



the | inimitable | qur'an

# An Introduction to the Philosophy of Miracles

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The question of Miracles is an important one to Muslims as it is the foundation of our belief that the Qur'an is Divine and that it can not be explained by human endeavour. Based on this point, Muslims adhere to the Quran as the window of revelation that has given us our unique defining way of life.

There has been much research on the inimitability of the Qur'an and the objective appreciation of its miraculous nature by Muslim and non-Muslim alike; however the discussion of the inimitability of the Qur'an is premised upon the assumption that miracles can actually occur and are a philosophical possibility; sceptics of a naturalistic persuasion however, would disagree.

### **Personal Experience?**

Often personal experience is used to cite one's proof of their particular faith, as the experience is seen as a miracle. However, this seems not to be a cogent case for miracles as personal experience is subject to our senses, which are prone to error.

If miracles have not been presented as even possible to begin with, then any event put forward to a sceptic will always be viewed as an illusion, a trick of the eye and a naturalistic explanation alone will suffice.

There are also other problems with personal experience as a sole means in warranting one's belief. If we imagine two individuals each adhering to a particular faith and experiencing the same event such as a great light appearing in the room, the experience would equally affirm their beliefs. This cannot be the case as both religious beliefs cannot be true; this would be an obvious contradiction. The reason this can happen is that a great deal of interpretation is involved in a personal experience. We make these interpretations based on the philosophy and belief system we already hold to be true, therefore what we learn from the experience is dependent on what we already believe.

It is therefore useless to appeal to personal experience before we have settled the philosophical question. However, one may still assert some virtue in a personal experience. There is no reason or a priori contradiction in suggesting that God might occasionally intervene to provide direction or guidance. Nevertheless, we must understand philosophical limitations in attempts to justify religious beliefs.

### **Historical Accounts?**

Less can be said for historical accounts, which many people believe are sufficient to determine whether miracles actually exist. No amount of historical evidence can convince us until it is established that miracles are in fact logically possible. The result of our historical enquiry is contingent upon one's philosophical views, which are held before we even begin to look at the evidence. Hence the question do miracles exist has to be answered philosophically before any investigation can occur.

### **What is a 'Miracle'?**

Let us examine the notion of a miracle. Does the concept of a miracle make sense? The word miracle is derived from the old Latin word 'miraculum' meaning "something wonderful". Intuitively, a miracle is something that would seem to be impossible or extraordinary, but this seems too broad of a definition.

A miracle, defined as a violation of natural law, seems to be appealing, as one could argue that only God might possess the ability to disrupt a natural law producing a miracle. However, if we examine this notion, it appears nonsensical for natural laws to be violated. More importantly, a violation of logical coherence occurs, giving rise to a logical impossibility of the existence of a miracle.

### **Violation of Natural Laws?**

Mainstream views of natural laws effectively characterise them as universal generalizations. The universality of natural laws is characterised by patterns in which the world appears to operate, free from any human interference and by a clear, objective, repeated, and undisputed observations about the universe at large.

This is where it becomes problematic with regards to the matter of violation. Viewing them in such way would mean that a miracle would be defined by the very violation of that universal generalisation. The dilemma is that if we claim that something is a natural law, a universal generalisation, then it would not be logically possible to put forward the notion of a miracle.

Indeed, the occurrence of a miracle is contrary to a natural law, an anomaly which would in return undermine the claim of the universality of that law to begin with.

### **An Alternative Description**

The Deist's arguments against miracles were predominately based upon the mainstream Newtonian perspective of prescribed laws of their time. The world worked so perfectly in harmony that even God himself was bound by the mechanics of his own creation. A way to overcome such a problem would be possibly to view natural laws as not from a Newtonian perspective of prescribed laws, but rather in the descriptive sense. These laws are not seen in the rigid sense but as inductive generalisations.

What we know of laws is that they are observed patterns in the world. They do not necessarily have to function in the way that they do. This then in return will give us room to speak of an exception to the rule. Hence, natural laws are seen as uncertain products of our inductive generalizations. However this still would not solve the problem of incoherence.

The problem with this view is that if any event was witnessed that did not fit in with the observed pattern, then this event would either be absorbed into the pattern resulting in a new pattern or the pattern would have to be abandoned all together. Either reformulation would not result in a law being violated. Incoherence still remains.

### **Miracles: A New Definition**

Bilynskyj asks us to consider another dimension to the debate on natural laws introducing [ceteris paribus](#). What if we were to say that natural laws function with the requirement of certain conditions to produce an event without any interference from God?

The problem here is that if we were to say that the universality of natural laws is dependent on ceteris paribus and that God is not interfering, then if a miracle is the interference of God with a given event, then that event can not be seen as a violation of that law, given that the law is recognised by its ceteris paribus stipulating the non-interference of God. Hence the incoherence is still not resolved.

As Bilynskyj observes "so long as natural laws are conceived of as universal inductive generalisations the notion of violation of a nature law is incoherent". Bilynskyj argues that either we should abandon the notion of natural laws as universal generalisations, or abandon the idea that miracles are violations of natural laws.

He chooses to abandon the first option, whilst attempting to rescue the notion of violation by introducing the idea that natural laws should be seen as dispositions. He suggests that laws are not why things actually happen but instead are given accounts of underlying, ontological structures of the world.

Bilynskij is right that one of the two must be abandoned to save of notion of a miracle. However, William Lane Craig argues that one can still retain the understanding of the universality of natural laws by abandoning the “violation of a natural law” and replacing it with “events which lie outside the productive capacity of nature”.

What Craig is advocating is that miracles should be re-characterised as ‘impossibilities’ rather than ‘violations’. Impossibility with regards to *ceteris paribus* implies the impossibility of an event occurring in any other way; unless a supernatural interference namely God exists.

What Craig achieves here is defining the precise boundaries of what a miracle is. His definition has shown that miracles are naturalistically impossible but supernaturally possible. Craig has shown that miracles are physically impossible. Hence even if we bring back the Newtonian rigid ironclad prescriptive view of natural laws and use this new characterised definition that a miracle is regarded as being outside the productive capacity of nature, we rid our selves of any logical incoherence, yet still retain the significance of the event, achieving a miraculous recovery.

## **Bibliography**

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