

In a Manner of Speaking ...

Goldwin Emerson gandjemerson@rogers.com

London Free Press, March 5, 2016

In the English language we sometimes use words in a way that is meant to be taken literally, but sometimes use the same words in a way that is meant to be taken figuratively.

For example, we may say we love ice cream and apple pie, but love is used figuratively. When we say that we love our partner or our children, love has a different degree of intensity and depth. We mean love to be taken more literally.

When an insurance company states its policy does not cover damages by “acts of God,” it may be referring to earthquakes, floods, forest fires or wars, but it is not using this expression in a literal theological sense. It is mainly attempting to absolve itself from paying for damages caused by extreme or unusual natural occurrences.

The word “accident” is often used to mean an unplanned and unexpected event. It also implies we do not know all the causes or even the results of the event. If we are not hurt by such an accident, we might say, “Thank God my friends and I were not killed” — even though others in the same accident may have been killed.

For many scientists and quite a few humanists, strictly speaking, there are no entirely accidental events, although it is understood that we often don't know the causes of many of the events that happen around us each day. Things happen as they do for a set of natural causes, yet we don't necessarily know all the causes leading up to the events, so we call them accidents.

In our language, we include words to express our amazement and our lack of knowledge in place of words that convey our full understanding of events. In English, words such as miraculous, wonderful, amazing, marvelous, good luck, bad luck, magical, wonderful, coincidental and serendipitous express both our feelings and our lack of understanding.

Many scientists and humanists generally avoid the word miraculous or miracle, since in its literal meaning there is the concept that God has intervened in the normal cause-and-effect operations of the natural world.

As scientific knowledge progresses there are many examples where we now understand better what were once thought to be acts of God and are now known to have natural causes and human cures. With modern medical knowledge, sickness and death from diabetes, some cancers, pneumonia, and scarlet fever, and many other illnesses, these ailments can be prevented or cured.

Problems of changing climate and global warming are now better understood to be human-made and consequently subject to human improvement. We are more able to understand that what once was thought to be in God's hands, both good and bad, now requires more thoughtful human intervention.

If we believe in divine intervention when exceptional good things happen — such as an unexpected answer to a prayer or the surprising cure of a normal deadly disease — then we may be inclined to call the cure a miracle as a recognition that God has stopped the normal natural processes to bring about a miraculous cure.

But if God intervenes in these good ways, we will also question why God fails to intervene to avert pain, or suffering or loss or evil.

This dilemma is taken as a serious issue in theology where it is debated as to why God often fails to avoid human hardships when God could have done so. In theological studies this dilemma is called theodicy. It's the study of the vindication and goodness of God in spite of the existence of evil, which presumably could have been prevented by God.

Many scientists and secular humanists are more comfortable believing that in the natural world of physics, biology and chemistry, natural tendencies recur in a predictable manner. They can be studied and perceived to be dependable and hence gradually understood. It is through this predictable manner that science can continue to make progress.

Hence for many scientists, but not all, the concept of God is set aside as they proceed in their scientific work.

Goldwin Emerson is a London professor emeritus of education with an interest in philosophy and moral development.

gandjemerson@rogers.com