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Miracles and the Principle of Causality: Christian and Shi'a Perspectives

Hanieh Tarkian

Abstract

The issue of miracles has always been a controversial one, both in theology, philosophy, and science. Most of the philosophers' and scientists' objections against miracles are founded on their claim of miracles being contrary to nature or breaking the laws of nature and the principle of causality.

In this paper, I will briefly mention these objections and quote responses and explanations from both the Christian and Shi'a perspectives, and I will conclude that miracles are not against the principle of causality.

Introduction

In proving the necessity of religion, it is established that reason and experience do not suffice human beings in achieving happiness in this world and in the Hereafter. Therefore, revelation is needed.

However, how can the reliability of the claim of a Prophet be proven?

The Prophet must prove his claim by showing his link to God, and this is where the importance of miracles and their theological value becomes clear.

Based on this from an Islamic perspective, a miracle can be defined as "An act contrary to the (normal) course of nature, depending upon the power of God. It has two characteristics: a) it cannot be taught and learnt, and b) it cannot be overpowered by another factor."[1] In the case of Prophets, a miracle is accompanied by a claim of prophethood.[2]

According to Islam, the Qur'an is the most important and eternal miracle of the Prophet Muhammad, and the main proof on which the truthfulness of his claim of Prophethood is based.

The Western philosophical perspective on the general concept of miracle is quite similar. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines it as follows:

A miracle (from the Latin *mirari*, to wonder), at a first and very rough approximation, is an event that is not explicable by natural causes alone. A reported miracle excites wonder because it appears to require, as its cause, something beyond the reach of human action and natural causes. Historically, the appeal to miracles has formed one of the primary lines of argument in favor of specific forms of theism, the argument typically being that the event in question can best (or can only) be explained as the act of a particular deity.[3]

According to Thomas Aquinas a miracle is that which is caused by God:

Now a miracle is so called as being full of wonder; as having a cause absolutely hidden from all, and this cause is God. Wherefore those things which God does outside those causes which we know are called miracles.[4]

Thus, it seems that in Christianity miracles are important as well given that they show the presence of God and His will to save human beings from perdition:

A miracle points to an eruption of God in history. It is a sign whose aim is not to astonish human beings by provoking their admiration, but to show them all of His saving love in freeing them from sin and death. Comprehending the meaning of a Christian miracle is not limited to demonstrating God is among us but also seeks to make it genuinely understood that God is for us.[5]

According to Christianity, a miracle par excellence is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and other miracles are important "in reference to that which they reveal about Jesus Christ, and to that which Jesus Christ reveals through them."[6]

Objections Against Miracles

Baruch Spinoza, a modern philosopher, had a pantheistic vision in which God and nature coincide, which led him to deny the "exceptional" or "contrary to nature" aspect of miracles. This is because for him the activity of nature coincides with the activity of God. The immutability of natural laws is such that even when they break from their course, this breaking away is itself not a violation of normal behavior, but rather a manifestation of a necessary behavior. Consequently, according to Spinoza, miracles are an absurdity.[7]

Section X of David Hume's Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding in 1748 argues that if rational people have a choice to believe more than one explanation of an event, they should choose to believe the most probable explanation. Hume then argues that miracles are by definition implausible:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. [.] There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event; otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.[8]

Hume further argues that because the only evidence offered for miracles is eyewitness testimony, and eyewitnesses may be wrong, any reasonable man would assume the eyewitness testimony in error rather than believe an abrogation of something as consistent throughout time as natural law (Hume believed in the rigid immutability of the laws of nature, although he negated the principle of causality).

In the corresponding entry of his Philosophical Dictionary, Voltaire speaks of miracles as a "contradictio in terminis" (or "an intrinsic contradiction"). They are a kind of "insult to God" because they ascribe to God the task of correcting by means of His miraculous interventions, that which He himself has created and brought into existence. Prior to Voltaire, Bayle had developed analogous arguments. According to these authors, God is seen as merely the architect of the universe and the guarantor of the laws of nature.

Christian response

In response to objections against miracles, Christian philosophers and theologians have always tried to explain miracles in a reasonable way. The mentioned objections had actually already been considered by Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) and centuries before by Augustine (354–430) who had offered a partial solution by simply recalling that the "rule" of nature is God Himself. Augustine says:

There is, however, no impropriety in saying that God does a thing contrary to nature, when it is contrary to what we know of nature. For we give the name 'nature' to the usual common course of nature, and whatever God does contrary to this, we call it a prodigy, or a miracle.[9]

Interestingly, Augustine suggests that besides their natural constituents, creatures also possess certain

seminal elements (*seminales rationes*) which God can stimulate into operation, contrary to the creature's ordinary mode of activity, and that in some instances miracles were simply speeded up natural developments, whereas other miracles arise from unknown causes hidden in God. Augustine argues that miracles do not conflict with the creation–order, since both usual and unusual events in nature are the expression of God's will.[10]

The Augustinian concept of miracle remained standard in the Church until the time of Thomas Aquinas, whose definition of miracle is mentioned in the introduction. He also states:

A miracle properly so called is when something is done outside the order of nature. But it is not enough for a miracle if something is done outside the order of any particular nature; for otherwise anyone would perform a miracle by throwing a stone upwards, as such a thing is outside the order of the stone's nature. So for a miracle is required that it be against the order of the whole created nature. But God alone can do this, because whatever an angel or any other creature does by its own power is according to the order of created nature; and thus it is not a miracle. Hence God alone can work miracles.[11]

Developing the thought of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas believed that the work of God can never be said to be against nature "since the order of nature is given to things by God; if He does anything outside this order, it is not against nature. Wherefore Augustine says [Contra Faustum XXVI, 3]:

That is natural to each thing which is caused by Him Who disposed all things in nature by measure, number, and order' [.]. God fixed a certain order in things in such a way that at the same time He reserved to Himself whatever He intended to do otherwise than by a particular cause. So when He acts outside this order, He does not change.[12]

Moreover, Aquinas proposes that miracles are not the effect of a changeable will, but a kind of interplay between the action of God in His ordinary Providence and the action of God outside of it, without creating tension or contradiction in the divine work:

God does not act by going against the laws of nature on account of a changeable will: God indeed from all eternity had foreseen and wished to do that which He works in time. Therefore, He fixed the course of nature in such a way as to order beforehand in His eternal will that at times He would have acted contrary to such a course. In acting by going beyond the course of nature, God does not totally eliminate the order of the universe, in which lies His goodness, but only the ordering of a particular cause to its effect.[13]

Today, the opinions of Christian and Catholic theologians in particular in defense of miracles are for the most part based on Aquinas' perspective.

On the other hand, in more recent times, there have been theologians and scientists who have tried to explain miracles in a way that can be accepted by science. For example, some prefer to think of an action of God "by means of" the laws of nature rather than by endorsing the idea of an action "contrary

to" or "above" the behavior of nature. According to the Biblicist X. Leon-Dufour:

God gives origin to the world. He does not contradict it: He is in fact its author and restorer. From a biblical point of view, one cannot see a miracle as a 'deviation from the laws of nature' because that would result in placing God the Creator in contradiction with Himself. To seek to make God a 'first cause' which supplants the 'second causes' would be comparable to placing Him at the outskirts of the world and in competition with the natural elements.[14]

Some others observe that the conduct of nature is more complex and creative than could be imagined in the past.

Some affirm that scientific analysis leaves ample room for unpredictability and indetermination. Physical and biological processes do not operate according to rigid and immutable laws but occur within a world of relations and interactions that are impossible to determine and know in depth. Thus, the miracle would be an action of nature and by means of nature.

According to some thinkers, science can speak about miracles as a series of coincidences of phenomena, which are by themselves wholly natural, but in their unexpected yet coordinated occurrence bear the sign and the intentional message of a personal Creator.

Finally, there are those who think what would externally appear to be a miracle would in reality be solely a subjective sensation caused by God's influence upon our psychic or sensible sphere. However, a Christian writer says:

If the preceding ideas seem to have the advantage of presenting miracles in terms more intelligible to the scientific mentality, their consequence is that theology would no longer need to be concerned with empirical observation as one of the means for discerning a miracle. If science 'explains' or 'will explain' that which theology calls miracles, they would no longer have any role in the dynamics of preparation for the faith or in the economy of divine revelation. Miracles would not be a "new" creative action of God, different from that through which He creates and maintains all things in existence.[15]

Thus, many Christian theologians believe miracles are reasonable because God is the creator of the universe and He may sometimes act in a way that we cannot understand. It seems to be contrary to the normal course of nature, although this does not contradict the rules that He Himself has established.

Responses by Shi'a scholars

Allamah Tabatabai's point of view

Allamah Tabatabai analyzes the concept of miracle in his Tafsir al-Mizan, exegesis of verses 2:21-25. According to Allamah, the Qur'an repeatedly asserts the occurrence of miracles. A miracle is defined as an unusual preternatural phenomenon, which shows the authority of metaphysical forces over the

physical and material world.

He affirms that the efforts some people make to explain miracles to fit the Qur'an into principles of modern physical sciences are unacceptable, as they are a forced burden on language and the Qur'an, which clearly reports miracles as events contrary to the normal course of nature.

The Qur'an says that in this natural world every effect has a cause; thus, it takes the principle of causality for granted when it speaks of life, death, sustenance, and other heavenly or earthly phenomena, although it ultimately ascribes all the effects and their causes too, to God (who is a Cause Himself).

The Qur'an, nevertheless, narrates many events that go against the normal system of cause-and-effect. However, miracles are not unknown to nature. According to Allamah, there are only two differences between a natural event and a miraculous one:

First, in a natural event, the material causes and their effects can be seen, whereas in a miraculous one it cannot.

Second, it is in the speed and steps required to reach the goal. A material cause brings about its effect, in special conditions, at a particular time and space, step by step, in a long series of changes. But when it comes to a miracle, the effect happens without any lapse of time by the will of God. And since we cannot see the procedure, we assume it happened without a cause, although this is not the case.

It is not within the main purposes of the Qur'an to identify any cause that would explain all natural and super-natural events; however, it affirms that every material phenomenon has a material cause and it is entirely dependent on God, Who has appointed for it a certain procedure a material cause through which it acquires its existence. However, the belief in the absolute power of God leads us to accept that He is not limited and He has His own way to let a thing happen.

Thus, Allamah affirms that this may possibly happen in two ways: 1) God may bring that thing into being simply by His will, or 2) there may be an alternative cause unknown to us. According to Allamah, this second possibility seems more appropriate in view of the verse ***"God indeed has made a measure for everything"*** (***65:3***)***.*** This verse shows that every effect, whether it is in accordance with the normal causality or not, has a measure appointed by God; thus, the cause and effect relation is not independent of God. He can attain His purpose through any way He wishes, and for this reason, no academic or scientific theory is capable of explaining all phenomena of the world; it is really as God knows, makes, and manages it.

The Qur'an, while affirming the causal relation between a cause and its effect, ascribes every effect to God. The real cause, in the true sense of this word, is only God. No one else can handle something except by His power; He allows whomsoever He wishes to manage, influence, and affect it to a certain extent. But this divine permission, establishing the relation of causality, does not make that cause

independent of God; it is a permission given by the real owner to use his property.

Then Allamah proves the influence of the Prophets' souls on supernatural events through the ***verse ". and it was not meet for an apostle that he should bring a sign except with God's permission; but when the command of God came, judgment was given with truth, and those who treated*** (***it***) ***as a lie were lost"*** (***40:78***)***.*** In this verse, it was the apostle who brought the sign by permission of God: his soul was given a special power to cause the miracle, and that causal power, like all other causes, created its effect with God's permission.

However, He has made it clear that the cause found in His Apostles, Prophets, and believers is predominant over all other causes, and it can never be overpowered: ***"And certainly Our word has already gone forth in respect of Our servants, the Apostles: Most surely they shall be the assisted ones, and most surely Our host alone shall be the victorious ones."*** (***37:171-173***) ***- "I will most certainly prevail, I and My apostle ."*** (***58:21***)

Allamah further explains that events may be either natural or supernatural, and the supernatural may be good, i.e. a miracle; or evil, such as magic and sooth-saying. But all of them come into being through natural causes and depend on the will of God. In other words, they cannot come into being unless the natural cause coincides, or becomes one, with the permission and command of God. All things are equal in this respect. But when a Prophet brings about a miracle - an additional factor which is the decisive command of God - the desired effect or event unfailingly comes into being: ***"I will most certainly prevail, I and My apostles."*** (***58:21***)

Thus, Allamah concludes that miracles, like other natural and supernatural events, need a material cause; however, in miracles this cause is not a normal and usual one. It cannot be seen or felt. Furthermore, miracles have an additional quality: they can never be overpowered, as they are always accompanied by the decisive command of God.

Then Allamah answers the following question: It is strange to say that a miracle is caused by a natural cause. Suppose we discover the real natural cause of a miracle; will it not then be possible for us to create that miracle? If yes, then a miracle is not a proof except against him who is ignorant of its natural cause; therefore, it cannot be put as evidence of the truth of a prophet's claim.

He replies that the miraculousness of a miracle does not depend on the unknowability of its cause; nor is it a miracle because it emanates from an extraordinary or mysterious cause. It is a miracle because it is brought about by such an extraordinary cause which is invincible and cannot be defeated. Allamah gives the example of a critically ill person, who, all of a sudden, is cured by the prayers of a believer. This cure is a miraculous event because it emanates from an invincible cause. We know that a patient cured by medical treatment is a normal process; but this cauase - the medical treatment - could be foiled by other more powerful factors, and that is why it is not called a miracle.

Therefore, according to Allamah, there is no reason to say that miracles are against the principle of

causality. They, in fact, have a cause, and the main point on which he insists is that miracles cannot be overpowered because they are accompanied by God's will. Allamah emphasizes very much on the fact that God is the real cause of everything, and this is real faith in monotheism (tawhid – in particular, tawhid in actions).

The belief that the causes are dependent on God in their existence but not in their being a cause is not monotheism; this instead would result in a belief in some kind of independence for them. Furthermore, according to Allamah, even if God has given them the power to cause an effect, He can take away this power from them whenever He wants. Moreover, some causes are given a power of causality that can be overpowered by other factors, though the causes of miracles cannot be overpowered by any other factor.

Ayatollah Misbah's viewpoint

Ayatollah Misbah's point of view is similar to Allamah's:

First, he asserts that both in philosophy and the Qur'an, the principle of causality is accepted and takes no exceptions.

Second, empirical sciences cannot prove that for a certain effect there is just one cause, which is the one that they have discovered, unless they could make experiments on all the cases in the universe, which is impossible.

Then Ayatollah Misbah affirms that miracles are certainly not against the principle of causality because God is their cause in the first place. In that case, we have two possibilities: either their cause can be natural, which, as we said, is not impossible because science cannot discover all causes; or the cause is supernatural, and this cannot be denied or excluded from a scientific point of view. Therefore:

a) there can exist supernatural and immaterial causes[16] for natural effects: science cannot prove that this is impossible because the immaterial world cannot be empirically experienced, and

b) the souls of Prophets or Imams can be the cause of miracles.[17]

Hence, Ayatollah Misbah does not see any contradiction between miracles and the principle of causality. For him it is clear that for some effects there can be causes that cannot be experienced empirically.

Conclusion

For both Christian and Shi'a theologians, there is no contradiction between miracles and the principle of causality. The perspectives are summed up as follows: God is the Creator of the Universe whohas set up the rules and manages the Universe. This is the pure monotheism in which we believe. Based on some of these rules, phenomena may sometimes be caused by factors – either natural or supernatural –

that our experience cannot explain.

Through miracles, which are accompanied by the decisive will of God and cannot be overpowered, God reminds us of His absolute power. Shi'a scholars emphasize that miracles also show His support to the Prophets for people to trust their claim of Prophethood. He therefore accomplishes His promise and duty to provide us with guidance towards eternal happiness.

The majority of the scholars of both religions state that the efforts of some people to explain miracles in a way to make them fit the principles of modern sciences are unacceptable. Interestingly, both Augustine and Allamah Tabatabai suggest that miracles may be the effects of speeded up natural processes, and this can be a subject of further study in the field of comparative theology.

1. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, Rah wa Rahnamashenasi, p. 61.
2. Ibid.
3. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/miracles/ [8]
4. Summa Theologiae, I, q. 105, a. 7.
5. INTERS – Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science, edited by G. Tanzella-Nitti and A. Strumia, www.inters.org/miracle [9]
6. Ibid.
7. Spinoza, A Theologico-Political Treatise, Part II, Chapter VI.
8. http://www.davidhume.org/texts/ehu.html [10], SBN 114-115.
9. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140626.htm [11] Contra Faustum, XXVI.3.
10. Chris Gousmett, Miracles: Signs of the Kingdom Coming, http://gousmett.webs.com/articles.htm [12]
11. Summa Theologiae, I, q. 110, a. 4.
12. Ibid., I, q. 105, ad 1um and 3um.
13. De Potentia, q. 6, a. 1, ad 6um and 7um.
14. I miracoli di Gesù secondo il Nuovo Testamento, p. 24, Brescia, 1980.
15. INTERS – Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science, edited by G. Tanzella-Nitti and A. Strumia, www.inters.org/miracle [9] (most of this part of the present essay has been taken from this article).
16. The main example of a material effect created by an immaterial cause is the universe itself, which was created by God (Mohammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, Rah wa Rahnamashenasi, p. 64)
17. Mohammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, Khodashenasi, p. 133ff.

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