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CHAPTER 7

MIRACLES

A Boulder

Time and again we have seen that "God" is not to be construed as the name of a person or a thing. It functions in our language quite differently from "Charlie", and the functions are brought no closer by the suggestion that God is a person who lacks a body, or is an invisible something. But there seems to be a problem here: God does things. As Christians believe, he performs miracles, he keeps the whole universe going, and he created it in the first place. We say that he does things in answer to prayers. It is surely no longer possible when we get to this point to say that God is nothing, that "God" is not the name of some being. For you have to be something before you can do anything. If hurtling boulders stop short, suspended in mid-air, inches from some poor child lying helpless in their path, that must be because somebody or something has stopped them, somebody or something with at least as much reality, as much power, as the boulders themselves. And if we attribute such events to the agency of God, hail them as miracles, then we must mean that God is somebody or something, a powerful, if invisible, agent. If we are minded to say that God sustains the whole natural order, as probably most Christians would be, then we are similarly talking about some very powerful, indeed indefinitely powerful (since we do not know the extent of the universe) agent, in whose existence we believe. And if we say – and what Christian does not? – that God created the world, we must also be committed to saying that God is an agent, somebody with

MIRACLES

the power to bring something out of nothing. It may indeed be very difficult to conceive how anybody might bring something out of nothing, but this much is surely certain: what is nothing cannot bring something out of nothing. From nothing and nothing there can only come nothing. This seems to be the crunch.

Suppose, then, that there is a child lying helpless at the foot of a mountain. (He has broken his leg, and his foot has been trapped in a crevice, or has been tied up and left there by a wicked uncle.) There is a landslide, and one particularly large boulder starts hurtling down, heading straight for the child. It is not deflected by an outcrop of rock, nor is it slowed to a halt by an intervening line of trees. It keeps on down, gathering more and more murderous speed, takes one final leap and is about to descend upon the boy, smashing him to pulp, when, suddenly, it stops dead in mid-air, just six inches above the boy's nose. Everybody who sees it (it happens near an alpine resort) is astounded. The boy is dragged out from underneath, and the whole thing is hailed as a miracle, for which God is thanked and praised. (Nobody thinks it would have been much better, would have saved everybody some very uneasy moments indeed, if God had arranged for the boulder not to have fallen from the mountain in the first place. Is that because they do not consider the matter carefully enough?)

Most reports of miracles are quite difficult to investigate, but not this one. Not only did many people see it happen, not only was the whole event captured on film, but the boulder now remains poised in mid-air, just hovering there, for some weeks. And despite all attempts to move it, it will not budge. This gives ample opportunity not just to verify that what is claimed to have happened did in fact happen, but also for people to investigate this boulder. An investigation is organised by the local church authorities, who are

very careful with reports about miracles. First, somebody throws a large bag of flour over the whole area; if there is anything or anybody invisible holding the boulder up, this will render it visible. But nothing is revealed – no large hands attached to powerful arms stretching up into the sky, or to arms attached in turn to some nearby, huge, invisible and evidently benevolent monster whose existence has hitherto been unsuspected; no invisible struts supporting the boulder from underneath; no invisible but extremely strong and quite inelastic rope tied round the boulder with its other end attached to the top of the mountain. Second, the scientists are brought in with their most sensitive and sophisticated instruments to see if any kind of force field can be detected that might account for the boulder's being held where it is (not that you would need very sensitive instruments to detect such a large force). This also reveals nothing. Other objects, even other boulders, are brought next to the boulder and let go; they drop to the ground in the normal way. The boulder is subjected to all known tests to find what it is made of, and its composition turns out to be exactly the same as that of other boulders in the area which fall to the ground normally. The scientists also perform all sorts of other tests I cannot think of. After weeks of investigation it is concluded that no cause can be discovered why this boulder should remain suspended in the air. The miracle is finally confirmed by the church authorities, bells are rung, *Te Deums* are sung, prayers of thanksgiving are said, the boy enters a remote monastery. Eventually the boulder sinks gently to the ground, where despite the best efforts of the guards to protect it, it is broken up by enthusiastic crowds come in search of relics.

Otto follows all this closely; he is on holiday there at the time and sees it all happen. That, he will be told, is a miracle if ever there was one. Thus he will begin to learn the use of

the word "miracle"; and he will also be told of other miracles that have been reported throughout the ages. Some of them, perhaps, he will believe, and others not, but he will now know the kind of thing a miracle is supposed to be. He will also know that a miracle is ascribed to God: a miracle is what happens when God intervenes in the natural course of things to safeguard the innocent, to thwart the plans of the wicked, to confirm the truth of the faith. Though God acts in many and often secret ways, here are instances where his agency is evident.

If Otto now believes in miracles, and believes that the incident with the boulder is one, then he believes that it was God who saved the life of the boy by stopping the boulder from crushing him, suspending it in mid-air. But does that mean that he believes that somebody or something held the boulder up, prevented it from falling to the ground and killing the boy? Well, he has seen and heard that it has been established at great length that there was *nobody* and *nothing* preventing the boulder from falling to the ground. Not only that, but it was just *because* it was established that nobody and nothing was preventing it from falling to the ground that it was concluded that its not falling was a miracle. If the flour had revealed a normally invisible giant holding it up, that would have been very surprising indeed, and a great find, but it would have meant that the incident was not, after all, a miracle. It was a miracle, not because it was, *per impossibile*, discovered that there was an invisible, undetectable agent called God who was, it was also discovered, responsible for the boulder's not falling on the boy, but because it was discovered that there was *no* cause for the boulder's not falling on him. To be justified in calling it a miracle, we do not have to establish *both* that there was no cause for its not falling *and* that there was one after all, namely God. That conjunction could not be established, for

it is a contradiction. And it does not help here to appeal to any distinction between natural and supernatural agents, detectable and by definition undetectable ones. If God is a natural cause, then the scientists, establishing that there are no natural causes involved, establish also that God is not involved. If, on the other hand, God is supposed to be a supernatural cause, then again it cannot be established *both* that no natural agents are involved *and* that God is involved, since God, being a supernatural cause, is by definition undetectable. So, however many scientific tests were carried out, they could only confirm the first half of the conjunction, leaving the second untouched; so it could never be established that we had the right to call any event a miracle.

But, more directly, that is not in fact how the word "miracle" is used. It is not applied to events when it has been established, *per impossibile*, that an undetectable agent was responsible for them, but when it is believed – has been established or is simply presumed – that *no* agent is responsible for them. Presumed: for in some cases no very thorough investigation may be made, or the claim that an event is a miracle may be made before any investigation is undertaken. If an investigation is made at some later stage and a cause for the event is discovered, then the claim that the event is a miracle may well be abandoned. Or, if a miracle is still claimed it will be a different kind miracle. It may be held to be a miraculous *coincidence* that the boulder was stopped by this newly discovered force just inches from the boy's head; or that the boy was lying just inches away from certain death. (Again, nobody who called this a miracle would reflect that a lot of anxiety would have been spared had God arranged for the boy to be lying three miles away; for nobody would think of using the word "coincidence" if the boy were so far away, and it is only when you have a

coincidence that you can have a *miraculous* coincidence, only then that you might think of God being involved at all.)

And so it because *no* agent is responsible for the event (or so it is believed) that it is said that *God* is responsible for it. To establish, or simply to presume, that an event is a miracle is of course to establish or presume that God is responsible for it. But to do that is not to say that somebody *else*, apart from all the agents that have been ruled out, is responsible for it. To say that God brought it about is not to say that *somebody* brought it about. God does what *nobody* does; God causes what *nothing* causes.

(And so we might want to call God an 'internal' cause. Causes act *on* things, so we can say that they are external to them. We say that God caused the boulder to stay suspended in mid-air when *nothing* caused it to stay suspended, as far as we can discover. That is, nothing acted on it. And now we do not want to say that there was after all a cause acting on it. If we say God was the cause, we don't mean that. So, we might go on, God is not an external cause but an *internal* one; he acts not *on* things, but *in* them. And by that we would not mean that God would be revealed by breaking open the boulder. Roughly, to say that God is an internal cause would be to say that he is *not* an external cause. Compare this with the way sensations and thoughts are said to be internal. We would not expect to find a thought or a sensation inside somebody if we opened him up. But on the other hand we certainly do not expect to find a man's sensations outside him, either. The similarity here is related to the fact that, just as "pain" is not the name of something, so neither is "God".)

God causes what *nobody* causes; is this not, after all, what makes a miracle so impressive? What is so astonishing is that an event can happen without a cause. If we wanted to say that there was after all a cause, would not that make it less

impressive? What impresses is not that God is discovered to be the cause of events, for Christians believe that anyway. It is no discovery for *them*, and atheists on the other hand would refuse to be impressed, refuse to call any event a miracle. They would, for the most part, because they believe that *every* event must have a cause (compare what I said about ghosts). Some Christians also believe that every event must have a cause, and are therefore also very sceptical about the occurrence of this kind of miracle; but they are none the less convinced for all that that God does act in the world.

But now suppose an atheist were prepared to allow that an event could happen without a cause. Suppose that in this particular case Freddie did accept all the scientific investigations as conclusive, and came to the conclusion that the boulder remained suspended in mid-air for no reason whatever, that nothing caused it to stay like that. What would be the difference between him and the Christian who said that the event was a miracle, that is, was caused by God? For the Christian the event certainly has a significance that it does not have for Freddie. That the boulder stopped dead just when it did, just when it was about to kill the boy, will be a sign of God's care for people, a vivid confirmation of what he has always believed. It will not be a *proof* of what he believes, for the event only has significance in the context of belief; it does not impress Freddie, who does not believe, as a proof of anything (and that need not be because Freddie is too dull to follow the proof). As such a vivid confirmation, the event will have its effect on the way the believer views the rest of his life: since God is here shown dramatically to care for people and to cause particular events to happen to show his care, the believer can come to see his own life and events surrounding it more vividly as a manifestation of the loving care of God for him. He may not in fact see it like this; there are other possibilities. But the difference between

this event for him and for Freddie is that it can connect with the believer's life and beliefs in any number of ways in which it cannot connect with Freddie's life and beliefs. However the difference may be put, it does not consist in this: that Freddie believes that nobody and nothing is responsible for the event, and the believer believes that after all somebody, viz. God, is responsible for it. Of course the believer does believe that God is responsible for it, but to believe that is not to believe that *somebody* is responsible for it. We may say that the Christian believes there is more going on here than Freddie does, but that does not mean that he believes there are more agents involved (and that he can correctly identify who the extra agent is); rather, he sets the event in a wider context. And it is by placing events within a context, fitting them into a scheme, relating them to other things that happen or to things we believe that we understand them. Freddie, who has no context available to him to fit the event into, therefore simply finds it baffling. At most, he can say that it *must* fit into the scheme of natural causes, even if apparently it does not and he cannot see how it might. (If he finds such a position unconvincing and is not content just to remain baffled by it, then he may be tempted to become a Christian in an attempt to get a more satisfactory view of it.)

I mentioned the matter of the correct identification of the putative extra agent. Here the following question arises. If the Christian thinks there is an extra invisible agent involved in all this, how can he say so confidently that that agent is God, the God of Christian religion? Might it not be one of the gods recognised in Polynesia, or in Africa, or among the North American Indians? The miracle takes place during an international conference, and is witnessed by North American Indians, Africans and Polynesians, as well as by Christians. They all say it is a miracle, and they all say that it was brought about by their respective gods. Should not the

Christian at least hesitate over his identification of the agent? And if he should not (for after all we know that Christianity is true and that there are no other gods but ours), then should not the others hesitate? In fact, none of them do hesitate, even though they are all very rational and thoughtful men, much concerned in their daily lives with establishing the identity of agents (it's an international conference of detectives). It is not that they are over-hasty in settling, each according to his own prejudices, the question of the identity of the invisible agent. There just is no such question here. They can each react with certainty because there is no question that can give rise to doubt. They do not make different assumptions, different inferences or different hypotheses. They each place the event in a different context, the context of a different faith, of lives lived out within different faiths. Since they ascribe the miracle to different gods, we can say that they are in disagreement, but whatever is going on here – and it can be difficult to characterise religious disagreements – it is not a dispute about the identity of an agent.

I have made all this up, to keep the story simple. But there are genuine reports of miracles (not necessarily reports of genuine miracles). Think of the shrine of Lourdes, where, it is claimed, people are sometimes miraculously cured of their diseases. Often close to death, they are suddenly restored to health. Brain tumours shrivel, cancers disappear, and the recovery is claimed as a miracle. How are such claims investigated, and what is taken to establish that a recovery is indeed miraculous? Much of the investigation is concerned with *ruling out* possible causes for the cure, showing what has *not* caused it; and it is certainly not proved to be miracle by the discovery of the cause for the cure and its subsequent identification as God.

A Rescue

Now take the case of a sheer coincidence. Some people want to say that some coincidences are miraculous, that they are brought about by God. If they say that, do they mean that *somebody* brings them about, arranges them?

Simon, a desert explorer, has foolishly gone off into the North African desert on his own. His Land Rover breaks down hundreds of miles from anywhere. He decides to try and walk back to civilisation, which he knows lies due north. Unfortunately, his compass has gone wrong, and it leads him off in the wrong direction, deeper into the desert. This would not be so bad, but his canteen of water develops a hole and all the water runs out into the sand. He struggles on for a couple of days until his strength is exhausted. He is about to lie down and die, but then, for no particular reason, he makes one last huge effort and drags himself round the corner into the next wadi. It is wednesday. Hugo is an eccentric millionaire. On thursdays he normally flies from his home in Wigan to one of his islands in the Mediterranean, just for a quick afternoon dip. This week, just on a whim, he decides he will go instead for a picnic lunch in the North African desert, where he has never been before. Furthermore, on another whim, he thinks it might be nice just this once to go out on a wednesday instead of a thursday. Thus it is that when Simon, almost dead, rounds the corner into one last wadi, he beholds a banquet spread before him. There is also a first-class medical team, well equipped with every modern facility (Hugo is very nervous about his health). Simon's life is saved, and Simon, being a Christian, gives thanks to God, whose hand he sees in the preservation of his life. He sees it as a miracle.

What does he believe when he says it's a miracle? There are no strange, uncanny events here, no violations of the laws of nature, no specific elements in this whole complex of

events that leap to the eye as being due to the agency of God. What is remarkable here is not any particular event, but the conjunction of them that resulted in the saving of Simon's life. If it is a miracle, it is a miraculous *coincidence*. Nobody has been coordinating it all, supervising operations to make sure that Simon and Hugo did meet up here. Simon and Hugo took their own decisions, quite unknown to each other and independently of each other. All this is implicit in calling it a miraculous *coincidence* in the first place. If somebody had been supervising everything, then, if it had been well planned, it would not have been a coincidence that Hugo and Simon met up; Simon's delighted surprise would have been misplaced, and he would have got over it as soon as he realised that it wasn't a coincidence. (And if somebody did plan it all, then is not Simon over-hasty in being so thankful for the preservation of his life? Could not the supervisor have arranged things to spare him so much anxiety and suffering? Could he not have arranged it so that Simon was never endangered in the first place – that his Land Rover did not break down but brought him safely and without incident back to town, or that Simon decided not to make this particular trip into the desert at all?) The assumption of a hidden supervisor behind the scenes is out of place here. We know what it is for people to plan things, to supervise and direct events – that is the kind of thing we see in battles, police manhunts and rescue operations. But that is just what we do *not* see here. And it is not that Simon, in calling it a miracle, assumes that is an *invisible* supervisor who issues coordinating instructions to the parties involved, or otherwise directs their actions, without their knowing it. Indeed, what is astonishing about the whole thing, and the reason why it is called miraculous, is that totally *uncoordinated* events should have produced this highly desirable result, and should have produced it as the outcome of a

highly undesirable situation – somebody being lost and about to die in the desert.

This fact, that the good result is brought out of a bad situation, is an important one. If we are tempted to say that everything has been arranged, then, as I said, it seems that it could have been a great deal better arranged – to avoid danger, anxiety, etc. But if it had been better arranged, if the situation had not been bad in the first place, then Simon's not dying would not have struck anybody as a miracle, because nobody would have been struck by any coincidence. This kind of coincidence has to be a close shave. That is to say, if we are to call it a coincidence, and a miraculous one, then things must already have been *badly* managed – if we think of them as managed at all. What we would have to say then is: How miraculous that things turned out so well – when they had been so badly botched. Just *because* things have come to this pass, just because it required a miraculous coincidence to remedy things, we cannot say that things were arranged to come out this way.

If we say that what happened was a miracle, we may also want to say that it was arranged by God. But that is not to say that *somebody* arranged it. God is the one who arranges when *nobody* arranges. God's arrangement of events is not a species of arrangement of events. That is why when God arranges a conjunction of events we can still call it a coincidence; whereas a conjunction of events that somebody arranges is *eo ipso* not a coincidence. It is also why it is not over-hasty to thank God for arranging things in this way. It would be quite out of place to say that after all things could have been differently arranged so as to produce less stress all round. They could not have been arranged differently, since they were not arranged at all.

For the same reason there does not arise any problem over the identity of the one who arranged this coincidence, since

nobody did. Hugo is a Hindu, so while Simon attributes his miraculous delivery to the Christian God, Hugo attributes it to Siva. Hence we may say that the two disagree. But their disagreement, whatever its nature may be, is not over the identity of an invisible supervisor.

Now suppose things are different. Suppose the whole thing *had* been arranged. Suppose Charlie, for reasons known only to himself, had arranged for the mechanic to put a faulty part in the Land Rover so that it would break down in the middle of nowhere, had replaced Simon's excellent compass with a dud, and had drilled a hole in his canteen. He had arranged for Simon's progress on foot across the desert to be monitored from a discreet distance, and had asked his friend Hugo to change his usual plans so as to allow Simon's dramatic rescue to be staged. Simon enters the wadi and exclaims, "Thank God! It's a miracle!" After he has been somewhat restored, Hugo lets him in on the secret. What is Simon's reaction going to be? He is not going to be overcome with gratitude to Charlie. He has been playing with his life. And even if it is explained to him that he was never in any real danger (had he collapsed before reaching Hugo, a medical team was ready on hand to rush to his assistance), still Charlie has played a very cruel practical joke on him. One does not thank such. – Yet he was ecstatically grateful to God when he thought his rescue a genuine coincidence, when he thought it had been arranged by God.

Once he realises the whole thing was arranged by Charlie, he realises also that it was not a genuine coincidence. There are two points here. First, he has to be told, or he has to surmise, that it was all arranged by Charlie, or arranged by anybody at all. If he thinks it was a coincidence, he does not have to be told or to surmise that it was due to God. "It's a

miracle!" is not a conclusion but more akin to an exclamation, a reaction. So neither is his gratitude to God, who is by definition responsible for miracles, the result of any inference. "God is responsible for this" does not work like "Charlie is responsible for this". Second, if he realises it was all arranged by Charlie, that means it was not a coincidence after all; it was not what it appeared to be. And that means it was designed to appear other than it really was; it was a *trick*, a *deceit*. But if he thinks it is all due to God – and perhaps he even says, "It was all arranged by God" – that does not mean that he thinks it was not after all a genuine coincidence. On the contrary, it is the *coincidence* that he thinks has been brought about by God, and for which he thanks him. So it was not other than it appeared to be; there was no design, no trick, no deceit. It is not that God made the whole thing *look like* a coincidence. It really was what it appeared to be; that is why it was ascribed to God. Simon took it at face value, and was right to do so. He did not think about what must be going on behind the scenes before thanking God.

The moral of all this is: God is not an invisible Charlie. Hence Simon does not behave inconsistently in thanking God for what happened when he thought it was a miraculous coincidence and cursing Charlie for what he did when he realised it was not. (So neither is there any need to find explanations for any supposed inconsistency in his attitudes. We do not have to suppose, say, that it has been drummed into Simon from his early childhood that God can do what he likes and is always right, that it is blasphemous to criticise him in any way. That is, we do not have to suppose that Simon would curse God if only he were able to think straight, to free himself from his preconceptions and prejudices, just as he curses Charlie. That would be to give a psychological explanation where a logical, philosophical one is called for.) A clue to the difference between God and

Charlie here is that it is natural to say that Simon curses Charlie for what *he did*, whereas he thanks God for *what happened*. Agency is attributed to Charlie in a way it is not attributed to God. And here it is not a matter of a mere form of words. Simon may also thank God for what he did, but the point is that this is equivalent to thanking him for what happened. And there is not the same equivalence in the case of Charlie: he is cursed for what he did, and *not* for what happened. He is cursed when it is realised that all these events did not just *happen*. And he is cursed because it is all a matter of what *he* did. So in the case of God, an event, what happens, is not *mere* event; it is equivalent to deed, what God does; whereas in the case of Charlie, mere event is opposed to deed, what he does. This connects with what I said earlier about prayer. Praying God to *do* something is praying that it *happen*. So if Simon prays God to save him, he prays simply to be saved. And when he thanks God for answering his prayer, for saving him, he thanks him because something has happened.

It is important to bear all this in mind when it comes to other things Simon might say when he attributes his rescue to God. For he may say that the conjunction of events that led to his rescue was not really a coincidence, that it was a sign, even a proof, of the loving care of God. It was not an accident, a random conjunction, but was brought about by God in his mercy. But here 'not *really* a coincidence' means: not *mere* coincidence, something devoid of significance. It does not mean that it was not what it appeared to be, not a coincidence but a carefully worked out plan rigged up to look like one (and the one who did the planning and the rigging was God.) No, it was because it was believed to be a genuine coincidence that it was ascribed to God in the first place. But now: because it is ascribed to God it is not really a coincidence, not a *mere* coincidence. And this is not to deny

the original premise, but to say that what is a genuine coincidence is, *in a deeper sense*, not really a coincidence at all. It is not that it has been discovered to be something other than it appeared to be. It remains what it appeared to be, only the words "not really a coincidence" express a *deeper insight* into what it is, into what it appeared to be. (So in religion generally, if we say that things are not what they appear to be, it is not that they are something *else*, so that appearances are deceitful; it is that you need insight, a deeper understanding – of things as they appear to be – to see them as they *really* are. Here is a glimpse of the function of the words "real", "really" in a religious context. When we say, "God really exists" or, "God is what is ultimately real", etc., what is going on in those sentences is not likely to be unrelated to my remarks here.)

So Simon may say that, because his rescue was due to God, it was not really a coincidence. And if, as a result of his experience, he gives up exploring deserts and becomes an evangelist or a theologian, he may develop whole theories of God's providential care for mankind, as manifested in, among other things, miraculous coincidences. But however highly developed these theories may be (and they may be good or bad ones, confused or unconfused) the basic logical difference between God and Charlie remains. If he wants to say that God watches over us all like a loving father, guides our lives, arranges our circumstances providentially, helps us out when we are, or are about to be, in trouble, that does not mean that *somebody* watches over us all like a loving father, guides our lives. So the questions that would arise if it were said that Charlie was doing all of this do not arise here: Why does he not do a better job of it? Why does he wait until sare in such a mess before helping us out? Why does he not always help us out? How can he allow such dreadful things to happen? Does it not degrade us and

deprive us of our freedom that he should treat us like children and guide (here we should prefer: manipulate) us all the time? Etc. And so also it is not irrationality or inconsistency on Simon's part if he urges us to be grateful to God for all this, to love him and thank him, whereas if Charlie were doing it all Simon and we would be indignant, resentful, etc. Perhaps much rebellion against and rejection of God, much indignation and resentment against him, comes from this kind of confusion: feeling imprisoned, degraded and dominated by a God who mismanages things to produce so much suffering – feelings that come from wrongly assimilating God to Charlie.

Miracles & Holes

What is going on in these stories of miracles is roughly this: Events take place of a kind that we would normally attribute to an agent, one who either acts directly (the boulder) or who guides, supervises and coordinates the actions of others (the desert rescue). They do not strike us as random but as significant, since they produce highly significant results, such as the saving of human lives. So we would normally attribute them not just to an agent but to an agent who is concerned with human welfare, who does roughly the kind of thing we hope we would do if we were in a position to. But: there is no sign of any such agent's being involved here. We do not discover an agent of an unusual nature, whom we call God, and we do not on that basis call the event a miracle. Rather, there is an established or presumed absence of any agent. It is not that an invisible and otherwise undetectable agent is inferred, either, and that the event is called a miracle on the basis of that inference. We have no reason to believe that people do typically make such inferences in situations where miracles are spoken of; and, as we have seen, such inferences would in any case be out of place.

The making of inferences is a much less common activity than some philosophers think, but there may be a special reason why it may be thought here that people *must* be making inferences, even though there may no evidence that they actually are. For, it might be said, even though we see no agent involved in these miracles, there *must* be one – and if not seen, then inferred. And the reason why there must be such an agent is the question: But how *could* a boulder suddenly stop still in mid-air, unless somebody or something very powerful stopped it and held it there? But to this it can be answered that there is another possibility: such a thing could also happen if *God* held it there. And that is in fact the explanation we give in this case, since we have already satisfied ourselves through our investigations that the boulder does *not* remain suspended in mid-air because somebody or something very powerful is holding it there. (It would be a mistake to say here that our investigations might not be conclusive, so there might after all be something holding it up, and that something might be God. Any possible uncertainty is not what makes room for our talk of God. On the contrary, to the extent that we doubt the exhaustiveness of our investigations, to that extent do we doubt that what has happened is a miracle, that God did it. If you like, our investigations are empirical, natural, and any room they might leave open is for a natural agent, not a supernatural one.)

These events are called miracles, not because an invisible agent is inferred, but because there is, it is believed, *no* agent involved. In particular, events like these are ascribed to the agency of God in the absence of any agent called God to whom they might be attributed. "God" is not the name of an agent. I am not, of course, saying that it is in any way wrong to call God an agent. Of course God is an agent, for he does things; for example, he saves the lives of people by

means of miracles. But in calling God an agent we are doing something quite different from what we are doing when we call Charlie an agent. We cannot without causing confusion say, "You know what it is to do things, to be an agent; after all, you have seen Charlie doing things, being an agent. Well, it's just the same here, only it is God who is doing things, being an agent. Acts are acts, whether it is Charlie or God who performs them".

But there really is a temptation to do this, to say: Agency is agency, no matter whose agency it is. Part of the reason for this temptation is perhaps the great similarity between situations in which we say that God acts and circumstances in which we say that people act; e.g. that things behave in ways that we normally attribute to an external cause (boulders suddenly stopping); and that these situations issue in humanly significant events, such as the saving of a life. These similarities are impressive, despite the *obvious* differences – in particular, that there just is no agent around (we can see there isn't), nobody doing the things we would normally attribute to somebody. And this absence is itself part of the trouble, for it seems to leave a hole in the situation, one that demands to be filled. But holes do not make any demands; *we* demand that they be filled, since otherwise the situation seems so difficult, even impossible, to understand. There seems to be nothing for the understanding to grasp. Well, are not situations in which we speak of God *supposed* to be difficult, even impossible, to understand, mysterious? Does not postulating an agent to fill the gap, an agent of a type we can understand and are familiar with (an agent we can choose from a list of possible agents), mean that such situations are made to seem too much like ordinary situations? Does not saying "agency is agency" make God too much like Charlie? To fill in the gap by postulating such an agent does not so much complete for

us what is there so that we may understand it better, as give us a different situation from the one we started with, and one which does not have the same significance for us:

Mere description is so difficult because one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches, and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape. – Whereas I want to say: Here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it.) (Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* I 257)

Part of the difficulty we have in understanding the action of God properly is that we try to understand it in the wrong way, because we are so tempted to fill in the picture; and we fill it in with something we can already understand, something ordinary, an agent like Charlie. We understand things better if we leave what seems to be the hole and content ourselves with what we see. God is not to be understood by trying to strain beyond what can be seen, by 'transcending the world of the senses', but by resisting the temptation to do that, by learning to be happy with what we have. God and God's activity are to be seen, if at all, in what can be seen and described, not by any attempt to look beyond or behind it:

Here we come up against a remarkable and characteristic phenomenon in philosophical investigation: the difficulty – I might say – is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognising as a solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. "We have already said everything. – Not anything that follows from this, no, *this* itself is the solution!"

This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it.

The difficulty here is: to stop. (Wittgenstein, *Zettel* 314)

If we still cannot rid ourselves of the feeling that there is a hole to be filled, then we may also still feel that this hole, even though it would be a mistake to fill it, makes the situation hard to understand. But that may be because we cannot get used to the idea that there is so little to understand. It is said that God is incomprehensible. What this investigation of miracles suggests is that if God is incomprehensible, that is not because he is so very *difficult* to understand, but because there is nothing that *counts* as understanding God; *there is nothing to be understood*. We may indeed have a use for the phrase "understanding God", but it will not be applied to the resolution of intellectual puzzles concerning God. The things of God must be understood in a different way, and that will include not trying to understand them by postulating agents like Charlie, only invisible. It will involve understanding that – in this sense of understanding – you do not understand. Here, as so often, what Wittgenstein has to say in the philosophy of mind is as illuminating in the philosophy of religion. (Here for "thinking" read "God"):

Compare the phenomenon of thinking with the phenomenon of burning. May not burning, flame, seem mysterious to us? And why flame more than furniture? – And how do you clear up the mystery? And how is the riddle of thinking to be solved? – Like that of Flame?

Isn't flame mysterious because it is impalpable? All right – but why does that make it mysterious? Why should something impalpable be more mysterious than something palpable? Unless it's because we *want* to catch hold of it. – (*Zettel* 125f.)