2.2 Miracles

Key Ideas

- The problem of defining a miracle
- Types and accounts of miracles
- The reliability and verifiability of miracles
- Do miracles prove the existence of God?

The concept of miracle

Paul Tillich in *Systematic Theology* (Nisbet, 1953), defines a miracle as ‘...an event which is astonishing, unusual, shaking, without contradicting the rational structure of reality... an event which points to the mystery of being’. The traditional understanding of miracles is that they are divine acts of God that cannot be explained in any other way. They are a religious experience with the power to convert people and affirm their religious belief. Thousands of testimonies abound from witnesses throughout the ages who have claimed to have experienced miracles in their own lives. Although these claims have been examined by scholars, doctors and theologians, no certain conclusion has been reached. Miracles capture the imagination of the religious and non-religious alike, all seeking to discover whether miracles happen and, as a result, discovering whether or not God exists.

What is a miracle?

A miracle is: ‘The unexpected and unusual manifestations of the presence and power of God’ (M. Cook, *Miracles: Cambridge Studies on their Philosophy and History*, Mowbray, 1965). Scholars throughout the centuries have been divided in their views on the definition of a miracle, although there is broad agreement that a miracle must contain three basic attributes:

- the event must be against regular experience, sometimes referred to as breaking the laws of nature (this will be discussed further)
- the event has a purpose and significance
- it is possible to ascribe religious significance to the event.

‘A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it’ (J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford University Press, 1982).

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas proposed a traditional definition of miracle in the *Summa Theologica*, suggesting that miracles were: ‘Those things... which are done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things’ (cited in *The Existence of God*, edited by John Hick, Macmillan, 1964). Aquinas proposed three categories of miracles.
1. Design argument

2.2 Miracles

- Events done by God that nature could never do, for example stopping the sun (Joshua 10:13). Such events are logically impossible, or a physical or natural impossibility.

- Events done by God that nature could do but not in that order, for example exorcisms (Mark 1:31). These events are not impossible but are highly unexpected.

- Events done by God that nature can do but God does without the use of natural laws, for example healing by forgiving sins (Mark 2:5). Such events take place in the natural order of things but the means by which God brings them about warrants the designation miracle.

Aquinas’s definition is not without its difficulties, however. What Aquinas is suggesting is an interventionist God, who only acts on certain, almost random, occasions. Brian Davies, in Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (Oxford University Press, 1993), argues that to talk about God ‘intervening’ suggests that he is normally just a spectator in human affairs who watches us struggle and suffer. This seems contrary to the classical theistic view, which says that God is a loving father who is always interacting with his creation.

Moreover, Aquinas’s argument is based on the idea that God breaks natural laws. The problem here is that we may not actually know all the natural laws, nor how they operate. We cannot, therefore, tell if a natural law has been broken or not. In the same way, if a natural law is broken this may be no more than saying that something happened that we did not understand or expect. What we call natural laws are effectively no more than descriptions of things that have occurred frequently enough for it to be rational to believe that they will happen in that way all the time. For example, we consider it a law of nature for the sun to rise tomorrow because it has happened that way every day of our lives. It is not irrational to believe that it will do so, but we have to allow for the (very low) probability that it will not. It would not, strictly speaking, be breaking a natural law if the sun did not rise because we cannot say decisively what the action of the sun will be in the future; we can only say what has definitely happened in the past.

Richard Swinburne

Richard Swinburne claims that the laws of nature are reasonably predictable and that, if an apparently ‘impossible’ event happens, then it is fair to call it a miracle. He gave examples of such events recorded in the Bible and in Christian history: ‘the resurrection from the dead in full health of a man whose heart has not been beating for twenty four hours and who was dead also by other currently used criteria; water turning into wine without the assistance of chemical apparatus or catalysts; a man getting better from polio in a minute’ (Richard Swinburne, Miracles, Macmillan, 1989). He suggests that while people actually do recover from illness and some are even resuscitated from death, what actually determines if an event is a miracle is the way and the timescale in which it occurs. Miracles take place outside the normal conditions in which such cures usually happen.

Miracles as fortuitous coincidences

In Thinking about God (Oxford University Press, 1985), Brian Davies argues that miracles are: ‘unexpected and fortuitous events in the light of which we are disposed to give thanks to God’. Yet such a view presents the problem of how to determine whether or not an event is truly a miracle. Perhaps the
biblical miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea, could be interpreted as natural occurrences that happened so fortuitously that the people saw them as miracles performed by God. However, what about many of the testimonies concerning miracles today: are they also simply ‘fortuitous events’? For instance, what are we to make of the many testimonies from survivors of the Asian tsunami in 2005 about how they were apparently saved by the miraculous intervention of God? And there are similar stories from some of the survivors of the 9/11 World Trade Centre terrorist attack. In addition, there are many miracles reported in the media: are they truly acts of God? Consider this headline from The Observer newspaper printed on 24 November 1995: ‘Priests in Bethlehem proclaim a miracle as “tears” appear on the painted face of Christ in the church built over his birthplace.’ Also in 1995, on 22 September The Daily Telegraph reported on the so-called ‘miracle of Nandi’ where marble idols in several different Hindu temples were seen to drink the milk offered to them by believers.

In his work The Miraculous (in Religion and Understanding, Oxford University Press, 1967), R. F. Holland suggested that a miracle is nothing more than an extraordinary coincidence that is seen in a religious way. He uses the example of a small boy who is stuck on a railway line. The driver of the express train, who cannot see the boy, unexpectedly faints and falls onto the brake lever bringing the train to a halt, saving the boy. His mother claims that a miracle has taken place even after she has been told what led up to the event. According to Holland: ‘A coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign and called a miracle.’

The problem with Holland’s interpretation is that it makes a miracle dependent on personal interpretation and this will vary from person to person. If one person says an action is a miracle and another says it is not, how are we to judge? Mel Thompson in Philosophy of Religion (Hodder and Stoughton, 1997) makes a similar point: ‘In July 1995, a Roman Catholic priest suffered a severe stroke and was not expected to live. A fellow priest took the 300 year old mummified hand of an English martyr and placed it on his forehead while he was in hospital. The hand… has long been regarded as being able to bring about miracles. The priest recovered.’ There is no evidence to suggest the recovery was anything other than a coincidence.

**Miracles and the Bible**

If miracles are indeed divine acts of God, then we must define what we mean by God. For this purpose, God is the title given to the supreme being in the universe. He is the creator and sustainer of the universe and all things depend upon him for their continued existence. He has created the universe, and humanity, for a purpose and he is wholly good, wishing only good for his creatures.

In the Bible, God also reveals himself to his people through miracles, events in which he suspends the laws of nature (the way in which events regularly occur) in order to accomplish his divine purpose for the universe. However, it must be remembered that biblical writers had no concept of the natural laws and so when God is seen to intervene it is interpreted in terms of God acting out of divine love and providence for his people. Although there may be opportunities for the glory of God to be revealed through events that appear to suspend or go against nature, the primary response of the observers is to praise God for his providential care for them.
The miracles of Jesus

The New Testament speaks about miracles in two different ways. Firstly, they are shown as God’s mighty power; secondly, they are shown as signs. In the biblical accounts faith is required in order to understand the miracles. Such faith enables believers to see God’s work in these acts: they are signs of God’s power and love. The miracles of Jesus point to who he is and what he teaches. They help a believer understand Jesus’s nature. But only those with faith will see and understand the miracles in this way. For example, Jesus heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman because of her great faith: ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted’ (Matthew 15:28). Similarly, when Jesus heals the leper: ‘Rise and go; your faith has made you well’ (Luke 17:19).

The miracles of Jesus were signs that he was from God and that God’s kingdom was being established in the world. They were signposts telling the people to respond and change their lives and believe: ‘The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me… even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father’ (John 10: 25,38).

However, the miracles of Jesus present problems for both philosophers and religious believers. It would surely have been impractical for Jesus to heal every sick person he met, but this raises the question of how he chose who to heal. In the same way, why does God seem to intervene is some people’s lives and not others? Furthermore, given the state of medicine at the time of the New Testament, how do we know what was actually wrong with the people Jesus healed: were they really sick or possessed by demons? There is a similar issue today with those believers who claim to be cured by religious healers such as Benny Hinn or by visiting shrines such as Lourdes: why are these people cured and not others? The answer may lie in the religious significance of miracles.

Science, reason and morality

Until the 18th century, most people believed that God regularly intervened in the world. However, during the Enlightenment a more rational, scientific and mathematical way of understanding the world developed and miracles were investigated in a new way. Science and rationality gave a superior role to reason in human thinking, along with the view that what was true could be proved by the senses and by experience. In an article in Dialogue (1998), Peter Atkins observed: ‘Everything in the universe can be explained in terms of physical science.’ Science offers a mechanistic view of the universe: it runs according to scientific principles and natural law, and these can be established and determined by empirical investigation. Knowledge of the universe, claim many scientists, can be found without reference to religion: God is the last resort of feeble minds masquerading as truth. Science... respects nobility of the human spirit’ (Peter Atkins, Dialogue, 1998).

From the scientific viewpoint, that which can not be categorised in a scientific manner is considered to be untrue and false. This is a problem for testimonies concerning miracles. The laws of nature are considered to be reliable and unchanging, and reports of miracles seem to deny this understanding of how the world worked. As a result there was a reaction against miracles, with claims that they went against science and reason.