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Is it Reasonable to Believe that Miracles Occur?

Alberto Oya

RESUMEN

Tradicionalmente, los milagros han sido definidos como acontecimientos causados de manera sobrenatural, que están fuera del alcance de la explicación científica. En este artículo criticaré el argumento que defiende que, cuando carecemos de una explicación científica para un acontecimiento, pero éste tiene una explicación adecuada en términos teístas, la conclusión más razonable es afirmar que el acontecimiento en cuestión es un milagro. Defenderé que este argumento no funciona, a menos de que tuviéramos una previa evidencia independiente a favor de la existencia de Dios. Argumentaré además que, incluso dentro de una concepción del mundo en la que no se cuestionara la existencia de Dios, no tendríamos justificación para afirmar que un acontecimiento es un milagro, puesto que no tenemos conocimiento suficiente de las intenciones y propósitos de Dios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Argumento desde de los milagros, Dios, milagros, explicación científica, explicación teísta.

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, miracles have been defined as supernaturally caused events which are outside the scope of scientific explicability. In this paper I will criticize the argument that, when we lack a scientific explanation for an event but it has an adequate explanation in theistic terms, then the most reasonable conclusion is to claim that the event is a miracle. I will defend that this argument would not work unless we had prior independent evidence for God's existence. Furthermore, I will argue that even within a theistic worldview in which the reality of God were unquestioned, we would not be justified in claiming that an event is a miracle because we would not have sufficient knowledge of God's intentions and purposes.

KEYWORDS: Argument from Miracles, God, Miracles, Scientific Explanation, Theistic Explanation.

I

In this paper, I will focus on the characterization of miracles as events which are outside the scope of scientific explicability, *i.e.* as violations of natural laws. This is the most traditional and commonly held view when characterizing the miraculous – it is, for example, the concep-

tion referred to by Hume in his famous essay ‘Of Miracles’ [Hume 1748/2004].

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. The argument might be formulated along the following lines: once there is an event which is outside the scope of scientific explicability, *i.e.* a violation of a natural law, the best explanation for it is that it is supernaturally caused. At least apparently, this is one of the main differences between this and other proposals that aim to avoid the use of the concept of scientific explicability when defining the miraculous.¹ Since these other proposals allow the possibility that miraculous events might have a scientific explanation – and, hence, that they have natural causes – it seems that from an atheistic point of view the appeal to God is here gratuitous and that the most reasonable thing to do is to stick to the scientific explanation.

In this paper, I will leave aside conceptual problems regarding the consistency of this notion of miracle and instead I will focus on one of the justifications usually offered for claiming that an event is a miracle, *i.e.* that, when the lack of a scientific explanation combines with the possibility of an adequate explanation in theistic terms, then the most reasonable conclusion is to assume that the event is a miracle. I will argue that unless we have prior independent evidence for God’s existence, the argument is not sound. Indirectly, this is to show that miracles, under this characterization in terms of being outside the scope of scientific explicability, have no apologetic force – and, consequently, that there is no possibility of constructing an argument from miracles. Furthermore, I will argue that even if it is assumed that God exists, the theist must show that theistic explanations have enough explanatory power as to be an adequate explanation, otherwise the theist would not be justified in claiming that there are events which are outside the scope of scientific explicability – and, hence, not justified in claiming that there are miracles. As Overall (1985) and Keller (1995) argued, the selectivity involved in the miracles reported shows that the notion of miracle is inconsistent with the notion of an all-good God. I will argue that the only way to avoid this conclusion is to claim that we do not have sufficient

knowledge of God's intentions and purposes and, since theistic explanations are intentional explanations, this implies that even inside a theistic world-view no theistic explanation can be justified on abductive grounds.

II

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 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.² 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 (1965), pp. 48-49, and Swinburne (1970), pp. 29-32. Holland argues that there are occasions when looking for a scientific explanation is too high a price to 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, if 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. The example offered by Holland is as follows:

Suppose that a horse, which has been normally born and reared, and is now deprived of all nourishment (we could be completely certain of this) - suppose that, instead of dying, this horse goes on thriving (which again is something we could be completely certain about). A series of thorough examinations reveals no abnormality in the horse's condition: its digestive system is always found to be working and to be at every moment in more or less the state it would have been if the horse had eaten a meal an hour or two before. This is utterly inconsistent with our whole conception of the needs and capacities of horses; and because it is an impossibility in the light of our prevailing conception, my objector, in the event of its happening, would expect us to abandon the conception -as though we had to have consistency at any price. Whereas the position I advocate is that the price is too high and it would be better to be left with the inconsistency; and that in any event the prevailing conception has a logical status not altogether unlike that of a necessary truth and cannot be simply thrown away as a mistake -not when it rests on the experience of generations, not when all the other horses in the world are continuing to behave as horses have always done, and especially not when one considers the way our conception of the needs and capacities of horses interlocks with conceptions of the needs and capacities of other living things and with a conception of the difference between animate and inanimate behavior quite generally. These conceptions form part of a common understanding that is well established and with us to stay. [Holland (1965), pp. 48–49].

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 [Swinburne (1970), pp. 29-32].

Notice that from an atheist point of view these arguments are clearly inadequate. The atheist will never accept that an event is adequately explained by a theistic explanation. Theistic explanations are intentional explanations; they explain the event in terms of following God's intentions and purposes. The point is that if theistic explanations are understood as intentional explanations then 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 that the atheist is seeking justification for. 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. To this it will probably be replied that I

am somehow being unfair to these arguments, since their aim is precisely to show that the intentional character of an event is justified abductively, which even the atheist cannot deny as being the only explanation for that event. But the point I am raising here is that this kind of arguments lack of any persuasive force for convincing the atheist in so far that he starts from an understanding of the world which precludes from the very beginning the possibility of accepting an intentional explanation for any worldly event: the atheist sees the world as a *mere* fact, and, as such, intentional explanations of *prima facie* non intentional facts are for him a dead option, something completely out of point.

Let's concede, however, that the atheist might accept that the hypothesis of God's existence would provide a possible explanation for certain events which do not fit with our current scientific knowledge. Still, 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 alleged counter-instance to our best scientific knowledge, we have many options which do not imply a completely turning around our best scientific theories and that are more rational than to assume the high ontological cost of positing a supernatural being with the capacity to intervene in the natural order of events. 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

Of course, if independent evidence is available that may increase the likelihood of the supernatural hypothesis, then the ontological cost might be overridden. There is an obvious reason for this: if we already believe that there is a supernatural being who has the capacity to intervene in the natural world if He so wishes, then it is more likely that some events will be caused by His intervention. But this is saying that the acceptance of a theistic explanation *does not provide* but *requires* evidence of

the supernatural. So, if the criterion for claiming that an event is miraculous is that the event be adequately explained by a theistic explanation, then the alleged apologetic force of the miraculous is lost, and consequently the possibility of constructing an ‘argument from miracles’ for showing God’s existence is rejected.

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. In the rest of this paper I will argue that the theist is committed to claiming that we do not have sufficient knowledge of God’s intention and purpose to satisfy this requirement. If this is so, the theist is not justified in claiming that an event is miraculous.

The classical objection to the claim that a theistic explanation can constitute an adequate explanation of an event is provided by Nowell-Smith, who argued that explanatory power requires predictive power, *i.e.* to explain an event we need to subsume it under a law that allow us to predict it, and that theistic explanations do not have any predictive power because when a particular event is said to be the result of God’s intervention we are not subsuming it under any law [Nowell-Smith (1950), pp. 248-253]. This claim has been contested by pointing out that theistic explanations are intentional explanations, *i.e.* they aim to explain the miraculous event in terms of God’s intentions, and intentional explanations have explanatory power but no predictive power [Dietl (1968), pp. 133-134]. My intention of seeing a film explains my going to the cinema, even if there is no law according to which whenever I have the intention of seeing a film, I go to the cinema.

In fact, that explanatory power cannot be equated with predictive power is a general point often made in philosophy of science: on the one hand, it seems that we might be able to predict a phenomenon without being able to explain it, *e.g.* ordinary men of all ages have been able to predict that the sun will rise tomorrow without them having any kind of astronomical or physical knowledge and, thus, without understanding *why* the sun rises every day; on the other hand, it seems that we might be able to explain a phenomenon without being able to predict it, *e.g.* while all patients who develop paresis suffer from syphilis, not all those who suffer from syphilis develop paresis; thus, although suffering from syphilis explains *why* somebody suffers from paresis, the fact that someone

suffers from syphilis does not allow us to predict that he will suffer from paresis.

It is true that while it is easily accepted that predictive power is not a sufficient condition for explanatory power, it is disputable whether predictive power is a necessary condition for explanatory power. Thus, the possibility of explaining the development of paresis in terms of suffering from syphilis might be contested by arguing that this explanation has explanatory power only to the extent that it relies on a complete causal explanation with predictive power. Some of the causal factors involved in this complete explanation might be unknown to us (and so we will not, in the end, be able to make any prediction), but this is only an epistemological concern, not one related to the predictive power of the explanation itself, *i.e.* if we *knew* all the causal factors, we *would be able* to make predictions. In other words, it might be argued that the explanation for the development of paresis in terms of suffering from syphilis only works under the assumption that it relies on a complete causal explanation which, if all the causal factors involved in this complete causal explanation were known to us, would allow us to be able to distinguish between cases of syphilis that will lead to the development of paresis and those that will not. It goes far beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether explanations need to rely on these kinds of complete causal explanations. For my purpose here, the important point I want to make is that there seems to be no reason why the theist cannot accept that theistic explanations might rely on complete causal explanations. As Dawes points out [Dawes (2009), pp. 73-74], the possibility to argue that theistic explanations, albeit they are intentional explanations, have some sort of predictive power is open: if we know what God's intentions or goals are, we assume that God acts in the most effective way, and if we know what the most effective ways to achieve these goals are, then we can predict God's actions. Of course, some of these causal factors might be unknown to the theist, but this, like in the case of the complete causal explanation of the syphilis-paresis example, will only be an epistemological concern and unrelated to the predictive power of the explanation itself.

The real problem is, however, that it is disputable whether the knowledge we have of God's intentions and purposes is enough to make theistic explanations an adequate explanation for any event. There are theological reasons for this claim, which some theists would gladly accept: it might be argued, for example, that a finite mind like ours cannot comprehend the intentions and purposes of an Infinite mind like God.

Faced with such theological arguments, the Christian might counterclaim that we can glean enough knowledge of God's character and intentions from the figure of Jesus. Although we cannot comprehend an infinite mind like God, God Himself incarnates to allow us to grasp His message in a way we could understand. The Christian's answer, however, does not solve the problem, but only postpones it: to claim that we can comprehend God's nature through the works of Jesus we must first be able to claim that Jesus is the Son of God and for that we need to be able to identify Jesus' works as miraculous events, *i.e.* we need to know that Jesus' works follow God's intentions. This is what explains that, taken in isolation, the testimony of Revelation has no apologetic force.

But apart from these theologically grounded arguments, there is a more convincing line of reasoning that aims to show that we cannot have enough knowledge of God's intentions and purposes. Focusing on the Christian tradition, Keller (1995) and Overall (1985) have argued that 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. 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. 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: C. S. Lewis, for example, argued that the selectivity of miracles, far from being unfair, serves a benevolent purpose, *i.e.* to encourage humility and generosity [Lewis (1947)/(1996), p. 155]. A theist might be content to accept this explanation of the selectivity of some of God's interventions, but this answer cannot be applied to all situations. As Mark Corner asks [Corner (2005), pp. 59-60], why did God, who had intervened on other more trivial occasions, remain silent during the Holocaust? I think it is impossible, *pave* C. S. Lewis, to argue for the claim that the organized genocide of six million people served a benevolent purpose. 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.

It is true that by accepting his ignorance regarding God's plans, the theist might reach an adequate answer for solving the alleged inconsistency between the selectivity of the miracles reported and God's alleged all-good nature: if the theist is already assuming that God is an all-good being, then it necessarily follows that all God's interventions are somehow motivated by His goodness, even if there are cases in which the theist cannot identify God's motives and so he cannot explain why God intervenes in some occasions but not in others. The problem is, however, that the theist cannot accept his ignorance towards God's plans and still maintain that the *criterion* for identifying which of those events for which we lack a scientific explanation are non-scientifically explicable (and hence, miraculous) is that they can be adequately explained by a theistic explanation, since this last requires that the theist is able to identify which events might accord with God's plans and which might not. This is why to accept our ignorance regarding God's plans is tantamount to accept 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 be justified on abductive grounds.

If the theist is assuming that a non-scientifically explicable event is a miracle, then it follows that there is a complete explanation for that event, even if he cannot comprehend it. But the proposal I am analyzing here, which was first raised by Holland and Swinburne, aims to offer an *epistemic criterion* for distinguishing non-scientifically explicable events from those events which have not received a scientific explanation yet. And that criterion is supposed to be that those events can be adequately explained in terms of God's intentions and purposes. Again, it trivially follows from the assumption that non-scientifically explicable events are miracles that they do have an explanation in terms of God's intentions. However, the argument I am analyzing here aims to give an abductive justification for the acceptance of the theistic explanation as being the only explanation for a given event, and so it relies not only on the assumption that there is an explanation but also on the claim that the theist can recognize the *explanatory power* of that explanation. The problem is, I say, that the theist cannot recognize any explanatory power in the explanations he can offer, because, if he wants to avoid the apparent inconsistency between the selectivity of the miracles and God's alleged all-good nature, he needs accepting that he cannot know God's intentions and purposes

III

In this paper, I have analysed the argument for claiming that an event is miraculous first offered by Holland (1965), pp. 48-49, and Swinburne (1970), pp. 29-32. According to this argument, faced with an event for which we have no scientific explanation, and which is adequately explained by a theistic explanation, the most reasonable thing to do is to conclude that it is outside the scope of scientific explicability by sticking to the theistic explanation. The aim of this paper was to show that from neither an atheistic point of view nor from a theistic one is this argument sound.

From an atheistic point of view, the argument is not sound for two reasons. First, because theistic explanations are intentional explanations and, as such, they only work under the assumption that the *explanandum* is an action carried out by a rational agent. This, obviously, is an assumption that the atheist does not accept. Second, because given the high ontological cost of positing the existence of a supernatural entity such as God, the most reasonable thing to do when faced with an event for which we have no scientific explanation, even if we concede that an atheist might accept that the hypothesis of God's existence would provide a possible explanation for certain events which do not fit our current scientific knowledge, is simply to consider it as a scientifically explicable event for which we have no scientific explanation *now*. Miracles thus lose their alleged apologetic force, which means that the possibility of constructing an argument from miracles for the existence of God is blocked.

From a theistic point of view, neither does this line of reasoning justify the claim that an event is miraculous since, as I have argued, the only way to explain the selectivity involved in miracles in a way which is consistent with God's all-good nature is to accept our ignorance with respect to God's intentions and purposes. And this is tantamount to recognizing that we do not have enough knowledge about divine intentionality to allow any theistic explanation to constitute an adequate explanation of any event. An interesting consequence of this is that if the theist is not justified in claiming that some events are due to God's intervention, this seems to go against (or at least, undermine) the very possibility of the theistic hypothesis: a God that does not act in the world is not what the orthodox theist takes God to be.

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.

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NOTES

¹Burhenn (1977) and Erlandson (1977), for example, claimed that the miraculous should be defined in terms of following God's intentions, irrespective of whether the event is in fact scientifically explicable or not. Holland (1965) and, more recently, David Corner (2007, especially ch.vi), argued that miracles are those events that have religious significance, in the sense that the believer gives thanks to God for their occurrence. And in giving thanks to God, the theist is recognizing divine agency in them: one cannot give thanks to God without assuming that God is somehow responsible for what He is being thanked for [Kellenberg (1979), p. 156].

² This must be distinguished from the proposals mentioned before, such as those offered by Burheen (1977) and Erlandson (1977): what Burheen and Erlandson were arguing for was the view that a miraculous event *is defined* in terms of following God's intentions and purposes, whereas what I am referring to now is the view that the *criterion* for identifying miraculous events is that they follow God's alleged intentions and purposes, *i.e.* that they can be adequately explained by a theistic explanation.

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