

1 Preliminaries

1.1 Introduction

Stories of miracles are found in many religions, not least in the three major monotheistic (Abrahamic) faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.¹ Such stories may evoke belief, scepticism, curiosity, or puzzlement. To one person, the story of a prophet, saint, or founder figure performing such seemingly impossible feats as walking on water or curing the sick through no known medical means may signify little more than the credulity of religious people and the patent falsehood of religious claims, while to another it may reinforce their faith by testifying to the truth of their beliefs, while to yet another it may be little more than a curiosity that has little impact on their belief or unbelief.

It would be tempting, but facile, to suggest that people in the past were more credulous and liable to believe all sorts of nonsense while we moderns are more knowledgeable, sophisticated, and critical, but this would be an oversimplification at best. Scepticism, doubt, curiosity, and belief have existed alongside one another from antiquity to the present day. The proportions may have changed over time, in part due to rising levels of education, the secularization of the modern West, and the intellectual inheritance of the Enlightenment, but the extent of the change may not be so great as is popularly imagined. The views of published intellectuals and academics may not always reflect those of the wider public, and the views of Western intellectuals are unlikely to reflect those of the world at large.

Even people who consider themselves as enlightened modern Western sceptics may find themselves praying for a miracle in the face of trying circumstances, such as serious illness. Conversely, some devout believers may be naturally sceptical towards the miraculous. One does not need to believe that Jesus walked on water to be guided by his command to love one's neighbour as oneself, and the urgent task of feeding today's hungry is not obviously advanced by insisting that Jesus and Moses were both able to do so by miraculous means. Many people of faith may consider that focusing on miracles is a distraction from more practical ways of furthering God's work in the world. Others will disagree.

The aim of this *Element* is not to survey the attitude to the miraculous in the various monotheistic faiths, but to explore some of the key issues that arise in connection with miracles within a monotheistic framework. Given both a monotheistic framework of belief and a commitment to the modern scientific view of the universe, can one give an account of divine action in the world that

¹ For a survey of miracles in all the major world religions, see Woodward, *The Book of Miracles* and Part III of Twelftree (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*.

allows for miracle? How are accounts of miracles to be evaluated? What sort of significance might they have? It might be thought that an omnipotent (all-powerful) God can do anything God chooses, so that monotheism automatically implies the possibility of miracle, but is that the case? And even if we know that God *could* in principle work miracles, can we be sure that God chooses to do so?

Before we can even begin to address such questions, we must first clarify what we mean by the two key terms involved: monotheism and miracle.

1.2 Monotheism

Monotheism can be defined simply as the belief in one God, but the term normally implies something about the nature of this God, namely that God is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, that God is the Creator of all that is, and that God transcends creation, meaning that God exists both independently of and beyond creation; the physical universe depends on God for its existence but God in no way depends on the physical universe for God's existence.

We should distinguish *monotheism* from *monodeism*. Deism is the belief that God acted only to create the universe at its inception, and that the universe then continues to run as an autonomous system according to its own laws without any further divine intervention. Such a creator God is wholly transcendent. Theism, on the other hand, holds that God acts not just at the point of creation but remains active in creation, maintaining and guiding it at every point. The God of theism, therefore, can be said to be both transcendent and immanent, both outside and independent of creation but also active and in some sense present within it.

Deism would seem to exclude the possibility of miracle, since in a deistic system, once God has created the universe, the universe is left to carry on as an autonomous system according to its inherent laws, and there is little scope for its wholly transcendent God to intervene directly to perform a miracle. One could imagine such a God so designing the universe that it would throw up what some people take to be miracles of its own accord, but the perception of such events as miracles would rely on their beholders' ignorance of the deeper complexities at work in the natural order, or else would require a rigid determinism in which everything had been tightly preordained in the initial design of the system to produce apparent miracles just when they were needed. Such ideas could be explored further, but here we are concerned with miracles in a theistic context.

Monotheism would seem more hospitable to miracles, since an all-powerful God who is continually active within creation could presumably make the physical universe behave in whatever way God wills, which could include miraculous events. Yet it has been observed that theism needs to be at least tinged with deism in order to avoid collapsing into pantheism. Theism

maintains a distinction between God and creation such that the created order is something other than God's physical manifestation and that God's maintenance of creation affords it at least some measure of autonomy. This surely places some limits on the ways in which God could be continually active within creation, limits we could explore by asking what a theistic God can either do or will if God is to be consistent with God's own nature.

Such limits have often been illustrated through examples of logically impossible actions, such as God drawing a square circle, creating a weight that is too heavy for God to lift, or making twelve a prime number. Rather than getting drawn into the debate over whether omnipotence includes the ability to do the logically impossible, it will suffice to question whether 'making twelve a prime number' is any more a coherent description of an action than 'eating a prime number' so the issue may be more about what verbal formulations make sense than about limitations on divine action.

More germane to the matter of monotheism and miracle are descriptions of actions that an omnipotent God could in principle perform but which nevertheless may strike most people as problematic, for example:

- God can break God's promises.
- God can act foolishly and irresponsibly.
- God can do evil for the sheer sadistic pleasure of it.
- God can act to thwart God's own purposes.
- God can behave contrary to God's nature.

The last element in this list summarizes what is likely to be felt problematic about the preceding four. It is logically possible that an all-powerful Creator could be capricious and inconsistent, but would such a Being conform to what most monotheists understand by the term 'God'? A God who is not only all-powerful but all-wise, all-just and all-loving must surely be a God who can be relied upon to act in ways that are consistent with this characterization. We may not know exactly how God's love, justice, and wisdom should work out in practice, but if such descriptions of God are to have any meaning at all, they must surely imply something recognizable as what humans would call love, justice, and wisdom.

The question is then not whether an all-powerful God *can* work miracles, but whether God might choose to or be able to do so without thwarting God's own purposes or contradicting God's own nature. Since a theistic God is believed to be constantly active in maintaining and upholding creation, it might appear self-defeating for God to perform miracles that go against the very laws of nature God is busily upholding. Moreover, in order for a loving God to afford a measure of autonomy to morally accountable sentient creatures, God must provide them with a stable and reliable environment in which rational actors can

behave with reasonably predictable consequences. For humans to flourish requires a stable and dependable environment, so that any God who takes responsibility for maintaining creation needs to play by the rules God has laid down.

Raising this question does not settle it, however, not least since the obvious counterargument would be that God could surely perform the odd miracle here or there without any risk of the cosmos collapsing into chaos or undermining the ability of free moral agents to act. To take an obvious example, it is hard to see how either the coherence of creation or human ability to plan and act would be undermined if someone you love is miraculously cured of terminal cancer, or if a humanitarian charity doing superb work receives a totally unexpected and transformational donation in response to prayer. Yet this counterargument is itself vulnerable to counterarguments. If miraculous cures to terminal cancer become common, might there not be a risk of removing incentives to research effective medical cures, so undermining human responsibility and initiative (and the possibility of curing sufferers who don't happen to have people praying for them)? But if miraculous cures remain sufficiently rare that cancer research continues unabated, on what basis can a just and loving God decide to cure Patient A but not Patients B, C, D . . . and Z? While such arguments do not settle the matter, they do raise questions that need to be probed further.

A different issue is how we envisage the nature of divine causation involved in working a miracle. The potential danger here is thinking along the lines of 'This event is inexplicable in human terms; no human can have brought it about, and no natural process can have brought it about, therefore only God can have done it'. The problem here is not that this is necessarily wrong, but that it risks placing God's action in the same category as human action and natural causation. Can that be right? Surely what monotheism understands by God is not just one actor alongside other actors or one cause alongside other causes, but an agent of a quite different kind. The problem with a 'God of the gaps' is not just that such a God risks diminishment as advances in human knowledge shrink the gaps, but that the gaps are conceived as lacunae within the natural order, not as something fundamentally transcendent, and that if God acts not only to set creation in motion but also to uphold and maintain it, then God's action is to be found throughout creation, and not just in the parts humans currently struggle to explain. Whatever divine action consists of, it must be something of a wholly different order from human action or natural causation. We shall be suggesting that a narrative or authorial analogy may be a more helpful way of conceiving such divine action than a divine clockmaker model that effectively envisages God intervening by tinkering with the mechanism as if he were another physical entity standing alongside the clock. But first, we should examine what we mean by 'miracle'.

1.3 Miracle

The discussion has so far treated the term ‘miracle’ as if it straightforwardly meant an exception to the normal course of events – a breach of the laws of nature. But although miracle is commonly conceived in these terms, and much discussion of miracle (classically going back to Hume and beyond)² has proceeded as if this is what the term ‘miracle’ principally meant, there are several reasons why this may be unhelpful.

The first is that it does not reflect the way the word ‘miracle’ is often used. On the one hand, it leaves out the requirement that to count as a miracle, some meaningful action by God is required, and on the other, people often count as miracles events that do not obviously contravene any known laws of nature. The charity that receives an unexpectedly large donation in response to prayer might well regard it as a miracle, but no one involved thinks any fundamental law of physics has been contravened. The person who recovers unexpectedly from terminal cancer may surprise their physicians, who may in turn struggle to come up with a medical explanation, but maybe the sheer complexity of the workings of the human body and the way the human mind interacts with it would make it impossible for medical science to point to any law of nature that had been clearly broken. Likewise, the person whose life is transformed by a chance meeting with a stranger might well look back on that meeting as a miracle, although here a breach of the laws of nature isn’t remotely in view. While someone might object that such events are not ‘real miracles’, these are all ways in which the term ‘miracle’ might be used by people who believe that a miracle has occurred. The common thread in all these cases is that something wonderfully unexpected has taken place, which the person or persons concerned are unwilling to ascribe to pure chance and which to them appear to be the result of divine action on their behalf, or for the furtherance of God’s design. While supposed breaches of the laws of nature often feature in discussions of miracle, this is not always the case, and there is in fact no generally agreed definition of miracle (just as there is no generally agreed sharp dividing line between miracle and providence).³

The second reason is that a definition involving breaches of the laws of nature does not correspond to anything in the Jewish, Christian, or Moslem scriptures, which supply many of the classic miracle stories in their respective monotheistic

² See Section X, ‘On Miracle’ in Hume, *Enquiries*.

³ For the difficulties in finding an agreed definition of miracle, see Basinger, ‘What Is a Miracle’, pp. 19–35. For objections to defining miracle as a breach of the laws of nature, see Larmer, ‘The Meanings of Miracle’, pp. 36–53, with which compare Hesse, ‘Miracles and the Laws of Nature’, pp. 35–42; and Keener, *Miracles*, Vol. I, pp. 128–38. Levine, ‘Miracles and the Laws of Nature’, pp. 128–51, argues that it is unhelpful to discuss miracle in relation to the laws of nature and that the more relevant issues are the nature of causation and divine action.

traditions. Indeed, no biblical writer uses a word corresponding to the modern English ‘miracle’ in any such sense. This in part is because no biblical writer operated with a modern (post-Enlightenment) conception of nature as an autonomous closed system running according to its own fixed laws. The biblical authors saw God as much at work in the regular workings of creation as in surprising exceptions to it. They also tended to see God as exercising power, not through tinkering with an otherwise deterministic mechanism but by exercising his sovereign power of command. At the beginning of Genesis, God acts by commanding creation into existence: ‘Let there be light.’ Jesus often also performs miracles through commands: ‘Who then is this that even wind and sea obey him?’ (Mark 4:39-41). God is the lord of creation, which is God’s for God to command. The notion that God may be contravening some fundamental law of physics is simply not in the sacred texts.

The third reason is the problematic nature of the term ‘laws of nature’ and hence ‘breach of the laws of nature’. Does the term ‘laws of nature’ refer to how nature actually behaves (which may be different from our current scientific understanding) or how nature is currently understood to behave (in which case ‘laws of nature’ means something like ‘the current best generally agreed set of scientific theories’, which may not be entirely correct or complete)? If ‘laws of nature’ means the former, then a breach of the laws of nature would imply nature not behaving as nature actually behaves, which is simply nonsensical. If it means the latter, then it leaves open the possibility that our current scientific theories are not entirely correct, so that a breach may occur whenever something happens that our current theories can’t account for, including occurrences that indicate that our theories may need correcting.

Richard Swinburne offers a potentially helpful way round the latter difficulty by suggesting a distinction between repeatable and non-repeatable exceptions to current scientific understanding, with miracle applying only to the latter.⁴ For example, the orbit of Mercury conforms better with Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity than with Newton’s theory of gravity, and so before Einstein’s theory became established, the orbit of Mercury would have constituted a breach of the laws of nature as described by Isaac Newton. It is a *repeatable* breach, however, because observations of the orbit of Mercury can be repeated as often as one might wish and always yield the same result, as might other observations that conform to General Relativity better than Newtonian mechanics, such as the bending of starlight round the sun. It is this consistent repeatability that make such exceptions to what was previously believed to be a law of nature evidence for a need to move to a better theory rather than evidence for miracle. On the other

⁴ Swinburne, *Concept of Miracle*, pp. 26–29.