MIRACLE AND THE MIRACULOUS:
A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a critique of the conceptions of miracle that dominate discussions in contemporary apologetic and atheist/agnostic Anglo-American philosophy of religion, and a pragmatic alternative. I identify three melioristic tensions that the contemporary conception of miracles risks leading to and go on to suggest how American pragmatism may help those bothered by these tensions to (at least to some extent) mitigate them. I develop the argument via a contrast between conceptions which see miracles as isolated events of which we are mainly spectators and a pragmatic conception of "the miraculous" which is a general feature of human life that becomes maximally manifest in processes where we, as attentive participants, manage to direct events so that richer, healthier and more flourishing lives become possible. With the help of these contrasts, I explain both which kinds of melioristic tensions I see with currently dominant conceptions of miracles and how pragmatism can help us articulate those tensions and at least to some extent come to terms with them better than before. The result is a call for a broadened – rather than entirely reconstructed – philosophical discussion of miracles and their place in religious commitments.

Background and purpose

Philosophers of religion in the Anglo-American tradition have long debated miracles and their potential evidential role within cumulative arguments for the existence of God. Are we rationally entitled to believe in the occurrence of miracles, past, present and future? More importantly: do such events rationally vindicate belief in God? Most of the time, these debates circle, at least since David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, around events that involve a violation of at least one law of nature.

The purpose of this paper is to, first, shift attention from the epistemological question at the core of this debate towards what I will call *melioristic tensions* that are part of the broader range of consequences of appealing to miracles as understood in the current debate to support belief in God. I believe that debaters not only ignore, but that they may even contribute to, these tensions. Second, I propose that a pragmatic approach inspired primarily by John Dewey and his notion "the religious" offers means to articulate and, to some extent, mitigate those tensions through a shift of attention from *miracles,* conceived of as events, towards *the miraculous*, conceived of as a potential feature of human life that becomes maximally manifest whenever we engage in *participatory quests that terminate in consummation*. Such a shift of attention would, I suggest, have positive consequences for our ability to actually in-habit the world religiously, particularly because it helps us reduce the melioristic tensions that I return to below. To develop this approach, I draw heavily on Dewey's thought.[1]

The method employed here is pragmatic in a rather straightforward sense. When encountering some debate, philosophers are, I believe, well advised to not just rush in and ask which side is right; occasionally, we should pause and ask which valued elements that are at stake within the debate, and whether there are ways to safeguard those values that both sides – due to shared presuppositions – tend to neglect. In this specific case, I take the valued element at stake to be *religious ways of in-habiting the world that include, as one constitutive part, acknowledgement of life's miraculous character.* These ways of in-habiting the world are, arguably, important to many people, yet also questioned at least since the Enlightenment. I will particularly discuss those (apologetic) positions that claim that appeal to miracles is a promising strategy for those who wish to safeguard this valued element, but the critique, if successful, is a critique of the entire debate, and not just of one side within it.

I will suggest that a pragmatic approach helps us see ways in which apologetic affirmations of miracles conceived as events in which we only partake as spectators, can – rather than functioning as a mainstay for religious ways of in-habiting the world – actually be a source of serious *melioristic tensions* that undermine

[1] I talk of the approach as pragmatic although I primarily draw on the work of Dewey to develop my position. Since this paper has no exegetical ambitions whatsoever, I still avoid calling the developing position 'Deweyan' or 'Dewey's'.

confidence in the very same ways of in-habiting the world that they were intended to support (I develop the notion of "melioristic tensions" in the next section).

Two *caveats* before I start. First, I do not claim that the proposal offered here is the only conceivable way to mitigate the melioristic tensions I identify, or that everyone will accept it as superior to every alternative. Partly for the simple reason that people are different, partially because this is not the way philosophical arguments typically work, and partly because I do not take philosophy (or any other single intellectual or practical endeavor) to be the ultimate arbiter of what we are entitled to do, believe or think. The argument developed here points to certain melioristic tensions that I believe a good many religious believers will recognize, and suggests one way of handling them without assuming that everybody will find that suggestion helpful.

Second, I will mainly focus on the philosophical debate that typically takes a third person-perspective by asking what the aggregate amount of miracles entitle us to rationally claim about God, rather than what individuals who have been through some life-shattering experiences, like surviving accidents where many others perished, are rationally entitled to claim. Towards the end of this paper, I will, however, have something to say about the more individual perspective, and how it relates to the pragmatic approach I advocate.

In-habiting the world

Before I begin, I want to clarify what I mean by "in-habiting the world" and how I relate that activity to the notion of "melioristic tensions", pragmatic philosophy in general, and pragmatic philosophy of religion in particular.

Pragmatism has, ever since its inception, aspired to be a *mediating* philosophy (James 1995, lect. 1). This implies that it is neither religious nor anti-religious, but pluralistic: struggles to satisfy deeply felt moral and existential needs lead people in diverse directions, some more religious and some more secular. These directions develop and become valuable as part of people's efforts to *in-habit the world* in the sense that Dewey has in mind in the following quote: "[t]hrough habits we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home, and the home is part of our every experience" (Dewey 1958, 104). Making the world a home means, both metaphorically and quite literally, creating a space for thought and action within which we feel a relatively high degree of familiarity and safety, and where that familiarity and safety help ensure tolerance towards others and a willingness to face and engage in challenges and problems that we come across. These engagements need not have an ultimate *telos*; hopefully, though, they help us in-habit the world more confidently than before, which, in turn, makes us more willing to engage in new challenges, and so on.

However, our sense of familiarity and safety is occasionally threatened, particularly when clashes and tensions arise within a person's or a group's ways of in-habiting the world, and/or between different persons' and groups' ways of in-habiting the world. In this paper, I call such clashes *melioristic tensions*. Meliorism is, in pragmatism, the in-between position between optimism and pessimism which sees progress and improvement as *possible* and within our reach, but also as such that they can only come about through means such as careful reflection, painstaking effort and constructive cooperation with as many "fellow inquirers" as possible (cf. Pihlström 2013; Koopman 2009).

Melioristic tensions, on my definition, are tensions that arise in situations where we experience that in order to preserve some valued element in our lives (that helps us confidently in-habit the world), we seem forced to make commitments and adopt habits of thought and action that jeopardize our ability to preserve or accomplish *other* elements that we also value. In other words, they arise in problematic situations where established habits of thought, action and judgment seem to partially undermine, rather than support, our opportunities to make progress. Thus understood,

melioristic tensions threaten our ability to confidently in-habit the world, and it is only natural that philosophers should ponder the question whether they can help us think through, in a systematic fashion, the different consequencs that may ensue from adopting a position or a claim as a guide for conduct.[2]

Debating miracles

Hume makes two claims concerning miracles. First, by way of *definition*, he suggests that a miracle is an *event* where at least one law of nature is violated. By 'law of nature' he means, faithful to his empiricism, stable regularities of experience that we become accustomed to throughout life. Hence, it is a law of nature that dead people remain dead, that knifes cut and that lost limbs do not grow back out again. The sudden death of a seemingly healthy person does not, however, violate any law of nature, since we are familiar with this happening from time to time (Hume 1951, 119).

Second, by way of *rational evaluation*, Hume argues that it is very hard to frame a rationally defensible argument for a belief that some specific miracle has occurred, and even more difficult to use it to argue for some other belief (for instance, belief in the existence of God). The difficulty lies in reconciling what Hume takes to be the incompatible tasks of (a) establishing that something is a law of nature and (b) demonstrating that this alleged law of nature was violated at some specific time and place where it should have applied. The more evidence you amass for (a), the more likely it will seem that the testimony about the alleged miracle was erroneous, consciously manipulated or exaggerated, not least since reports about miracles become less frequent as cultures become more 'advanced' (Hume 1951, 121ff). Hume thus concludes that we should be skeptical of any and all claims that a miracle has occurred, and contemporary thinkers such as J. L. Mackie, David Saunders and Richard Dawkins reach similar conclusions. Dawkins, for instance, suggest that our human "appetite for wonder" can and should be satisfied by the natural phenomena that we, through science, can investigate and explain in more and more sophisticated manners (Mackie 1982; Dawkins 1999; Saunders 2002). Miracles become spectacular, law-governed, natural events.

In line with the pragmatic approach outlined above, I take these critics to suggest that a religious way of in-habiting the world *cannot* be reconciled with habits of thought and action that we have developed in science and elsewhere lest we commit intellectual suicide by rejecting substantial parts of a modern scientific worldview. Apologetic responses, on the other hand, seek to show that these problems can be overcome without any substantial reconstructions of our current habits of thought and action.

One apologetic strategy is to argue that we should reject Hume's first move, i.e., the definition of miracles as violating laws of nature (e.g. Peterson et al. 2009, chap. 9; Lewis 1960). I will have something to say about this strategy below, but I will focus on the mainstream approach in what follows. Hume's definition is attractive from an apologetic point of view for the simple reason that it is the violation-requirement that makes miracles "spectacular evidence" for God's existence (Mackie 1982, 19), and hence make them seem like promising resources for attempts to safeguard our ability to confidently in-habit the world religiously.

Richard Swinburne questions Hume's one-sided emphasis on *testimony* which, he holds, leads Hume to frame the clash in terms of a quantitative weighing of testimonies. In many cases, Swinburne claims, we can actually bypass questions about testimony entirely by consulting traces and physical evidence of miracles – such as X-ray documentation of a miraculously fast disappearance of cancer tumors (Swinburne 1989, 136).

Alvin Plantinga and a number of Muslim philosophers argue for a modification of Hume's absolutistic conception of laws of nature as allowing for

[2] Purely theoretical clashes that create no practical problems regarding how to act or how to coordinate our ways of in-habiting the world with others' are, from this perspective, significantly less pressing.

no exceptions: the clash can be handled if we instead take laws of nature to chart statistical regularities. If you add to this the view of God as the author and upholder of all laws of nature, then the occurrence of violations of laws of nature is not at all the intellectual stumbling-block that Hume took it to be (Plantinga 2011; cf. Bigliardi 2014; Swinburne 2004, chap. 11).

Stephen T. Davis and Nancey Murphy represent the most pragmatic form of defense of belief in miracles; in Murphy's case, it is even explicitly based on Quinean holism. On a holist basis, Davis and Murphy criticize Hume's simplistic view of the justificatory relation between miracle and religious belief. *Pace* Hume, they hold that it is not just the case that miracles justify belief in God; belief in a God capable of performing miracles *also* justifies the claim that miracles occur (Davis 1999; Murphy 1999). Religious believers' epistemic position is hence, Murphy and Davis argue, stronger than Hume, and other critics who start from an agnostic or outright skeptical position, think.

Melioristic Tensions in the Current Debate

Before I go on to develop a pragmatic approach that can function as a critical contrast to the contemporary miracle-debate, I want to identify the melioristic tensions that the presuppositions underlying the current debate tend to generate. I will then go on to argue that a pragmatic approach that subsumes miracles under the notion the miraculous would enable us to come to terms, at least to a significant extent, with those tensions.

A shared presupposition that structures the contemporary debate is the view of the human knower as primarily a *passive spectator*: the human task with regard to miracles is to form beliefs on the basis of events that she records but does not partake in, or affect, in any way. In the debate on miracles, passivity and distance are no contingent features of this epistemology; it creates a space where God's agency can manifest itself and become detectable in specific events free of human interference. This is an example of the form of epistemological thought that Dewey characterized as *spectator theories of knowledge*: the ideal knower is detached from the phenomena she studies (Dewey 1929, chap. 1). Even alternative views of miracles such as Dawkins' mirror this kind of spectator conception through a focus on naturally existing phenomena and events. I will call the shared conception the *event- and passivity-centered conception of miracles*.

Dewey argues that such *spectator theories of knowledge* estrange human beings from the world in which they actually live by denigrating ordinary ways of being in and acquiring knowledge about that world, ways where *participation* and (I would add) *cooperation* play crucial roles. (Dewey 1929, chap 1; Dewey 1986; Alexander 1987, 197). The result is a set of dichotomies (theory/practice, knowing/doing, etc.) that hampers our ability to confidently in-habit the world. Dewey suggests, instead, that observation and participation are phases within larger processes of experiencing, acting and undergoing that together result in new knowledge and insights (Dewey 1958). Against, this background, I now wish to look closer at the consequences – in the form of melioristic tensions – of an event- and passivity-centered conception of miracles and of their role in a religious way of in-habiting the world.

A first melioristic tension arises primarily in relation to miracles as alleged violations of laws of nature. Let us take the swift recovery of a fatally ill cancer patient (who has not refused any therapies or treatments offered to her) as a standard example of a miracle, and let us assume that the reports about the recovery have not been manipulated in any way.

Within the framework of the contemporary miracle-debate, we can hold either (i) that this swift recovery was indeed a miracle (and hence a sign of supernatural agency), or – retaining Hume's terminology – (ii) that it was the work of some as yet unknown laws of nature. Let us assume that doctors and researchers engage in an inquiry into this case and that the inquiry results not just in new theoretical insights, but, more importantly, in the

taking of important steps towards new and improved therapies that eventually enable us to save patients who previously had no hope of recovery.[3] Ideally, isolated events can be integrated in ways of understanding that offer them a new significance, and these processes of understanding may well terminate in a situation where people may lead longer, healthier and more flourishing lives than before.

It would be a serious mistake to portray such quests for natural rather than supernatural explanations as the result of a narrow-minded naturalistic inability to take the possibility of supernatural events seriously: there is reason to think that very many people of both religious and secular persuasion would consider such a *participatory quest* not just one among several, but actually the only, adequate response to this situation. I call this a 'participatory' quest to underline both that it is a process in which human beings are active participants yet not in full control of the outcome since it is undertaken in interaction with an environment, and also because it is, typically at least, a process where a number of people partake.

In popular debates over religion, atheists sometimes seem to imply that a commitment to the possibility of miracles *inevitably* causes religious believers to back away from and even prevent others from engaging in participatory quests like the one described above. I have never seen any convincing arguments or firm evidence for that allegation, and for the sake of this argument, I will assume that such reactions are very rare and more or less always avoided. I am more interested in the kind of melioristic tensions that may arise when alleged violations of laws of nature are appealed to in arguments for God's existence.

Briefly stated, the root of the melioristic tension is this: given Hume's definition of miracles, whenever we come across a *real* miracle, our quest for new knowledge and new therapies lead to naught. Whenever we come across a merely *apparent* miracle – that is, the events turned out to be fully explainable in terms of laws of nature after all – it is, however, quite possible that we will find ways to use the newfound insights into the natural process to develop new therapies. Perhaps we find out (at first rather coincidentally) that a therapy becomes much more effective when combined with other treatments, for instance, and when repeated, similar positive results follow, so that eventually, this combination of treatments become the new standard method to treat this particular form of cancer. The paradox lies in the fact that the logic of most apologetic uses of alleged miracles forces us to say that whenever we manage to develop new therapies that relieve suffering, the original event – the alleged miracle – has lost its *religious (and apologetic) significance* – it was no miracle after all.

A second melioristic tension arises from the fact that very many of the stories about alleged miracles are tradition-specific: particular miraculous events occur or have occurred in the setting of a particular religious tradition, and so on, are taken to justify tradition-specific doctrines and/or claims about the sacred status of some religious authority, such as Jesus or the Buddha, and/or some disciple. This means that claims about miracles, when treated as evidence for the existence of some divine being, are significantly weakened once we learn that similar events are appealed to in *other* religious traditions as evidence of the existence of other divine beings or to justify incompatible beliefs about the divine.

Dewey takes this to point to one of the great plights of both religion and apologetic philosophy of religion: the tendency to encourage *sectarian approaches* that pit religious traditions – and even branches of the same tradition – against one another, and, even more so, believers against non-believers. As already Hume pointed out, similar events are appealed to in religious traditions that are incompatible with one another. In order to win converts, some committed believers even

[3] A parallel case could be made, I think, with regard to the opposite of miracles, that is, cases where the outcome is unexpectedly bad. Here, too, we should engage in an energetic quest to discover laws of nature that may explain this unfortunate course of events, and find methods to avoid that similar things happen in the future.

consider it a religious duty to question the genuineness of the alleged miracles of other religious traditions. The contemporary miracle-debate does little to combat and question such sectarian tendencies, since its event- and passivity-centered conception of miracles typically leads it to concentrate on just the kind of spectacular events that typically underpin some *specific* religious way if inhabiting the world.

Now, for many philosophers of religion, such sectarian tendencies are unproblematic. I would suggest, though, that a significant problem with them is that they do not sit comfortably with the experience that many of the most significant accomplishments that have occurred in the last centuries – e.g., the growth of modern science, the gradual breakthrough of democratic governance and impartial systems of jurisprudence – are cooperative in nature, and require broad coalitions and relations that involve a basic trust across dividing lines between religions and religious and secular individuals. These accomplishments are what Dewey called truly "ecumenical" in that men and women of good will can participate in and benefit from them (almost) regardless of religious of secular religious commitments, and I will return to their significance below.

A move in the direction of a religious pluralism could arguably go some way towards mitigating the second melioristic tension (though the divide between religious and secular people would still be as marked as before). Similar sectarian tendencies surface, however, typically in a third melioristic tension as well, namely, one that emerges from the undeniable fact that miracles occur against a solid background of *lacks* of divine intervention where the absence of interventions seem to offer "spectacular evidence" *against* God's existence. Certainly, Swinburne is right to respond to such objections by pointing out that without such a solid background, *human* life would be impossible, but Maurice Wiles is, arguably, equally right to point out that divine interventions could have occurred much more frequently (and in more dire circumstances than presently) and still not threaten our basic confidence in the uniformity of nature or the importance of human agency (Swinburne 2004; Wiles 1993). The image of God as an agent who intervenes in such a patchy manner in our lives seems hard to combine with our moral sensibilities.

Of course, there are many responses to the problem of evil and I cannot discuss them all here. I will concentrate on one recent response that is currently very much discussed in analytically oriented journals on philosophy of religion publishing in English (such as *Religious Studies* and *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*), and that claims to have a simple and elegant response to problems connected to patchy divine interventions, namely, the approach of *skeptical theism*.

According to skeptical theist responses to the problem of evil, humans are in no position to determine whether God is or is not justified in allowing the massive amounts of evil and suffering that we see. We cannot know whether there are goods and evils unknown to us that God takes into consideration, and we cannot know whether we have fully understood the complex relations between different goods and evils that we have come across. Given these limitations and God's unlimited powers, it is actually anything but surprising that God's interventions look patchy, random and even morally dubious from *our* point of view (e.g. Bergmann 2008). From the skeptical theist's point of view, then, the fact that God's actions *seem* to occur in response to relatively petty ailments and in a random fashion offer no good ground for a critique of appeals to miracles – after all, this is only what we should expect given our limited cognitive abilities.

The skeptical theist response is, however, problematic in several respects. First, as long as you retain belief in miracles as violations of the laws of nature, you still have to handle the melioristic tension described above. Second, even if we opt out of that tension by adopting the minority position which holds that miracles only occur *in accordance with* the laws of nature, we are, given skeptical theism, left completely in the dark with respect to the question of how to discern

miracles. Even the most horrendous event could, for the skeptical theist, be a miracle in the sense that it promotes some of God's unknowable plans. Third, the above problems illustrate that once you have embarked on the skeptical route, it becomes difficult to leave it at the appropriate time (Rowe 2006). If we should be so skeptical about our ability to distinguish good events from bad, then how can we be confident that the teachings of our religious tradition are really *good* in the first place? How could we confidently draw on its rites, myths and symbols in our attempts to in-habit the world?

Significantly, Bergmann and Rea respond to this challenge by admitting that the ensuing skepticism is indeed a real problem, but only for those (agnostics and atheists, say) who lack a firm grounding of their commitments in revelations from God. Hence, it is revelation that underpins and safeguards a religious person's ability to confidently in-habit the world (Bergmann and Rea 2005).

The upshot of this defense is that religious believers with a privileged access to *genuine* revelation have at their disposal very important normative resources that secular people and adherents of other religious traditions lack. The defense of the possibility of religious ways of in-habiting the world boils down to a defense of a *particular* religious way of in-habiting the world, and thus it reintroduces the second melioristic tension discussed above by drastically reducing the number of people we should be prepared to consider fellow inquirers. In addition, the strategy adopted by Bergmann, Rea and other skeptical theists has the further inconvenience that if consistently applied, it will also make us skeptical about the status of any and all events classified as miracles: if we are not in a position to know why certain events occur, it seems implausible to hold that we could know that certain events are good or bad in the first place, and thus whether an event was a miracle or not.[4]

To summarize, I think we can say that while the first melioristic tension is, arguably, the most serious one, the second and third form of melioristic tensions also add stone to the burden, not least because attempts to come to terms with one of them can easily make the other worse. Now, I willingly admit that as long as we treat the question: *are there certain events that are such that they can rationally be taken as support for the belief that there is a God?*, then my suggestion that appeals to miracles such as those that we find in the current debate probably cost more than they taste will probably look strange. Once we broaden our focus, however, and see that this is neither an academic nor an isolated question, but part of a strategy aiming to enable people drawn to religious ways of in-habiting the world to do so more confidently than before, we cannot brush aside melioristic tensions, such as the above-mentioned, as irrelevant.

A pragmatic philosophical approach to the miraculous

The miraculous is, I suggest, a general feature of human life, namely, that processes that terminate in consummation are a real (and not just a theoretical) possibility in human life. It is a feature that becomes maximally manifest in the processes where we *find ourselves already participating and, in attentive interaction with the environment, manage to direct events in such a fashion that richer and more significant lives become possible.* Dewey writes:

> There are two possible worlds in which esthetic experience would not occur. In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative, it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being. Equally it is true, however, that a world that is finished, ended, would have no traits of suspense and crisis, and would offer no opportunity for resolution. Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment (Dewey 1980, 16–17).

[4] I have developed this critique of skeptical theism in significantly more detail in (Zackariasson 2015).

The first world would, at the most, be a world of chaotic impressions which would not even qualify as *experiences* in any humanly interesting sense. Since meanings are always developed through *interaction* with the environment, the second world, too, would lack sense: where nothing that we do makes any difference, our responses become inconsequential. Dewey continues:

> The live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his [sic!] surroundings. The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life. In a finished world, sleep and waking could not be distinguished. In one wholly perturbed, conditions could not even be struggled with. In a world made after the pattern of ours, moments of fulfillment punctuate experience with rhythmically enjoyed intervals (Dewey 1980, 17).

The very fact that human thought, habits and practices exist is all the proof we need that *our* world is unlike the worlds that figure in Dewey's examples. Our world is a world where a *human* life, with its typical oscillation between rest and struggle, equilibrium and lack of equilibrium, is possible, and religions can, Stuart Rosenbaum suggests, be seen as ways of acknowledging and giving expression to this feature of life:

> In all of the diverse niches in which humanity has managed to survive there have been myriad threats, the most daunting of which have been beyond human control. But even the most daunting of these natural threats have alternated with conditions beneficial to human flourishing. Hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods punctuate seasonal periods of growth and harvest; bitter winters give way to romantic springs and summers; times of sickness and death yield to times of health and vigor. In such natural contexts, religions bring a perspective to the vicissitudes of human lives, families, and communities that support the larger human hopes that keep humanity oriented toward a better future (Rosenbaum 2009, 403).

It is hence a typical feature of human life that we can adapt to and occasionally control both beneficial and threatening elements of our environment. But that is not all: Rosenbaum perceptively links religion to the fact that human beings also need to *give expression* to life's miraculous character, Here, we begin to trace a pragmatic understanding of the value of religious ways of in-habiting the world.

I will speak of 'relate', here, as the ability to both be able to respond in various ways to the situations we encounter *and* to give expression to what it is to be a human being living under existential conditions such as ours. That means that we need habits of thought and action that enable us to respond adequately, both individually and collectively, to existentially significant encounters with success, failure, goodness, evil, birth, illness, recovery, suffering and death (the list could, of course, be further extended). Elements that typically constitute a religious tradition, such as narratives, rites, myths and symbols, have emerged in our struggles to in-habit the world, and they have both shaped and been shaped by our concrete questions about how we should in-habit the world *in a way that fully acknowledges life's miraculous character*. I believe that secular thought-systems and ideologies can function in a similar manner, but I will not make much of that thought here, but concentrate on religious ways of in-habiting the world.

I want to suggest, then, that religious traditions offer a range of *paradigmatic responses* to the situations of existential significance that beings living under our existential conditions inevitably meet (cf. Davies 2011), like, as I listed above, when we encounter success, failure, goodness, evil, birth, illness, recovery, suffering and death. For religious persons, it becomes important to seek to integrate these paradigmatic responses in habits of thought and action, and processes that lead to consummation works as a kind of confirmation of the adequacy of these paradigmatic responses and a confirmation that they are supported by forces that work for the good. As William James writes: "[Leo] Tolstoy does well to talk of it as *that by which men live*; for that is exactly what it is, a stimulus, a faith, a force that reinfuses the positive willingness to live even in full presence of the evil perceptions that erewhile made life

seem unbearable" (James 1982, 187; James' emphasis). Such "real effects" on our conduct is, James points out, what pragmatism would expect from a God that is real and not an illusion (James 1982, 516f). The Deweyan point I wish to make here is that this force should not be denied or downplayed; the melioristic suggestion is rather that such a force primarily plays out and becomes manifest in concrete situations where we manage to integrate elements of the paradigmatic responses into our lives and find strength to live with and accept our frequent failures. There is hence no need to think to think of it as primarily discernible in cases where we are passive spectators.

So far, my discussion has primarily aimed to pin down the generic features of talk of the miraculous, and thus construed, Nazism too, to take an extreme example, has a conception of the miraculous, though we would consider it cruel and inhuman (just as we would consider certain religious sects' identification of some events as miracles cruel and inhuman, by the way, like when the Tsunami on Boxing day 2004 was interpreted as a righteous God's way of punishing tourists from gay-friendly nations for those nations' wickedness). The kind of melioristic tensions that I am interested in here concern, I believe, those who would agree that the paradigmatic responses of many (though not all) religious traditions and secular counterparts seek to capture and give expression to a couple of central insights about what it is to be human in a world such as ours. The arguments that follow will primarily appeal to those who recognize these insights and their centrality in many people's religious commitments.

The first insight arises directly out of the fact that there are always elements of contingence in human life and endeavors; occasional strokes of luck are intermingled with cases where even meticulously planned actions fail miserably. Illness strikes some of us while others remain healthy, and so on. This does not imply that we would be just as well off if we stopped planning ahead or began ignoring hazards in our surroundings, but the realization brings about the first important insight I wish to discuss: *that neither accomplishments nor failures are ever fully deserved*.

This dependence on conditions partially outside our control instils a sense of what Dewey calls natural piety, and one of its important aspects is that personal accomplishments and failures cannot have the final word as regards my own or someone else's worth – at each step, there are contingent factors that occasionally benefit us, and occasionally work against us. These factors are, however, at an aggregate level, not forever unpredictable or in principle unknowable: through participatory quests, they can become known and increasingly taken into account. Both religions and secular traditions seek to capture and transmit this insight in narratives, rites, myths and symbols that portray life and its constituent goods as *gifts* rather than something we have *earned*, as well as in warnings against self-righteousness and calls on us to help those who fare ill.

The second important insight balances the first, and arises out of the realization that although we are always to a certain extent at the mercy of contingence, we are also what David Schmidtz calls *persons*: "beings who make choices and who are accountable for the choices they make" (Schmidtz 2006, 38). The insight dawning on us, then, is that *we are responsible both for what we do, the way we do it, and for what we choose not to do*. If we use the best possible methods of inquiry and plan carefully, we can do much more good than if we just rush ahead to do whatever comes first to mind, no matter how good our intentions may be.

This sense of responsibility is often expressed, both within and outside religion, in Golden Rule-style formulations about your obligations towards others (but also, importantly, about others' responsibilities towards you). Needless to say, individuals and religious traditions have very often failed to convert such teachings into concrete practice (Runzo 2001, 187), and the same holds true for secular traditions and ideologies as well. All the same, such moral imperatives have power over us because, I would hold, our experience of what it is to be

human and lead a life that oscillates between equilibrium and lack of equilibrium with the environment leads us to acknowledge them.

Miracle and the Miraculous

When combined, the insights sketched pragmatically entail a form of meliorism: *adequate* responses to life's miraculous character are those that call on us to take action against injustice, suffering, hate, cruelty and inequality, regardless of whether it is directed towards us or others. No one *deserves* to be in that kind of situation, no one is *entitled* to treat others like that, it is (as a rule) *possible* for us to do something about it, and we are hence *accountable* if we do nothing – or act so unwisely that we fail to improve matters. Failure to feel at least *compelled* to take action in these situations would thus, from this perspective, comprise a failure to acknowledge life's miraculous character.[5]

The pragmatic suggestion is that the miraculous becomes manifest in the kind of participatory quests that arise out of an acknowledgement of life's miraculous character and is intelligently conducted in accordance with our best knowledge. The starting-point of such participatory quests *can*, but need not, be the kind of spectacular events that the current debate concentrates on. The pragmatic conception of the miraculous is hence significantly broader than the conception of miracles both in that it is much wider and in that it includes entire processes that encompass not just events but also our responses to those events, and so on and so forth. The miraculous functions as a support of our efforts to religiously in-habit the world when we find, in concrete situations, that the paradigmatic responses transmitted by some religious tradition are *adequate* in the sense that they give our responses a direction that enables us to lead more significant and richer lives than before. This does not, as Dewey was keen to point out, signal a lack of piety but is rather a very pious way of responding to *all* situations that we find ourselves in.

Participatory quests of this kind not only *acknowledge* life's miraculous character; at the same time, they help make that character maximally manifest. Ideally, they terminate in new habits of thought and action that make richer and more significant lives possible, and if not, this signals a need for a renewed quest. From a pragmatic point of view, our ability to respond adequately to life's many different situations offers a much stronger support for religious ways of in-habiting the world than any isolated events, however, beneficial, ever could.

Here, the connection to Dewey's notion "the religious" should be obvious. Dewey defines the religious as a dimension of any experience which brings us closer to some ideal state (Dewey 1934, 9ff). Strivings to acknowledge and make life miraculous character maximally manifest thus typically take a characteristically democratic and emancipatory direction. Pursuit of egoistic desires, no matter how intelligently performed, will thus, on this account, not qualify as *religious* pursuits at all, since they fail to acknowledge life's miraculous character.

Still, it could be objected, I expect, that the pragmatic approach misses something important here connected to alleged miracles' ability to provide "spectacular evidence". It is, for instance, quite common for people who have survived a serious illness or an accident where several others perished to speak of their rescue as a gift from God. Are they rationality entitled to think like that or are they not? a critic might ask.

In response to such an objection, I would like to point out, first, that this is actually not quite the question at the centre of the current debate, where focus is instead on the kind of aggregate of events that seem to violate laws of nature, and what they, taken as a whole, entitle us to claim about God. Yet, I believe that

[5] There may be many reasons why such impulses to act are not discharged, like if we do not know how to make a difference or if we live in a society that severely punishes those who, for instance, help a persecuted minority. Thus I prefer to say that we would at least feel *compelled*.

there is an interesting continuity between these individual persons' responses and the pragmatic approach's focus on the miraculous that deserves further exploration. Let me illustrate by way of an example where a person inexplicably survived a car crash in which many others perished.

I think it is quite natural for this person to speak of the event in terms of a miracle and one way of seeing whether she is earnest about that characterization would be to check whether she fully acknowledges that she in no way deserved to survive by, for instance, committing her life to the work for improved road safety. A religious life orientation may, for this person, offer adequate ways to both express and constructively channel the sense of guilt that she likely experiences into a project where her survival *makes a positive difference for others* – and here, we recognize what I had to say above about important insights that we find in many religious and secular traditions.

Hopefully, this person's work will, eventually, carry fruit. That success will, however, depend on a great many factors that together constitute a comprehensive process involving cooperation with many others. The spectacular event – the survival – is here 'only' part of a process that only in its totality makes life's miraculous character maximally manifest. In fact, similar comprehensive processes could even result from accidents where no one survived, and members of the families of the victims take action to ensure that such accidents will not happen again. This goes to show that the occurrence of some alleged miracle is not even a necessary condition for the initiation and consummation of participatory quests that make life's miraculous character maximally manifest. Individuals who have experienced drastic events may very naturally come to talk of them as miracles, but I believe that pragmatism helps us see the extent to which the miraculous is a feature of human life that can be made manifest not only in response to such events, but to more or less *any* event in human life.

This means that rather than taking a stand within the current debate on miracles, pragmatism suggests a perspective where this debate's central topic gradually comes to *wither away* once we learn to appreciate the way the miraculous is a potential feature of very large parts of human life. The very spectacular character that, according to Mackie, promised to make miracles "spectacular evidence" for the existence of God, might actually drives in a direction where we become less sensitive to the manifold of ways in which religious attempts to confidently in-habit the world – in ways that very often transcend, rather than reproduce, sectarian tendencies – find support in everyday actions and interactions in a wide array of human practices.

Against this background, I think we are now in a better position to understand my claim that a pragmatic approach can help people in-habit the world religiously more confidently than before. First and foremost, confidence in religious ways of in-habiting the world does not depend on the occurrence of events that will forever frustrate participatory quests into their causes and thus attempts to learn from them. Once the spectator- and evidence-oriented conception that dominates the current debate is abandoned in favor of a focus on the miraculous, this melioristic tension withers away.

With regard to the second melioristic tension, the pragmatic approach enables us to acknowledge that many of the most remarkable achievements in human history are ecumenical in the Deweyan sense that they have grown out of joint participatory quests open to people of many religious and secular persuasions, and it would be odd indeed to hold that these are only of secondary religious importance, compared to some spectacular events, past and present. This opens for a form of religious pluralism where we hopefully can see how adequate responses to life's miraculous character can grow out of different religious traditions and their rites, myths and symbols, but also from secular ideologies. This is not tantamount to a form of religious relativism, because not just any paradigmatic responses

can be consonant with the insights I discussed above, but it means that pluralism only becomes problematic when participatory quests become impossible or our different participatory quests clash in some ways.

Now, the third melioristic tension I identified concerns the problem of evil. It would, of course, be absurd to suggest that a pragmatic approach would *solve* the problem of evil; arguably, this is not a problem that we should attempt to solve at all. However, I believe that pragmatism can help us better understand and appreciate the character of the problem of evil. Let me explain how.

From a pragmatic angle, the problem of evil should not be construed so much in a spectator-like fashion concerning why God does not do more, but rather in the agent-oriented form of a gnawing suspicion that we deceive ourselves when we come to believe, talk and act as if life has a miraculous character that we can make manifest: in fact, our efforts will, in the end, turn out to have made no real difference at all. Such suspicions are strengthened whenever civilized communities slide back into barbarism and authoritarianism, when aggression and warfare replaces peaceful coexistence, when scientific results becomes sources of death and destruction, and so on and so forth. When even our best efforts to resolve a problem generate new and larger problems or just come to naught, and no way to restore equilibrium with the environment presents itself, this is cause for despair and skepticism about the miraculous character of human life, and thus also a threat to our ability to confidently in-habit the world religiously.

Now, as several pragmatists have pointed out, the only promising response to this kind of gnawing doubt is, arguably, some kind of will to believe-like response where we commit ourselves to projects that seek to shape reality in ways that make richer and more significant human lives possible (James 1956; Koopman 2009; Pihlström 2013). Just as the problem is shared across life orientations that seek to acknowledge life's miraculous character, so is, arguably, the solution one that requires people of many confessions to join forces and engage in joint participatory quests. This further underlines the need to steer clear of sectarian tendencies and suggests, once more, why a shift of focus towards the miraculous and its emphasis on participatory quests should be a promising option that deserves further attention.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have identified some melioristic tensions that suggest that the contemporary defenses of religious ways of in-habiting the world that appeal to miracles risks generating melioristic tensions that ultimately harm rather than support our ability to confidently in-habit the world in religious ways. The main problems with affirmations of miracles as isolated events are, from a pragmatic point of view, more of an existential and moral than an epistemological character.

Pragmatism suggests that people bothered by these tensions should consider the possibility to shift the focus of these discussions towards the miraculous. Such a shift is justified if people bothered by the melioristic tensions discussed above find ways, by means of this new focus, to articulate and to some extent come to terms with experienced problems and tensions outside philosophy proper. The limitation of such an approach is, of course, that its appeal is limited to the people who actually *experience* those problems and tensions. Neither the problem-description nor the proposed solution I have offered here will gain universal assent. I believe that this is something pragmatists should accept and even endorse as part of a general commitment to pluralism: there are simply no master arguments or final answers, least of all in philosophy. But that does should not prevent us from trying to come to terms with certain problems and suggest ways to resolve concretely experienced tensions wherever possible.[6]

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