

## MIRACLES — A Philosophical Analysis

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The term “miracle” like the word “nice” is quite often used to refer primarily to the response of the user. It covers a wide spectrum of application from odd, unusual to rare and in a weaker sense “miracle” connotes extraordinary coincidence of a beneficial nature. But the senses of “miracle” that are of philosophical and methodological interest are stronger and less subjectively oriented. Although they include the idea that wonder is called for as at least part of the appropriate response, the crux as well as the ground for the wonder is that a miracle should consist in an overriding of the order of nature. A miracle is something which would never have happened had nature, as it were, been left to its own devices. In this strong understanding of miracles, they are events which cannot be explained in terms intelligible to the natural scientist or observer of the regular processes of nature. Many would agree and there are historical evidences to the effect that miracles occur or that they have occurred. However, the topic of miracle has occasioned considerable philosophical debate.

As stated above, a widespread view of miracles sees them as breaks in the natural order of events in the material world. Sometimes these breaks are referred to as violations of natural laws and it is often said that these breaks or violations are brought about by God or by some extremely powerful being whose action can interfere with the normal course of nature’s operation. Aquinas gave a perfectly clear and unequivocal definition of miracles that makes no bones at all about the heart

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of the matter, namely, that “those things are properly called miracles which are done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature.”<sup>1</sup> A classical definition of miracles given in these terms also comes from David Hume who wrote on miracles in Chapter X of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>2</sup> ‘A miracle’, says Hume, ‘may be accurately defined as a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity or by the intervention of some invisible agents.’ Again, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr. Eric Mascall, remaining in the same forthright tradition, insisted in his article in *Chamber’s Encyclopaedia* that the word “miracle” signifies in Christian theology a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified. In the perspective of the Holy Quran, miracles are not only overriding but also signs and portents for all those who ponder and reflect. I shall explicate the manifold nuances and derivatives of the words “*aijaz*” and “*mu’jaza*” (miraculous and prodigious) in the later part of this article.

Let us first, very briefly and schematically, deal with David Hume’s position — the main and strongest opponent of miracles (as understood in the theistic framework) in modern Western thought. His main contention was, in his own words, that “a miracle can never be proved so as to be the foundation of a system of religion.” For him, all other questions about the miraculous were officially at least merely incidental to this basic tenet. Hume is supposed to have demonstrated the irrationality of the belief in miracles. If Hume is right, it is never rational to believe that some event is a miracle, or a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent. Recently, there have been attempts, made largely by analytical philosophers, to show that there are circumstances in which it is not irrational to believe that some events are miraculous. Steve Clark’s article “Hume’s Definition of Miracle Revised”<sup>3</sup> and Paul Dietl’s article “On Miracles”<sup>4</sup> are admirable attempts in this direction. Against Hume, Clark has argued that we can construct a set of circumstances under which it would be rational to believe in miracles, more rational indeed than any alternative account of the

anomalous occurrences. Thus, if we are confronted with repeated, reliable reports of a type of event which is an anomaly to a well-established law of nature, then Hume's probability objection does not hold. If further we are unable to justify allowing the exception as a *ceteris paribus* clause to the law, and we have no realistic expectations of being able to do so in the foreseeable future, then it becomes rational to believe that miracles have occurred; that is, there has been a supernatural violation of natural laws. Believing in miracles under these circumstances has the advantage of putting the anomalous occurrences within a theological framework, thus, protecting the well-established law of nature by securing its universality over naturally caused events. Following this strategy, the defence of the belief in miracles is not bogged down in the charge of incoherence, because there is no *natural* violation of a natural law, or alternatively, no violation of a natural law as it applies to naturally caused events.

All the objections raised by Hume against the possibility of miracles are conjectural, hypothetical or at least tentative and based on whimsical opinion. As a matter of fact contained within the general idea of believing in miracle are many different ideas, such as the law of nature, the "transgression" of such a law, a supernatural agent or God, when it is rational to believe something, and, so on, each with its own logical structure. It is not surprising at all, rather it is quite conceivable that opportunities exist for adjusting the structures of the constituent ideas to render the belief in miracles rational. For instance, Richard Swinburne<sup>5</sup> has argued that the notion of "transgression" can be understood in such a way that a miracle is not a violation of any law of nature. Alternatively, laws of nature can be conceived in such a way as to allow for miraculous violations of them.<sup>6</sup> Similarly Brian Davies, Antony Flew and J. C. A. Gaskin make strong and convincing criticisms against the Humean rejection of miracles. For example, Brian Davies presents an elaborate critical review thus.<sup>7</sup>

Suppose that some event occurs and is monitored by strict scientific methods. Let us suppose that some amazing planetary

motion is observed and that the whole process is noted by the most reputable scientists in the world. If we now say that this event can be explained in terms of some law of nature, we will evidently have to show that it exemplifies some previously noted phenomena and is understandable. But it may be that nobody observing it would say that it does exemplify some previously noted phenomena — at least, not in the sense that it exemplifies any phenomena reported and assimilated by scientists. If we want to deny that any natural law has been violated in this case, we will therefore have to revise our theories about the behaviour of the planets. The trouble now is that it might be enormously expensive to do so. We might have to agree, for example, that in accordance with perfectly natural laws it is more than conceivable that the planets should behave in the way observed on the occasion now in question. And such a position might play havoc with a vast amount of scientific theory. In such circumstances it might, in fact, be more economical and more reasonable to accept that a law of nature has been violated. But if this is correct, it follows that a law of nature can reasonably be said to be violated and that Hume is wrong to say that miracles are absolutely impossible.

Nor does it seem that this conclusion of Hume's is entirely consistent with some other things that he says. As is well-known to students of Hume, he denies any necessary connection between cause and effect. So how can he be so sure that certain reported events, like those said to have occurred in the Bible and the Quran could never happen? Antony Flew<sup>8</sup> suggests that when Hume declares that certain miracles are 'impossible' he means that they are physically impossible, not logically impossible. Flew adds that 'the criterion of physical as opposed to logical impossibility simply is logical incompatibility with a law of nature in the broadest sense. But in that case Hume is saying either that certain events do not happen or that what is said to happen conflicts with what we take to be laws of nature. But the first suggestion is not equivalent to the assertion that certain events could not happen and is in any case simply over-dogmatic and hardly a proof of anything relevant to a philosophical discussion of miracles. And the second suggestion seems open to

the reply that what we take to be a law of nature may just not be so. This point is well brought out by J. C. A. Gaskin:

Consider an example. Hume could have said (with complete justification) that it was physically impossible, according to the best nomologicals [propositions stating supposed laws of nature] at his disposal, for a man in England to be able to talk to and see a man who is at the same time in America. Now if he had taken this to mean 'it could not happen that ....' Then we would simply retort it *has* happened. In short, if we are to employ the notion of physical impossibility, the most this can mean is that: within 'our' experience of the world the event has not happened, nor are we able to conceive how it could happen, nor could it possibly happen *if* the laws of nature have in fact the form and content which we attribute to them. What force then has such impossibility got as used by a 'just reasoner' against a report of a miracle? No more force than Hume's original argument that the event is against all our past and what we presume to be our invariable experience. That is, there is a strong and rational presumption against the event but not a demonstration of its 'absolute impossibility' in any sense of that phrase in which it can be taken to imply '*could not happen*'.<sup>9</sup>

Two very serious faults in Hume's presentation of his denial of miracles may be formulated thus: The first fault is a rather unwarranted dogmatism of disbelief. For against all his own high, sceptical principles, Hume tended to take it for granted that what in his own day he and all his fellow men of sense firmly believed about the order of nature constituted not just humanly fallible opinion, but the incorrigible last word. He was thus betrayed into categorically dismissing as downright impossible certain reported phenomena which the later progress in the study of human psychology and psychosomatic medicine has since shown to have been perfectly possible. There is no gainsaying the importance of the canons of historical criticism and the determination of possibility and probability in evidence, but one

must not fail to appreciate that all such canons are themselves subject to criticism, correction and updating. I have above called Hume's dogmatic disbelief unwarranted because the radically different ideas (different from those held in Hume's days) have undermined the old notion of solidity of matter and a mechanistic worldview. Though Hume rightly emphasized the role of sentiments and emotion in human nature, his overall vision was extremely myopic. Recent development and growth of depth psychology has, on the other hand, opened up a new window on unravelling the inner denizens of human psyche, especially in the work of Stanislav Grof, which has revolutionized the psychodynamic theory with profound implications for religion.<sup>10</sup>

The second major fault in Hume's treatment is more serious. He was unable to provide an adequate account of the logical character of a law of nature. Hence, he could not offer any sufficiently persuasive rationale for employing propositions which express, or which are believed to express, such natural laws. The way may thus seem to be open for a historian who holds different presuppositions, yet still remains truly a historian, to endorse as veridical stories of events which, had they occurred, would have been truly miraculous. In my considered opinion few topics have in fact been more misunderstood or mishandled than miracles. Hume and all his acolytes put entirely the wrong interpretation on the prominence of miracles in the revealed narratives and unduly oversimplify the issue. We shall find the position not radically different in the cases of Muslim scholars who were under the spell of 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalism. It was as a result of deistic view of God and His relation to the universe that Sayyid Ahmad Khan denied the possibility of miracles and efficacy of prayer. As is well-known, he did not accept miracles as violation of nature for the "law of nature", according to him, "is a practical promise of God that something will happen so, and if we say it can happen otherwise we are accusing Him of going against His promise and this is inconceivable."<sup>11</sup> Very strangely he maintains that he does not deny the possibility of miracles because they are against reason, but because the Quran does not support the happenings of events or occurrences that are against the law of nature or those that

violate the usual course of things. Sayyed Ahmad Khan was definitely wrong in this view as the Quran is full of the accounts of miracles of earlier prophets and Prophet Muhammad himself. It is solely on account of naturalist/ apologetic interpretation of miracles very clear and oft-reported that his *Tafsir* did not gain popularity among the devout Muslims. If God is the mere Cause of causes and cannot rise above the laws of nature, then he is God only in name. God is really dethroned and all religious emotion and life become extinct. Sayyed Ahmad Khan is perhaps excusable as he was enchanted and overzealously influenced by the invading culture. The West had cast religion aside by submitting to the sovereignty of science. The world was no more located in God's omnipotence, nor was it explainable through revelatory knowledge but only through man's sensory experiences, explainable through a mechanistic materialism. Einstein and Planck's non-material view would take some time before it made its presence felt.

I suggest that, so far as the problem of miracles is concerned, we should take the Quranic understanding as our norm and therefore in the sequel an attempt will be made to explicate it. In the Quranic perspective, God is the Alpha and Omega of being and as such there is no duality or opposition between the natural and the supernatural. From the point of this theistic conception, the autonomy of nature, as it is increasingly confirmed by the sciences, offers no contradiction to religious belief and faith. The sciences are exploring a universe which is divinely created and sustained, but which has its own God-given autonomy and integrity. The Quran repudiates the conception of science as a simple, exclusively materialistic and totalising discourse. The entire cosmos and natural processes are important phenomena pointing beyond themselves to Divine activity. The Quran, and for that matter all revealed scriptures, know nothing of nature as a closed self-regulating system of law. Indeed from this point of view the very word "nature" as understood by mechanistic naturalists is un-Quranic. There is a continuum as one moves from the natural to the supra-natural. For the Quran, the whole of nature is one firm, well-knit structure with no gaps, no ruptures, and no dislocations. It works by its own laws, which

have been ingrained in it by God, and is, therefore, autonomous, but it is not autocratic, for in itself, it has no warrant or ultimacy for its own existence and cannot explain itself. Those who think that nature is "given" and therefore somehow "necessary" are like a child for whom toys are a "given" and therefore somehow "necessary".

Since nature is well-knit and working with laws that have been made inherent in it, there is undoubtedly "natural causation" and Quran recognizes this and calls it *sunnat-Allah*. This, however, does not mean that God creates nature and then goes to sleep; nor does this mean that God and nature or God and the human will are rivals and function at the expense of each other; nor yet does it mean that God operates in addition to the operations of man and nature. Nature's magnitude and utility for man, as well as the stability and regularity of natural phenomena are stressed. If you sow seeds and nurture the saplings, you can expect to reap the harvest; otherwise not. The working of natural causes, therefore, is inevitable and undeniable. The Quran uses both naturalistic and religious idioms to describe all world phenomena, with no question of contradiction between the two. On the contrary, the religious idiom presupposes the naturalistic language, and far from supplanting it, envelops it: winds and clouds do cause rains but it is God who brings rain and Who is working within the natural causes.

Quran is replete with historically authentic accounts of tangible miracles which provided evidence in support of the Prophet's claim to be designated by God. The Quraysh unbelievers had repeatedly asked the Prophet (Peace be upon him) to produce such signs. Quran's philosophy with regard to showing "signs" or "miracles" to people however was that once people witnessed such miracles and still refused to believe it, they inevitably invited God's chastisement upon themselves. Such people were not spared from destruction. If they did not care to accept the truth even after witnessing miracles, then they were bound to meet the calamitous end of nations like the Thamud. Miracles were never performed to entertain people. Their underlying purpose had always been to make people



realize that the Prophets enjoyed the support of God's infinite power. Additionally they served to warn people of the dire consequences of disobeying Him.

If people are concerned with miraculous signs in order to determine whether or not the message of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) is indeed true, then let them look around with open and attentive eyes. If they actually do so they will find the world full of such signs. Let them take any species of animal or bird they like. They can reflect upon the superbness of its organic structure. They will notice how its instinctive urges are in complete conformity with its natural requirements. They will also observe how wonderfully adequate are the arrangements for providing it with nourishment; how marvellously well-determined are the limits within which it lives, how tremendously efficient is the system under which each living creature is protected, provided for, looked after and directed towards self-fulfillment; how strictly each one is fitted into the framework of the discipline devised for it, and how very smooth is the operation of the whole system of birth, procreation and death. Were one to reflect on this alone from among the innumerable signs of God, one would perceive fully how true the teaching of the Prophet is concerning the reality, unity and other attributes of God and how necessary it is to live a righteous life in conformity with the concept of God preached by Him (Al-An'am: 38).

When the pagans of Mecca demanded "signs" or miracles from the Prophet, the Quran's usual response was to point out the complexity, the regularity, and the order of nature itself, and to emphasize that the universe and all that is in it could not have brought themselves into existence. This claim appears to rest on the assumption, or rather seeks to prove, that the same God who created nature and displayed His wisdom therein so clearly has also revealed the verses (*ayat*, also meaning "signs") of the Quran. Thus Muhammad's claim of prophecy stood vindicated. Thus, whereas natural miracles are, in a sense, weak for most mankind and in the Quran are usually called simply *ayat*, the historical (portents) miracles, the supernatural miracles, and

much more patently the revelation, are called *ayat bayyinat*, or simply *bayyinat*: clear, manifest, and indubitable signs. Previous nations had been shown supernatural miracles at the hands of their prophets exactly as they had demanded them, but the people still rejected the prophets. Similarly if Muhammad (Peace be upon him) were to bring a thousand miracles to the Meccans or to Jews, it still would do them no good.

The demonstration of life after death (of probably a Prophet who remained dead for a hundred years and then raised to life), the incidence of the quickening of four birds for Abraham,<sup>12</sup> the birth of a child to the infertile wife of Zechariah, the miraculous birth of Jesus, the consumption by a fire from the sky of the sacrifice accepted by God.<sup>13</sup> Prophet Saleh's she-camel, numerous miracles of Moses,<sup>14</sup> Job's (Ayyub) striking the ground with his foot and flowing of a spring<sup>15</sup> are some of innumerable occurrences of miracles narrated by the Quran. They are, so to speak, macro-miracles which do not admit of any apologetic reduction, attenuation or reinterpretation. From the religious point of view, all attempts at naturalist interpretation of such authentic happenings are at best irrelevant, and at worst, they take away the religiousness of the belief in miracles, depriving the believer an important expression of religiousness. The belief in the veracity of miracles, to be a religious belief, is an expression of a certain passion, and is not a matter of cognition and hence not a matter of sense-based limited rationality. On the other hand, we cannot rule out God's hands even in the ordinary affairs of life — the level of, what may be called, micro-miracles. Here even process/activities like speaking or lifting one's arm are nothing less than a miracle (all neuro-physiological explanations notwithstanding). Even intending to move my arm involves what Nicolai Hartmann has aptly called 'a plus of determination' which uses physical processes without wholly suspending them. The element of nescience and uncanny in the field of mind-body relationship puts in bold relief subtle affinity between my sense of micro-miracles and Flanagan's mysterianism.<sup>16</sup> I shall here quote extensively from my paper presented in the last national seminar organized by HSSRD<sup>17</sup> and published in its journal.



Flanagan uses the term “Mysterian” for the position that there is something fundamentally inexplicable about how physical processes result in conscious experience. According to his view, mysterianism in its strong sense means our inability to explain consciousness. And it reflects a built-in cognitive limitation. Weak mysterianism remains more agnostic. We cannot understand how consciousness would be physical, and, what is more, this is a fundamental sort of not understanding; not the sort that is alleviated by a little more research along the same lines we have explored already. Indeed many philosophers today openly express their epistemic puzzlement on the issues and plead to live with puzzlement. And, in my view, it corroborates and affirms the Quranic assertion:

O men, you have been granted very little of (real) knowledge. (Bani Israel 17:85)

Man is endowed with as much knowledge only as he is capable of understanding and utilizing; and a knowledge of the nature of soul does not lie within his purview. Even the physical nature of life is not quite easy for modern science to explain, and this is admitted by the leading biologists themselves. And quite a few materialist philosophers have been led to confess: “The more we learn about nature, the more do we become aware of our own ignorance.” The sphere of the Unknown is infinite; the sphere of the Known may be expanding but is always finite.

There are, however, people who cannot swallow the notion of epistemic puzzlement or mystery. Perhaps it would be useful to draw their attention to this passage by Albert Einstein. “The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead.” Einstein’s view was shared by other great scientists — Niels Bohr, Max Planck and Werner Heisenberg — who concluded (at the end of their life-long enquiries) that there is room in a rational universe for incomprehensible wonders. We must, therefore, realize that the biggest, most fascinating mysteries are to be savoured, not resolved.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 2, Chap. 10, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York, 1956), p. 82.
- 2 *Enquiry*, p. 115.
- 3 See his article in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1999): 49-57. Also immensely thought provoking is his earlier piece "When to Believe in Miracles", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (1997): 95-102.
- 4 See his article in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 5(1968): 130-34.
- 5 Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracles* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970).
- 6 M. Leckey and J. Bigelow, "The Necessitarian Perspective: Laws as Natural Entailments" in F. Weinert, ed. *Laws of Nature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 92-119.
- 7 Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, OPUS Books, Oxford (1993), pp. 110-11.
- 8 Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London, 1961), p. 168.
- 9 J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London, 1960), Ch. 7.
- 10 See Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), p. 427-29.
- 11 *Tafsir al-Quran*, Volume III, p. 28.
- 12 Al-Baqarah: 259, 260.
- 13 Al-Imran: 40, 47, 183.
- 14 Bani Israil: 59, 101, 102; Taha: 40, 68-70.
- 15 Al-Anbia: 83; Saad: 42ff.
- 16 Flanagan, D. (1992), *Consciousness Reconsidered*. Cambridge, MD, the MIT Press.
- 17 "Science and Philosophy of Mind", published in *Science-Religion Dialogue*, Volume 1, No. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 5-13.