not matter if we build an assumption of the falsity of Edwardianism into our definition of miracle. This presumably commits the modified Hughesian to saying that in a relatively rich sense of 'could not' we can know that Edwardianism could not be true (and thus generates a need for an argument to

this effect) and then, in a correspondingly rich sense of ‘must’, to saying that we must

... conceive of nature as a system of beings with causal powers, causally interacting with each other. And this way of conceiving of nature is built into our concept of a miracle. That is, a miracle is an event directly caused by God occurring in an (up and running) nature, where ‘nature’ must be understood as a system of beings with causal powers, causally interacting with each other.<sup>17</sup>

These considerations thus raise, at least, the following question. Could the example of the prophet interpenetrating the wall show that miracles need not violate natural laws to someone who did not allow that determinism might be false, or thought that ours could be an Edwardian world? As a preliminary to answering this question, let us consider the relationship between Edwardianism and determinism.

Edwardianism, if combined with determinism, would require that one think that the sense of ‘necessary’ in which the state of the universe at a later time was necessary, given its state at an earlier time, should be understood merely as necessary, given that God had created that universe as a system of beings, each of which was directly caused by Him strictly to follow certain non-statistical laws of nature, save perhaps on those occasions, if any, where He performed Humean miracles. To require a stronger sort of necessitation than this to hold between successive states of the universe for the truth of determinism would mean that a commitment to Edwardianism entailed a rejection of determinism; however, such a requirement would seem extreme, and I therefore conclude that Edwardianism and determinism are at least compatible with one another. Is there a stronger connection than mere mutual consistency between Edwardianism and determinism? I shall suggest that there is.

For an Edwardian, laws of nature are, at an ultimate level, just a way of talking about how God’s directly causal will regularly manifests itself in the behaviour of His universe. In an Edwardian indeterministic world, God would directly cause things to follow statistical laws of nature and, within those parameters, He would, metaphorically speaking, roll dice. The consequence of this dice-rolling would be that everything would also act in accordance with certain non-statistical ‘laws’. These ‘laws’ would not be explanations of why things behaved as they did, in that it would not be in virtue of a desired accordance with these ‘laws’ that God directly caused things to behave in the way that they did. Within the parameters imposed by the statistical laws of nature that He had chosen to follow, there would be no other rule that He was following in deciding what to directly cause. In an Edwardian deterministic world, by contrast, God would cause everything to follow laws of nature (not just behave in ways which happened to be in accordance with them); when things happened at even the most microscopic level in such a universe, they would happen because God was following a rule, albeit perhaps one so complicated that none other than God Himself could understand it. Supposing

that we allow both sorts of universe to be possible, then for every Edwardian indeterministic universe there is a 'corollary' Edwardian deterministic universe, that is to say, one which looks exactly the same and where what occurs in the first because of God's acting in such a way that it is merely in accordance with the simplest rule that conforms to the data, occurs in the second because of His following that rule. On Edwardian indeterminism, nothing can be entirely explained in terms of God's will; a certain amount of randomness, which is inexplicability by another name, must feature. On Edwardian determinism everything, at however a microscopic level, can be explained in terms of God's will. It seems then that Edwardian determinism will have one less inexplicable class of events than Edwardian indeterminism. Where Edwardian determinism has God's (arguably arbitrary) choice of laws of nature, Edwardian indeterminism has God's (arguably arbitrary) choice of laws of nature and God's arbitrary choices of what to cause within the parameters those impose. Unless (and this is perhaps a big unless) there are good arguments to the effect that He would have reason for generating laws of nature that are fundamentally statistical (say because this would be necessary if He were to give His creatures free will and free will is a good thing for His creatures to have) Edwardianism, insofar as its proponents wish to think of it as an explanatory hypothesis, if not entailing determinism, could certainly be said to lead naturally to it.

Let us break off this discussion temporarily, to return to it in a moment after another example. Consider the following situation.

One day a prophet finds himself unjustly imprisoned awaiting execution. He prays for a means of escape. In desperation, he throws himself at the wall of his cell. To his amazement, he passes straight through it unharmed. Once outside, he makes good his escape. We may suppose that the prophet inhabits a world where such an occurrence would not contravene the laws of nature. He exists in a deterministic universe where every event is directly caused by God to occur in such a way that it strictly follows the non-statistical deterministic laws He has chosen. However, in this universe, as in most other deterministic universes, unlikely (from the point of view of creatures such as humans, should they exist) events happen and this is simply an instance of one. Every atom of the prophet's body was determined to pass through the wall of the prison in the way in which the laws of nature of his universe say such atoms must do under certain conditions, conditions which it so happened that all his atoms were determined to satisfy at that time. His wall interpenetration looked the same as that unlikely (in the sense of statistically *and* physically improbable) wall interpenetration that happened in the indeterministic universe Hughes described. We can even suppose that this prophet's universe is the corollary Edwardian deterministic universe to an Edwardian indeterministic one which has the exact phenomenal features Hughes supposes of his. In this prophet's universe, the laws of nature plus the past were not merely consistent with his interpenetrating the wall naturally on this particular

occasion, as they were in the universe Hughes described. They necessitated that he did so; they were not consistent with any other outcome. The initial conditions plus the laws necessitated an event which violated the quasi-law of non-interpenetration and which was thus to his amazement.

Let us further suppose that the wall interpenetration has been brought about as a result of the prophet's prayer. In the prophet's universe a 'spiritual' quasi-law operates to the effect that those who are prophets and who pray for deliverance in times of great need have their prayers answered, a law the operation of which on his situation required that he pass through the wall of his prison unharmed. What this supposition requires is that we think that when selecting between the infinite number of deterministic universes He could create, God chose to create a deterministic system which had as a consequence that this spiritual quasi-law operated, just as He chose to create one which had as a consequence that the physical quasi-laws which operated accorded with Newton's laws.<sup>18</sup> This quasi-law of praying-prophet-deliverance deserves the caveat 'spiritual', as, in this universe, there is nothing obviously significant to the natural sciences in the physical similarities of prophets praying in great need and their modes of deliverance. For example, a prophet about to be shot might pray for deliverance and the spiritual quasi-law of praying-prophet-deliverance manifest itself in the fact that all the guns jam or misfire etc. Rice would object at this stage, seeing God's reacting to prayers and His responses being laid down as part of His unitary act of creation as 'two competing accounts'<sup>19</sup>: on the first account He would be reacting to *me*, on the second He would be reacting just to 'any person of such-and-such a sort'.<sup>20</sup> My contention would be that they are not two competing theories; they are simply two ways of stating the same theory. To draw the distinction between them would be to assume that what makes me *me* cannot be something that God could know about and build into his spiritual quasi-laws, an assumption we have no reason to make. Another objection might be that my account makes the spiritual quasi-law merely an epiphenomenal consequence of the natural laws and in this way deprives us of the chance of really making sense of the prophet's passing through the wall as an answer to his prayer. However, firstly, the spiritual quasi-law is no more epiphenomenal than any physical quasi-law – it is just harder (indeed probably impossible) to derive from a study of the natural laws as they can be known by the inhabitants of the universe. Secondly, we may suppose that God has created a deterministic world in which it is true that the event which is the response – the prophet's interpenetration – would not have happened had his prayer not been made and that the content of the prayer dictated the result. What more than this could reasonably be required to think of his subsequent interpenetration as a response to his prayer – that it be directly caused by it? This requirement cannot indeed be satisfied in that in this Edwardian universe God alone directly causes all things, but if it makes sense to think of an earthly agent in a Edwardian deterministic world as asking another earthly agent to do something for him or her and

to conceive of something that happens later as a response to that request, I see no reason why it would not make sense to think of an earthly agent in such a universe asking God to do something for him or her and to conceive of something that happens later as a response to that request.

The prophet's wall interpenetration was then an instance of the operation of the spiritual quasi-law that prophets who pray for deliverance in times of great need receive it; his interpenetration occurred as a result of his prayer. However, by far the vast majority of medium-sized objects, or even persons in the prophet's universe, are not prophets praying for deliverance in times of great need, and thus his interpenetration was a violation of the much more generally applicable quasi-law which represents God's general volition as to the behaviour of the sort of thing the prophet is. The prophet is essentially a medium-sized object of the person variety, and, generally speaking, persons do not interpenetrate walls. Thus, this prophet's wall interpenetration is a transgression of a quasi-law brought about by a particular volition of the deity in response to the prophet's prayer and is perceived of as such by the prophet. This is, I suggest, sufficient for the event to be a miracle. On this understanding then, no assumption of the possible falsity of determinism or of the distance of Edwardian worlds need be made to enable us to reach the conclusion that there could be miracles that violate no natural laws.

One might grant that it was possible to have an entirely deterministic universe which generated a spiritual quasi-law of the right sort, but argue that such a universe would necessarily violate other principles which theism compels us to think of God as creating in accordance with. It might be argued that the laws of nature in such a universe would need to be hideously complicated and well beyond the powers of cognition of all of its creatures. Let us concentrate on humans. Of course, the laws of nature might not look beyond the powers of human cognition from the point of view of humans within that universe: they might look as if they were fundamentally statistical, but that they looked this way would be deceptive. It could be argued that the God of theism would never create such a universe. He would prefer to create a universe in which the laws of nature really were fundamentally statistical, as He would prefer to create a universe in which humans, when they probed as deeply into the natural world as they could, discovered the fundamental laws of nature, a universe in which there were no further facts underlying these laws which explained them, but of which humans were, given their finitude, doomed to remain ignorant.

The claim that God, being good, would never allow it to be the case that, however well we used our intellect, we could never know the truth on some matter is obviously incompatible with theism. No theist would suppose that the only thing stopping humans becoming omniscient is weak will. The Cartesian principle that God, being no deceiver, would never allow us to be deceived in a way in which, however well we used our intellect, we could never discover, is a more plausible one. However, this principle need not be violated in a deterministic world, even

one that had spiritual quasi-laws. In such a world, humans need not be deceived; they might realize – perhaps amongst other things having read the correlate of this paper – that they should believe that their universe might be one which followed deterministic rules which were ultimately beyond their comprehension. Would such a world be one in which science as we know it could not precede? No, the physical quasi-laws in such a universe would still be understandable and God could create such a universe in which the laws immediately underlying these quasi-laws were understandable; and the laws underlying those; and, if He liked, the laws underlying those. This process could be continued indefinitely, though not of course infinitely, at each stage simplicity at the higher level being purchased at the expense of more complication lower down. As science progressed, eventually, scientists in such a world might, though of course they need not, reach a level beyond which their comprehension did not allow them to penetrate. At this stage, some of those scientists might say that the laws of nature were fundamentally statistical; others might say that they were deterministic but that statistical approximations seemed to be the best that we could manage; still others might say that we could not know which of these two positions was right. In other words, that our universe is like this is not a theory that past, present or future scientific developments might give us reason to think was false. It is not a theory that has any implications as to the history of science; it just has implications as to the interpretation of that history.

In an Edwardian deterministic universe, things happen for reasons ultimately known only to God: the fundamental constituents of nature follow laws that constitute His ideas of them. If the universe were to be one that had spiritual quasi-laws of the praying-prophet-deliverance level of generality operating in it, it is reasonable to suppose that the natural laws ultimately underlying the quasi-laws would need to be so complicated that they would be beyond the powers of human understanding. Humans could, I suggest, still reasonably attribute these violations of the quasi-laws to God's will, but they would not be able to answer the question 'Why did this happen?' at a naturalistic level, even though there would be an answer at this level known to God. Thus there is a sense in which humans in such a deterministic world could not ultimately know why things happened. However, such humans would not be in a worse position than their correlates in an indeterministic world. In the corollary indeterministic universe, things would happen for no reason – not even one known to God – and thus humans could not ultimately know why things happened there either.

Which, if either, of these sorts of universe does theism make more probable, one with more explanations less of which are known to humans or one with less explanations more of which are known to humans? Again, I suggest that theism directs us to prefer the deterministic universe, one where there are more explanations and thus more things that humans do not know, rather than the universe where there are less explanations and thus less things that humans do

not know. Theism tells us that the natural order is the way it is because God wants it to be that way rather than any other. It does not tell us that some elements in the natural order are the way they are because God wants them to be that way rather than any other, and others are simply random. Again, however, to argue thus is to ignore arguments that might suggest that only in an indeterministic universe could there be free will, something that God might want to effect. Again, there is not room here to give such arguments the attention they deserve. We must therefore try to move on by finding a way around these issues.

The case of a prophet's interpenetrating a wall in a deterministic universe (be it Edwardian or not) raises the issue of whether God would create a deterministic universe that followed laws that it was beyond the powers of its creatures to comprehend. It raises this problem particularly acutely in that the prophet's wall interpenetration would break a physical quasi-law by being in accordance with a spiritual quasi-law of quite a general sort, and thus we would be forced, if we accepted it were possible at all, to posit a more complicated set of natural laws as operative in that universe to account for it. The natural laws of such a universe would need to be such as to explain why the physical quasi-law of non-interpenetration generally operated but also why the indefinitely large (potentially infinite) numbers of particular exceptions to it predicted by the spiritual quasi-law of praying-prophet-deliverance obtained. I have suggested that the incomprehensibility of the fundamental laws of nature is not improbable on theism. I anticipate that some will disagree, and disagree even if they accept for the sake of argument that God might create a deterministic universe. Let us take another route then, and consider a case which, I shall suggest, ought to be considered a miracle, yet which would break neither natural laws or quasi-laws. Consequently, it is an event which does not require such complications in the natural laws as would be necessary to accommodate a spiritual quasi-law of as high a level of generality as the praying-prophet-deliverance law (although some complication may be necessary). The event is, I suggest, the sort of thing which we could imagine happening in a relatively uncomplicated deterministic universe. Indeed it is the sort of thing which we could imagine happening in a universe very much like ours.

Thomas lives in a completely deterministic world created by a God who never performs any Humean miracles. (The world may also be an Edwardian one.) He is in his office one morning with the radio quietly playing in the background. Although otherwise psychologically well adjusted, he is in a bad mood today as electricians, who are working elsewhere in his building, are causing the electrical equipment and telephone in his room to malfunction. The lights and radio have been coming on and off rather annoyingly and his computer has already crashed on him three times. Each time, he has called the electrical company to complain and, on those occasions when the telephone worked, received a recorded and platitudinous message. Now the lights flicker and his computer crashes again. Angrily, he picks up the telephone. As he does so, he accidentally knocks a novel

off his desk and it falls open on the floor. It is a story he has been reading with interest and empathy concerning a character whose first name happens to be 'Thomas' and the relationship he has with his unduly self-important boss. The telephone is working and this time he does not get the company's answerphone. As he reaches to retrieve the book with one hand, he growls into the receiver held in the other, 'I was beginning to think you didn't even exist'. Before he can continue, the lights go out entirely and the telephone and the radio go dead. Now, in the silent darkness, he sits still with one hand outstretched towards the book and the other holding the receiver to his ear. He mutters under his breath, 'It's this sort of intolerable suffering which justifies my agnosticism about the existence of a benevolent omnipotent God'. He pauses, then – more meditatively – adds out loud the prayer, 'God, if you are out there, just send me a sign that you exist'.

As it happens, at the precise moment he finishes uttering these words, the electricians elsewhere in the building reconnect the electricity to his room and there is a consequent power surge. The result of this is that the lights in Thomas' room flash on in a brilliant blaze at the same time as the radio blasts out two words at high volume. As it happens, the words of the radio drama which are thus amplified to resound around the room as it is bathed in bright golden light are 'I exist!'. Simultaneously, the man in the complaints department at the other end of the telephone is reconnected and says loudly, in order to reassure Thomas that the complaints department is not a fiction, 'I exist'. Whilst Thomas hears these words in deafening unison, his eyes alight on the book which he had knocked off his desk and was reaching for and in particular they fix on the sentence at the top of the page at which it has fallen open and to which his finger happens to be pointing: it is a line spoken by the character of the self-important boss. Thomas does not notice this, but merely reads the sentence. It says, 'This is God talking to you, Thomas'. The whole episode lasts only a second and the electricians then disconnect the power supply and his telephone, and Thomas is thus immediately plunged into darkness and silence once more.

Ending A: Thomas returns to his prayer: 'As I was saying, God, just send me a sign, any sign'. (Within a few hours, he has forgotten the whole incident.)

Ending B: Thomas returns to his prayer, thanking God for sending him a sign. (In later years, he looks back on this moment as the start of his religious life.)

I suggest that a reaction similar to that attributed to Thomas in ending B is the most likely outcome of such a coincidence of events. I suggest that it is certainly a more natural one than that attributed to him in ending A. I do not offer any argument in support of these contentions, hoping that my readers will simply agree with me that B, rather than A, represents the effect such a set of coincidences is likely to have on a psychologically well-adjusted person such as I have described Thomas as being.

If this is right, it would be a mistake to argue, as Pearl does,<sup>21</sup> that miracles ought to be understood as violations of laws of nature for J. S. Mill's reason that a revelation 'cannot be proved unless by external evidence, that is, by the exhibition of supernatural facts'<sup>22</sup> and theism requires such supernatural facts to be law-violating ones as only law violations could mark out a truth spoken by God or another supernatural agent from one spoken by more mundane others. The example of Thomas is clearly one of God 'getting His message across' in a non-law-violating way. The only question that remains is whether such a non-law-violating sign would naturally be called a miracle. I would suggest that it would: to return to what I have assumed is common usage, it is a marvellous event due to some supposed supernatural agency.

If we allow it as a possibility, the case of the prophet's interpenetrating the wall in a deterministic universe might tempt us to point to the quantitative difference in the statistical probability of the event in question relative to Holland's example as an essential element in any justification for thinking it more rational to treat the interpenetration as a miracle than to treat the train's stopping as one. People fainting and trains stopping are common features of our experience. Even if trains stopping as a result of people fainting in such a way that children are saved is not a common feature, it is a coincidence of common features: the situation Holland described did not violate any quasi-laws. A person's interpenetrating a wall is neither a common feature of our experience, nor is it a combination of common features: the prophet's interpenetrating the wall did violate a quasi-law. However, although necessarily a violation of a quasi-law is extremely unlikely and the extremely unlikely is, other things being equal, more arresting than the merely unlikely, the example of Thomas, I suggest, shows us that an event which it would be natural to consider a miracle need not violate even a quasi-law.

The events which constitute the coincidences that occur in Thomas's office are as naturalistically explicable as others, and we may assume that Thomas knows that they are. They are extremely unusual, perhaps even more unusual than the events in Holland's case, but whilst their coincidence is even more unusual still, it does not violate any quasi-laws. The events in Thomas's office are more arresting even than some events that would violate quasi-laws, in that they form a coincidence with a rather obvious religious significance. The most important difference between Holland's example and mine, in virtue of which it is reasonable to hold that the latter ought to be counted as a miracle whilst the former ought not to be, is, I suggest then, that in my example there is a religious context in which the events occur and a specific religious content to the events themselves: both of these features are lacking in Holland's example. We have already observed that there is nothing in case of a train's failing to kill a child which requires, in order to avoid transgressing the rules of ordinary language or rationality, that we call it a miracle. We suggested that not merely does it not seem obvious that most people in the mother's position, in the situation Holland described, would persist in hailing the

train's stopping as a miracle, upon learning of the naturalistic explanation, but further it may seem obvious that they would not. None of this is true of Thomas's situation. There does seem something unnatural about his responding to the events that have occurred in his office in the manner of ending A, something unnatural in the strong sense of failing to accord with the rules of ordinary language and rationality. Altering Holland's example by providing the mother with the naturalistic explanation of the train's stopping at the time of the event itself negates any plausibility in hailing that event as a miracle. In contrast, that there was a naturalistic explanation of the events in Thomas's office known to Thomas at the time they occur does not diminish the rationality of hailing them as a miracle or at least does not entirely negate it. Why?

Thomas was praying before the events in question for a particular outcome, that he be sent a sign that God existed. His room was then bathed in bright golden light; the words 'I exist!' blasted at him in stereo; and his eyes fixed on a sentence which read 'This is God speaking to you, Thomas'. It was, to say the least, extremely natural to see these events as an answer to his prayer. I suggest that no psychologically normal person could fail to do so. The events had an obvious propositional meaning, the auditory ones that the speaker existed and the visual ones that the speaker was God. It was thus natural to see these events as due to a particular volition on God's part to convey a particular message, namely that He existed, to Thomas. This, then, made the events a marvellous sign of a particular supernatural volition. One may be reminded of the incident in Augustine's life where, having overheard a child saying 'Take and read', he picked up a copy of Paul's letters and read the passage on which his eyes first fell, taking the words to be God's speaking to him.<sup>23</sup> In Holland's example, the child's being saved was not an answer to anything; there was no religious context 'up front' and there was no religious content to the events themselves. Thus the mother's interpretation and her leap to thank God seemed entirely arbitrary. The event was given a religious interpretation, but there was nothing in the event itself or those events leading up to it to make such an interpretation more natural than any other. A theistic interpretation was no more reasonable than a more mundane or at least a less theistic one. We observed that the mother in Holland's example could have thanked no-one for her son's survival without any incongruity. Thus she was incorrect, in the sense of misusing the term, in her description of the event as a miracle: a sign that does not point anywhere in particular is not really a sign at all. Thomas, by contrast, would be correct in thanking God for the sign in the manner of ending B and, crucially, he would be incorrect if he did not do so, as in ending A. That only one form of behaviour seems appropriate shows us that he is correct in the sense of using the term appropriately if he thinks of the coincidences in his office as a miracle, as a sign which does indeed point to a particular supernatural agency, God, rather than anywhere else.

### Conclusion

To draw the strands together, what definition of the miraculous emerges from these considerations then? I suggest that a miracle should be understood as a sign of particular supernatural agency. This will entail usually seeing it as brought about by a particular volition of God and thus as being for the good (divinely bodged miracles aside); occasionally it may be thought of as being brought about by another invisible agent, in which case it may be for the good or bad. Its particularity means that a miracle must be an uncommon event; an uncommon event need not be, in any interesting sense, an improbable one, although that which is improbable will, of course, be uncommon. It may be effected by a process that transgresses quasi-laws or even natural laws, but it need not be. An event – or series of events – which violates no quasi-laws might be more natural to interpret as the result of a particular supernatural volition than an event which does violate quasi-laws. If an event or series of events occurs in a context where it is natural to see it as a response to prayer – whether it be offered by one who already believes, as was (arguably) the case with Augustine, or by an avowed agnostic, as was the case with Thomas – and if the event has specific religious content, it may be reasonable to take it as indicative of the truth of that content and unreasonable – a subverting of the principles of understanding – not to.<sup>24</sup> This characterization of miracles differs then from Holland's, but, like Holland's and Hughes's, it makes no reference to the violation of natural laws and, unlike Hume's and Hughes's, it builds the perception of religious significance into the notion of miracle. Hume was right to say that nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happens in the common course of nature. However, uncommon things do happen naturally and to take some of these uncommon occurrences as not pointing beyond themselves to particular supernatural volitions might be unreasonable by any standards actually employed in our understanding of our world and ourselves.

It will have become apparent that I place a rather high epistemic value on what it is natural to believe and, in this respect at least, I anticipate that I might be taken to be being rather too descriptive and not prescriptive enough in my analysis of the principles of understanding. One justification for considering Thomas's thinking of the events in his office as a miracle not merely more natural than not doing so, but also more rational, would rest on attributing to Thomas an argument to best explanation, specifically on supposing that he must be aware of the fact that a universe in which this sort of coincidence occurs is more probable on the hypothesis of theism than it is on other hypotheses and that, therefore, these experiences confirm the theistic hypothesis for him. Whether or not one wishes to endorse this general style of argument or this particular instantiation of it, that which it is natural for a psychologically well-adjusted adult to believe in certain circumstances must surely be accepted as, *ceteris paribus*, the best evidence we could ever have for what it is rational to believe in those circumstances. One might

ask, 'What plausible definition of "knowledge" is there, on which the, *ex hypothesi*, true belief in God, which Thomas comes to in ending B because of God's particular volition, would not count as knowledge?' and anticipate silence in reply.

And finally...

A man answers his door to a policeman who tells him that he must evacuate immediately in order to avoid the flood that is about to hit his neighbourhood. The policeman says that he has a car in which they can both travel to safety. 'I trust in the Lord', the man replies, 'He will rescue me'. The policeman shrugs his shoulders and drives away. The waters rise, eventually forcing the man to climb up onto his roof to stay above them. A fireman paddles by in a boat and asks him if he would like to escape. 'I trust in the Lord', the man replies, 'He will rescue me'. The fireman paddles off as the waters become more turbulent and rise even higher. Now the man is perched precariously on the top of his chimney – the only bit of his house above the raging torrent. An air-ambulance helicopter flies low over him and a paramedic leans out to shout that they are willing to airlift him to safety. The man replies, 'I trust in the Lord. He will rescue me'. The helicopter flies off. Soon afterwards the waters wash over the man and drown him. He arrives in heaven and says to the Lord, 'Lord I trusted in you to rescue me. Why didn't you?'

The Lord replies, 'I sent a car, a boat and a helicopter: what were you expecting – a miracle?'<sup>25</sup>

### Notes

1. D. Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), X. I, 115.
2. *Ibid.*, 114.
3. R. F. Holland 'The miraculous', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1965), 43–51; revised by the author and reprinted in J. Donnelly (ed.) *Logical Analysis and Contemporary Theism* (New York NY: Fordham University Press, 1972), 218–235. All quotations are from the revised edition.
4. *Ibid.*, 218.
5. *Ibid.*, 220–221.
6. C. Hughes 'Miracles, laws of nature and causation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 66 (1992), 179–205.
7. *Ibid.*, 194.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. R. Swinburne *The Concept of Miracle* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970), 31.
12. *Idem The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 232.
13. Hughes, 'Miracles', 200–202.
14. *Ibid.*, 202.
15. *Ibid.*, 203.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. I take it that this is a version of the hypothesis of the 'Direct Actualisation of Conditional Situations (DACS)', as expounded and defended by Peter Forrest in 'Answers to prayer and conditional situations', *Faith and Philosophy*, 15 (1998), 41–51.
19. D. H. Rice *God and Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 122.

20. *Ibid.*, 124.
21. L. Pearl, 'Miracles and theism', *Religious Studies*, 24 (1988), 483–496.
22. J. S. Mill, 'Theism', pt 4, in *Three Essays on Religion* (London: Longmans, 1885), 216.
23. This incident, which on my account would be a miracle, is discussed by N. Wolterstoff in *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch. 1 and following.
24. This is contrary to the 'theistic-constituted conception of miracles' argued for by J. Gilman in 'Reconceiving miracles', *Religious Studies*, 25 (1989), 477–487. Gilman's conception 'presupposes that miracles are ascertainable and identifiable solely through 'eyes of faith'; only to those whose set of basic presuppositions includes belief in God' (485).
25. My thoughts on this topic have benefited from discussion with John Kenyon and Richard Swinburne, and I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of the Editor and two of the journal's anonymous referees on an early draft of this paper.