

Henry Imler
December 16, 2003
Religion and Philosophy
Dr. Lisa Issacson

Miracles: a Preliminary Study
By C.S. Lewis

Where does one start when approaching a classic such as this? One starts with an overview, then proceeding on to the writer, for he is its source, style, content, and finishing up with commentary. At least this is the route that will be taken here.

The book, *Miracles: a Preliminary Study*, in contemporary Christianity is championed as one of the greatest apologies of the miraculous ever penned. However, in reality, most patrons have never read it. There is so great a wind about C.S. Lewis's memory that anything penned by him is at once slotted into the "one of the greats" category. There may be reason behind the wind, which we will get to in a moment, but it is interesting to note that the mass of Christians who recommend this book have not read a drop of it.

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1898 to Albert and Flora Lewis. It is believed that his parents played a large role in Lewis's development, as parents do in any child's life. His father was a solicitor, which means he was an attorney who advises clients on legal matters, represents clients in certain lower courts, and prepares cases for barristers to present in the higher courts¹. His mother was a graduate from Queen's College, Belfast with degrees in logic and mathematics. It is said that his father was quite wrapped up in politics and emotional whereas his mother was content and affectionate to Lewis. Flora Lewis died when Clive was almost ten years old. James Lewis ended up turning Lewis off to politics and to some extent,

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=solicitor>

emotion. It seems like Flora sparked Lewis's love of thought. After his mother's death, Lewis was sent to study with W.T. Kirkpatrick, and then gained admittance to Oxford. While there, Lewis picked up degrees in Greek and Latin, Philosophy, and English Language and Literature. He was awarded an English fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford and later moved to Magdalen College, Cambridge and elected Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature. He was a long time atheist and was converted to Christianity by J.R.R. Tolkien, a catholic. Lewis went on to become a quite accomplished author. He wrote a number of books, including *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Mere Christianity*, et.al. Most of his works were philosophical defenses of Christianity. *The Chronicles of Narnia* are children fantasy novels that, for the most part, are an allegory of Christian theology. In 1941 thru 1942, he gave a series of radio broadcasted lectures entitled "Right and Wrong," "What Christian's Believe", and "Christian Behavior". These lectures would be grafted together with *Beyond Personality* to form *Mere Christianity*. *Miracles* was published in 1947. He would publish the first of the *Chronicles* three years later. Lewis died in 1963, six days short of his sixty-fifth birthday. He is remembered for his beloved novels and as being the brightest Christian philosopher of the twentieth century. This reveals his bias, which must always be considered when reading someone's work.

The book, *Miracles*, is written in conversational form. That is, Lewis made it seem as if he was sitting across from you, telling you his thoughts on the subject. This can help or hinder the comprehension of the reader. Some will find the style eases the difficulty of the book, whereas others will find that it hampers their reading. This is unavoidable. It is a necessary byproduct of each style of writing.

Lewis starts the book by noting what the scope will be. He says his purpose is to examine the possibility of miracles on a philosophical basis. The historical evidence for their existence will not be considered. At this point, portions of the readers find themselves disappointed, for they were looking for a historical defense of the miracles in the bible. However, Lewis reminds the readers that he is on a quest to see if they are possible, not if they have happened. This is the first step; for if miracles are not possible metaphysically, then there is no need to examine their historical basis.

In chapter two, the reader is presented with two choices about the nature of the Universe's make-up. Either the Universe is "the whole show," or something else exists independently from the Universe. Next, the two views are refined. Naturalism, the view that hold the Universe as "the whole show," maintains that everything is interconnected. To the Naturalists, every event occurs because some other event has occurred. Supernaturalists on the other hand, think that there is something that operates outside the "grand machine" of nature. Lewis theorizes that if something can be found that operates independent of nature, then naturalism will be discounted and Supernaturalism will win by default. This is very important because if Naturalism is true, then the laws of the machine utterly dominate and cannot be altered, suspended, or otherwise tampered with. In short, if Naturalism is true, there can be no miracles. Conversely, if Supernaturalism is true, then miracles are at least possible. It is here where one must start his journey when tackling the question at hand.

Lewis has set the stage for his great battle of the mind: Naturalism versus Supernaturalism. What does he give for evidence of his side being the victor? His argument is two-fold. First off, Lewis considers the phenomenon of reason. He states that reason exists independently from the rest of the Universe. The very existence of

reason is grounds for the rejection of Naturalism. Lewis argues that Naturalist must hold that every thought that passes through our heads must be a product of events without rational cause. Ergo, reason cannot exist in a purely naturalistic universe. Lewis goes on to maintain that reason could not have arisen from a naturalistic universe, therefore it must have come from outside the universe, and therefore there must be a supernatural intelligence.

His second line of reasoning involves the presence of morality. Lewis says that each human acknowledges the existence of good and evil. To him, because we can reason about good and evil, there must be an objective standard for good and evil. He goes on to argue that in a purely naturalistic universe there can be no standard for good and evil to be measured against. Taking all of this into consideration, one must conclude that a supernatural power must exist.

The topics turn next to objections to Supernaturalism. One common argument is that if the supernatural exists, then it should be obvious that it exists. Since it is not obvious to everyone, the Supernatural does not exist and therefore miracles are not possible. Lewis answers this assailment by noting that the most common things are not obvious all the time to everyone. He gives the example of a person looking at a garden from the third story of a building. He says it is obvious to the person that they are looking outside, but it is not obvious that they are looking through a window. He says that likewise the naturalists are always busy thinking about nature, not the fact that they are thinking. Since it is through reason that we know there is the Supernatural, then likewise we should not be surprised that men do not automatically recognize the Supernatural.

Another common argument says that science has revealed to us the laws of science and the only reason that people of the past thought that events were miracles was because they were ignorant of the laws of nature. Lewis quickly heads this off. He recalls Joseph wanting to divorce his wife because he did not understand the laws of nature. He knew as well as we do that a woman has to lay with a man to be with child. In chapter eight Lewis demonstrates that miracles are not acts that break the laws of nature, only they are events added into the machine from without. Once they have entered into nature, they obey the natural laws.

After dealing with some common objections, Lewis turns his ship into the skeptical wake of Hume. Hume maintained that historical statements about miracles are the most improbable statements. He taught that since miracles are exceptions to natural law, then they, by definition, have zero probability. Since they have zero probability, then any statements about the occurrence of miracles must then be considered less likely to be true than statements to the contrary. Therefore, we cannot rationally believe in miracles. Lewis set fire to all of this very quickly in chapter thirteen. He acknowledges that miracles are by definition rare and improbable, but not impossible. Once God (the Supernatural) is allowed, we have no security against miracles. Probability as a judge of possibility is thrown out the window.

Lewis now turns and begins to talk about what he calls the "Grand Miracle," that is Jesus Christ coming into this world. He says that all other miracles are a result or prepare for this central miracle. New and Old creation miracles are then discussed.

As a whole, this work can be considered among the great tragedies of literature. Lewis is at once right and wrong. While he is correct in pitting Naturalism against Supernaturalism, he only considers one formulation of Naturalism. In the 56 years

following the publishing of the work, Naturalists have whittled away at his arguments against Naturalism. In order for Naturalism to be disproved, one must discount all versions of Naturalism. Naturalists have since come up with ways to work around the charge that reason and morality cannot arise without the Natural.

With that said, the work is brilliant. It is woven with a natural, witty style. Lewis does not try to talk over the heads of his readers; however, the paths he takes in the work sometimes lead him there. Lewis does refute the deterministic view of Naturalism and objections to miracles, most notably those of Hume. While not all views of Naturalism are dealt with, Lewis's main premise is correct: If we admit God, we must admit the possibility of miracles. That is the over arching point of Lewis's work. All that is left is to prove the existence of God.