

On the Possibility of Miracles

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Abstract

Miracle, as a concept, is from the Latin *mirari*, which means ‘to wonder’. They are divine actions believed to be performed directly by God or through human beings. It is a phenomenon or experience that is beyond the explanatory categories of most current and commonly held scientific theories and cultural perceptions. Thus beyond the threshold of ordinary explainable events, it invites wonder, awe and a curiosity about the dimension of human reality that is called the supernatural. This paper focuses on the credibility of certain claims in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, emphasizing the religious contexts of miracles. This study would lead the researcher through various philosophers on this issue, but principally with an in-depth study and evaluation of David Hume’s analysis of the possibility of Miracles.

Key Words: Miracles, Possibility, David Hume, God, Wonder.

Introduction

The word miracle is from the Latin *mirari*, which means ‘to wonder’. They are divine actions believed to be performed directly by God or through human beings (Sterling, 1989). It is a phenomenon or experience that is beyond the explanatory categories of most current and commonly held scientific theories and cultural perceptions. Thus beyond the threshold of ordinary explainable events, it invites wonder, awe and a curiosity about the dimension of human reality that is called the supernatural (Fragomeni, 2003). From this understanding, it is therefore not surprising that miracle is described as involving the interruption of the course of nature, and by the interruption of the course of nature, it is meant a change in the natural conclusions of reality. Thus Adams (1767) avers:

An experienced uniformity in the course of nature hath been always thought necessary to the belief and use of miracles. These are indeed relative ideas. There must be an ordinary regular course of nature, before there can be anything extraordinary. A river must flow, before its stream can be interrupted. (p. 15).

The idea of the interruption of nature in the occurrence of miracles indicates that it exceeds the productive power of nature. Thus, Hume (1748) and Voltaire (1764) defined miracle as a violation of the laws of nature.

The philosophical discussion on miracles has focused principally on the credibility of certain claims in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, emphasizing the religious contexts of miracles. In the New Testament of the Christian Scripture, there are many miracles performed by Jesus Christ. He made the blind see. He made the woman who had suffered from haemorrhage for twelve years to be well again. He made Lazarus who has been in the grave for four days to rise up from the dead. He made the servant of the Centurion well again. Miracles are not just events that took place during the time of Christ. There are also claims to miracles in our time. Woodfin (2012) relates the miracle that happened to Dr Keith.

Dr. Keith Allison, an ophthalmologist, and his wife Lou were looking forward to retirement. But one evening Keith noticed a lump on his neck. "I just, I went like that (*puts hand on throat*) and all of a sudden there was a lump there. And I thought, 'It wasn't there when I shaved this morning.' And it was perhaps the size of a golf ball."

His doctor immediately ordered biopsies on the lymph nodes in his neck and in his bone marrow. Two medical labs, including the Mayo Clinic, revealed he had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma stage IV in both places. Doctors gave him five years to live.

He started calling the 700 Club for prayer. "You just want to talk to somebody. See, and they're there and they listen. And always close with the greatest prayer. What a comfort."

As a doctor, Keith knew that older patients respond less well to chemotherapy and radiation than younger patients, so he decided to forego treatment.

Just five months after the diagnosis, Keith and Lou were at a hotel in Texas and turned on the 700 Club. "As I remember, Pat said, 'There's somebody, some man or somebody out there that's struggling or had issues with cancer.'"

"You know, that's what happened. Anyhow, the heat just radiates out of your body. And that's what happened. I told my wife later. I said, 'Lou, I don't know but something just happened.' And I said, 'I know me.' And I said, 'I can't believe that a miracle would happen to me.' But I said, 'I think it did.'"

Keith returned to the doctor for tests, and there was no sign of cancer. The doctor told him he was in spontaneous remission. "That's fine. That worked for him and I know what worked for me. And to this day I have no doubts. I just have great wonderment as to why a sinner like me would be so blessed." It's been thirteen years since Keith was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Today he and Lou are enjoying retirement and travelling around

the country. When asked how he feels now, Keith says, “Fantastic! I start every day with an attitude of gratitude.”

On the one hand, the occurrence of miracles has been used by the proponents of the existence of God to assert that God exist. It is in this regard that Larmer (1988) asserts that miracle involves a being not bound by the laws of nature. The argument typically being that the event in question can be explained as the act of a particular deity. This notwithstanding, Chryssides (1975) argues that a miracle, conceived as a violation of a scientific law, could never be attributed to any agent, divine or otherwise, since the assignment of agency implies predictability. Dawes (2009) defended this perspective moderately when he argued that it is difficult to meet the standard necessary to attribute particular events to the personal agency of God. On the other hand, those who argue that there is no God also argue against the existence of miracles, and the man we see at the fore of this argument is the thorough going empiricist, David Hume. However before the analysis of Hume’s arguments against the possibility of miracles, it is worthwhile to study the different characterizations of the arguments against miracles.

Based on the Non-existence of God

Arguments for the possibility of miracles is always annexed to the existence of God, and it is seen as taking place through the agency of God. Those philosophers who believe in the non-existence of God, automatically deny the existence of miracles; for if there is no God, there would be no need of the argument for the existence of miracles, since miracles are performed through the agency of God. It is thus not surprising that philosophers like David Hume who had objected to the existence of God would argue that miracles are not possible.

Based on the existence of God

Just as some philosophers argue against the existence of miracles because of their conclusion regarding the non-existence of God, some argue against the possibility of miracles based on the existence of God. They argue that the existence of God presupposes that miracles are not possible. One of the key proponents of this perspective is Spinoza (1670). He argues that the course of nature cannot be interrupted, because it has been fixed. He believes that God’s will is identical with the laws of nature, and since God’s will is inviolable, it implies that the laws of nature are inviolable, and if a miracle is the violation of the law of nature, it means that it is not possible. Another version of this argument is found in Voltaire (1764), who argued that if miracles are a violation of laws that are divine, immutable, mathematical and eternal, it then means that a miracle is a contradiction in terms, since it is impossible for a law to be immutable and violatable at the same time. He argues further that the infinitely wise God cannot make laws to violate them. He writes,

It is impossible a being infinitely wise can have made laws to violate them. He could not ... derange the machine but with a view of making it work better; but it is evident that God, all-wise and omnipotent, originally made this immense machine, the universe, as good and perfect as He was able; if He saw that some imperfections

would arise from the nature of matter, He provided for that in the beginning; and, accordingly, He will never change anything in it. (p. 273).

Overall (1985) further urges that a miracle would count as evidence *against* the existence of God. He maintains his position on three grounds:

1. If order and harmony are evidence for the existence of God, then a miracle, which entails a breach in the order and harmony of the universe, must count against the existence of God;
2. the inevitable controversies over the identification and authentication of a miracle are an impediment to the growth of scientific knowledge and philosophical comprehension;
3. an omnipotent God who does intervene in His creation would be obliged, on pain of moral defect, to intervene more often and more even-handedly than He is supposed to have done in the Christian tradition.

A cursory glance at the above argument reveals that it is based on the definition of miracle as the violation of natural laws, but we know that miracle is far beyond just the violation of the laws of nature. However, if 'the violation of natural laws' constitutes a problem, scholars like Trench (1847), has an explanation for it: he considers it rather as the operation of higher laws which govern not only the behaviour of physical entities but the interactions of both physical and non-physical entities.

Based on Reason

The primary proponent of the argument against miracle on the basis of reason was Hume (1748). He argues like Voltaire that if miracles are a violation of divine laws, that are immutable, mathematical and eternal, it then means that a miracle is not reasonable, since it is impossible for a law to be immutable and violatable at the same time. He writes,

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (pp. 86–87).

He believes that a testimony is a kind of evidence very likely to be false. And since the evidence for the Christian miracles is testimony, therefore evidence for the Christian miracles is likely to be false. Addressing the issue of the resurrection, he writes,

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion. (pp. 87–88)

Based on learning, integrity and level of civilization of witnesses

Hume (1748) believes that for the testimony of a miracle to be accepted as true, it must meet certain conditions. These conditions surround the level of learning and integrity of the testifiers. He writes,

There is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time attesting facts, performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable: All which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men. (p. 88).

Another argument that relates with the above is that given by Toland (1702) in which he argues that the idea that stories about miracles are more popular with cultures that are backward, ignorant and barbarous. The unstated moral to be drawn is that both the production and the reception of miracle stories are due to a failure to understand the secondary causes lying behind phenomena, while increasing knowledge and culture leaves no room for such stories. This argument can be objected to. Hume (1747) also subscribed to this perspective when he said that the miracles that men used to attest to in the past is now disproved by the present findings of science; since most miracles testified to in the past were told by ignorant and unskilled people it is fading away with enlightenment and civilization. During the 18th century contrary to Hume and Toland, renowned scientists such as Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle were well known defenders of the Christian miracle claims.

Based on the human passion for wonder and surprise

This perspective proposes that miracles are stories made to feed the human hunger for wonder and surprise. It is in this regard that Morgan (1739) avers that men are more imposed to wonder and surprise. Since miracles feed this hunger of the human heart, they are more likely to be believed uncritically by people more than other falsehoods. Stressing on this passion in man, Hume (1748) writes,

If the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality: He may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it, with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause: Or even where this delusion has not place, vanity, excited by so strong a temptation, operates on him more powerfully than on the rest of mankind in any other circumstances; and self-interest with equal force. (p. 89)

He believes that love for wonder is the spirit of religion and thus accounts for why religious men and women subscribe to miraculous testimonies.

David Hume on Miracles

Hume (1748) based his philosophy on the experimental method and thus studied human nature by applying the empirical principles of the experimental sciences. He is a thoroughgoing empiricist notable for bringing it to its logical conclusion. The problem of causality takes a central place in his philosophy. It is noteworthy that neither Locke (1664) nor Berkeley (1688) challenged the basic principle of causality. Though Berkeley did say that we cannot discover the efficient causes in things, his intention was to look for the cause of a phenomenon in God. But Hume's most original and influential ideas deal with the problem of causality.

For Hume (1748), the notion of causality is to be suspected. He approached the problem by asking the question: 'What is the origin of the idea of causality?' Here he applies his principles of ideas and impressions. Since ideas are copies of impressions, how then does the idea of causality arise in the mind? Having found no impression corresponding to the idea of causality, he concludes that the idea of causality arises in the mind when we experience some relations between objects. For when we perceive anything we do not perceive in it the idea that it has a cause. When one particular species of events has always in all instances been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning, which can alone assure us of any matter of fact in existence. We then call the one object cause, the other effect (Marias, 1966).

He avers that when we speak of cause and effect, we mean to say that something causes the other. For instance A causes B, but which kind of relation does this further indicate? Experience, for him, furnishes us with two kinds of relations. First, there is a relation of contiguity, for A and B are always close to each other; secondly, there is priority in time, for A the cause always precedes B the effect; and thirdly, there is a constant conjunction, for we always see A followed by B (Kanu, 2004).

However there is still another relation that the idea of causality conveys to common sense, namely that between A and B there is a necessary connection. But neither contiguity, priority in time and place, nor constant conjunction implies necessary connection between objects. Where then does the idea of necessary connection come from? He attributes it to our 'habit of association' in the mind, produced by the repetition of instances of A and B. For there is no object, says Hume, that implies the existence of another when we consider objects individually. No amount of observation of oxygen can ever tell us that when mixed with hydrogen it will give us water (Kanu, 2004).

From the background of his understanding of causality, we can better appreciate his ideas about miracles. His ideas will be explained in points:

1. Hume (1748) defines miracle as the "transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of a deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent" (p. 127). With his understanding of causality, one already discovers that his position on miracles wouldn't be favourable.

2. He argues that the laws of nature and the uniform experience of mankind all over the world and in all ages is infallible. And since miracles is contrary to the laws of nature and not established by a collective human experience but by individuals and particular groups, its falsehood is more miraculous than the fact which it tries to establish.
3. Claims to miracles are usually made by people who education, learning and good sense is questionable, and among ignorant and barbarous people, such that such claims are always the product of delusion.
4. Some religious groups and people are prepared to tell lies in order to propagate their religion.
5. Miraculous claims are based on the natural tendency of human beings to be attracted to stories of wonder and surprise.
6. Since different religions teach contradictory doctrines which are backed with miraculous claims, the contradictory and mutually exclusive nature of these doctrines and claims only proves that they are false.

Evaluation and Conclusion

A glance at Hume's idea of causality reveals that his concept of inviolable laws of nature cannot be sustained. If he argues that strict necessity cannot be observed but only found in the mind and not in things, and that we should not draw conclusions beyond what we observe, it implies that his idea of inviolable laws of nature cannot be justified. Also, if these laws as he had argued were established by empirical experience, it then means that they cannot tell us about how things will be in the future but only about how they have been in the past. Thus Hume can only assert that there has been no miracle in the past, and not that there will be no miracle in the future. Moreover, his definition of miracle is inconsistent with his empirical principle, for to talk about the laws of nature is metaphysical rather than empirical.

In another argument he claims that people who say they have witnessed a miracle are usually people with poor learning. During the 18th century contrary to Hume, renowned scientists such as Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle were well known defenders of the Christian miracle claims. We also have the Jesuits who are among the educated class in the Church, and they agree to miracles. He also gives the impression that miracles are only found among people that are barbarous; but in our present age, we put on our television and we see American and European countries reporting the occurrence of miracles. As he had argued that some religious groups and people are prepared to tell lies in order to propagate their religion, that is true, but to generalize that all religious people are ready to tell lies so as to promote their religion is a fallacy.

Although Hume is about the first philosopher to give adequate critical attention to the issue of miracles, he has failed in disproving the possibility of miracles. His failure began with the use of the wrong tools; he employs empirical tools to study a divine intervention which is a metaphysical issue; a miracle is an expression of belief and an act of faith and so one wouldn't be surprised if an atheist disagrees

with it. The universe and its creator have not been fully comprehended by man and to reject the possibility of miracles is to deny the limitation to man's knowledge. Most religions, if not all, accept the possibility of miracles, from the Christian perspective, as an act of faith, miracle is a possibility.

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