

Kierkegaard on Miracles: Introductory Observations

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In the following, I discuss briefly Kierkegaard's view on miracles. I observe how Kierkegaard is only tangentially interested in the philosophical problem of miracles. According to Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, the miraculous element is never immediately observable in an alleged miracle. Historical contemporaneity makes no difference: a miracle is no more immediate to an eyewitness than it is to someone who reads about the alleged miracle two thousand years later in the Bible.

As Kierkegaard shows very little explicit interest in natural laws or in order of nature in general, it is not surprising that he also shows very little interest in miracles explicitly defined as violations of natural laws. Further, Kierkegaard does not argue for any particular definition of a miracle. He and his pseudonyms are interested in *belief in miracles* and in the relevance this belief has or should have to a person's religious resolutions.

Reading the literature, one observes that miracles are almost exclusively mentioned in connection with Kierkegaard's pseudonyms Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus,^{i[i]} and their *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Practice of Christianity* are part of my focus of interest in this paper. On the other hand, Kierkegaard makes philosophically relevant remarks about miracles in his signed writings and in his unpublished writings, too. For example, there is a whole topical section on miracles in *Journals and Papers*. In the following, what I have in mind is the idea of a miracle overriding the order of nature, which has received its most famous expression in the definition of a miracle by David Hume: "A miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."^{ii[ii]}

In *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* Kierkegaard writes about John the Baptizer, whose origin Kierkegaard describes "as marvelous [vidunderlig] as the origin of the one whose coming he proclaimed, but the difference here again was the same as the difference between the marvel [Vidunderlige] that an aged woman becomes pregnant, which is contrary to the order of nature [mod Naturens Orden], and that a pure virgin bears a child by the power of God, which is above the order of nature [over Naturens Orden]."^{iii[iii]} In *Journals and Papers* Kierkegaard also refers to this same biblical event, and calls it one of "the highest collisions, where the expected is altogether opposed to the order of nature [mod Naturens Orden] (for example, that Sara gets a child although far beyond the natural age to bear children)."^{iv[iv]} According to Kierkegaard, some event being contrary to the order of nature does not mean that it is an overriding of the order of nature (or, perhaps, a transgression of a law of nature), because there is no law or order of nature 'saying' that an aged woman could not become pregnant, within certain biological preconditions, of course. In my view, Kierkegaard means that an event is 'contrary (or opposed) to the order of nature,' when it is something very rare and surprising but belongs still to the natural realm of things, and 'above the order of nature,' when it clearly violates some uniformly established regularity of nature. As I see it, Kierkegaard's 'above the order of nature' refers to the 'truly miraculous' as something very exceptional, which violates or transgresses the order of nature—that is, like 'a pure virgin' bearing a child by 'the power of God.' The 'contrary to the order of nature' refers to the 'merely marvelous' in the sense of something very rare and surprising, but not overriding what is possible in the natural realm of things—a woman can sometimes bear children although she is 'far beyond the natural age' to do it. It is important to note that the paragraph from *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* cited above is the only one in Kierkegaard's published writings, as well as, to my knowledge, in his published writings, where he explicitly discusses miracles in relation to natural order. Kierkegaard uses the phrase 'contrary (or opposed) to the order of nature' ['mod Naturens Orden'] once (above) in his published writings and, to my knowledge, once (above) in his unpublished writings; he uses 'above the order of nature' ['over Naturens Orden'] only in the paragraph from *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* cited above and 'the order of nature' (or 'the natural order') only twice in addition to the paragraphs cited above, in the simple sense of, in my own words, 'this is just how things are in this world we live in.'^{v[v]}

In *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* Kierkegaard also writes: “youth understands it immediately—how marvelous—but is not the fact it is marvelous again the explanation! There was a thinker, much admired in memory, who taught that miracle was a characteristic of the Jewish people, that in a characteristic way this people leaped over the intervening causes to reach God.”^{vi[vi]} The thinker Kierkegaard is referring to is Spinoza.^{vii[vii]} In *Journals and Papers* Kierkegaard discusses the same issue: “Strange that Spinoza continually objects to miracles and revelation on the ground that it was a Jewish trait to lead something directly back to God and leap over the intermediate causes, just as if this were a peculiarity only of the Jews and not of all religiousness, so that Spinoza himself would have done so if he had been basically religious, and as if the difficulty did not lie right here: whether, to what extent, how—in short, inquiries which could give the keenest thinking enough to do.”^{viii[viii]} Kierkegaard thus suggests that there is a connection between seeing something as a miracle and ‘leaping over the intervening causes to reach God.’^{ix[ix]} Further, this trait is something that is characteristic, according to Kierkegaard, of all religiousness. In my view, Kierkegaard suggests that religious people have a kind of inclination to see natural events as miracles or God’s acts, and that they do not bother with available natural or scientific explanations expressed in terms of natural laws—that is, they leap over the intervening causes to reach God and, in a way, see God everywhere. Hence, a ‘miracle’ under discussion in the paragraph above from *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* is not (based on the quoted *Journals and Papers* entry, too) necessarily overriding of the order of nature and, consequently, is not necessarily a “truly miraculous’ event. As I see it, it is more like an expression of its user’s religious attitude and faith in a certain interpretation of a certain event than in a description of the event itself. In *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* Kierkegaard writes how Ascension “disrupts or contravenes natural laws” and how it “goes against all the laws of nature,”^{x[x]} but he *does not* call Ascension a miracle and, in fact, *does not explicitly discuss natural laws in relation to miracles at all!* Kierkegaard mentions a law or laws of nature only in five paragraphs in his published writings in addition to those above but, as I see it, they are not relevant regarding the theme of my paper.^{xi[xi]}

In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard writes how “faith always relates itself to what is not seen” and how a person “by faith *believes the unseen into* [‘til’ is in bold-face in the original] what is seen” and a little later, regarding love’s forgiveness, “the miracle of faith happens (and every miracle [Mirakel] is then a miracle of faith—no wonder, therefore, that along with faith miracles [Miraklerne] also have been abolished!).”^{xii[xii]} In *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* Kierkegaard writes how “[I]deed, no gaze is as sharp-sighted as that of faith, and yet faith, humanly speaking, is blind; reason, understanding, is, humanly speaking, sighted, but faith is against the understanding.”^{xiii[xiii]} I suggest that Kierkegaard means that faith is blind in the sense that it goes beyond the immediate and in this sense does not see it. Understanding, on the other hand, sees only the immediate and in this sense is sighted. In *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* Kierkegaard refers to miraculous healings by Christ: “In order to be healed, the person must believe—now he believes and is healed. Now he is healed—and now that he is saved, his faith is twice as strong. It is not this way: he believed and then the miracle happened and then it was all over.”^{xiv[xiv]} In my view, Kierkegaard means that believing and miraculous healing come together and that faith is not something that is just picked up when it is needed and then dropped off after it has showed its usefulness: “No, the fulfillment doubles his faith; after the fulfillment, his faith is twice as strong as it was before he was saved.”^{xv[xv]} Further, the miraculous in a way emerges as a part of the ‘state’ of faith, which is provided by God. So, there is evidence in Kierkegaard’s signed writings, too, of faith trying to grasp what is not immediate in our experience and that the idea of a miracle is closely linked to the idea of faith.

One could argue, Kierkegaard suggests in *Journals and Paper*, that because a miracle is unreasonable, it cannot be a miracle—but, Kierkegaard asks “would it be a miracle if it were reasonable?”^{xvi[xvi]} On the other hand, one could conclude that because one has finally been able to establish that a miracle is understandable, it is indeed a miracle—but then, Kierkegaard points out, “it is indeed no miracle.”^{xvii[xvii]} Kierkegaard then asks intellectual analyzers of a miracle to “let miracle be what it is: an object of faith.”^{xviii[xviii]} This is an interesting point, because, to turn to writings of Climacus and Anti-Climacus, the paradoxical unity of the god and a human being in the teacher is according to Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments*, not *a*, but *the* object of faith.^{xix[xix]} Further, Climacus also writes about encountering the paradox without distorting its true nature.^{xx[xx]} So, one could argue for miraculousness of the paradox and, indeed, Climacus may be suggesting something like this in *Philosophical Fragments* when he writes

that "the paradox is the most improbable" and the "the paradox is the wonder."^{xxi[xxi]} But this line of thought needs and, in my view, deserves another study.^{xxii[xxii]}

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Climacus writes how "he [Lessing] does not deny (for he is quick to make concessions so that the categories can become clear) that what is said in the Scriptures about miracles and prophecies is as reliable as other historical reports, in fact, is as reliable as historical reports in general can be"^{xxiii[xxiii]}—that is, not reliable, since, according to Climacus, all historical knowledge is always doubtful and only an approximation.^{xxiv[xxiv]} Climacus is suggesting that from some event being historical it logically follows that this event is contingent and that all reports depicting that event are doubtful. Climacus points out now that the alleged miracle by Christ is a historical and contingent event and, consequently, *all* reports recording it are inevitably doubtful and there is nothing I can do to change the situation.

What if I had lived during the time of the god as the teacher and had had the wonderful opportunity of witnessing personally his life and teaching? Would not this contemporaneity have made a difference? Unfortunately, according to Climacus, this alternative would not make my situation any easier than that of a person who is reading about Christ's miracles in the Bible. In my view, Climacus' main point in "The Situation of the Contemporary Follower" in *Philosophical Fragments* is the non-immediate divinity of 'the god.'^{xxv[xxv]} According to Climacus, the servant form of the god is not like a disguise, which can be taken off at will. The god really is a servant and a human being, but at the same time he is a godhead. Climacus even writes how the god "has himself become captive, so to speak, in his resolution and is now obliged to continue (to go on talking loosely) whether he wants to or not. He cannot betray his identity."^{xxvi[xxvi]} To further 'go on talking loosely,' it is not possible for the learner to take a peek behind the god's human form and get a glimpse of his 'true' divinity. That is, it is not *humanly* possible; only the god himself can grant the learner this occasion. Even an attempt to increase the amount of historical information about the god by the learner brings neither the god's divinity nor the learner's eternal happiness any closer to the learner, or, as Climacus puts it, "it is easy for the contemporary learner to become a historical eyewitness, but the trouble is that knowing a historical fact—indeed, knowing all the historical facts with the trustworthiness of an eyewitness—by no means makes the eyewitness a follower, which is understandable, because such knowledge means nothing more to him than the historical."^{xxvii[xxvii]} Consequently, to return explicitly to miracles, no amount of trustworthy eyewitness information attesting the authenticity of the alleged miracle, say, the raising of Lazarus from death, can make the eternally significant occasion more 'available' to the eyewitness learner than to a learner who learns about the miracle two thousand years later in the Bible.^{xxviii[xxviii]} To Climacus, then, a miracle is not a 'back-door' from historical to eternal in the sense that the more or less established historical authenticity of a miracle would make the transition from historical to eternal more obvious or more direct than in a case of no historical evidence supporting the authenticity of an alleged miracle.

Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity* discusses, among other things, the situation when a person encounters a human being who claims to be God and who performs alleged miracles. What should that person think of such a 'God'? More particularly, if that person thinks that that enigmatic human being might really be God, could then a well established miracle finally convince him and demonstrate that he really is dealing with God? Anti-Climacus' answer is 'clear': "The miracle can demonstrate nothing, for if you do not believe him [Christ] to be who he says he is, then you deny the miracle."^{xxix[xxix]} Anti-Climacus' point is, as I see it, that if a person first wants to form a well-founded belief in the authenticity of a certain miracle by Christ and then, based on this belief, (if he) is ready to conclude and believe that Christ really is who he says he is, this means that the person in question has completely misunderstood what miracles can do: "The miracle can make aware—now you are in the tension, and it depends upon what you choose, offense or faith; it is your heart that must be disclosed."^{xxx[xxx]} Anti-Climacus means that if you see a miracle this means that you also see Christ, but if a person doubts Christ's authenticity, an attempt to establish the authenticity of a certain miracle does not lead that person to 'real' Christ, who was a human being, who in a stunning way defined himself as God. Instead, a person encounters Christendom's "fantasy picture of Christ, a fantasy God-figure, directly related to performing miracles."^{xxxi[xxxi]} As I see it, Anti-Climacus is now referring to a kind of altar-piece image of Christ with immediately observable divinity despite a human form, and an immediately observable ability to perform miracles, too. "But this is an untruth;" Anti-Climacus insists, "Christ never looked like that."^{xxxii[xxxii]} Anti-Climacus thinks that miracles can make a person aware that he is now possibly in the presence of God, but there cannot be anything like a direct route from miracles to faith, because miracles are never immediately miracles. From

something being inexplicable (that is, like an alleged miracle), in Anti-Climacus' words, "it still does not follow that it is a miracle."^{xxxiii} In my view, Anti-Climacus means that faith, as he understands it, does not come in small 'packages'; either you believe the whole thing or you do not believe nothing at all. Faith in the truth that Christ really is who he says he is—faith in the paradox—is not a conclusion of an argument based on the established authenticity of Christ's miraculous acts. Historical study of miracles leads to doubtful historical results, but faith deals with the eternal, and there is no immediate or direct way from the former to the latter, as both Anti-Climacus *and* Climacus say.

I conclude that Kierkegaard, in his signed writings, uses the difference between an event 'contrary to the order of nature' and an event 'above the order of nature' to suggest that he endorses a distinction between the 'merely marvelous' and the 'truly miraculous' in the following sense: The 'truly miraculous' refers to an event which violates the established order of nature, and the 'merely marvelous' refers to an event which is very unusual and surprising, but does not violate the established order of nature. There is evidence in Kierkegaard's signed writings and in his pseudonymous writings that Kierkegaard recognizes a strong order of nature and a strong bond of natural laws. On the other hand, he thinks that a person should not let the order of intervening causes alienate him from God, who is the source and preserver of all order. Further, the idea of a miracle expressed explicitly in terms of violation of the laws or order of nature is not important to Kierkegaard.

Historical reports are always doubtful, and so are personal experiences, in the sense that there is an unavoidable logical gap between an immediate experience and the leap of belief or faith to 'what really happened.' I claim that the idea of the unavoidable doubtfulness of all historical knowledge and the 'non-immediate' meaning of personal experience are the most important reasons for Kierkegaard's 'narrow' interest in miracles. Reports telling about true miracles are just a subsection under the section which includes *all* historical—that is, doubtful—reports. Even personal and 'convincing' miraculous experience would make no difference, because the miraculous element observed in a subjective experience is never immediate or self-evident, but 'emerges' only in the happy passion of faith, which, consequently, is in the focus of interest where miracles are concerned.

- ⁱ[i] Cfr., for example, Evans, C.S. (1983) pp. 236, 258-259, 268; (1992) pp. 160-162, 165-166, 195 n. 39; (1994) pp. 63, 68-70, 76, 82-83; Ferreira, M.J. (1990) pp. 63-66; Law, D.R. (1993) pp. 187-188, 195; Pojman, L.P. (1983), 135-136, 140; (1986) pp. 71-73.
- ⁱⁱ[ii] Hume, D. (1995) p. 115 n. 1.
- ⁱⁱⁱ[iii] *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 277 (SV1 IV, 159) (All references to Kierkegaard's works are according to *Kierkegaardiana*, the first one refers to the Hong translation of Kierkegaard's works). I point out regarding the use of 'marvel' instead of 'miracle' by Hongs that 'vidunder' can be translated as 'miracle,' too.
- ^{iv}[iv] *Journals and Papers* 3130 (*Pap. X, 2 A 594*). I point out that this is the only place where 'Naturens Orden' is indexed in *Pap.*
- ^v[v] SV, 271 (SV1 VI, 254) and *Practice in Christianity*, 165 (SV1 XII, 154). Regarding Kierkegaard's other uses of 'order,' the most interesting one, in my view, is Anti-Climacus' idea in *SD* according to which God wants to maintain order in existence, because God "is not a God of confusion" (*SD*, 117 (SV1 XI, 227)). Regarding 'order,' cfr., also, *TTL*, 9 (SV1 V, 177); *Works of Love*, 209 (SV1 IX, 201). I notice that 'order' is not indexed in *Journals and Papers* and 'Orden' is not indexed in *Pap.*
- ^{vi}[vi] *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 243 (SV1 IV, 131-132).
- ^{vii}[vii] *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 521 n. 110.??
- ^{viii}[viii] *Journals and Papers*, 1333 (*Pap. IV A 190*).
- ^{ix}[ix] Regarding the phrase 'intervening cause,' cfr. also *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 41 (SV1 III, 46); *Philosophical Fragments*, 75 (SV1 IV, 239) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 543 (SV1 VII, 474).
- ^x[x] *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, 69-70 (SV1 XII, 353-4).
- ^{xi}[xi] *BI*, 74 (SV1 XIII, 167), 109 (SV1 XIII, 197); *EE1*, 153 (SV1 I, 130); *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 33 (SV1 III, 38); and *SV*, 40 (SV1 VI, 42). I point out that 'naturlov' is not indexed in *Pap.*
- ^{xii}[xii] *Works of Love*, 294-295 (SV1 IX, 281-282).
- ^{xiii}[xiii] *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, 132 (SV1 XI, 268).
- ^{xiv}[xiv] *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, 176 (SV1 XII, 278).
- ^{xv}[xv] *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, 176 (SV1 XII, 278).
- ^{xvi}[xvi] *Journals and Papers*, 2720 (*Pap. X 1 A 373*).
- ^{xvii}[xvii] *Journals and Papers*, 2720 (*Pap. X 1 A 373*).
- ^{xviii}[xviii] *Journals and Papers*, 2720 (*Pap. X 1 A 373*).
- ^{xix}[xix] *Philosophical Fragments*, 62 (SV1 IV, 227).
- ^{xx}[xx] *Philosophical Fragments*, 59 (SV1 IV, 224).
- ^{xxi}[xxi] *Philosophical Fragments*, 52 (SV1 IV, 218-19).
- ^{xxii}[xxii] Regarding this idea, cfr., for example Pojman, L.P. (1983) pp. 134-136, 140 and Evans, C.S. (1983) p. 236.
- ^{xxiii}[xxiii] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 96 (SV1 VII, 76). Climacus is here referring to Lessing's treatise "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power" (cfr. Lessing, G. (1967) pp. 51-56.)
- ^{xxiv}[xxiv] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 23 (SV1 VII, 12).
- ^{xxv}[xxv] *Philosophical Fragments*, 55-71 (SV1 IV, 221-234).
- ^{xxvi}[xxvi] *Philosophical Fragments*, 55 (SV1 IV, 221).
- ^{xxvii}[xxvii] *Philosophical Fragments*, 59 (SV1 IV, 225).
- ^{xxviii}[xxviii] Cfr. also *Bogen om Adler*, 47 (*Pap. VII 2 B 235, 89*), where 'Petrus Minor' points out that if "one can understand that those men eighteen hundred years ago believed that it was a miracle, then one can just as well say straight out that one does not believe it oneself." 'Petrus's' point is that if a person has 'real' faith, he can encounter Christ in his own everyday life without being offended at Christ's paradoxical nature.
- ^{xxix}[xxix] *Practice in Christianity*, 97 (SV1 XII, 93).
- ^{xxx}[xxx] *Practice in Christianity*, 97 (SV1 XII, 93).
- ^{xxxi}[xxxi] *Practice in Christianity*, 97 (SV1 XII, 93).
- ^{xxxii}[xxxii] *Practice in Christianity*, 97 (SV1 XII, 93).
- ^{xxxiii}[xxxiii] *Practice in Christianity*, 97 (SV1 XII, 93).

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