

MIRACLES: A PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION

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1. The Common Notion

For many people, a miracle involves a breach of the laws of nature. In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Antony Flew notes that the crux and ground of a miracle is the overriding of the order of nature.¹ In *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Charles C. Hefling, Jr. describes a miracle as “an astounding event, astounding because it is extraordinary, and extraordinary [because] what has occurred is or involves a breach of the usual natural order.”²

Some insist on adding a reference to God: a miracle can be worked only by God or his agents.³ Thus Hefling goes on: “Nature ‘on its own’ does not bring forth miracles; if they occur, the laws of nature must, by way of exception, have been suspended or overridden; and such a suspension can only be ascribed, directly or indirectly, to God.”⁴ The new *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says that a miracle is an unusual event, the result of direct divine intervention, circumvention or modification of natural order.⁵ The *Dizionario delle idee* (published by a Jesuit philosophical faculty in Gallarate, Italy) describes a miracle as a fact of experience which is an exception to the laws of nature and which goes beyond those laws, and owes its explanation to a positive intervention of God.⁶

For some, a miracle is an event that nature *did* not

produce; for others, it is an event that nature *could* not produce; for still others, it is simply an event in which God was involved.⁷

2. The Attack on Miracles

The conception of miracle outlined above has been under attack since the time of the philosophers Spinoza and Hume. This conception is 'logically parasitical' on the idea of an order to which it is an exception. Now Hume and company believed in a very rigid conception of natural order, and on this mechanist and determinist conception, it was inconceivable to think of exceptions to the laws of nature. They therefore concluded that the very concept of miracle is self-contradictory.⁸

Today of course very few scientists subscribe to Hume's mechanist and determinist view of natural order. Classical empirical laws are no longer considered to be logical certainties, but only verified possibilities. Further, statistical laws are not mere cloaks for ignorance. And since both classical and statistical laws obtain in our universe, our universe is not a mechanistic and deterministic universe, but rather one in which genuine novelty is possible.⁹

However, there is another objection. A. McKinnon points out that natural laws are merely a generalization of what in fact happens. To call something a violation of this is funny. If we do in fact come across a 'violation', we are not entitled to consider it a miracle; what we must do instead is modify the law! So the very concept of miracle is incoherent.¹⁰ The counter-argument is that this argument overlooks the possibility of direct divine activity which is part of the definition of a miracle. We cannot assume that a miracle is conceptually

impossible unless we assume that divine intervention itself is impossible.¹¹

But there is yet another variation of the argument. To say that anything is inexplicable is to reject the fundamental methodological principle of all science. Science can never say something is inexplicable; it can at most say that in the present state of our knowledge, it is inexplicable. It can never give up its search for an explanation in the realm of the phenomenal; it can never look to a transcendent cause for an explanation.¹²

Again, even granted that miracles are possible, how are we to identify miracles? Since Hume, the real discussion regarding miracles centres around our ability to identify miracles.¹³ Flew points out that we have no natural way of knowing where an event is within the bounds of natural possibilities, and where it exceeds such bounds. The attitude of a scientist, when faced with something that seems inexplicable, is to *revise* his earlier law, rather than say that it exceeds the capacities of nature.¹⁴ The *Dizionario delle idee* supports this view when it notes that divine intervention can be excluded only a priori, but admits that the passage from extraordinary fact to attribution to God is complicated.¹⁵

Yet another argument against miracles runs thus: even if miracles are possible, are they fitting? At the beginning of the last century, P. Bayle argued that miracles are ridiculous, and that God's greatness lies in enforcing his own laws.¹⁶ Bernard Shaw concurs: miracles are improper; they make God appear whimsical, assigning some events more than others a revelatory value.¹⁷ The originator of this line of reasoning is Spinoza: miracles as after-thoughts are unworthy of God.¹⁸

We may note that the rationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dominated the method of historical investigation, including Higher Criticism of the Bible, even into the twentieth century.¹⁹ Bultmann, for example, held that miracles are unintelligible in a world governed by science.²⁰ Till recently, contemporary exegesis has tended to reject miracles as historical facts.²¹ There has prevailed the a priori attitude that miracles are impossible, and that miracle stories have to be explained away, keeping only the existential and faith meaning.²²

Radical exegesis also appeals to the history of religions. From a similarity in literary structures it passes to a judgment of value: all these narratives are fables.²³

Recently however there has been some abandonment of this rigid a priori approach. But for many, the old view remains.²⁴

3. The Contemporary (Christian) Theological Notion

We have been examining the very common notion of miracle as a breach of the laws of nature, but now we must point out that contemporary Christian theology offers quite a different notion of miracle, one which makes no mention of any violation of the natural order.

Thus Hefling observes that contemporary (Christian) theology is reluctant to discuss miracle as involving breach of the usual order of nature, and that it shifts emphasis to the personal and existential dimensions. These, he says, are missing in the received view, but are very much present in the New Testament, which considers a miracle as a vehicle of meaning,

a sign which invites a personal response of commitment, conversion, faith.²⁵

R. McBrien speaks of miracles as manifestations of the power of God which are consistent with divine providence.²⁶

McFadden describes a miracle as a religious sign whereby God testifies to his saving presence by an extraordinary event, and points out that in the Bible the implication of an event beyond the forces of nature is not necessarily present.²⁷

R. Latourelle insists that miracles cannot be defined a priori as a breach of the laws of nature, or as the product of a primitive mentality, or as a literary genre common to all religions. They should be defined only with respect to and in the context of (Christian) revelation.²⁸ Apart from Christ and salvation, he says, miracles have no meaning.²⁹ In the light of the personalization of revelation and of the signs of revelation brought about by Vatican II, a miracle may be defined as follows: "A religious wonder that expresses, in the cosmic order (human beings and the universe), a special and utterly free intervention of the God of power and love, who thereby gives human beings a sign of the presence of his message of salvation in the world."³⁰

So contemporary Christian theology has been involved in a redefinition of the notion of miracle. But is this some sort of dodge in the face of trenchant philosophical criticism? Perhaps not, and the key to this is a consideration of the classical pre-Enlightenment notion of miracle.

4. The Classical Notion

For St. Augustine, miracles are not *contra naturam* (against nature). God's will is the source of all things, and nothing can be *contra naturam* which happens by God's will. Everything is natural, not to us perhaps, but certainly to God. Miracles are really part of an established order.³¹

Proceeding along the same lines, the scholastic theologians of the middle ages distinguished between a higher and a lower order of nature. The higher order is at once natural and supernatural. It is God's ideal plan. It contains the *causales rationales et primordiales* (primordial causes) of miracles. Miracles are not extraordinary to God. They are beyond the lower order of nature (*praeter hanc ordinem*), but not *contra naturam* as such.³²

Thus neither Augustine nor the Schoolmen defined miracle as involving a breach of the laws of nature. This view, that a miracle involves a circumvention or modification of the laws of nature, evolved only later; and it is this view that is attacked by Spinoza and Hume.³³

5. Miracles in Other Religions

It is a well-known fact that miracles are reported not only in the Catholic religion but also in the other churches, in the sects, and in non-Christian religions.

The history of religions defines miracle as an event, action or state that is so unusual or extraordinary and supernatural that the normal level of human consciousness finds it hard to accept rationally. It is usually taken as a

manifestation of a divine being, but it may also be caused to occur ‘naturally’ by controlling the consciousness through visions, dreams, meditation.³⁴ Among the natural causes must also be included magical powers which are generated through spells, mantras, mediums, and past karmic actions.³⁵

The Buddhist sacred books provide the following classification of ‘superknowledges’ (*abhijnas*):

1. magical powers, deriving from concentration of the will: teleportation, thought transference, seeing things from a distance
2. clairaudience
3. telepathy
4. memory of former lives
5. knowledge of future lives
6. liberation, or cessation of mental defilements.³⁶

H. Choudhuri, a modern yoga scholar, offers the following classification of yogic magical powers (*siddhis*):

1. extra-sensory powers: these include the first five *abhijnas* of the Buddhists
2. physical powers
3. wisdom powers and transcendent powers
4. ecstatic powers.³⁷

It is important to note that yogic powers are considered as a possible block to *mukti*. Only when they are renounced can a person proceed to the highest liberation.³⁸

In general, there are three ways of acquiring magico-religious powers:

1. as a medium: through possession by a deity or spirit
2. as an instrument: by way of election or

- commission by a deity or spirit
3. as a free agent: by attainment of mastery over the subtle body or mind.³⁹

What can we say then about miracles in a non-Christian context? We must distinguish firstly between magical powers and religious powers: magic uses techniques that are mysterious to the beholders but commonplace to the masters; religious powers instead are equally mysterious to both. Those who wield religious power may operate as mediums of a higher power.⁴⁰

Again much of what the Western world considers miraculous would in another tradition be perhaps considered fruit of powers attained by meditation, concentration of the will, etc.: cf. the yogic *siddhis*.

Further most Catholics do not seem to have trouble admitting that the Spirit and Power of God may blow wherever it will. But what of miracles as evidence of the divinity of Christ and of the validity of the Christian religion? In a study published in 1965, a Catholic priest comes to the following conclusion after having engaged in a comparative study of miracles:

“Claims of miracles in historical documents, then, can be divided into three categories: obvious frauds, incomplete signs, and complete signs. In this category fall no well-known claims outside of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. And within this tradition, at least the miracles of Christ qualify collectively as a complete sign, so that still, after nineteen centuries, the light from his works makes that of all others seem as darkness. His works shine as a beacon guiding all men to look again at his words, the first and last source of peace.”⁴¹

Such a conclusion today raises a hornet's nest of questions. Hume himself had already pointed out that if a miracle is to serve as endorsement of a doctrinal system, that miracle must be independent of that system, and the means of identification must also be logically independent of that system. Appealing to revelation itself for evidence in favor of revelation is useless.⁴²

Not all theologians however are willing to take Hume as the last word on this matter. Few would care to defend classical apologetics. But Latourelle represents those who propose that revelation be considered in terms of its intrinsic persuasiveness. In addition, he also proposes an evaluation of the historicity of miracle stories, both in a global way and individually. The individual evaluation is done by means of a set of internal criteria: multiple attestation; discontinuity with earlier and later tradition; conformity or continuity with the basic teachings of the wonder-worker; a style marked by simplicity, restraint and authority; internal intelligibility of the stories; substantial agreement in the midst of divergent interpretations; the criterion of 'necessary explanation'; and finally, individual examination of each miracle story.⁴³

Will such a procedure give us definitive results? Perhaps not, but nonetheless it is worth trying out in an ecumenical and inter-religious setting. Neither 'progressives' nor 'conservatives' should assume that they know the outcome *a priori*.⁴⁴

6. What Then Can We Say About Miracles?

6.1 *Are miracles possible?*

It all depends how one defines miracles. On the rationalist-determinist view, the very notion of miracle is self-contradictory, and so miracles are impossible a priori. On a non-rationalist, non-determinist view, miracles are possible. Such a world view is found in Augustine and the Schoolmen. Such is also the world view which is emerging from the labors of contemporary science.

6.2 *Are miracles fitting?*

This difficulty can apply equally to the whole economy of God's intervention in history. From the Christian point of view, this would involve asking: Why the incarnation? Why the Church? Why sacraments? As Hefling points out, the difficulties regarding miracles are a species of a more general problem: how to interpret '*grace perfects nature*'.⁴⁵ Miracles presuppose recognition of a free and transcendent being who can establish interpersonal relationships with human beings, who can intervene in history, who is lord of history. Creation does not exhaust God's freedom.⁴⁶ To question miracles is to question the incarnation, the redemption, the Church, the sacraments; it amounts ultimately to questioning God's freedom.

6.3 *Can miracles be identified?*

On the rationalist-determinist notion of miracle, this becomes next to impossible. As we have seen above, science can never say something is inexplicable; it can at most say that in the present state of our knowledge, it is inexplicable. It can

never give up its search for an explanation in the realm of the phenomenal; it can never look for a transcendent cause for an explanation.⁴⁷ On a non-rationalist and non-determinist notion, however, we do not have to prove that an event is scientifically inexplicable. If the event is extraordinary or baffling, it is enough to confirm its value as a sign.⁴⁸

7. A Concluding Word

I have been taking the position that given a proper notion of miracle, miracles cannot be a priori ruled out as impossible; that in fact, they are possible to the supreme power and freedom of God. Having said that, there are plenty of other questions that could be raised, but these are theological and pastoral questions, and I leave them to others. I end with the following observation by R.H. Lesser:

“Miracles are gifts of the Spirit to an individual but they are definitely for the sake of others to build up the Church. They may, but they need not, build up or even indicate the sanctity of the person through whom they are worked. Indeed, since it is possible to be deceived on this matter (pseudo-miracles are common) St. John of the Cross prayed that he might not be given that gift.”⁴⁹

Notes

¹Antony Flew, “Miracles,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan, 1972) 5:346.

²Charles C. Hefling, Jr., “Miracle,” *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J.A. Komonchak, et al. (Bangalore: TPI, 1993) 661-62.

³Flew 346.

⁴Hefling 662.

⁵David Basinger, "Miracles," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 6:412.

⁶Centro di Studi Filosofici di Gallarate, "Miracolo," *Dizionario delle idee* (Florence: G.C. Sansoni Editore, 1977) 704.

⁷Basinger 412.

⁸Cf. Flew 346-347; *Dizionario delle idee* 705.

⁹Hefling 663. Cf. also T.M. McFadden, "Miracle," *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, ed. P.K. Meagher et al. (Washington: Corpus, 1979) 2380: the world is not a closed, deterministic system. A basic discussion of this view may be found in B. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) esp. ch.4.

¹⁰A. McKinnon, "'Miracle' and 'Paradox'," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967) 308-314, cited in Basinger 412.

¹¹Basinger 412.

¹²R. Laurentin, *Catholic Pentecostalism* (London: DLT, 1977) 128. Cf. the same point in *Dizionario delle idee* 705.

¹³Basinger 413.

¹⁴Flew 348-49.

¹⁵*Dizionario delle idee* 705.

¹⁶R. Latourelle, "Miracle," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella (Slough: St.Pauls, 1994) 691.

¹⁷Hefling 663.

¹⁸Latourelle, "Miracle" 691.

¹⁹Hefling 663.

²⁰Latourelle, "Miracle" 692.

²¹R. Latourelle, "Miracolo," in *Nuovo dizionario di teologia*, 4th ed., ed. G. Barbaglio and S. Dianich (Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1985) 933.

²²Cf. McFadden 2380; Latourelle, "Miracolo," 933.

²³Latourelle, "Miracolo," 933.

²⁴Hefling 663.

²⁵Hefling 662.

²⁶R. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 3rd ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994) 342, 339.

²⁷McFadden 2379.

²⁸Latourelle, "Miracolo" 931.

²⁹Latourelle, "Miracle" 690.

³⁰Latourelle, "Miracle" 701.

- ³¹J.A. MacCulloch, "Miracles," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1930) 3:687.
- ³²MacCulloch 687.
- ³³MacCulloch 687.
- ³⁴M. Waida, "Miracles. An Overview," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan, 1987) 9:541-48.
- ³⁵R.A.F. Thurman, "Magico-Religious Powers," *Encyclopedia of Religion* 9:115-118.
- ³⁶Thurman 115-118.
- ³⁷Thurman 115.
- ³⁸Waida 545.
- ³⁹Thurman 117.
- ⁴⁰Thurman 115-118.
- ⁴¹R.D. Smith, *Comparative Miracles* (St.Louis: B. Herder, 1965) 178.
- ⁴²Flew 348-49.
- ⁴³Latourelle, "Miracle" 694-97.
- ⁴⁴For more details regarding such a method, cf. B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
- ⁴⁵Hefling 664.
- ⁴⁶Latourelle, "Miracolo" 932-933.
- ⁴⁷Laurentin 128.
- ⁴⁸Laurentin 129.
- ⁴⁹R.H. Lesser, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal* (Bangalore: TPI, 1978) 198.

