On the Miraculous

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The discussion in the philosophy of religion about miracles—the standard question concerns whether miracles are possible—often starts (explicitly or implicitly) from examples of miracles held to be paradigmatic: the sick are healed, the dead are raised. This can be understood in two ways. Either the question is whether such paradigmatic examples, in case they happen, could (or should) be regarded, within the framework of a given religious belief, as a miracle. “Miracle” is then an intra-religious category, the application of which takes place in a religious belief which is already there. As far as I can see, the concept miracle, understood in this way, is not generally problematic. Or the concept miracle is regarded as independent of religious belief, and the question is then whether there could be miracles or not, whether there could be “objective” miracles or not. It is the concept miracle understood in this latter way I will discuss here.

In the background of the standard discussion, there is the idea that miracles, if one occurred, would lead to religious belief. What is it about miracles that makes them into reasons, if they happen? It is, one thinks, their being unexplainable, that such happenings make it necessary to postulate the existence of God, in order for us to be able to account for them. But what one does not pay attention to when arguing in such a way, is that the unexplainable, a concept which will be examined in what follows, only becomes a reason against the background of one particular way of considering it, of one particular attitude to it. Even though this attitude, for historical and other reasons, has been common, it is not an attitude one should philosophically presuppose as evidently given. Hence, the focus of my discussion will primarily be that attitude which a particular way of asking the question is already from the start an expression of, not the question whether miracles are possible or not. An important point—the meaning of which it remains to account for—is that belief and miracles are, in one sense, mutually dependent. The way one understands miracles expresses already from the start a specific way of relating oneself to religious belief; and, vice versa, the way one understands miracles is an aspect of the way one relates oneself to religious belief. A specific spiritual orientation hides behind the standard way of seeing miracles in the philosophy of religion. It will not do to say that this is only a way of asking the question about miracles—as if asking a question is innocent and neutral and only the answer possibly wrong, misguided or misleading—since asking in this way is still an emphasis which is far from a matter of course. Thus, the decisive issue is not what understanding of the question we should “choose”, nor what the answer is when we have chosen, but to become clear about how one’s way of understanding the question shows a specific spiritual orientation already on the philosophical level. This attitude need not be clear for one; it may be a result of the fact that...
one has taken over the standard way of asking the question without deliberation. But having taken over this way of asking the question, one has at the same time taken over that attitude which this question is an expression of; and simply taking over the standard question because it is the standard one also expresses a specific attitude.

In other words, by the way in which one asks the question one has already settled what answers (what kind of answers) one will accept. The one who feels the inclination to ask the question “is miracles possible” must then at least see the importance of asking a prior question: “what is a miracle, what does the concept miracle mean”. If there is any kind of unclarity with regard to the latter question, asking (and even more answering) the former one will not be of philosophical value. The course of my discussion will be another one, however. I will start negatively, trying to become clear about what miracles are taken to be in the standard discussion and what kind of spiritual orientation this expresses. By means of this, another way of understanding the issue will become clearer as we go on.

1. One starting point for many discussions about miracles in the philosophy of religion is that there is some kind of tension between miracles and science. The idea is that science has showed, or is believed to will show, that there are no miracles; or, in opposition to this, that there is really something scientifically unexplainable, i.e. miracles. In other words, “miracle” is here taken to be a quasi-scientific concept, referring to what does not have a scientific explanation. That this is so is evident in the second case, but it goes also for the first one: the reason for the dismissal is that the concept miracle is not scientifically explanatory, and since it is taken to be a (quasi-)explanatory concept, it is dismissed generally. Another example is when miracles are dismissed since the use of the concept is taken to presuppose that something spiritual (God) works be means of material causes, which is held to be impossible. Ontologically understood, it is hard to see the point of identifying the causal and the material, an identification which this line of thought depends on. However, the idea seems to be another one. When one asks for causes, the idea is that it always makes sense to ask for the cause of this cause. The cause of a miracle, on the other hand, is God, and here no more questions about causes can be asked. The point is then that explaining something be means of the concept miracle is only a pseudo-explanation.

At present, it is the presupposed understanding of science which needs to be commented upon. A more straightforward discussion of this (implicit) answer to the question “what is a miracle” – that which does not have a scientific explanation – will have to wait a minute.

The idea is here that “There is nothing unexplainable / Everything is possible to explain” or “There is something unexplainable” are scientific statements which science could establish, corroborate or refute. The mere fact that “everything” in the first one is used in a completely vague way shows that it is not a matter of a scientific statement but, rather, of an emphasized denial of the second one. But also the second one is strange. In what situation is such a statement established scientifically? In one sense, but in another than the one here intended, the statement is uncontroversial. There are always, at every stage of the scientific development, lots of things which are not possible to explain: it is precisely about finding answers to such questions which the scientific practice is about. “There is something unexplainable” – when it does not simply refer to something temporarily unexplainable but to something definitely unexplainable – would then be possible to state in a situation when one knows that it is pointless to look for an explanation. And the question is what it would mean to know that. Saying that something is definitely unexplainable is not, as the advocates of this idea would like to give the impression of, to give a humble expression of the limitations of human knowledge, on the contrary: from the fact that I have not found an explanation, the conclusion drawn is that no one will, from the fact that we have not found an explanation, the conclusion drawn is that no one ever will. (On the one hand, it does not take much for the person who draws such a conclusion to give up – “we have failed to find an explanation, so there is no point in trying” – on the other hand, this person has a strong need for explanations – “since we have not found an explanation, we must take God as the explanation, it is not alright to leave the issue open, unsettled”). Thus, “There is nothing unexplainable / Everything is possible to explain” are not theoretical statements within science (not statements which the scientist establishes as true or false) but rather statements describing the character of science as practice. This does not mean, to be sure, that anything

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5 That miracles are violations of the laws of nature is one form this idea might take.
6 Feuerbach (1969, 210-11) argues in this way, but uses another terminology.
8 Feeling oneself forced to place a phenomenon on the axis between having an explanation and not having one, means forgetting that there is another issue: when the concept explanation is applicable and when it is not. I will come back to this below.
could be given, say, a physical explanation, only that if something is a physical phenomenon, the scientist tries to find a physical explanation of it (if the phenomenon is of any interest). On the contrary, it is of the utmost importance to consider what is really a physical phenomenon: to treat something which is not a physical phenomenon as a physical phenomenon only results in the phenomenon becoming distorted, in one explaining something other than what one believes oneself to be explaining. It is in relation to the kind of phenomenon something is (or in relation to the kind of phenomenon something for particular reasons is regarded as being) that it makes sense to ask for explanations, that the question what kinds of explanations it makes sense to ask for could be answered. Hence, the first question is not how to explain something, but what this something is and what it means to relate to it in this or that way.

Consequently, whether there is a tension between belief in miracles and being scientific depends on what type of phenomenon miracles are. If one identifies miracles and that which does not have a scientific explanation, a tension arises, but not because two contradictory theoretical statements are contrasted, but because one makes use of a practice without paying attention to what it means to make use of this very practice. To find something that one cannot, however much one tries to, find an explanation for, something that one cannot dismiss by claiming that it is more probable that I have seen (heard, remembered, etc.) wrong than that it has really happened, is then still not of any help, since science as a practice is still striving for an explanation.

The idea behind this way of understanding what miracles are, is as far as I can judge, that if the concept miracle is not used as some kind of explanation of the unexplainable (i.e. if it would relate to something which already has, or seems to will get, a scientific explanation), it is redundant. Although (or rather precisely because) miracles are here understood as the opposite of the scientifically explainable, redundant here means scientifically redundant. If there is a natural explanation for something, this something cannot be the work of God, it is thought, since the work of God must be something else than that which “merely” happens, namely either a break of the causal chains or that which starts them off (causa efficiens). Also the one who does not go this far, who does not talk about redundancy, has the idea that there must be something that makes it certain, that it must be something that makes it beyond all doubt, that what has happen is the work of God – and this certainty one gets if it is necessary (because of the unexplainability of the occurrence) that God is brought in, and this is then what a miracle is supposed to be. The force of the spectacular is that it is able to destroy some kind of doubt or lethargy; it is spectacular only against this background and presupposes that perspective. The point of miracles is, it is thought, that they make it necessary to postulate the existence of God (and so to believe, according to this line of thought), on pains of us otherwise not being able to explain them.

Having come this far, it is wise to halt and try to get some distance to these kinds of discussions. The discussion about miracles, as it is normally pursued in the philosophy of religion, is characteristically compulsive: it is pursued as if it were not even possible to think in other terms than those used in the debate. It is not the case that the standard discussion is based on a preceding discussion of what miracles are, a discussion which has already been concluded. However, this should not be understood as if our task was to find an alternative, as if the standard discussion was still the standard. Instead, one should begin by trying to understand what it means to ask the question in the way it is usually done. One characteristic feature of the standard way of asking the question is the way in which it emphasizes some contrasts. Miracles are the scientifically unexplainable, in contrast to that which is scientifically explained; miracles are what is in that sense improbable, in contrast to the well known and the familiar; miracles are in that sense spectacular, in contrast to the everyday; and all this...

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9 “Take the case that one of you suddenly grew a lion’s head and began to roar. Certainly that would be as extraordinary a thing as I can imagine. Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him I would have him vivisected. And where would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say ‘Science has proved that there are no miracles.’ The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle.” Wittgenstein 1993, 43.

10 This means that a confused idea about causal chains is at work here. Cf. Hanson, Norwood Russell, 1965, Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ch. 3. However, this question I will not discuss here.
11 This is evident in Hume. His famous conclusion (1999, 173-4) – “The plain consequence is […] ’That 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 endeavours to establish: And even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.’” – means that we can only conclude that something is a miracle if the opposite would be more “miraculous” (i.e. for Hume, since he identifies the two, incredible). In other words, the general a priori principle at work here is that we should always make the amount of miracles as less as possible.
means that miracles could be graded, from the not so miraculous to the very miraculous.\textsuperscript{13}

However, one should note that the relation between miracles and the familiar is not a stable one on this account; miracles are here both improbable and probable. What has been said this far is only one side of the coin. The other one is that an attempt is made to philosophically show that miracles are after all credible. Miracles are on the one hand spectacular, on the other hand something to take for granted. It is only without the postulation of the existence of God that the miracles are really miraculous. When the existence of God has been postulated, on the other hand, miracles are something to count upon – that is the reason for the postulation.\textsuperscript{14}

A connected relation to the relation between miracles and science is the one between religion and technology more generally. There is a story often told\textsuperscript{15} about how religion is born out of the dependency of human beings on nature and dies when technology makes us independent of it: whereas we formerly hoped for a miracle to happen, we nowadays visit the physician, it is said. No doubt there is much confusion in this line of thought – the one easiest to recognize is the idea that technology brings about independence (the difference is to be found at specific points and is furthermore at most relative)\textsuperscript{16} – but what I am here going to focus on is something in this line of thought which is really an insight. The point is then not a historical one, but this. If one understands miracles in a technological way (as a way in which some goals of mine are achieved), the difference between miracles and technology is only, as have already been pointed out, one of explanation: since I am not able to explain them scientifically, I cannot employ them technologically. In other words, the question is not whether miracles, so understood, do happen or not, or whether they could happen or not. Instead, the point is that with this understanding of miracles, it is only a coincidence that technology has not taken the place of miracles, if it has not already done so. Consequently, even if miracles would be something to count upon – in particular when – it is important to ask the question about whether miracles are (or could be) something else, whether there is a non-calculative understanding of miracles.\textsuperscript{17}

2.
Before beginning to try to describe such an understanding of miracles, I want to make some methodological remarks. When I talk about different understandings of miracles, from where do I take them? Is what I do a matter of contrasting a philosophical picture of what miracles must be (the one discussed in the section above) to the understanding of miracles which shows itself in the practice of religious believers?

Such an investigation could be of interest, but it is not one of that kind which I will pursue. In fact, what I will say is not dependent on anyone having had the understanding which I will try to describe (least of all it is dependent on whether I embrace that understanding or not). To explain this, let me illustrate by a discussion of reductionism.

A reductionist claim about religion – say, “religion is wish fulfillment”\textsuperscript{18} – is not simply wrong. If it did not apply to some cases, it would be strange that such an idea ever struck anyone. And it could be the case that such a statement is an expression of a way of regarding things which could solve some problems when it comes to, say, psychoanalytic treatment; in that case, the statement would not really be about religion, but about precisely these problems (hence, there is here an, at least implicit, understanding of the limitations of this way of regarding things). However, the reductionist wants, precisely as reductionist, to say something more than that this goes for some or many cases: her claim is that this is the only possibility. But that this is the only possibility, if it is, could never be established by means of the gathering of empirical evidence, would not be established even if the theory would \textit{de facto} accord with ever hitherto known case. (And if the reductionist says that every counter-example is an example of something else than religion, one could answer, “Alright, you do not

\textsuperscript{13} Hume is very explicit on this point. The terms he uses for the miraculous (1999, 171-176) are such as the following: the extraordinary, the unusual, that which has seldom fallen under our observation, the incredible, the uncommon. And what he compares miracles to is of the same kind: take the example of the Indian prince who never has seen water freeze to ice (Hume 1999, 172). For Hume, that miracles are uncommon is \textit{a priori}.

\textsuperscript{14} Again, Hume’s principle, that we should always make the amount of miracles as less as possible, is an example: that a miracle has occurred can only be established when the opposite is more incredible, which means that such a miracle would be (at least relatively) credible.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Horkheimer & Adorno 1984, 19-60.

\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, there is always an ambiguity in talking about independence from or mastery over nature. Mastering nature means regarding it in a specific way, which means that other aspects of nature disappears from view; in that respect, mastery is impotence. (See Heidegger 2003, 33.) I will touch upon this question in section 4, but not with reference to nature.

\textsuperscript{17} It should be noticed that already the calculative understanding of miracles refers to something else. It is not anything which is counted as a miracle, even if it is not possible to explain. In other words, there is something non-calculative here: miracles as something good, as something to rejoice at. I will come back to this later on.

\textsuperscript{18} See Freud, 1927, 47. In this context, it is not necessary to enter into a discussion about how Freud’s claim should be understood.
have to call it religion if you do not want to, but do not shut your eyes to the similarities”.)

When it is really a matter of reductionism, “religion is wish fulfillment” is said to be a disclosure. Here the point is not to regard something as something for specific purposes, but to say something about the nature of the subject in question, i.e. in this case religion. That something is a disclosure means that this nature has previously been hidden and that there is resistance against disclosing it. The resistance has to do with the critical character of reductionism: something is said not to be what people generally claims it to be. However, that it is a criticism says something important about the way in which reductionism works. It may be the case that the reduction de facto is correct with regard to every hitherto existing case. But that it is a criticism – and not just a simple statement of a fact – shows that there is already here a direction towards something else, i.e. that even in the one to whom the reductionist’s analysis applies, there is a rudiment of something else, in so far as this person understands what the reductionist is saying as a matter of criticism. That this is so is something which the reductionist systematically shuts her eyes to. The only answer which the reductionist might be able to give is that there is no alternative, that they are a priori excluded. In other words, reductionism is, when it is consistent, not an empirical claim, but a philosophical one. However, the reductionist’s basis is commonly of an empirical kind.

How ever well that understanding which I discussed in section 1 might accord with what religious believers take themselves to believe, the question is, consequently, if there is another possibility.19

3.
I have now described some aspects of the attitude which the standard way of asking the question is already from the start an expression of. Thereby, I have at the same time described what I meant when I said that belief and miracles are, in one sense, mutually dependent, that the way one understands miracles expresses already from the start a specific way of relating oneself to religious belief, and that, vice versa, the way one understands miracles is an aspect of the way one relates oneself to religious belief. In other words, the basic point is that we should not primarily try to answer the asked question, but try to understand what asking it means, what attitude the very asking of this question is an expression of. Hence, what I try to do is not bring hidden theoretical presuppositions (premises) to the fore, but to understand what the act of asking expresses. Since what miracles are is an expression of a spiritual orientation, I will in the rest of the paper work with one way of relating oneself to religious belief – when it is understood as love of a God of love20 – and try to see what form the question then takes. In a way, this means that I will understand the concept miracle as an intra-religious concept. However, what is important right now is not whether the place of it is inside or outside of religion, but the way this understanding of the concept miracle contrasts with the one in section 1 – in that respect, they are not on completely different planes. In the last section, I will return to the question about how the line between what is said to be religious and that which is not said to be religious is drawn. Moreover, this understanding of religious belief – that it is love of a God of love – is not a hypothesis, an assumption, or the like. Instead, our question is: if one understands religious belief in this way, what does this mean in regard to miracles. But starting out from this understanding is not arbitrary: as I said and as we will see, this understanding creates a good contrast to the standard discussion. (That it is a contrast does not mean that these two possibilities are exhaustive. But, of course, what I will say in what follows is relevant also for those who would like to find some third or fourth possibility.)

However, saying what I just said may make it sound as if the two understandings of miracles are on a par. But our previous discussion points in another direction. The tension between miracles and science takes place within the framework of a specific attitude, an attitude which could be described as a-scientific (the “reasons” or motives for it are philosophical, existential, not scientific) or unscientific (the attitude is a dogmatic one: things have to be regarded in a specific way, one is not open to other possibilities). The latter

19 Perhaps one might believe that Kant should be open to such different possibilities, since for him the theoretical one is not the only way of relating to the world. Of course, Kant denies claims to theoretical knowledge about miracles (1974, 112-13), but the same goes for the context of the practical: the belief in miracles is not a moral duty (107-8, 112-13). Hume’s understanding of what miracles are, is simply never questioned by Kant (see Kant’s definition, 110-11). The only indication of a different understanding appears in a note (110), in which Kant in passing mentions the possibility that the work of God could be understood not as a matter of causation or magnitude but of the form of the event (and whether the event is natural or supernatural, “easy” or “difficult”, does not matter then). What Kant says about the sublime could be interpreted as a different understanding of miracles: I will touch upon this in a later note. But Kant’s official conclusion with regard to miracles is that they should not be denied since they could be of tactical use against Jews (108-9 (the style of Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft is peculiar: he writes a lot about Christendom and Judaism without mentioning them by name)). In Fichte’s words (1998, 63-4): upon a person obsessed by the sensible, God must work through the sensible.

20 For this phrase, see Strandberg #2.
description is better, for it is characteristic of this attitude that it is had on what is regarded as scientific (“rational”) grounds – in that respect it is not a self-conscious one. When this attitude is one of a religious believer, it may nevertheless be combined with rhetorical outbursts against scientism, but that does not change anything: *de facto* everything is seen from an explanatory perspective which is simply taken for granted as self-evident. The criticism of the concept miracle as an intra-religious category, a criticism which I touched upon in the beginning, should be understood against this background. The idea is that the concept miracle could not mean anything else than an “objective” attempt at explaining something – the concept miracle as something intra-religious is then no more than an illegitimate attempt at explanation. However, as an intra-religious concept, the question is not what the *explanation* of something happening is, but what its religious *meaning* is. To the religious believer who shares the above attitude – which means that she affirms the possibility of the kind of explanation which the non-believer denies – the predilection for explanation in contrast to meaning may have its ground in fear of immanence: the explanation takes us outside of the world, whereas meaning with necessity is stuck to the world, one believes.

However, to believe that the difference is simply a difference between different persons would be a simplification, as if each one of us exclusively emphasizes the one or the other. No, for my part (and I think that this is not just a personal idiosyncrasy) I can see a doubleness – which is independent of any explicit religious confession – between wonder *about* something on the one hand, and wonder *at* something on the other hand (using, as a verb, a word kindred to “miracle”). What follows, when we start out from religious belief as love of a God of love, is one way of making this doubleness clear. When it comes to love of a God of love, the contrast to the explanation perspective widens, in two respects. First; using the concept miracle as the way to account for that which is scientifically unexplainable, means that no fundamental difference between good and evil is made – if something is scientifically unexplainable, it does not matter what further characteristics this something has. Second; the need which I have mentioned above – to make certain that what has happen is the work of God, which can only be done if it is required (because of the unexplainability of the occurrence) that God is brought in – arises only against the background of a doubt: we cannot be sure that this miraculously good is really the work of God. But for the one who loves a God of love the relation to God is not a hypothetical one (which is why the relation could be called “love”), which means that there is no further step to take beyond the immediate wonder at the good.

Also in this context, one could say that miracles are improbable. But this should not be understood as a contrast to something else: the familiar, the well known. What is miraculous is not some particular thing as opposed to others. Rather, seeing that something is miraculous has its home in a new way of seeing everything. Another way of expressing the point is this. In the case of explanations, what the character of the occurrence is is clear; the question regards how one should account for its possibility, what must be postulated in order for it to go together with what we already know. But, in contrast to this, seeing the miraculously of something could be to see it in a new light, to really see this something for the first time although it might be something extremely familiar. Here what I come to see is not something additional to this something; the something does not get its importance by making it possible for me to draw some conclusion. But what I come to see is nevertheless new to me; what I see is the relation between this something and God, a relation inherent in this something.

Whereas the direction in the former case goes from the improbable to the familiar (upon seeing something spectacular, one tries to account for it by

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21 To be sure, there are connections between explanation and meaning, but I will not discuss that issue in this context.
22 I will not say anything about this line of thought here. Obviously, the very terms of it should be questioned. In that respect, some of what I say in Strandberg #3 is relevant.
23 The tension between miracles as explanations and miracles as meaning is discussed by Peter Winch (1995, 210).
saying that it is a miracle, thereby seeing to it that it goes together with what we
already know), the direction in the latter case goes from the familiar to the
improbable. In that sense, both of them are orientations with regard to the world
in its generality – to emphasize the spectacular in contrast to the familiar, as the
former one does, is an attitude to both of them. When it comes to the latter one,
however, miracles are not contrasted to something non-miraculous: in the end,
nothing is to be counted upon (as probable), everything is seen as a miracle (as
dependent on God).26

However, what I just said is not right as it stands. What has been forgotten is
that the understanding of religious belief we are working with is it as love of a
God of love. Not counting upon anything, not taking anything for granted, is
typical for the hard-boiled person, the one who, in order not to be disappointed,
has “freed” herself of every expectation. But it is an important difference
between, on the one hand, trying to foresee what is going to happen (and such
an attempt my take religious forms) in order to be able to use the opportunities
that arises, in order to take appropriate precautions, etc., and, on the other hand,
the hopes and expectations which the loving person’s defenclessness expresses. In the latter case, the expectation is not a hypothesis. Expressed
differently: For the religious believer the concept miracle is intimately related to
joy; it is this that creates a room for talking about miracles. For the believer it is
not the case that there is first a question about whether something is the work of
God or not, on which a question about joy accidentally follows. No, it is a prior
question of joy which makes it possible to talk about something as the work of
God or not; within belief, there is no room for an indifferent attitude to it. That
something is a work of God means for the believer that it is something to
rejoice at. Instead of “joy”, one could say “gratitude” – to some, the latter word
is held to be more obvious religious. The problem with “gratitude” is that it may
be a matter of distancing oneself: instead of one’s immediate relation to that
which one is grateful for, questions about how to express this gratitude arises,
but that is not the case with joy. (However, when it comes to third person
accounts – saying “she rejoices at x” or “she is grateful for x” – there is, in this
context, no relevant differences.)

An example of the intimate relation between joy and the concept miracle is
when the birth of a child is said to be a miracle. Two things need to be pointed
out here, however. First, saying that the birth of a child is a miracle should not
be understood as a contrast, as if the existence of the child would be the less a
source of joy the older it grows, as if the miracle would be the “innocence of
childhood”. Second, saying that the birth of a child is a miracle should not be
understood as a matter of shutting one’s eyes to the problems this birth may
give rise to, that the child may be an additional mouth to feed. On the contrary,
that this is a real problem in such a case, and not just something to shrug one’s
shoulders at and not care a bit about, underlines an aspect of what the one who
says that this is a miracle means by saying that.

As I said, that something is a work of God means for the believer that it is
something to rejoice at. This puts limits to what could be a work of God: only
that which it is possible to rejoice at is a work of God. The emphasis on the
possible is here important. It is one thing to see that something is of God,
another to actually rejoice at it. When something thwarts my egoistic plans, I
feel hardly joy at it, even though I see, reluctantly, that this something is good,
which means that a question about joy is addressed to me.27 The question about
the works of God will for the believer be a question about considering what it is
really possible to rejoice at, and, conversely, what it is, in a sense, necessary to
rejoice at, although I may not actually rejoice at it. (That does not mean that joy
is chosen or thought out; existential reflection does always mean that one is
some steps away from the good, but that does not mean that it is less important,
as long as one does not think that the end of the reflection is an informed choice
or the like.) What one rejoices at, and what one sees as a miracle, is expressive
of whom one is. To rejoice at what is evil, is evil. The one who takes the
spectacular to be the prime example of the miraculous, is existentially focused
on the spectacular. For the one who loves a God of love, everything is not
miraculous: what is miraculous is first and foremost love. For her, nothing
hangs on whether or not something spectacular (like the breaking of a causal
chain) happened on the way; she need not affirm or deny a claim about
something spectacular having happened. As Simone Weil says: “Hitler could
die and rise again fifty times, but I would still not regard him as the Son of
God.” 28

4.

27 That I may come to see something which thwarts my egoistic plans as a miracle is not paid
attention to by Feuerbach. For him, belief in miracles and egoism are inseparable (see Feuerbach
1969, 186 & 297). But with regard to much philosophizing about miracles, what he says is to the
point.

The emphasis on the spectacular is connected to a specific emphasis on (and understanding of) power. The more spectacular, the more powerful God – the power simply shows itself in the unexplainable. (There is a difficulty here which I will not discuss: it is not clear what it means to say that it is difficult, requires power, to do the unexplainable. If I in some way can relate to the means used, there is a point in saying that something is more or less difficult to do, but here every such relation is excluded.) Thus, the ground for talking about the power of God is here the fact that there is no explanation. The idea is that this way of talking about the works of God, in contrast to every other way, does not result in a limitation of the power of God: the spectacular is seen as no more than an extension of the familiar, in the sense that if one has said that it is God who have made the spectacular, one has ascribed a power to God which includes the ability to make that which is easier, namely the familiar.

The contrast to this idea is, as has already been said, the work of God understood only as a matter of goodness. The one who emphasizes the spectacular therefore probably asks: does this not mean that the power of God is limited? There are two simple ways of rejecting that question. First, to the one who loves a God of love, the question makes no difference – to her, the question about power is not at all central, so she does not care about having or not having limited the power of God. Second, the question can be rejected by pointing out that if love of a God of love is limiting the power of God, not limiting it would be to reject love of a God of love. (This does not mean that God is judged by means of some sort of principle – such an idea presupposes that love is a principle and not a person, which is the opposite to what love a God of love means.) The one who emphasizes the importance of not limiting the power, has simply a spiritual orientation of her own. Hence, one cannot object to the one who loves a God of love by claiming that she makes power (or miracles) into something which is not worth as much reverence, that God (or miracles) are to her “smaller” than they are for the one who emphasizes the spectacular, that religious belief for her is not as serious, that her God is not as worthy of worship. For saying this is to give expression to precisely that attitude which the one who loves a God of love turns her back to – the objection is based on one particular way of relating to power and miracles. To hang on firmly to that attitude and try to force others to decide on it on its own terms, is not a matter of neutrally asking a philosophical question.

However, both of these rejections – which are important, of course – risk accepting a simplified understanding of the concept power. It is not the case that we have religious belief in isolation (here understood as love of a God of love) and that this later on is related to other things, as if religious belief and these other things were originally unrelated. No, what these other things are (how they should be understood), is intimately related to how religious belief is understood. That this is so we have already seen when it comes to the concept miracle. Thus, it is not the case that what power is is clear, and that the question is only about relating to it in some way or other.

Consequently, what one should philosophically avoid is a routine affirmation or denial of omnipotence. As usual there is a question that precedes every such emphasis or denial, namely “what does ‘omnipotence’ mean?”, and, above all, “what could ‘omnipotence’ mean”. Without an answer to these questions there is not anything to emphasize or deny. In other words, the question is not about “omni-”, but about “-potence”. (That God is omnipotent with regard to that kind of power it is relevant to say that God has, could be said to be a grammatical point.) Our discussion of these questions is here brought about by the discussion about miracles, more generally speaking about the work of God, and in addition by the starting point that God is love. It is in relation to this context we ask the question.

That asking whether something is in someone’s power, whether she has the power to do this something, is a question which depends on a relevant contrast – and hence that “power” is not something one simply has without further specifications – could be seen already in cases in which God is not involved. If I claim, say, that running 100 m will take me no more than 12 s – that I have the power to run that fast – and I fail when proving it, does this show that I do not have this power? Not necessarily; someone might say that it is in my power, what I must do is only to train harder – what “having” means is hence not

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29 I have discussed this issue in Strandberg #2 above all, but also in Strandberg #3.
30 That the question about what to believe is a personal one – which does not mean that it is not a philosophical one, on the contrary – is systematically ignored in philosophical theology. That the question about what is “worth of worship” (a heading popular in books of this type) is a question which has to do with the one who writes the book him- or herself, does almost never become evident. One example (but not from philosophical theology as such): When John K. Roth (2001b, 128) criticizes a specific conception of God for being “pathetic” and “too small”, for inspiring “little awe, little sense of holiness”, for not making “a difference that is decisive enough”, for not deserving “much attention”, he takes it for granted (since the issue is not discussed by him at all), that the problem is not in himself, that his way of making the distinction is morally innocent. This does not mean that I am an advocate of the conception which he criticizes, but it is beyond my understanding how anyone can say, as Roth does, that God is pure will (2001a, 13) – and thereby, in contrast to a God understood in moral terms, inspiring awe and a sense of holiness – without seeing how shady that general way of relating to the world which this understanding of God expresses is.
absolutely determined. Say that I train harder, but does not succeed. Does this show that it was never within my power? The question is indefinite, and could be answered in both ways; someone might say that it was within my power, that I would have succeeded if I had only had a tiny bit of luck (!). Furthermore, and focusing on a question nearer to the philosophy of religion, if one person says that she would never be able to kill another human being how ever much money someone would pay her for it, another person could say that he is not that sure, that he is afraid that he might become corrupted in such a situation. Here we see that not being able to do something may be a matter of strength, being able to do something a matter of weakness. (Imagine a mafia boss, who precisely because he is able to do with other human beings as he pleases feels himself imprisoned in a life he has come to see is a lie, whose power is impotence.) The primary question is about whether one has the power to do something, when that action is, in a specific sense, described in its entirety: whether one could kill someone or not. Hence, to say about someone that she is in fact able to kill (because she has the requisite physical strength etc.) and claim that her insistence that she could never do it is no more than a philosophically or scientifically misleading phrase, is confused. Secondly, one could, for specific, in some context relevant, purposes, abstract from certain features of the action, in order to become clear about why someone says that she could not kill someone else, say: one could contrast the one who is a good shot to the one who is not. But concentrating on these secondary questions should not make one believe that one could account for the “could not” by referring to, say, a psychological inability (as if the “could not” did not concern the person as such) or a choice on her part (as if killing or not killing were an open question for her). Thus, for the person who loves a God of love it is not possible to account for God’s not being able to kill for money – comparing God to the first person in our above example – by referring to a choice on God’s part: that would trivialize the question. Instead, what one could say is that God’s inability to kill for money (or doing evil generally) is as fundamental as can be, or that there is no application for “killing for money” (or “doing evil”) here at all: it would be like asking whether a stone has the power to think.

Consequently, the question about the omnipotence of God cannot be correctly understood until it is made clear what is meant by freedom generally (an abstract conception of freedom of choice on the one hand is contrasted to the freedom in love and the impotence of evil on the other hand), a question which is far from well understood. This question about freedom will not here get a discussion of the extent which it deserves, and I hope to be able to return to it in another context. Right now, it suffices to clarify something we have already caught a glimpse of, a way it is possible to understand the omnipotence of love (and thus the omnipotence of a God of love). The power of love is that love does not set limits to whom should be loved, whereas the hateful person will always see herself as surrounded by opponents and is consequently in that sense impotent. This could also be seen if one tries to understand what cultivating the image of God as pure power would mean. If one removes every limitation, it is thought that what one will get, what will remain – and this is supposed to be God – is a pure will, which is not limited by anything. But if one thinks this over, one will see that not even this will remain. God as pure will is unmoveable, callous. Furthermore, such a God would be incapable of making any decisions (i.e. it would be unclear what willing here would be) since everything is supposed to be subjected to God as a question of God’s decision and one thing would then be as good as another for God. Thus, what remains is not a will, but the pure arbitrariness or, rather, the mere chance. Further away from a personal God it is hardly possible to get; what remains is, at the most, a philosophical pantheism. The power of love is, on the other hand, one that is not in contrast to dependency – love is not voluntary (nor involuntary) or optional, the sense in which love has to do with power and freedom is not one of will or choice – and the one who loves is fundamentally dependent on the loved one.

We have here approached the question about the power of God by focusing on the concept God; another way is to focus on the concept of belief. What we then come to see is that love of a God of love means a belief in the omnipotence (and omnipresence) of love. No limits to the reach of God is set: if there is love, God is there – this is what it means to talk about the work of God – so there is no preceding question about the reach of God which must be answered before one is able to tell whether God is in this love or not. In other words, joy is joy at everything good.

5.

If it is the case, as I have tried to show, that that line of thought which tries to make miracles into an argument for the existence of God – the existence of God must be postulated for us to be able to account for the unexplainable – already from the start expresses a specific attitude, this means that miracles are only an

31 Cf. Strandberg #1, ch. 4.

32 Cf. Heidegger 1997, 43.


34 Cf. Shestov 1969, 269.
argument against the background of that attitude (and only against the background of that attitude the question about whether the argument is good or bad is applicable). But also the other understanding, the one I have tried to describe in the last two sections, can (but does not have to) be seen as such an intermediation. In that case, it is an intermediation in a very different sense: the point is simply that this understanding of miracles has its home both within and outside an explicit religious belief. That I have approached it by starting out from religious belief as love of a God of love does not mean that this belief must play a role for anyone who speaks about miracles in the same spirit. This does not mean that the concept miracle remains even when the framework which made it an intelligible one has been abandoned. No, in one sense the concept miracle is primary to religion: it is not the case that not until one has come to embrace a religious belief one is able to see what is meant by “the work of God”. Rather, already in saying that something is miraculous (insofar as this saying relates to joy at the good), there could be something which makes it possible for one to understand what is meant by “the work of God”. If someone who says that she is not a believer sees something as miraculous, does this then show that she is after all a believer? There is a tendency to answer definitely in the negative to such a question, by referring to the fact that she does not use the word God or simply feels that such a label is uncomfortable. But that is a bad point, since if the weight is put on the word God or on a way of labeling oneself, it would be unclear what religious belief would be in such cases in which they are really found. And, furthermore, the possibility that someone is a believer even though she says she is not should not to be excluded by means of definition. Conversely, those who call themselves religious believers cannot claim their ownership to the concept; if it means something to them, it can mean something to others too. Therefore, to answer definitely in the affirmative would not make anything clearer. Rather, what I would like to say is that it is philosophically pointless to try to draw a definite line (and in that way making “religion” into a heavy term), instead of simply trying to understand what it means (existentially) to say that something is a miracle. Hopefully, what I have done here is a contribution to that endeavor.

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