

Is it reasonable to believe that miracles occur? (Long abstract)

Traditionally, miracles have been defined as supernaturally caused events which are outside the scope of scientific explicability. The motivation for this definition is that it seems to preserve both God's causal role in the occurrence of miraculous events and their alleged apologetic force: since miracles are scientifically inexplicable, they do not have a natural cause and they can only be explained by appealing to a supernatural one, *i.e.* God. Thus, this characterization of the miraculous seems to offer the theist the possibility of constructing an 'argument from miracles', an argument for showing the existence of God by appealing to the occurrence of scientifically inexplicable events.

Any characterization of the miraculous in terms of scientific explicability must be able to distinguish between events that are outside the scope of scientific explicability and those that do not *yet* have a scientific explanation. Notice that the question I am focusing on now is epistemological, *i.e.* *how* we can distinguish between events that are outside the scope of scientific explicability and those that do not *yet* have a scientific explanation, and not logical, *i.e.* whether it is logically consistent to make this distinction. For the sake of the discussion, I am assuming that in principle there is nothing logically contradictory in the possibility of scientifically inexplicable events.

The justification usually offered for claiming that an event is a miraculous one is grounded on claims that we do not have a scientific explanation for that event and that it is adequately explained by a theistic explanation. This argument is construed on pragmatic grounds. When faced with an event for which we have no scientific explanation and where that event is adequately explained by a theistic one, the most reasonable thing to do is to conclude that it is outside the scope of scientific explicability by sticking to the theistic explanation: since we already have a successful explanation for the event, it would be unreasonable to be without any explanation at all, while hoping for a scientific explanation which may or may not be available one day (it would be, so to say, *an unjustified act of faith*).

This line of reasoning can be found in Holland and Swinburne.¹ Holland argues that there are occasions when looking for a scientific explanation is too high a price to

¹ Holland (1965). "The Miraculous". *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1), 48-49; Swinburne (1970). *The Concept of Miracle*. New York: St Martin's Press, 29-32.

pay since it requires us to abandon our already well-justified scientific theories that work well with all other known cases. In such a position, since these events are adequately explained by a theistic explanation, it is preferable to stick to this rather than try to reformulate our scientific theories to accommodate the event for which we have no scientific explanation. Similarly, Swinburne argues that if reformulating our scientific theories to accommodate the alleged violation of a natural law implies that these theories lose predictive power and simplicity, then it is more reasonable to conclude that the event is outside the scope of scientific explicability rather than try to find a scientific explanation for it.

The aim of this talk is to show that this argument does not work neither from an atheistic point of view, nor from a theistic one.

From an atheistic point of view, the argument fails for two reasons. First, because theistic explanations are intentional explanations and, as such, they only work if we assume that the *explanandum* is the result of the intentional activity of a supernatural rational agent, but this is precisely the claim for which the atheist is seeking justification. In other words, from an atheist point of view, an explanation in terms of God's intentions and purposes can never constitute an adequate explanation for an event since the atheist does not recognize divine intentionality in any event. Second, because even conceding that the hypothesis of God's existence would provide a possible explanation for certain events which do not fit with our current scientific knowledge, this does not mean that the explanatory power of the theistic explanation *overrides* the ontological cost of positing the existence of a supernatural cause. This seems to be false: when faced with an event that seems to falsify our best scientific knowledge, we have many options which are more rational than completely turning around our best scientific theories. We can decide that the event has not been correctly described, that a hidden variable is interfering or that it has been inadequately measured, and so on. This is a common strategy in the philosophy of science. If this is right, then it should be even more obvious that the high ontological cost of positing a supernatural entity such as God makes sticking to the theistic explanation not reasonable. This explains why, unless there is minimal prior plausibility for God's existence, the most reasonable thing to do when faced with an event for which we have no scientific explanation – even if it is adequately explained by a theistic explanation – is to simply consider it as an event for which we do not have a scientific explanation *now* and to wait until a scientific

explanation is found. Indirectly, this is to show that miracles have no apologetic force and, consequently, that there is no possibility of constructing an argument from miracles for showing the existence of God.

The mere acceptance of God's existence, however, does not justify this criterion for identifying miraculous events. Even if we are engaged in a theistic world-view wherein the reality of God is not questioned, we still need to show that theistic explanations have enough explanatory power to constitute an adequate explanation of an event.

The problem is that it is disputable whether the knowledge we have of God's intentions and purposes is enough to make theistic explanations workable. If we focus on the Christian tradition, the miracles reported reflect selectivity in God's interventions, which is inconsistent with His alleged all-good nature: God's interventions seem arbitrary, capricious, and hence unfair. Some (but not all) prayers are answered, some (but not all) sick people get healed, and we can find no reason to explain why God acts on some occasions but not others: all terminally ill children deserve God's helping Hand, but not all children are healed. Some attempts have been made to explain this selectivity in the miracles reported in a way that makes them compatible with the benevolent nature of God, but these answers cannot be applied to all situations (*e.g.*, why did God, who had intervened on other more trivial occasions, remain silent during the Holocaust?). Since God is an all-good Being, the unfair nature of miracles shows that the notion of miracle is inconsistent with the very notion of God. The only way to explain God's absence in a way which is consistent with His all-good nature is by claiming that God acts according to a benevolent plan which we cannot comprehend, *i.e.* that God had reasons for not stopping the concentration camps, and that these reasons are benevolent. This, however, is to accept our ignorance of God's intentions and purposes and hence our incapacity to recognize which events follow God's intentions and purposes, which in turn implies that, even from a theistic perspective, no theistic explanation can constitute an adequate explanation of any event.

The most reasonable thing for both the theist and the atheist to do then, is to conclude that events for which we have no scientific explanation *now* are in fact scientifically explicable.