

Miracle or Mirage? The Paradox of Miracles & Science

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Sheikh Mansour Leghaei

What are miracles? Do they exist? Are miracles a form of magic? What is the scientific take on miracles? This and more in this very educative and thorough text.

Introduction

The first issue after proving the existence of God is the fact that He has appointed and dispatched some selective humans as His messengers to guide man to the right path.

The position of prophet-hood is the greatest status man can enjoy and as such, unfortunately there have been false claims as to whether the person is truly a messenger of God or not. Thus, like any other claim it needs ample proof that the claimant is genuine and honest.

In normal life if someone knocks on your door with the claim that he is an undercover police officer and needs to ask you some questions, you may not co-operate with him unless you have seen his genuine identification.

Historically, there have been people who claimed to be the messengers of God and recipients of His divine message by means of revelations. They also advocated for believing in God, the life in the hereafter, moral values and things as such. These people can be either true in their claim, or are completely forged prophets such as Mosaylema, or that the claimer himself is hallucinating.

التحدي

There can be three different approaches to them: a) accepting whoever comes with such claims, b) rejecting all who have such claims, c) accepting them if they have ample evidence for their claim.

The first two approaches are against commonsense, for on the one hand accepting all may mislead humanity, which gives the chance to any forged person, and on the other hand rejecting them all could deprive man of divine guidance.

Thus, the wise approach is to ask for evidence or a sign to prove his legitimacy.

The sign must also be so unique that no one else is capable of duplicating it. In fact, a prophet presents the Sign of God with His permission and also calls upon all people to challenge and contest the Sign.

A miracle is the evidence and the sign of a true invitation of a prophet. Their evidence is also so unique and genuine that no one can present or produce anything like it.

In the modern English language, the usage of the word miracle is meant quite differently than that of the traditional use. The modern sense of miracle is merely a remarkable specimen of ingenuity. Thus, I suggest the Arabic term 'Al-Mo'jezeh' is more adequate for the purpose of this chapter.

The term 'Al-Mo'jezeh' (which is normally translated to 'Miracle') in Arabic, means 'an act that all other humans are incapable of performing similar to that.'

I shall however, mention that the term 'miracle' is not mentioned in the Quran. The concept of miracle is always referred to in the Quran as 'Sign', 'Proof', 'Evidence' and similar words.

For instance:

وَقَالُوا لَوْلَا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْهِ آيَاتٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِ ۚ قُلْ إِنَّمَا الْآيَاتُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَإِنَّمَا أَنَا نَذِيرٌ مُبِينٌ

Ye they say: "Why are not Signs sent down to him from his Lord?" Say: "The signs are indeed with Allah: and I am indeed a clear Warner." (29:50)

وَرَسُولًا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَنِّي قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِآيَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ ...

“And (appoint him) a messenger to the Children of Israel, (with this message): ‘I have come to you, with a Sign from your Lord...’” (3:49)

Similarly, the term used to describe miracle in the Bible, is ‘S^{ign}meion’ (see for instance: Acts 2:22)

The problem is, since the purpose of miracles is to manifest the existence of God and they occur in an unordinary way, which leaves mankind in absolute wonder and submission and realization of an omnipotent metaphysical power.

So a miracle is an act of a messenger of God, by the will of God, to perform something absolutely out of man’s capacity of performance.

The Characteristics of Miracles

1. Miracles are well beyond man’s power of any age, they cannot be reproduced by anyone else and can be distinguished from natural occurrence or even marvelous events.
2. Miracles are the acts of the Prophets but cannot happen without the Providence, Will and the Might of God. For this reason the emphasis is always given in the Quran that they can only occur ‘With the Permission of God’, or by ‘His revelation’. 1

وَمَا كَانَ لِرَسُولٍ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ بِآيَةٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

And certainly We sent messengers before you and gave them wives and children, and it is not in (the power of) an messenger to bring a sign except by Allah's permission (13:38)

Similarly, in the Bible miracles are called ‘the Finger of God [Exodus, VIII, 19 Luke XI, 20]. Thus, miracles are the manifestation of God’s power.

3. Prophets are capable of performing miracles due to the divine knowledge they enjoy², which provides them with ‘The Power of Changing’ (Welayatul-Tasarrof).

العبد يتقرب الي بالنوافل...

4. Their occurrence is not irrational.

5. They are not contrary to the principles of divine religion. Thus, converting water to wine cannot be accepted as a miracle of a prophet.

6. The dignity of miracles: Miracles are positive and are blessings. Miracles never produce any disorder, discord or any element which is wicked, ridiculous, useless or meaningless. Hence, they are not on the same plane with mere wonders, tricks, works of ingenuity or magic. For instance, no Prophet destroys a forest miraculously, nor would he ever cause any harm in showing his miracle.

Miracle, Magic & Keramat

Some Examples of Miracles

The literature of religious traditions is filled with stories of strange and mysterious events. Muslims, Christians and Jews have all reported many different types of miracles from the Prophets. Here are some examples of the miracles performed by the Prophets as reported by the Bible or the Holy Quran.

1) Moses: It is mentioned in the book of Exodus as well as in the Quran, that when the Egyptians pursued the Israelites and caught up to them at the Red Sea, the Israelites panicked. Moses, by the will of God, split the sea and they crossed it to a dry land. The Egyptians pursued them into the sea and at God's command, Moses stretched his hand forth over the sea and its water closed up again and the Egyptians were drowned.³]

2) Jesus: According to the Bible and the Quran, Jesus was born of a virgin mother, healed a person born blind, raised the dead and ascended to heaven. The present Bible also narrates that he turned water to wine, walked on water etc. The miracle of his virgin birth is considered in Christianity the greatest miracle.

3) Prophet Muhammad: In spite of the false assumption of many orientalist who denied that the Prophet of Islam enjoyed any miracle, there have been many miracles reported from the Prophet of Islam too. As for now an example of his miracle was glorification of the pebbles in his hand. As I shall deal with his miracle in a separate chapter, I will not further discuss any details on it for the time being.

Since these events cannot be explained in ordinary terms, they can then only be explained in terms of some supernatural power, which means God caused them to occur. Thus, it proves the existence of God and the credibility of His messenger in whose hand the miracle has taken place. Imagine you see a shepherd stretch his hand over the sea and the sea splits into two parts and immediately a dry road opens amidst the sea! What other than a supernatural power could explain that?

There is however, a problem that the miracles as narrated seem contrary to the laws of nature that we know of. This created a question about the validity and credibility of the reported miracles.

In other words, if you believe in God and His messengers, then you are needless of any miracle and

should it happen, it does not give you any more knowledge. But if you don't believe in God and his messengers, then the narration of miracles prove nothing to you as they are contrary to your universal observations and hence sound more like fairy tales.

According to Newtonian's concept of nature, the natural laws are fixed and immutable. In an empirical view we always observe physical objects fall in accordance with Newton's law of gravitation. There are no known exceptions. But a miracle would be an exception. Hence, miracles are contrary to universal scientific observation.

The Jewish-born philosopher of the 17th century – Spinoza – has put this argument that can be summarized as follows:

- Miracles are violations of natural laws.
- Natural laws are immutable.
- It is impossible for immutable laws to be violated.
- Therefore, miracles are impossible.⁴

David Hume: After Spinoza, David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and developer of skepticism in the 18th century, continued the arguments in chapter 10 (Of the Miracles) of his book; *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

David Hume said of his argument: "I flatter myself that I have discovered an argument . . . which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion and consequently will be useful as long as the world endures."⁵

In short Hume's argument about miracles is as follows:

1. A Miracle is a violation of the law of nature.
2. No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony is of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, even in that case there is a mutual destruction of argument.
3. There is not to be found in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves.
4. There are many instances of forged miracles and prophecies, which in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence or which detect themselves by their absurdity which begets a suspicion against all relations of this kind.
5. The fact that such prodigious events never happen in our days, shows that ignorant and barbarous nations in the past would relate any event they had no scientific explanation for to a supernatural power, such as famine, sudden death and miracles is of the same nature.

6. Man's inclination to the marvelous has given full opportunity to propagate miracles.

7. It is impossible for all religions to be established on any solid foundation. Thus, their testimony on their miracles destroys their testimony.⁶

I may add two more provisional points to the list of Hume which puts the religious people in a serious dilemma.

8. The law of cause and effect is one of the basic laws by which we prove the existence of God. That means for instance fire is always the cause of burning. Miracle, however, means fire sometimes doesn't burn— as in the story of Ibrahim when thrown to the fire—. Thus, for a miracle to be true, the causative proof of God is wrong and if the law of cause and effect is not universal and necessary then no miracle can occur.

9. There must also be compatibility between a cause and its effect or else *لصدر من كل شيء كل شيء* that means water does not boil by any cause, thus ice cannot cause water to boil. Therefore, there is a necessary relation between a cause and its effect, the lack of which results in the lack of the other. However, in the instance of miracle it is claimed that the cause is missing, but the effect exists!

The great problem of modern theology therefore is the place and value of miracles.

Now after all, is there any reason to suppose that miracles do exist? Is there any answer to the questions without a prior commitment to a general metaphysical position?

Suggested Answers

1. Naturalism V. Supernaturalism

C.S. Lewis the well-known 20th century's Christian writer maintains in 'Miracles' that in order to assess whether miracles exist, it is first necessary to decide between naturalism and supernaturalism.

He argues: "It by no means follows from Supernaturalism that Miracles of any sort do in fact occur. God (the primary being) may never in fact interfere with the natural system He has created. If we decide that Nature is not the only thing there is, then we cannot say in advance whether she is safe from miracles or not. But if Naturalism is true, then we know in advance that miracles are impossible: nothing can come in to nature from the outside because there is nothing outside to come in, Nature being everything...our finest choice therefore must be between naturalism and supernaturalism.

Comment

Obviously, if Lewis is correct, then the existence of miracles could not provide any independent support for the existence of God, since in order to establish the existence of miracles one would already have to assume supernaturalism.

Moreover, even if we assume Supernaturalism, still one ought to be able to have a rational explanation for the miracles.

2. It's Symbolic

Paul Tillich; the famous Protestant German-born U.S. theologian and philosopher, died in 1965, based on his opinion on religious language, suggests that the language of the Scripture is symbolic. Thus, passages such as 'Jesus healed a born blind' are more symbolic than narrating a historical event.

Sheikh Muhammad Abdu; the author of the Al-Minar interpretation of the Quran also suggests that when Jesus – as quoted in the Quran – says that he will create a bird with the permission of God, does not imply that he really did create a bird. He is rather informing them of the possibility of it, should God will so.

Comment

This explanation is rather disclaiming the validity of miracles and is not a solution to the problem.

3. Simultaneity of Two Events

Al-Ashaera denoted the law of cause and effect and believed that there is no real causative law in the universe. According to them, the observed order in the world is solely due to the fact that we are used to simultaneously seeing them together and hence assume that one is the cause for the other. For instance, we are used to always seeing fire burning, and hence by mistake assume that fire is the cause of burning. In other words, in reality fire burns not because it's the cause of burning, but because it is the habit of God to burn wood when it is next to the fire.

Thus, God can change His habit and although fire is associated with wood, it may not burn, such as in the situation of Prophet Ibrahim.

Comment

Without the law of cause and effect one of the principle proofs of God will be missing. Also, this explanation is based on the assumption of faith in God which the miracle is claiming to prove. Also, **ابي** الله ان يجري الامور الا بالاسباب

Are Miracles Possible?

Three different concepts of possibility:

1. Rational Possibility
2. Scientific Possibility
3. Historical Possibility

4. Religious Possibility

1. Rational Possibility

In order for a statement to be rationally impossible it has to eventually lead to the Principle of Contradiction.

The principle of contradiction is a law of thought stating that a thing cannot 'be' and 'not be' at the same time. The principle of contradiction usually develops itself on three specific forms known as the "Three Logical Axioms" which are:

- A is A.
- A is not 'Not-A'
- Everything is either 'A' or 'Not-A'.

For a miracle to be logically and rationally impossible, it should result in the principle of contradiction. If for instance the concept of a miracle is like a 'triangle square,' then it is rationally impossible. Then we are obliged to conclude that what happened was not a miracle or whatever is a miracle does not happen.

Here we can certainly assert that the claim of Christians on the deity of Jesus and the concept of trinity as a miracle is wrong, for it is rationally impossible and hence their claim must be rejected.

Similarly, the law of cause and effect is a rational law and hence for miracles to be in violation of any rational law, it has to be rationally impossible. If a prophet for instance claims that the total of the angles of a triangle miraculously equals to 190 degrees, then his claim is rationally impossible.

Our claim is that miracles are rationally possible for it is not against the principle of contradiction nor is it against the law of cause and effect.

In order for something to be rationally possible, it is enough that it cannot be logically proven wrong. Presumably no one can rationally prove that there cannot be any other influencing force to nature beyond ordinary human knowledge.

If the concept of miracle is like saying this object is a triangle square, then it is irrational.

Miracles are rationally impossible if they happen without any cause. But if the natural cause that we are aware of is replaced with another cause – which was not known to us, it is not irrational.

For instance, we have discovered a relation between Nurofen as a painkiller and a cure for headaches. If one claims that, 'My headache was miraculously cured,' meaning that it was cured without any cause whatsoever, then he is talking irrationally and only then we can say that either a miracle did not occur and he is wrong in his claim, or what happened is not miracle.

The claim in a miracle is that perfect humans such as prophets, due to their access to divine knowledge,

have access to other causes of healing a headache different from ordinary known medical methods. Thus, the cause is there, though it is a different cause to the one known to ordinary humans.

Moreover, the correlation between a cause and its effect is also present in a miracle. Because what the necessary correlation between a cause and its effect is that the cause must enjoy what it wants to give to the effect. For instance, ice does not enjoy the heat to burn the wood. Again, the claim in a miracle is that the extraordinary cause by far enjoys the properties required, for instance to cure a person who was born blind.

Therefore, our claim in miracles is the substitution of one cause with another; be it a known physical cause to us, or a metaphysical.

Parapsychology

There are many phenomena that appear to contradict physical laws but today parapsychologists suggest the possibility of their causation by mental processes such as telepathy, clairvoyance and psychokinesis that are inexplicable by science.

Dr. V. Frankle; the founder of logotherapy claimed that he could even cure an asthmatic by the method of logotherapy. Does it mean his claim is irrational?

In religion we are taught of some causes that otherwise would have been unknown to us. For instance, paying charity, visiting the first of kin, and praying for others are introduced as possible methods of prolonging one's life.

Statistics today show that people with strong religious faith react better to fatal diseases such as cancer and enjoy more chance for recovery. (See the chapter on the Power of Faith)

2. Scientific Possibility

Is a miracle scientifically possible?

In order for us to understand whether miracles are scientifically possible or not, we ought to get acquainted with some of the characteristics of natural science.

Some Characteristics of Natural Science:

1. Nomological (Newtonian): That means according to the Newtonian natural concept of the world, the scientific laws are general based on our observation.
2. Repetition: (See the article: Miracles and Modern Scientific Thought)
3. Statistical (Quantum Physics): That means according to quantum physics, what we call a natural law is in fact the most possible option, not the absolute one.

4. Natural laws are conditional not absolute. That means the relation between a natural cause and its effect is not absolute and limited and hence there are scientifically more possible methods to achieve the effect. For instance, one of the ordinary known methods of splitting the water of a river is to construct a dam. But is this scientifically the only possible method? Science has no negative answer for it. Thus, though perhaps exceptionally there is a natural phenomenon of making a path amidst a sea in Korea which is one of the most surprising sights in Korea.

Internationally renowned, "Chindo's Sea Way" is a natural phenomenon that occurs when the waters around the island of Chindo recede to reveal a long path connecting Hoedong-ri with the neighboring Modo-ri. The seaway is formed because of the great difference between the ebb and flow of the tide. The path is 10 to 40 meters wide and 2.9 km long.

This phenomenon occurs regardless of the speed of the tide or waves. Every year, around half a million foreign tourists and local tourists come to witness this marvelous phenomenon in February of the lunar calendar.

A variety of lively festivals take place to mark the occasion such as Kanggangsullae (Korean traditional circle dance), Ssitkim-gut (a shaman ritual, consoling the souls of the dead), Dul Norae (songs people sing while working in the fields), Tashiraegi, Manga (songs of consolation sung at burial ceremonies), and Puknori (drum performance). A French Ambassador, who visited Chindo Island in 1975, first introduced "Chindo's Sea Way" to the world, by contributing an article to a French newspaper saying that he has seen Moses' Miracle in Korea.

In 1996, the Japanese popular singer Taentoyosiri sang about Chindo's Sea Way, which was a great hit. This song motivated a lot of Japanese tourists. To visit the site:

www.happytour.co.kr/english/set_seaway.html [4]

5. Possible Alternatives. Ibn Sina suggests that miracles and other extraordinary events occur because some humans enjoy a powerful soul that can influence nature. He argues as any human soul can influence his own body, they have the power to exceed this power to other materials. Levitation, thought reading, hypnotism and evil eyes are ordinary examples of this influencing power.

Imagine you are a plant. In the world of plants it is impossible in the natural movement of a plant to move from one continent to another. But a human can interfere and move a plant thousands of miles away just in a few hours.

Therefore, our senses can only claim the relation between two phenomena but cannot scientifically claim that A is the only cause of B. Thus, a miracle is not the violation of a natural law; it is introducing a new cause to a particular effect.

As a matter of fact, given the scientific progress of the last two centuries in medicine for example, diseases that were considered mysterious are now understood without appeal to supernatural powers.

Thus, if today's medicine cannot cure a born blind, it is not rational to assert it is rationally impossible to cure a born blind.

Postmodernism

Dr. Paul Feyerabem: *Against Method* (1924–1994)

The Austrian physicist and scientist who perhaps due to a personal experience of his health problem not only lost his faith in western medicine but in science in general and promoted the school of postmodernism or decentralism.

In his book '*Against Method*' he argues that there is no scientific method and as such we can't justify science as the best way of acquiring knowledge. The truth, he argues, is that: "Science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best."⁷

6. Descriptive or Prescriptive. We were told that natural laws differ from national laws in that the first is descriptive and hence cannot be changed. One can claim that natural law is descriptive to us since we do not make them, we only discover them, but for the Maker of the natural laws it is possible to be prescriptive. For instance, national law for any ordinary citizen is descriptive as he cannot change it, but for the members of the parliament it is prescriptive. Similarly, natural laws for us as humans are descriptive, but for God who made these laws, it is prescriptive and He can order fire not to burn or harm His Prophet Ibrahim.

'It is a miracle!' Many physicians have experienced situations during their careers whereby something out of the ordinary and contrary to their medical knowledge had happened; they call it a miracle. We have witnessed many patients diagnosed with fatal diseases, who without any scientific explanation, and ironically 'impossible,' were cured. The Shrines of our Imams (a.s) have cured many miraculously.

3. Historical Possibility: Fact or Fable

Could strong historical evidence prove the occurrence of miracles?

First of all as Swinburne⁸ stated, it is unfortunate that Hume was so bigoted in his views by refusing to face facts, in that he claimed even if there is ample historical evidence for the occurrence of miracles, we cannot accept them.

Secondly, there can be three different ways of finding the occurrence of an event in the past:

- a. By the means of remembering it.
- b. The ample and excessive number of eye witnesses narrating it,
- c. From the remaining physical impacts

Any of the above methods are acceptable so far as they do not report a rational or scientifically

impossible event.

Does testimony of the followers of different religions on their miracles destroy their testimony as Hume claimed?

The fallacy of his argument is that a miracle is a proof for the truth and authenticity of prophet-hood of a prophet not a proof for all the present teachings of those religions.

From the Islamic point of view, all previous prophets are true and we believe in them as well as their miracles unless its narration contradicts the fundamental teachings of religions. The difference between Islam and today's Christianity is about the wrong concepts imported and fabricated doctrines of churches.

Three Living Miracles

If one persists to argue about the authenticity of historical miracles, we can still prove the possibility of miracles by the virtue of the still present living miracles of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). And the best proof for the possibility of something is its occurrence.

1. The Qiblah of Masjedul-Nabi
2. The Quran
3. Al-Mobahala
4. Religious Possibility

Any reported miracle from Prophets is religiously possible in so far as their occurrence is not contrary to the sublime teachings of divine religions. Thus, although the Christian narration of the miracle of Jesus, that he had supposedly changed water to wine without any known catalyst, is not rationally or even scientifically impossible, but religiously is impossible and hence cannot be historically agreed upon either.

Further Reading

1. Miracles and Modern Scientific Thought; Prof. Norman Geisler
2. Richard Swinburne; For the Possibility of Miracles
3. Miracles and the Laws of Nature; George Mavrodes
4. The Miracle of Quran; Allameh Tabatabaei
5. Al-Esharat, Chapter 10; Abu Ali Sina

1. See also: 3:49, 14:11, 40: 78.

2. Said one who had knowledge of the Book: "I will bring it to thee within the twinkling of an eye!" (27:40)

قَالَ الَّذِي عِنْدَهُ عِلْمٌ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَرْتَدَّ إِلَيْكَ طَرْفُكَ۔ نمل

3. Surah Sho'ara 26:63

فَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ اضْرِبْ بِعَصَاكَ الْبَحْرَ ۖ فَانْفَلَقَ فَكَانَ كُلُّ فِرْقٍ كَالطَّوْدِ الْعَظِيمِ

Then We revealed to Musa: Strike the sea with your staff. So it had cloven asunder, and each part was like a huge mound.

4. Miracles and Modern Scientific Thought; Prof. Norman Geisler

5. David Hume, An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, ed. C. W. Hendel (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 10.1.118.

6. Extracted from 'The Evidence for Miracles is Weal'; David Hume printed in 'Philosophy of Religion' pp417-421 M. Peterson.

7. Against Method, p. 295.

8. Philosophy of Religion; Melville Y. Stewart, p. 608.

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[4] http://www.happytour.co.kr/english/set_seaway.html

[5] <https://www.al-islam.org/library/general-belief-creed>