

The Self-Contradicting God? On Miracle and the Laws of Nature

by
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Abstract

Not a few critics attack the concept of miracle on various fronts. Atheists, who deny the existence of God, expectedly, reject the reality of miracle, since miracles are necessitated on divine agency. Some others, who, though, believe in the existence of God, place miracle in the context of the laws of nature and contend that it is an impossible phenomenon because it is unfitting of God. They argue that God could not violate the laws he had established to govern temporal happenings; if he does, he would then be self-contradicting. Adopting a phenomenological methodology, this research investigates whether the possibility of miracles actually constitute a contradiction on the part of God. It bears upon interactions with recent scientific developments regarding the laws of nature, and observes that science itself has proved that the laws of nature are not fixed, eternal and unalterable to suggest that anything contrariwise would be divine contradiction. It further argues that even if the laws were fixed and unalterable, miracle does not really imply the breaking of any, but God working out his purpose according to his sovereign will and love. It concludes that in that context, miracles are possible realities, and do not make God self-contradicting.

Keywords: Deism, laws of nature, love, miracle, sovereignty.

Introduction

That Christianity is a belief system with miracles as its foundational locus is evident both from biblical accounts and from historical events. Paul's admonitions in 1 Corinthians 15 make it clear that Christianity is baseless without the miracle of the Resurrection. Furthermore, both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed affirm that the Christian faith is based on a belief in the miracle of the Incarnation whereby God took on human flesh, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary, as Jesus of Nazareth. Both Creeds also affirm the belief in the miracle of resurrection, not only of Jesus Christ, but also of Christians in the *eschaton*. As Craig (2008) states without mincing words, 'Christianity is a religion of miracles' (p. 247).

However, this doctrine of miracle, so central and crucial to the fabrics of the Christian faith, has been attacked severally and on various fronts by not a few critics. Kanu (2012)

observes that the existence of God or otherwise is the basis upon which possibility of miracle has been argued against. Those who deny the existence of God inevitably deny the possibility of miracle, since miracles are attributed necessarily to divine agency. Yet there are those who attack miracle as impossible phenomenon, even though they do not doubt the existence of God. Such persons believe they uphold the integrity of God by arguing that God cannot perform miracle. They argue that miracle is impossible because it is unfitting of God. And this is so because the critics place God and miracles within the framework of what is generally believed to be the laws of nature.

The critics contend that God cannot turn around to violate the laws he has established to govern temporal happenings; if he would, he is then a self-contradicting God. But would the performing of miracles constitute a contradiction on the part of God? This is the concern this paper hopes to investigate.

Defining Miracle

Although the word, miracle, might be common and its understanding taken as a given, it is still not out of place to begin by engaging a conceptualizing of the phenomenon, in order to place this work in its right perspective. This is necessary since there is a myriad of perspectives within which scholars have defined and understood it, in line with their individual presuppositions and research contexts. For the context of this paper, a very popular and significant definition would be engaged. This is the phenomenal definition offered by Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume. For Hume (1748) 'a miracle is a violation of the laws nature'.

Hume's definition is considered significant in view of the implications it holds for the understanding of the possibility or otherwise of miracle, and the fiery discussions it has engendered over the years up until presently. This definition is foundational to the numerous attacks hurled at the possibility of miracles ever since. It is, therefore, surprising that Sulmasy (2007) would contend that 'Hume's argument should cease to be considered anything more than a curious historical footnote' since, as he presumes, Hume's attack is on 'a belief mainstream Christians do not hold, and that most deists have been dead for centuries' (p. 1223). Sulmasy is clearly mistaken; for Hume continues to be forcefully vocal and prominent in academic discourses on miracles till date. Such overbearing influence of Hume's definition on discussions on miracle is what Louis (2007) has fittingly referred to as 'The Long Shadow of David Hume'—a subtitle to his article on miracle and science.

From Hume's definition of miracle, a few things are worthy of note. First, for an event to be considered a miracle or miraculous, it must be recognized as an act that could not have been brought about primarily by any human or natural means. In other words, it must transcend the capacity of natural or human cause, both in timing and in effect. This is premised on the presupposition that nature, on its own, lacks the capacity to produce such effects. In the context of this study, nature refers to all the component elements of the created order, including humans. Second, from the ongoing, an occurrence would be considered a miracle if it can only be deemed possible as a divine act. The implication here is that the explication of its occurrence, or even possibility, can only be attributed to

God. This is so since, as a matter of fact, God is not part of nature, but above nature—supernatural. Consequently, it must be seen as God intervening in the process of the created order.

It is within the premise of the above observations that Hume considers a miracle as a violation of the law of nature. Predicated on presumed comprehensive knowledge of the laws of nature and of the nature of God, Hume's arguments hold that such acts are not fitting of God. This is of serious implication for the Christian faith which, as earlier demonstrated, is founded on the belief in miracles, and so demands further objective probing.

Laws of Nature

In the words of Hodge (1992), laws of nature are 'uniformly acting forces in nature' (p. 221). They are recognized by empirical observations of occurrences in nature. In the early years of modern science such laws of natural sciences were thought to be universal laws that could govern anything that had to do with nature. This was because scientists presupposed and conceived of nature as a systemic whole by which they formulated, through empirical observations, natural laws that they concluded were constant and fixed natural principles. As Moltmann (2011) elucidates, 'in classical physics the natural laws were thought to be timeless, unalterable, always and everywhere the same, like the Platonic Ideas' (p. 407).

This scientific subjectivism was brought to bear on the investigation of the possibility or otherwise of miracles. That was why Hume and his adherents defined a miracle as 'transgression of a law of nature'. Consequently, miracles as violation of the laws of nature became the premise upon which subsequent criticisms of their possibility or otherwise were based. Since laws of nature had been established by empirical observations of occurrences in nature, and given that the laws were considered fixed and unalterable, Hume and his progenies, concluded, based on *a priori* approach, that miracles were, therefore, impossible.

For philosophers in the stock of Hume, this understanding of the universe as a unity, and of the philosophy of laws of nature as universal, fixed and unalterable made the claim for the possibility and legitimacy of miracles anything but plausible. They understand the laws, and rightly so, as originating from God. They, therefore, look disparagingly at any claim that the same all-knowing God who created the world and made laws to govern it, could turn around, for whatever reasons, to break any of these laws. This position is understandable. Those scientists, mostly deists, operate within the framework of a universe which Craig (2008), among others, has rightly termed the 'Newtonian world-machine'. This deist world-machine ideology makes it absurd to imagine that God should interfere with miracles since he had designed the world and set it to function according to his own instituted universal and eternal laws. Conclusively, for such philosophers and scientists, miracles were just impossible because of the ultimate implication it would otherwise hold for the person and integrity of God.

The problem: The self-contradicting God?

The deist argument against the possibility of miracle is a simple one, perhaps a double-faced coin. On one side, the laws of nature, and not God, now hold sway in the affairs of the universe; so it is absurd and unrealistic to think of God involving actively in the course of nature. On the other side, even if God were to be actively involved in the affairs of the universe, by performing miracles he would be contravening his own decreed laws of nature and would thus be a self-contradicting God. In the final analysis, it is either God does not perform miracles or God performs miracles and so contradicts self.

One can infer, at this time, as Hicks (2006) opines, that the arguments over miracles result from clash of rival worldviews in which one's acceptance of miracles or otherwise depends on whether one believes in the supernatural or not. Such belief in the supernatural does not only mean belief in the existence of God. In the context of this submission it implies the belief in the active involvement of God in the affairs of the universe in such terms as could be directly felt and experienced by humans. In simple terms, deists do not believe God still involves self in the affairs of the world; so they reject *a priori* the possibility of miracles. In contrast, without necessarily denying the validity of natural laws, theists believe in the supernatural; that God is still directly and actively involved in temporal and cosmological happenings. Consequently, they believe that God can and does interfere in the affairs of the creation, sometimes by means of miracles. Yet for such Christians—who both uphold the validity of the laws and still believe in the supernatural—it must be seen that the argument for the possibility of miracles against the deists' position is clearly an uphill task.

Two perspectives would help to buttress the quagmire. First, is a simple question: Why must God break any of the laws he made? Would that not be unfitting of God whose integrity is unquestionable? Second, as Worthing (2009) recognizes, it is not out of place to wonder what kind of creator-God would continue to make necessary adjustments to his creation that he had originally termed 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). Would that not present such a God as self-contradicting? Again this must be seen as resulting from the understanding of miracles as breaking the laws of nature, and the laws themselves (and nature) as being fixed, definite and unalterable. Therefore, either God is truly self-contradicting in performing miracles or an objective rethinking of the laws of nature is most timely and pertinent.

The solution (a): Rethinking the laws of nature

Scientists and philosophers, especially of the Enlightenment, argued that miracle demands God necessarily violating the laws of nature; but since God cannot contravene the laws he has made, therefore miracles cannot just happen. This contention can be explained by the fact that, in the words of Moltmann (2011), 'the initial premise of all science is the knowability of nature' (p. 405). With its empirical observations and conclusions, science claimed to have known nature and its guiding laws. Thus, empiricism seemed to hold the answer to everything; issues that had metaphysical nexus were dismissed as void. This is the point Ruthven (2008) illustrates when he writes:

Hume presumed to predict exhaustively all the 'laws' of nature and whether or not they would be 'violated' by the occurrence of a certain event. Hume's peculiar notion of 'nature' was strictly material and physical, not allowing for the possibility of God's action in it. (p. 548).

Thus, Hume and his intellectual progenies suppose all the laws of nature are known, definite and predictable. But as will be shown later, this position is both subjective and fallacious. Again, this is predicated on a worldview of a world-machine. It is a mechanistic perspective that, as McNeal (2003) elucidates, 'believes the world is controlled by unalterable natural laws and cannot allow for the possibility of miracles' (p. 1136).

But two questions raised by Moltmann (2011) are immediately crucial and relevant. First, is the scientific claim on the knowability of nature valid? Second, are the laws of nature really fixed and eternal decrees for temporal events or are they themselves part of temporal happenings? Interestingly, development in modern science itself provides challenging insights in the light of these questions.

As Hefling (1996) correctly observes,

The mechanistic determinism that was once thought inseparable from scientific knowledge as such has begun to be dismantled by science itself. The classical laws of physics, once construed as expressing what cannot possibly be otherwise, are coming to be recognized instead as expressing possibilities that are regularly verified.... possibility of genuine novelty, in the universe as it really is. (p. 663).

It is interesting how science has changed its own terms in the last century. For instance—and of some serious implications—scientific development has now shifted grounds in its understanding of the nature of physical law, from classical physics (which is universal in form and states what must happen) to a quantum physics (which is statistical in form and states what might probably happen). This is a point firmly argued by Worthing (2009) who also plausibly concludes that quantum theory, therefore, creates a flexibility which makes it difficult to speak with certainty as to future happenings with nature.

This recent understanding of physical laws is of serious implications for the discussion on the possibility or otherwise of miracles. First, it reveals that the laws of nature are themselves part of temporal happenings and not unalterable orders for cosmological events. They are not fixed, universal and unalterable laws, but are part of the created order. There is, therefore, a continuous unveiling of God's supreme and sovereign will and acts in nature, contrary to the views of deists.

The bottom line is that what scientists call laws of nature may not necessarily be laws in the true sense of it, but mere generalizations of future expectations based on past empirical observations and their consequent inferences. They are conclusions on observations made in the past, and so cannot be used as a basis for full proof judgment or prediction of the future. In other words, there is no logical conclusiveness in asserting that because an occurrence habitually happened in the past it therefore follows that it must happen in the same manner or, better put, cannot happen otherwise in the future.

This reveals a few facts about the Newtonian World-machine worldview of the critics. First, it demonstrates that such worldview lends credence to deism, and presupposes that God finished his work on and with nature, setting in place the laws that would govern the affairs of nature, without further active involvement from him. Nothing can be more fallacious. Truth is God is still at work in and with nature up to this day. Second, it also demonstrates that the claims on the knowability of nature by some scientists and philosophers have been the climax of intellectual arrogance. It is now clear that they never had such comprehensive knowledge of nature and its laws as they claimed—the grounds upon which they ruled out the possibility of miracles, *a priori*. Theirs was, and remains, a developing knowledge built on statistical probabilities based on past empirical observations. Kanu's (2012) submission hits the nail at the head: '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' (p. 88).

It is, therefore, clear that the definition of miracle that speaks of violation or transgression of laws of nature is misleading. A miracle is not a violation of any law—natural or otherwise. In the context of its relationship with the laws of nature, Worthing's (2009) submission is apt: A miracle 'would be a violation of statistical probability rather than of some absolute set of laws' (p. 8). This by far reflects what miracle truly is because it shows that what scientists term laws of nature are not a comprehensive body of knowledge but only as has been explored and accessed by science. It also reveals that science is yet to unveil a full or comprehensive understanding of the universe, even though it is constantly making astounding progress. Thus, insofar as Newtonian deterministic understanding of physical laws is no longer held as valid and has been replaced by quantum theory which is statistical, we can more reasonably speak of miracle as transgressing statistical probability than of some fixed, eternal and unalterable laws. Scholars are already acknowledging this.

The Solution (b): The Ultimate and Overruling Law of God's Nature

But what if the laws were really fixed and eternal—although disproved by science itself—would miracles still involve the necessary violation of laws of nature, and would performing a miracle ultimately be unbecoming of God?

Two perspectives would help in this regard. First is that miracles could have been willed by God from eternity so that they become part of the possibility for genuine novelty in the unfolding events of God's creation. On this the conclusion of Craig (2008), deserves to be concurred with:

Miracles do not contradict God's nature, because the laws of nature do not flow in necessitarian fashion from the being of God, but are freely willed and therefore alterable; and miracles as well as laws could be willed by God from eternity so that their occurrence represents no change in God's decrees. (p. 258).

Moreover apart from the possibility of being part of God's will from eternity, the nature of the laws as statistical probabilities makes a miracle a possible reality in nature. Such statistical probabilities imply, in the words of Hefling (1997), 'the possibility of genuine novelty, in the universe as it really is' (p. 663). This possibility of genuine novelty also obtains in the category of miracle. Thus, even if a miracle has never happened or been

empirically observed in the past, there is at least the possibility in nature that it can happen in the future. And if it can happen in the future, it gives enough reason to not deny that it actually happened in the past, in the event that someone claimed so. Thus, miracles can happen—in the future or in the past.

Second and most crucial for this work is the engaging of the nature of God in the light of the subject. This is decisive since critics argue against the possibility of miracle on the premise of defending/upholding the integrity of God as lacking the capacity to contravene his own laws of nature and thereby becoming self-contradicting. While the premise is obviously positive and commendable, it has a major flaw that is of serious implications for any objective discussion on miracles. It upholds God's integrity but shows disregard for God's sovereignty to act as he wills irrespective of whatever laws of nature exist—if there really be any.

This is as fallacious and idolatrous as deism purely is. It makes the laws of nature a sovereign god that now reigns supreme in creation. Truth is, scriptural and historical experiences make it evident that God is still at work in and with his creation. As Bavinck (2011) argues, God's presence and activity are both evident and not excluded from the natural order. And, as the Sovereign Lord over nature, he can do whatever he wills. Whatever he does then becomes part of the continuous unveiling of his creation, comprehensive knowledge of which humans are yet to access perhaps even by half, notwithstanding the numerous advances in science.

So, if God decides to perform a miracle, it should not be misconstrued as being unfitting of him. In contrast, the category of miracle reveals that he is constantly at work in the universe. Very importantly, it also upholds the integrity of God's nature as sovereign over all. As Russell (2006) poignantly submits, in the light of God's sovereignty,

He still works extraordinary events that produce awe, wonder and excitement. Rather than being a suspension of some autonomous law, these are occasional, startling displays of the same almighty power with which God upholds the universe. By creating awe and wonder, these unusual events point human beings to the fact that God is Lord over the usual course of events. (p. 435).

Perhaps two further perspectives will help to illustrate and ground the contention that miracles are not unfitting of God, in the light of both his continuous participation in the affairs of creation and his all-pervasive sovereignty.

First, there is need to emphasise that the Christian concept of miracle is in the main, not a philosophical category but a wholly theological one with its locus firmly rooted in the Bible. Thus, its most objective evaluation should be biblical-theological. Biblically, the word miracle does not have a single equivalent in both the Hebrew and the New Testament scriptures. As Packer (1993) observes, in the Bible the notion of miracle 'is a blend of the thoughts expressed by three terms: *wonder, mighty work, and sign*' (p. 49).

The words translated miracle in the Old Testament include *'ôt* (sign: something that attracts attention), *mōpēt* (a wonder or portent: often signifying future event) and *pālā'* (something that surpasses the ordinary). A careful look at the different words and their connotations reveals that while there may be a few common grounds of idea between them and miracle, there seem to be more clearly fundamental differences between Jewish

understanding of such marvellous occurrences and the contemporary philosophical interpretation of same. Evidently, the Old Testament does not consider any event miraculous in the sense of God intervening in the course of nature. This is a clear difference from the contemporary conception of miracle, and the reason is obvious.

Just as Hebrew has no word for miracle, it also has no word for nature, and this is because Semitic people generally did not conceive nature as a unified system. As Milne (2009) further explains, they simply considered miraculous events as the continuous unfolding of another dimension of the manifold greatness and power of the Almighty God, who has the sovereignty to act as he wills. And this was more so because they did not conceive of nature as a unity with laws that were fixed and unalterable.

The New Testament has almost the same understanding of miracles or miraculous events as the Old Testament. Just like in Hebrew, there are three Greek words used in the New Testament to designate the miraculous. They are *dunamis* (power, works of power), *sēmeion* (sign) and *teras* (portent). According to Louis (2007) they emphasize 'that the main point of biblical miracles is to serve higher theological purpose and not just to evoke amazement' (p. 5).

How then should this be understood in the light of the laws of nature and of God's nature? In this context, Russell (2006) offers a useful guide. He reckons that 'in the biblical world-view, nature is not autonomous, for the Creator is always active, sustaining and ruling over his creation' (p. 435). Thus biblically, the world is God's finished and yet-ongoing project in which affairs he is still actively involved. God's involvement in the created order, through the performing of miracles, cannot be judged within the parameters of the laws of nature; for the Bible knows of no such laws. With such a biblical worldview, miracles are seen as God's special revelatory events that are wholly compatible with God's overall purposes and are thus, in the words of Milne (2009), 'neither arbitrary nor excessively numerous, and centre in his supreme self-disclosure in Jesus Christ' (p. 100).

Once placed within the framework of God's greater purpose and glory, miracles find justifiable and incontrovertible grounds for their occurrence. Furthermore, it ought to be understood that in the biblical worldview there is no difference between the natural and the supernatural. As McNeal (2003) insightfully recognizes, while the Bible sees God in miraculous terms as working in astounding ways to draw awareness to himself or his purpose, in natural events God works providentially.

This does not in any way suggest that miracle is synonymous with acts of providence, which is described, according to Allison (2011), as God's 'preservation of all he created, his cooperation in the ongoing activities of the created order, and his government in directing the creation to fulfil his purposes' (p. 277). While providence is God's overall activities in the natural order, miracle speaks of specific supernatural acts of God. The view of Grudem (1994) that the belief in miracle is predicated on the understanding and acceptance of the doctrine of providence illustrates the intersection between miracle and providence. They both arise from God's nature of love and care for his creation; yet they do not mean or imply same thing.

Worthing's (2009) conclusion in this wise is both succinct and apt: miracles must be understood 'in light of God's special care and love for us in the sense that ordinarily, we would not have expected it to occur' (p. 14). Thus, in the context of God working in love, it becomes easier to understand and accept that miracles are appropriately fitting of God. That God supposedly bypasses the assumed laws of nature becomes less of a moral difficulty when considered in the light of God's nature and ultimate law. When he acts in such dimensions he is not being self-contradicting but in consonance and conformity with his loving and caring nature, and subject to the only absolute law: love.

The illustration offered by Humphreys (2007) is most appropriate and insightful. With an analogy from music, he writes that a composer follows set rules of particular key signature to compose an interesting piece. Yet he may occasionally break this rule and play what musicians call accidentals (notes that are not in the key signature). Humphreys likens God's miracles to musical accidentals and argues convincingly:

It is the accidentals which contribute to making the piece of music great. The analogy with how God operates is clear: God created and operates the universe but, like the great composer, he is free to override his own rules. However, if he is a consistent God, it must make more sense than less for him to override his rules. (n.p).

When musicians compose and play accidentals they are not judged unprofessional or inconsistent. On the contrary it credits them as great musicians. In like manner, God's miracles do not present him with a moral challenge of being inconsistent with his nature or self-contradicting. Rather, they reveal that God could go out of his usual acts (in human understanding) to demonstrate his love and care for his creation. Nothing can be more consistent with God's nature.

Love is God's nature. In the Bible there is a clear unequivocal affirmation that love is the summation of God's nature. Barker (1981), commenting on 1 John 4:8–16, writes that the very nature of God is love, and refers to the expression, 'God is love' as the ultimate statement over other biblical descriptions of God. For Barker (2000), the declaration, 'God is love' in the above Bible passage, simply implies that 'in his essential nature and in all his actions, God is loving' (p.1911). Therefore, whatever he does within the ambit of love is most consistent with his nature. And since he performs miracles as demonstration of his love and care for his people, then miracles are most fitting of his nature.

This would not be much of a problem to those who perceive God as loving and involving. As Hicks (2006) notes, those with positive worldview of the supernatural will usually argue that:

If there is a God, if he made the world in the first place, if he upholds all things by the word of his power, if he loves his creation and is concerned for his creatures, if his might and wisdom are infinite, then it is not all surprising that on occasion evidences of his special activity should be seen in the world. (p. 432).

It is with this positive worldview that Christians who believe in miracle approach its subject, and with acknowledgment of God's nature as a loving and involving God who could go out of the usual order to ensure the good of his creation and creatures.

Conclusion

One can clearly see that initial premise of miracle implying self-contradiction on the part of God has been orchestrated by a wrong definition of miracle as a violation of law of nature. As Nmah (2012) notes, a wrong definition of miracle would naturally lead to wrong conclusion. A more revealing definition would be, among others, one by Grudem (1994) as 'a less common kind of God's activity in which he arouses people's awe and wonder and bears witness to himself' (p. 355). It has also been shown that miracles ought to rather be discussed in the light of God's work of love and care for his creation. When that is done it becomes clear, as Douglas and Tenney (2011) reveal, that 'miracles are not violations of natural law... they are intelligent acts of a personal God. They are not erratic or exotic occurrences; they are reasonable parts and phases of a cosmic program of revelation and redemption' (p. 958).

Moreover, since miracle is a theological category, it therefore follows that the only comprehensively valid context for a discourse on its possibility or otherwise and implications to the person and character of God must be theological.

Milne's (2009) submission makes an apt conclusion:

Within this basic framework believers can pursue their lives with secure faith in God's miraculous redemption in Christ in the past, and in God's personal care and sovereign freedom to answer prayer and fulfil his redemptive purposes in the present and future. At the same time Christians as scientists can pursue their investigations with faith in God's consistency as expressed in the observed regularities of the physical universe in the past and future. (p. 101).

Thus, in performing miracles, God is not self-contradicting.

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