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The Hand of God, and Other Soccer . . . Miracles?

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June 1986: It's early in the second half of a scoreless World Cup quarterfinal at the Estadio Azteca. Argentina's Diego Maradona slips the ball to Jorge Valdano, who tries to play it back, but is closed down by England's Steve Hodge. The ball deflects high off Hodge's shin, into the path of Maradona and the advancing English goalkeeper Peter Shilton. They both jump—and Diego tips the ball into the net, over Shilton's outstretched fist.

What?! Maradona outjumps Shilton? Incredible! Unbelievable! Miraculous . . . .? At the time, even the BBC's commentator didn't notice the how the goal was scored—and Tunisian referee Ali Bin Nasser surely didn't, either. But replays and photographic evidence soon revealed the truth: Maradona had used his hand to tip the ball over the onrushing Shilton.

Maradona celebrated the goal as if nothing special (well, over and above an opening goal in a World Cup quarterfinal!) had happened, cheekily remarking in post-match interviews that God had a hand in the goal: it was scored "un poco con la cabeza de Maradona y otro poco con la mano de Dios [a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God]." This quote delighted the Argentinianes, and gave the English fits. In the larger context—a history of imperial colonialism, previous football grievances, and most significantly the recent Falklands Islands conflict—this appeal to providence struck many Argentiniannes as a perfect response. They took the outrageous goal and Maradona's glib account of it as poetic justice delivered by a nation victimized by the English, as confirmation that they were and would in the end be favoured by God. The English, of course, heard Maradona's description as a continuation of a despicable act; a bald-faced, villainous lie perpetrated on
the pitch now extending beyond the Azteca. Only nineteen years later did Maradona publicly acknowledge the way he had scored that opening goal.

In the game, Maradona added to his legend just minutes later with an individual effort that left more than half the pitch and five English defenders (plus Shilton, again) in his wake to score FIFA’s “Goal of the Century”. Gary Lineker’s late goal brought the English back into contention, but too late: the Argentines won this quarterfinal 2–1 on the way to their second world title, avenging their controversial loss to England in the 1966 World Cup.

Okay, So It Wasn’t Really a Miracle . . . Was It?

Few took Diego’s claim of divine assistance literally . . . but what if we do? What would it mean, if that goal was scored “a little with the hand of God”? How could this be a miracle, given that we know the cause of the goal was a mere mortal hand—captured in video and still photos, no less! No divine intervention seems required, here: Diego was responsible for that goal, legitimate or not. Even if it was God using Diego as His bodily instrument, how could we ever really know that was the case? (Could even Maradona himself know that God had performed a miracle through him?)

The fact is, that goal didn’t look particularly miraculous—especially if you were English. But the second, scored just a few minutes later? We might be able to make a better case for that goal’s status as a miracle. Maradona deftly dribbled and carved through half the English team, contending with a less-than-pristine pitch in the process, to slide the ball past Shilton again. Jimmy McGee, calling the game for Irish television, commented that Maradona had delivered “a goal for the gods.” Given the quality of that play we could fairly ask whether McGee got it backwards, that Maradona received rather than delivered. Even Sir Bobby Robson, the England manager, described it as “a miracle, a fantastic goal.” It was eventually voted as FIFA’s “Goal of the Century.” Though I’ll only be discussing this game, I’m sure that any soccer fan can recall equally amazing moments of the greatest significance for their team, which we might wonder about: were they just the product of human toil and skill, or was there a little bit of divine aid playing a role as well?

What Are Miracles, Anyway?

One of the problems with discussing miracles, for philosophers, is that this is one of those words that is just a little too familiar to the every-
day speaker—it seems to have a perfectly understandable meaning, even to those without any particular religious background, until we realize exactly how flexibly the word is used. Sometimes, it seems almost secular, meaning something close to “improbable.” (Most sports fans are familiar with this sort of usage.) But then it doesn’t seem to have to have that meaning at all in other contexts: take for example ‘the miracle of birth’, which happens thousands of times a day, all around the world.

So what does “miracle” really mean, then? The Italian theologian and philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas, identifies two crucial elements that make an event truly miraculous: “those things are properly called miracles which are done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature.” (Summa Contra Gentiles, III). To count as a miracle under Aquinas’s definition, the event in question first needs to be an intentional supernatural action. That means it can’t be accidental, or a by-product of some other thing God did intend to accomplish. (So, the rippling of the net as the ball nestled in the back of Shilton’s goal is not, by itself, miraculous.) The event also has to be legitimately divinely caused, not just inspired by God. Secondly, the alleged miracle needs to be “beyond the order commonly observed in nature.” There seems to be roughly two ways to read this: either it just means the event is improbable or unexpected, if we stress the ‘commonly observed’ part of the phrase, or it means that it could not possibly have occurred naturally, if we stress the ‘beyond natural order’ part.

Does this help us figure out whether either of Diego’s goals were miracles? It’s just a start: we have to dig deeper into these components of miraculous action, to see how they might work in these two cases. We’ll have to see what philosophers and scientists understand the ‘natural order’ to be, and what it might mean to go beyond it—that’s the philosophical study of reality, or metaphysics—and we’ll also have to explore what it means to be able to identify a miracle, or be justified in believing that one did occur. That involves the philosophical study of knowledge, or epistemology.

**Identifying a Miracle**

I’m going to start by granting that there aren’t very many people who would say the “Hand of God” goal was a miracle: Maradona’s statement in the press conference was just the off-the-field portion of his guile and personality. Especially with the multiple camera angles and still photos, this looks like a simple case of handball. But, this raises the
question: what do ‘real’ miracles look like, then, if they don’t look like this?

This question is one of knowledge and evidence: what signifies a miracle? Is there a tell-tale sign, like stud marks or a ripped jersey that reliably indicate a foul? It’s not as if like there’s a neon sign over every miracle, attributing it to God. One of the oldest traditions in philosophy is scepticism, the idea that we don’t or can’t know some of the things we think we know. A popular argument for scepticism has to do with accessibility: often, we don’t have direct access to the object of our knowledge. What we have direct access to, perhaps, is only our perception of an object, not the object itself. This is a subtle but very important distinction for epistemologists! (We know our perception isn’t always direct, because we sometimes perceive nonexistent things—we hallucinate.) This presents a problem, because if all we have are indirect methods for getting at the truth (like our senses), then we can’t ever be sure that we’ve really reached the truth. Some might claim they have direct intuition or revelation of God’s work, but one problem with that sort of knowledge—if we admit it is knowledge—is that it’s not inter-subjectively verifiable. We can’t share it with others, so it’s much less robust, in terms of surviving criticism or testing, than publicly shared evidence. If we limit ourselves to the sorts of things that are publicly experienceable, like visually verifiable facts about the actions of a player on the pitch, can we say anything about what might count as evidence for a miracle?

Well, we might start our search by looking at the event itself: is there any intrinsic (internal and essential) feature of an event that ‘labels’ it as a miracle, some sort of metaphorical “I did it” sign that God can hang on his handiwork? After all, some historical accounts of miracles seem to have such features—a visually remarkable or even magical nature that believers and non-believers alike realized was an indicator of divine activity. Sometimes, the sign was simply the massively improbable, unusual, or impossible nature of the event. (Think of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, especially as envisioned by De Mille!) There are a couple of competing arguments for and against miracles being obvious, ostentatious displays of God’s power like this. In favour of “flashy” miracles is the idea that miracles are at least partially intended as signs for the faithful and unfaithful alike, undeniable evidence of God’s providence over the natural world. Subtle miracles might be overlooked! But there are reasons to think that our popular ideas about the flashiness of miracles might be wrong, or at least not required.

First, we have to appreciate that the observer of an event is, to some degree, in charge of how they perceive that event. Neither of Diego’s
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goals was “just” a goal. Their significance was in part due to the larger context of the rivalry between the nations both on and off the field. A Ghanaian or American, or even an Argentinian or Englishman ignorant of recent history, would have ‘seen’ these goals much differently. Think of showing a soccer fan just a highlight of Maradona’s Hand of God goal, without providing context. Would they just shrug? Probably. Considered on its own, there doesn’t seem to be any intrinsic features of the goal that even hints at its miraculous nature. Given Diego’s character and drive, you could make the case that this goal was really pretty unsurprising. We might have expected, before the match, that Diego would score, and that the goals could contain some element of controversy—that’s just Maradona, after all.

There may be other ways for God to convey the message that He has performed a miracle—in particular, by the timing and larger effect of the intervention, rather than by the actual details of the event. Perhaps miracles can be identified as miracles not because of some intrinsic feature of the event considered by itself, but only by considering the event in the context in which it occurs—the extrinsic features of the event. In this case, the fact that the goal was the opening goal in a very important game would be a start in identifying this as a miraculous occurrence. Add in the footballing rivalry from 1966’s quarterfinals, when these teams were involved in a highly charged match where the Argentines—and others—thought they had received the short end of the stick in terms of refereeing decisions. (That match was filled with fouls, bookings, and plenty of ill will. Among the incidents: Argentine captain Antonio Rattin was sent off controversially in the thirty-fifth minute, for dissent, and England manager Sir Alf Ramsay forbade his players to swap shirts at the end of the game, calling the Argentines “animals” for their behaviour.)

But of arguably more importance would be the political context surrounding the match. This 1986 meeting was the first between the two soccer powers after the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas Islands conflict, in which Argentina failed to reclaim a small group of islands off their coast from the British. In particular, the illegal manner in which the goal was scored could be highlighted as significant, as it mirrors what Argentines perceive as the lawless actions of the English in the history of their occupation of the islands. Altogether, the underlying sense of injustice that Argentines felt before the game and the retribution that this victory represented could be seen as contextual signs of divine influence. Yes, outrageous infractions of the rules do happen without the referee seeing them—but to happen there, in that game, between these two nations, and involving the brightest star of Argentinian soccer (who also
happens to be almost a foot shorter than the English keeper)... the significant coincidences abound! It is this larger context, and not the play on the field, that does most of the work in providing suggestive evidence for this goal's miraculous nature.

But this raises an important issue: given those extrinsic identifiers, is it just this goal that is "the miracle"? Imagine that the game had proceeded as it did, except that in addition to his first goal, Lineker somehow found a way to get his head on Barnes's cross in the final minutes of the game, sending it to extra time—and the English (for the sake of this argument) go on to win in extra time, or on penalties. (I know, just bear with me.)

If that's how the game had played out, would the Hand of God be anything more than pub quiz trivia? The important thing, arguably, was that the Argentines won that game, avenging the loss in 1966 and their perceived political mistreatment. So the 'real' miracle was winning the game, of which the Hand of God goal was only a part. A crucial part, perhaps, but just a part. This goes to show that even if we can agree that something miraculous has occurred, it might be really difficult to figure out what precisely it was that occurred miraculously. Was it Maradona's handball? Hodge's clearance? Bin Nasser's blown call? Or was it the much-earlier selection of a Tunisian referee instead of an official from a more recognized soccer federation, more familiar with the rivalry and Diego's character?

Part of the difficulty, beyond trying to pin down what identifies a miracle, is determining what those identifiers might say about the scope of the miracle. If we focused on the footballing context—just the rivalry arising from the way the 1966 match had been officiated—then perhaps the goal in itself could be the miracle. But the Hand of God by itself seems insufficient response by God, if he was intending to redress the injustice of the political situation. In that case, the goal would only be a part of a larger miracle, and may not have been a part of the game that God intervened in to bring about an Argentinian victory at all.

On the other hand (sorry), Maradona's second goal seems to have more intrinsically miraculous attributes. Yes, it was important in the larger context that this goal was scored—it was the winning goal after all—but the intrinsic features are much more prominent. We can make a better case here that this goal was miraculous regardless of the final result. The touches of Maradona in that surge forward (with Jimmy McGee of Irish television fairly shouting all the way through, "a different class! A different class!"), the almost inexplicable melting away of the English defence, the last-second touch to send the ball past Shilton before finally getting
tackled, all combine to form a very extraordinary package of skill when considered all on its own. Showing a fan a highlight of “the Goal of the Century” surely wouldn’t elicit a shrug!

So, the occurrence of these goals does provide us with some reasons to think they might be miraculous. But we need to ask: are these ‘signs’ sufficient? Calling any event a miracle is an extraordinary claim. Is there ever a case where we can collect enough evidence to justify it? We’ll get to this question later, but before we do we ought to switch tactics and shift our attention to the other half of Aquinas’s definition, and explore the mechanics of miracles. How does God actually bring them about, in a usually orderly and natural world?

**Natural v Supernatural: Can God Score at Will?**

Aquinas’s definition of miracles as ‘beyond the natural order’ seems to many to imply that miracles violate natural laws, break causal chains of events and disrupt the lawful regularities that order natural occurrences. Characterizing miracles as just unusual or improbable events seems inaccurate, as we typically think an essential part of an intervention is that it alters what would have happened, had God not stepped in. Though this antagonistic idea of the relationship between miracles and natural law seems compelling at first glance, most modern theologians and philosophers think that miracles don’t break laws at all.

This doesn’t seem to make much sense, though: if God is doing something that natural laws forbid, then of course he’s breaking those laws—right? Not quite. We can explain this idea by analogizing with the laws of soccer: players who handle the ball are violating one of the laws of the game—Law 12 (*Laws of the Game*, International Football Association Board)—but not the keeper within the penalty area. The keeper in the area is exempt from that rule, and can freely handle the ball. It’s not that he’s breaking the law at all: that law just doesn’t apply to keepers. We can say the same thing about God and natural laws: like the keeper’s very restricted special status that allows him to handle the ball, since God isn’t natural, he is not bound by natural law. An even better analogy might be spectators: they aren’t constrained by the laws of the game that the players have to live by, in any respect. Spectators can’t be offside, be guilty of handling the ball, or of simulation, or violate any other regulation of the game because they aren’t ‘in’ the game.

This is how we can think of God as interfering, without breaking laws: He can do whatever He wants, because, if He does it, it’s not against the rules.
But this way of thinking about God’s actions in the world is unsatisfying. Though it seems indisputable that a supernatural being just isn’t constrained by merely natural laws, there still seems to be something wrong with the picture that God can, on a whim, divert the natural course of events in any way he sees fit. This kind of limitless capability is certainly possible, but it just doesn’t seem fair.

There’s a good reason why spectators aren’t allowed on the pitch. Imagine we let a few fans loose on the field during a game. Now, strictly speaking, their actions—whatever they may be, but you can probably guess—aren’t going to be illegal according to the Laws of the Game. The Laws state that the referee’s role is in part to ensure, “that no unauthorized persons enter the field of play,” but practically, this authority is limited at best. The referee won’t be able to discipline fans, and he can try to compensate for the rogue fans’ activities, but likely that effort will be fruitless. That’s why, though the referee can’t directly control “outside agents”—what the laws of the game call fans and their pitch invasions—he does have the authority to suspend the match until they stop. If there was a significant pitch invasion, it would be wildly surprising if anything resembling a soccer match appeared. Only self-restraint by the spectators, or some other imposed ‘meta-rules’ (rules imposed by a higher order of law) governing spectators’ actions would keep the game from becoming not a game at all.

So while God, the original “outside agent”, may be capable of a ‘pitch invasion’, there seem to be awfully good reasons to restrain Himself from doing so—especially since he’s the one who set up our game to be played under these rules in the first place! Still, one might wonder if there are ‘gentlemanly’ ways to influence the proceedings, without directly interrupting the players or trumping the rules of the game. This would be the equivalent of crowd chants, or coaches shouting tactical instructions (though possibly more effective and efficient than these mortal examples!). In other words: are there ways for God to intervene that don’t override the laws of nature, but instead work in a supplementary fashion, in areas where the laws don’t proscribe what’s permitted and what isn’t?

There is such a way. The idea is to exploit ‘silent’ parts of natural law to perform miracles, without doing things that are contrary to nature. By ‘silent’, I mean aspects of the natural world that the laws don’t speak to at all—elements of the natural world that aren’t lawfully governed. In soccer, there are rules that constrain the action, but there are very many things that players and managers can do that aren’t in any way dictated by the rules. For example, though the laws constrain the number of play-
ers fielded (ten plus one goaltender) and the allowable number of substitutes, they don’t say anything about formations or tactics. A team can line up with eight strikers, or three left midfielders. Players have an almost limitless number of possibilities to pass, dribble, and shoot. The laws of the game are “silent” on these issues, as long as the things the laws do speak about are respected. So, the possibility is there that the same sort of thing could be done with miracles and natural laws. Are there areas where the laws are silent, such that God can intervene without running contrary to them?

Performing this kind of miracle would have other advantages over the earlier-discussed ‘exemption’ type of miracle, besides avoiding the ‘pitch invasion’ problem. In particular, this kind of miracle has the virtue of making sense of “Hand of God”-type miracles, where nothing ‘unnatural’ apparently happened. It’s compatible with photo and video evidence of normal natural behaviour, unlike the ‘exemption’ miracle, which seems to require at least some (detectable?) overriding of natural behaviour.

The Mechanics of Miracles

What sort of space might natural law give to God, to display his skill? It depends on what the fundamental natural laws are, of course! Without getting too much into modern physics (this is a philosophy book, after all), there seem to be two ways the world could be: either all natural events happen the way they do because they were caused that way by other natural events, or there are some events that happen for no good natural reason. The first kind of world is called deterministic, because the way things are at one time uniquely determines how they will be at any later time. Indeterministic worlds don’t have that sort of predictability about them, because some of the things that happen aren’t determined by anything—they happen randomly or arbitrarily. (It could be that the randomness is rare, and most events are predictable, with only a very infrequent occurrence of random events. Indeterminism comes in many different degrees.) So how would God manage to perform miracles that don’t override natural laws, in these sorts of worlds?

If a deterministic picture is right, then the entire world including soccer matches is like a great big Rube Goldberg device: a whole bunch of interconnected parts being influenced by and influencing other parts in specific, fixed ways. Once things are set in motion, there’s only one outcome possible—no randomness, no open alternatives. This doesn’t sound much like soccer—players have many options open to them at every moment, and rarely is a result truly a foregone conclusion. (As
many colour commentators put it, “this is why we don’t play the game on paper, but on the pitch.”) Natural laws, in this sort of world, connect the past, present, and future arrangements of things very rigidly: given that the past is the way it was, there is only one way for the present to be, and only one possible future too. For a world to be deterministic like this, there cannot be any events that natural laws remain silent about; the way that every event occurs depends on the way that past events occurred, exactly.

Soccer’s rules are not even close to being deterministic: they do constrain some events, but they aren’t nearly so comprehensive as to dictate exactly how a game will be played down to the smallest detail! In a soccer game, there is plenty of room for a player to improvise. But, if the natural world is deterministic, that is an illusion: the choices that appear to us to be free and unconstrained (by the laws of soccer, or anything else) are in fact not choices at all, but strict reactions to previous events. In other words, a deterministic world only appears spontaneous and creative: Maradona’s mazy run for his second goal was determined, every footstep dictated, by the positions of the other players, his balance, the position and speed of the ball, and his brain’s reactions to all of those things. Given the circumstances, Diego could not have done anything but score the goal, exactly the way he did. In such a world, God could not intervene as He might like, for to do so would require overriding the course of nature in a way that was contrary to natural law. If we’re okay with God exempting Himself from natural law, then fine—but here, we’re trying to find out if there is a way to perform miracles that doesn’t require acts contrary to nature.

If God wants to influence the way things play out in a deterministic world, without interfering with natural laws, then He will have to find another way. It turns out that there is one. Though natural laws strictly dictate every detail once the game is underway, they don’t say anything about the initial setup. Natural laws typically only apply to the evolution through time of a system; they don’t specify what state the system would start out in. (This ‘split’ is technically known as the difference between dynamics and initial conditions.)

In a deterministic soccer match, there would be rules that strictly governed every player’s actions on the pitch—the dynamics of soccer—but there wouldn’t be any that applied to who was selected for the team, or how they lined up—the initial conditions. And, as we all know, team selection and formation can have a great effect on games! To use this method of miraculous intervention, God would have had to intervene in the set up of the Argentina-England match in such a way that Maradona’s...
goal (or whatever was intended as the miracle) would happen, given the
strict deterministic unfolding of the match. It Think of this as analogous
to a person setting up a complex chain of dominoes: they have to set
them all up in the exact right positions, so that when the first domino is
tipped and the law of gravity takes over, they can be confident that the
last domino will fall.

It seems very difficult to see how that could be managed for a soc-
cer game—it’s not quite as simple as a set of dominoes! Bringing about
a specific series of events (like those required for either of Maradona’s
goals) would plausibly require precisely setting up a whole host of ini-
tial conditions very carefully. God would have to use every bit of his
omniscience to know how to arrange both teams, the pitch, the ref,
and every other influence on the game, to achieve the end He desired.
And, it’s actually worse than that, because if the world as a whole is
deterministic, then God can’t just muck around at the start of the
match, because how the match started was itself determined by earlier
events, and on and on to the beginning of the universe. So, to accom-
plish the “Hand of God” goal—or any other miracle in this fashion—
God would have to set it up at the moment of the Big Bang itself. Now
that’s vision!

What if the world isn’t so strictly governed? What if natural laws don’t
fix every last little detail in such a way that the present is determined,
uniquely, by the past? In this sort of world, some events happen the
way they do for no reason at all as far as the laws of nature are con-
cerned. One of science’s most successful theories, quantum physics,
describes a world like this. In quantum physics, some events are as ran-
dom as we’d like to think the pre-match coin toss is—there are clearly
describable alternatives, but no fact of the matter about which one will
be realized. (It’s important to be clear here: it’s not that we don’t or can’t
know the outcome of this kind of event ahead of time. It’s that there’s
no knowing, because there’s no fact about the outcome to be known—
until it happens.) Instead of certainties, we have only probabilities.

Could God take advantage of these unregulated events, and “load
the dice” to make sure that things go the way He wants them to? In a
quantum world, most events have some indeterminacy in them—popu-
larisers of quantum physics will talk about objects being “smeared out,”,
and not having fixed positions until they are observed in one spot and
not another. This uncertainty, however, is only supposed to exist at the
microscopic level. Once we scale up to human-sized objects and events,
this uncertainty is supposed to ‘wash out’. Think of microscopic uncer-
tainty and macroscopic predictability like form and class: both are
important to a team or player's performance, but over the long term, variations in form even out, and class is what determines success. But what about very sensitive large-scale events that might have turned out differently if one small thing had been different?

Let's take Maradona's second goal, the "Goal of the Century", as an example. Part of what made this goal amazing was the ball control Maradona maintained throughout the play, on a less-than-perfect pitch while under great pressure. Each touch seemed perfectly weighted, each step tuned to take the ball away from tackles and towards open space. But the result of each touch, arguably, depended fairly sensitively on a myriad of factors. If those factors had been different, even slightly, then perhaps a move would have failed to beat a defender cleanly, and the play would have been snuffed out early and unremarkably. If part of what went into each touch turning out the way it did was an element of chance, then in this sort of world God might be free to guide the result by ensuring that those random factors turned out "just so."

This sort of meddling would only work out, of course, if there were such chancy events available for God to interfere with. That would depend on the details of the situation, and what sorts of things in that world were undetermined. Quantum physics describes a world where everything has a non-zero chance of being found somewhere else (of instantaneously 'teleporting', in effect), but the odds of that occurring with anything not microscopic in size are ridiculously miniscule. Even the small chance that natural law allows means that it's not illegal, so God could make the physically improbable happen, without overruling natural law at all.

There is one caveat: though indeterministic natural laws like the ones in quantum physics might not fix exactly what happens, they do fix exactly the odds of something happening. Depending on different technical views of probability, it might be against natural law for God to meddle with those naturally-fixed odds, even if the specific event itself is undetermined by natural law. Think of it this way: strictly speaking, a game where someone has been bribed to play poorly is still a game where anything can happen. But, because the chances of the bribed player's team winning have been affected, we would protest the result as not being a fair game. Likewise, even though natural laws may be silent about which way a random pre-match coin toss goes, we may insist that one thing they aren't silent about is that it should be 50–50 odds—and God stepping in to ensure that it lands "heads" is overruling natural law in that respect.
But Can We See Any of These Miracles?

There seem to be some ways that God might have managed to intervene, to ‘help’ Diego score his first (or second) goal. Even if we require divine interventions to respect natural laws, there still might be room to perform miracles. What we mere footballing mortals might want to know is: can we know that the miraculous account is correct? In particular, perhaps you have a very dim view of Maradona’s post-match claim about his first goal . . . . . . but is there any case where we could be justified in believing a miracle has occurred?

One of the things that makes Maradona’s post-match claims about the goal simply outrageous is that at the time, there seemed to be only a very few people who didn’t know it was a mundane, non-miraculous hand-ball. The English players immediately protested, holding up their arms; Diego said much later, “I was waiting for my team-mates to embrace me and no one came. I told them “Come hug me or the referee isn’t going to allow it'.” Just moments later, the broadcaster had multiple angles replayed showing fairly conclusive if blurry evidence of the handball, and shortly after the match, very clear and damning photos were published. Attributing his goal to divine intervention was the height of cheek, since Maradona had to know that this kind of evidence was out there. It seems to be an event particularly ill-suited for the label of ‘miracle’, given the evidence we have about exactly how the goal was scored, and very plausible natural explanations for each event in the sequence occurring as it did.

In contrast, we might have a harder time defending the idea that his second goal was entirely naturally caused: the specific moments of skilful ball control on that mazy run downfield, the sometimes perplexing decisions of the defenders to give him the space they did, and engage in the tackles they apparently half-heartedly committed to, seem to give some room for the possibility that there could have been more subtle, more easily-missed moments of divine input in that play. A difference between the goals is the longer chain of events that the “goal of the century” was made of, with many of them very sensitively determining the overall outcome. The greatness of that goal, from a technical standpoint, was the sustained quality of the dribbling and ball control. A patch of sod upturned, a muscle twitch astray, an eye blink at the wrong time, and Maradona might have mishandled the ball enough to allow a defender time to steal it. The sensitivity of each touch, and the closeness of failure to success (in terms of a touch that kept the ball where Diego could advance with it and score) makes it harder to establish conclu-
sively that no unnatural causes were at work there, because though the
difference between a supernaturally-aided run and a natural one might
be great, no particular event in the sequence need differ by more than a
fractional amount, not capturable on film.

But would it be defensible to believe that the “Goal of the Century”
was miraculous? One eighteenth-century Scotsman would likely dis-
agree. (Yes, a Scotsman defending the English!) David Hume was an
empiricist—someone who thought that all knowledge ultimately came
from our senses only—who concluded on that basis that we could never
be justified in believing in miracles. (No matter how ostentatious or visu-
ally remarkable they were.)

Why is that? Well, he thought that our knowledge of the way that
nature worked—including our knowledge of the order in it—came from
generalizations formed from our experience. The laws that scientists have
established as regulating the world come entirely from their empirical
investigations, from the collected experience we have of the world. To
call any event a miracle, for Hume, was to say that your evidence that
this event didn’t follow the normal course of nature was weightier than
all the evidence you had that nature did have regularities. For Hume, no
matter how ostentatious the miracle was, there was always some alter-
native law-abiding explanation which has all the evidence of your past
experience going for it. It was always more reasonable in his estimation
to believe that an event was unusual but natural, rather than miraculous.
Even if it actually was a miracle, says Hume, you shouldn’t believe it was
one. As an analogy, think about a referee deciding whether to award a
penalty or book an attacker for simulation after a challenge in the box.
Without the benefit of slow-motion replays, the evidence a referee has
can often be very ambiguous—but if the past experience of the referee
is that the attacker is a notorious diver then we know who’s going in the
book, don’t we? In such cases, it might be hard to criticize the referee
even if the replays later show a clear foul.

The decision, for Hume, is between two ways to account for an expe-
rience that seems contrary to nature. First, it could be a real miracle that
is contrary to nature, and we accurately perceived it as such. Or, it could
be that we misperceived a natural occurrence for some reason, and noth-
ing contrary to nature actually happened. That is, we hallucinated, or
were deceived, or had some other shortcoming as an observer
exploited—which is occasionally expected in nature. (We have abundant
evidence that, at least periodically, we can be and are mistaken about
what happened. Just ask any player called for a foul: really, they got the
ball, ref.)
Hume says that we have only the experience of the event itself to support the miracle interpretation, but that we have all our past experiences supporting the hallucination/mistake interpretation, because those same past experiences are what we have used to define ‘the normal course of nature’. So, if your senses are what you rely on to gain knowledge, you will never have enough experiential evidence of a miracle to outweigh your past experience. It will always be most sensible to think that a remarkable, unusual but natural event occurred, or that you just went crazy for a bit.

Maradona’s Hand of God goal is a perfect example of this: it seems really bizarre to think of it as a real miracle, when it’s just so patently obvious that there is a much more plausible, mundane explanation for this unusual occurrence. Sure, it’s possible that God was involved here, but in this case we don’t have anything that’s even remotely mysterious or difficult for nature to account for. Whatever evidence you may marshal for a miraculous interpretation, Hume says you’re up against the combined weight of all your past non-miraculous experience, which supports an interpretation that’s in character with that experience. In this case, that footballers at the highest level are insanely competitive, a little mischievous, and willing to bend or break rules to find an advantage. And, that referees occasionally miss even obvious calls.

But even where we might have had the soccer equivalent of seas parting (as the English defence appears to emulate in the Goal of the Century,) Hume would argue that we still cannot reasonably believe a miracle has happened. (You can almost hear him scoff, “The presumption! To believe a miracle is required to get the better of an Englishman!”) There are just too many other potential explanations that have the virtue of conforming to our past experiences: lapses of concentration or poor communication among defenders, Maradona just having the lion’s share of luck, along with his skill, seeing his touches executed so perfectly. Any of these natural explanations is superior, simply because they are natural: “unlikely” beats “wholly beyond experience” every time. For Hume, there is simply no justification to do more than marvel at the unexpectedness of this wholly natural event; to think that it’s the result of some supernatural activity is to go well beyond the evidence at hand.

**Added Time**

So, as is fairly typical in philosophical discussion, we haven’t really come to many concrete conclusions. It ‘is logically possible that both goals (or neither) were miracles. Each goal on its own might have been a miracle,
or just small parts of a larger miracle. God could have brought them about in several ways—by ignoring this or that natural law (as arguably is his prerogative), or by only intervening in things not determined by natural laws (like initial conditions, or the outcomes of random processes.) Trying to pin down some defining characteristics of the miraculous is difficult, too. There seem to be a cluster of suggestive properties—improbability, unusual skill or ability, political or religious (or sporting!) significance—that aren’t sufficient or necessary to qualify something as a miracle.

But, as is also true of philosophy done right, there are some things we can say with relative confidence. If we confine ourselves to empirical, publicly sharable, observation-based, evidence, it seems that we cannot ever conclude miracles occurred. Only an interpretation of observational evidence that brings in other sources of knowledge could possibly justify a belief in miracles. On the other hand, we can’t ever know empirically or scientifically that miracles don’t occur. Strict empiricists—those who rely only on past observations, and not on intuition or other ways of knowing—can’t make any definitive pronouncements about the existence of miracles, one way or the other. The metaphysical issue of miracles is just beyond where mere experience can reach.

Does that mean that miracles are just a matter of interpretation and opinion? Not just... There are standards (“ground rules,” if you will) that we’ve found to constrain our arguments about the miraculous. And at least in that respect, this discussion seems very much like almost any other soccer-related discussion: supporters of any view can make a fairly compelling case for their side that a non-partisan fan would have to take seriously.