

An Occasionalist Approach to Miracles

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This paper aims to propose the basic tenets of an occasionalist approach in characterizing miracles. By extending St. Augustine's and Said Nursi's insights regarding miracles, I attempt to develop a coherent, plausible and systematic account of miracles in which every possible finite being is considered to be a miracle. In addition, I will discuss three major objections that might be applicable to my characterization. This paper presents essentially a conceptual analysis of this approach and clears obstacles from the way for further substantive studies within this framework.

Introduction

There is a common tendency to consider miracles to be extraordinary events. In addition to this dominant perception of miracles, there are some other approaches regarding how to characterize miracles. In this paper, I will focus on the approach that lies behind the statement: "everything is a miracle," which we can hear in daily life from time to time. However fascinating this may seem to be, it leads to a paradox, due to the indeterminate scope of the term "everything" in the sentence. If both God and what He has created fall under the same extension of "everything," then we have a problem of depicting God and His works as miracles, which should be restricted to the depiction of only His works. As this initial problem indicates, an alternative approach needs to be developed in order to have a coherent and plausible conception of miracles.

In this paper, I will lay down the foundations for a well formed alternative conception of miracles by appealing to occasionalism. According to occasionalism, nothing has genuine causal power except God, and He is constantly

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creating the universe through His power. I will argue that all possible creation can be plausibly regarded as miracles. That is to say, ordinary events, as well as extraordinary ones at different levels, fall under the extension of this notion. In characterizing miracles, this view can be called an “occasionalist approach.” In developing this approach, I will extend St. Augustine’s and Said Nursi’s insights on miracles. This shows us that there is common ground both in the Christian and Muslim traditions on miracles. What I aim to do is to merely suggest a plausible alternative concept of miracles; however, I will not attempt to prove that the universe really exemplifies this notion of miracles. Let me begin with St. Augustine’s analysis of miracles.

St. Augustine’s Analysis of Miracles

St. Augustine is probably the only well-known figure in the Christian tradition who considered that it was not only extraordinary events that could be miracles, but ordinary events as well. His view comes very close to what I call “the occasionalist approach” to miracles. I will indicate some important insights in his analysis of miracles which will be useful in developing this occasionalist approach.

The first important insight that should be pointed out in Augustine’s characterization of miracles is that he appeals to the element of *wonder*. The following is his characterization of miracles: “I call a miracle whatever appears to be arduous or unusual, beyond the expectation of the abilities of the one who wonders at it.”¹

The term in Latin for miracles is “*miraculum*,” which is derived from the root “*mirari*,” which means to wonder. With this definition by Augustine, we can say that miracles are things that give us a feeling of wonder. In many of his works, both the earlier and later ones, we can see an emphasis on this element of wonder. John A. Mourant draws attention to this emphasis and points out that it is a subjective element. Wonder is a psychological state experienced by people.² What role does it play in characterizing miracles? According to Augustine, do we have a right to call everything we wonder at a “miracle”? I think Augustine’s remarks should be interpreted along with some of his other contentions; he also distinguishes magic from miracles. Even though magic may lead to some

1 St. Augustine, *De Utilitate Credendi*, XVI.34 *On the Profit of Believing* appearing in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. III, ed. by Philip Schaff, p. 364

2 John A. Mourant, “Augustine on Miracles,” *Augustinian Studies*, vol. 4, 1973, p. 103.

extraordinary events, to a certain extent, it is totally different from miracles. Augustine regards magic as *theurgy*.³ In his opinion, magic appeals to satanic forces and aims to deceive people, whereas miracles show the providence of God. It seems that not everything at which we wonder is a miracle. However, every miraculous event makes us wonder. So, this subjective element must be connected to the attitude we take concerning such events.

If we look at Aristotle's treatment of wonder, we see that he regards it as the starting point of philosophizing. We wonder at *aporia*, dilemmas, some difficulties, and extraordinary cases that we are unable to understand when first faced by them. However, this wonder initiates a questioning process. At this point, we try to learn the reasons behind such cases and aim to obtain some knowledge about them. As a result, we can say that wonder leads to knowledge.⁴ For instance, a solar eclipse might be wondrous when first seen. When we try to seek the causes behind it and begin to understand it, then the wonder we have is appropriately felt, since it has led us to search for knowledge. Otherwise, the value of wonder would not be recognized. It is possible that Augustine might have had similar contentions about the role of wonder with respect to miracles. As Benedicta Ward points out, miracles are seen as "signs" (*signa*) from God to men for Christians according to Augustine, but they are just "marvels or wondrous events" (*mira*) from a pagan perspective.⁵ For Augustine, it seems that Christians do not stick with the wondrous aspect of such events; they go beyond the wonder and interpret these events as signs or indications from their Creator. On the other hand, the pagans were just shocked by them and did not undertake any further investigations.

Since wonder is a subjective element, which can differ from person to person, according to Ward, Augustine mentions the following three types or levels of wonder.⁶

1-The wonder provoked by ordinary events but felt only by wise men as signs of God's benevolence

2-The wonder provoked in the ignorant, who do not understand the hidden causes behind some extraordinary events and therefore can be amazed by them

3 St. Augustine, (*The City of God*)-*De Civitate Dei*, ed. tr. by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), X. 9, p. 404.

4 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), Book I, ch.2, 982b-983b, pp. 692-693.

5 Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 8 and see *De Civitate Dei*, XXXI. 7.

6 Ward, *Miracles*, pp. 3-4.

even though such events are no more wondrous than ordinary ones from the point of view the wise man who know their causes

3-The wonder provoked by reported miracles, which are the unusual manifestations of God's power, but which are nevertheless not contrary to nature (*contra naturam*)

St. Augustine's emphasis on different types of wonder gives us a clue as to why he talks about different kinds of miracles. For him, all natural things are filled with the miraculous. For instance, the birth of men, the growth of plants, and rainfall, are all daily miracles: these are the signs of the mysterious creative power of God at work in the universe. Let us consider the following remarks of Augustine:

No matter then how cheap the natural marvels, that we can see (*miracula visibilia naturarum*), have come to be held because they are always before us, yet whenever we contemplate them with the eye of wisdom, we see that they are greater marvels (*miraculum*) than the least familiar and rarest of miracles (*miraculum*); for man is greater even than any miracle performed by any man's agency.⁷

In these remarks, Augustine considers unusual occurrences to be miracles, but he takes the occurrence of "men" to be a "greater" miracle than these. Consider the following passage:

Even everyday matters, known to all, are equally marvelous, and would be a great wonder to all consider them, if men marveled at any marvels (*si solerent homines mirari mira nisi rara*) except the uncommon.⁸

When we link these two passages, we can see that, according to Aristotle, any event is wonderful and a miracle. He preserves the root meaning of the term *miraculum* and considers every event to be marvelous. However, one needs vision to come to this conclusion. I think what Augustine means is that we begin to wonder when we go beyond the superficiality of mediocrity, and see the perfection in objects underneath.

Augustine's contention that even everyday matters are miracles is not an unfounded assumption. It seems that this is an implication of his presuppositions about the nature of causality. In his philosophy, God is not conceived as an agent who created the world and then merely abandoned it. God is constantly

7 St. Augustine. *De Civitate Dei*, Book X.12, p. 411

8 St. Augustine. *De Civitate Dei*, Book XXI.7, p. 1055

sustaining the universe and creation continues. Augustine expresses this in the following way:

If the Creator's virtue were at any time to be missing from the created things which are to be governed, at once their species would go missing, and the whole of nature would collapse. For it is not like the case of a builder of houses who goes away once he has built, but whose work stands, even though he is missing and goes away. The world could not last like this for the duration of an eye blink, if God were to withdraw his governance from it.⁹

According to Augustine there is a continuous creation. However, does this imply that there is no secondary causality in nature? Is God the only causal agent or do some other beings such as angels, and human beings have their own causal powers? The answer to this question is not clear in the writings of Augustine, and there are different interpretations. On the one hand, Richard Sorabji presents his philosophy as an alternative to occasionalism,¹⁰ and De Vooght ascribes him a position that affirms secondary causality.¹¹ On the other hand, Mourant rejects any secondary causality in the system of Augustine and refers to Malebranchian occasionalism as the proper interpretation of his philosophy.¹² Let's examine these different interpretations in detail.

First, Sorabji claims that Augustine gives voluntary agents a causal role even though he ascribes all creative power to God. The causal role of the voluntary agents is so that they can make use of the power that has been given to them by God. He uses the following citation Augustine takes from the Bible to support his interpretation:¹³ "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So then neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."¹⁴

Whether this passage supports Sorabji's interpretation is quite debatable because Mourant uses the same passage to support his occasionalist interpretation. This passage presumes that voluntary agents have a role in their actions but does not clearly state if this role is a causal one or not. Actually, it is more plausible to interpret the previous passage from the Bible as being in favor of

9 St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis (de Genesi ad Litteram)*, tr. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982) IV. 12. 22

10 Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and Continuum* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 302.

11 D. P. De Vooght, "La notion philosophique du miracle chez saint Augustin," *Recherches de Theologie Ancienne et Medieval*, 1939, pp. 317-343.

12 Mourant, "Augustine on Miracles," p. 119.

13 Sorabji, *Time, Creation*, pp. 302-303.

14 St. Paul, I Corinthians 3: 6-7. Cited by Augustine in *De Trinitate*. 3.8.14

occasionalism as voluntary agents, such as St. Paul and Apollos, did not regard themselves as being able to cause the growth. This is actually what occasionalism states. According to occasionalism, necessarily, there is no causal power except God; however, voluntary agents have free will and are responsible for what they do. This theory does not regard human free will as a kind of causal power.

Apart from this passage, Sorabji mentions the theory of seminal reasons to support his interpretation. The roots of this theory go back to the Stoics and Neo-Platonists. Augustine regards seminal reasons as the seed of things in the world or archetypal forms. All natural kinds were created in seminal form at the very beginning of the history of the world. From then on, things developed independently from the seminal reasons, which were already there.¹⁵ According to Sorabji, these seminal reasons are like the fixed essences and natures of things.¹⁶ De Vooght interprets them as having their own causal power. Mourant opposes this interpretation indicating that the way to interpret seminal reasons is as occasions whereby the causal power of God is implemented. However, I do not want to commit myself to any of these interpretations about Augustine's view of divine causality. Most scholars tend to interpret Augustine's causal theory by affirming genuine secondary causality. However, it is useful to point out that an occasionalist interpretation of Augustine's writings on this issue can also be plausibly advocated.

Whichever way it is interpreted, the theory of seminal reasons is used as a basis for Augustine's other types of miracles. In addition to the ordinary ones, extraordinary events are regarded as miracles as well. In fact, the reported miracles of Christianity are of this type. Augustine insists that these extraordinary miracles are not contrary to nature, however much they are contrary to our expectations or to the regularity in nature that we have observed so far. They have some hidden causes which are actually seminal reasons. In the words of St. Augustine:

Miracles (*portent*) are merely contrary to nature as known, not to nature as it is.¹⁷

There is, however, no impropriety in saying that God does a thing contrary to nature, when it is contrary to what we know of nature; whatever God does contrary to this, we call a prodigy or miracle. But God never acts against the supreme law

15 See St. Augustine, *de genesi ad Litteram*. V. 7.20, V. 12.28, V.23.45, VI. 5.7, VI. 6.10, VI.10.17

16 Sorabji, *Time, Creation*, p. 305.

17 St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XXI.8, p. 1060

of nature, which is beyond knowledge of both the ungodly and weak believers any more than he acts against himself.¹⁸

All the works of God, whether ordinary or extraordinary, have their causes and their right and responsible reasons. But when these causes and reasons are hidden, we wonder at their being made. However, when they are evident we say that they have been made logically or appropriately. Nor is it to be wondered that they are made as reason demands they should be made. ...It is another kind of wonder when the reason is manifest to he who wonders.¹⁹

In these passages, Augustine clearly states that miracles cannot be excluded from the established order of nature because such events would then be contrary to the will of God, Who is behind this order. However, I would like to make a distinction here between the “phenomenal order of existence” and the “providential order.” The former is the order where everything can be explained by an observable mechanism. The explanation in question might be based only on descriptions of the case without appealing to any efficient causality. For instance, to explain the event of thunder with electrical charges indicates the phenomenal mechanism that lies behind this event. We can refer to God as the only efficient cause of both thunder and electrical charges, but the point is that we can show an observable mechanism and cause for each event. An occasionalist might interpret these causes and mechanisms as “occasional causes,” depicting God’s manner of creation in the universe. If we can find an event which really does not have a cause that can be depicted in phenomenal terms, or by any hidden causes, then it is out of the phenomenal order. However, its reason might lie in some of God’s attributes, such as His goodness and providence. He may specially create an event without any phenomenal reason to show His grace. In such a case, the event in question is still within the providential order, although it is out of the phenomenal order. According to Augustine’s remarks above, the phenomenal order coincides with the providential order. That is to say, it is impossible to find any event which is within the providential order but not part of the phenomenal order. Augustine’s reason for this supposition is that if God wills an event that is out of the phenomenal order that has been established in the universe, He is then contravening His own will which orders the universe. I think Augustine makes a sudden jump here. He limits God’s will to the phenomenal order, as if this order is the only manifestation of His will. Think of the following scenario. What if God wills from eternity to create a cosmos in a certain order but determines that some events will take place at certain

18 St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum manichaeum*, 26.3

19 St. Augustine, *Epistula*, 162.7

times without any mechanism that belongs to this phenomenal order? When such events happen in the actual world, they would not contradict God's will because they have already been willed that way. If Augustine thinks that God had to have chosen this actual phenomenal order, then certainly events that fell outside this order would contradict God's will, but he would have rejected God's freedom in creation. This would be a serious drawback, if Augustine intended it. In my opinion, Augustine does not make a clear distinction between the providential order and the phenomenal order. It is plausible not to allow any event contrary to the nature of God, His attributes of will, goodness, and providence within such a theistic philosophical framework; however, this does not imply the rejection of events that do not have any phenomenal causes.

I would like to point one more important aspect of St. Augustine's analysis of miracles. As I mentioned above, Augustine tries to make a distinction between miracles and magic. Even though both categories include wondrous events, the former is defined by its appeal to evil or demonic forces and the aim to deceive. Miracles do not have this evil dimension. They can be either wondrous or produce great benefit and goodness. Healing sick people in unusual ways can be regarded as a miracle that aims at goodness.²⁰ The distinction between miracles and magic in terms of their aims implicitly indicates that the context of the wondrous event is important in characterizing it as a miracle. Although Augustine considers all phenomena to be miraculous, he tries to separate magic from miracles. At first glance, this attitude might be regarded as paradoxical; however, it seems that Augustine analyzes the nature of miracles in terms of two different perspectives. According to the first perspective, all phenomena are miraculous, if we consider merely the ontological-metaphysical status of events. According to the second perspective, not every event is miraculous, because there are also magical phenomena. In this case, what distinguishes miracles from magic is the context in which the phenomenon takes place. If the phenomenon is associated with some evil intention, it is magic, however wonderful and extraordinary it is. If the event is associated with good intentions, then it is a miracle. Even though Augustine does not explicitly states these two perspectives in his analysis of miracles, he seems to presuppose them. Augustine's second level of the analysis of miracles, which takes into account contextual factors becomes more explicit and central when located in the Islamic tradition. As we will see, this perspective provides us with a plausible ground to analyze testimonies regarding religious miracles.

20 St. Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing* appearing in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. III, ed. by Philip Schaff, p. 364

Said Nursi's Analysis of Miracles

In the Islamic tradition, Said Nursi gave one of the most extensive and detailed account of miracles; here all observable phenomena are treated as miraculous. Like Augustine, Nursi also considered both ordinary and extraordinary events to be miracles. Unlike Augustine, Nursi does not explicitly limit miracles to the phenomenal order. In addition, as a general Sunni perspective, his emphasis on the importance of contextual factors in evaluating prophetic miracles might be regarded as an explicit expression of Augustine's implicit presumption regarding the role of the context in distinguishing miracles from magic.

Nursi's analysis of the apparent cause-effect relations in the world is worth considering. He regards every effect as wondrous (*harikulade*) and miraculous (*mucize, mu'jiza*) in comparison to its causes. In his view, an apparent cause, which normally precedes the effect, is unable to bring about the effect. This characterization implicitly depends on the root of the Arabic term "*mu'jiza*," which can be translated as miracle in English. "*A'jz*," the root of this term means inability, and if something is unable to produce an effect, then this effect is a *mu'jiza*—a miracle for that thing. Let us focus on a crucial passage where Nursi explains this analysis.

All things are in need of a single All-Glorious Creator in everything, in every matter and circumstance. Indeed, we look at the beings in the universe and we see that there is the manifestation of an absolute force within an absolute weakness. And the traces of an absolute power are apparent within an absolute impotence. Like, for example, the wonderful states and stages plants display when the life-force awakens in their seeds and roots. And there is the manifestation of an absolute wealth within an absolute poverty and dryness. Like the poverty of trees and the soil in winter and their glittering wealth and riches in the spring. And the sprinklings of an absolute life are apparent within an absolute lifelessness. Like the transformation of the elements into living matter. Also, there is the manifestation of an all-encompassing consciousness with an absolute ignorance. Like everything, from minute particles to the stars, acting consciously and conforming to the order of the universe and to the demands of wisdom and the benefiting life. Thus, this power within impotence, and strength within weakness, and wealth and riches within poverty, and life and consciousness within lifelessness and ignorance necessarily and self-evidently open windows on every side onto the necessary existence and Unity of One Possessing Absolute Power and Absolute Strength, a Possessor of Absolute Riches, an Absolute Knowing, All-living and self-sufficient one.²¹

21 Said Nursi, *The Words*, tr. Shukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publication, 1992), p. 694.

A few pages after this quoted passage, Nursi asks the following question: “With what can you explain this wise, generous, compassionate, providential sustaining, this strange, wonderful, miraculous state of affairs which is before your eyes?”²² This passage states that the observable reality manifests opposite attributes such as an all-encompassing consciousness and an absolute ignorance or absolute wealth and absolute poverty and dryness. This observation provides Nursi with a ground from which to regard all the states of affairs we observe as wonderful and miraculous. In the following passage, he indicates the way in which the opposition of some attributes might be understood:

It sometimes happens that in order to dismiss apparent causes from the ability to create and to show their distance from this, a verse points out the aims and fruits of the effects, so that it may be understood that causes are only an apparent veil. For to will the following of most wise and purposeful aims and obtaining of important results is of necessity the work of one who is most Knowing and Wise. And causes are lifeless and without intelligence. So by mentioning the aims and results, such verses show that although causes are superficially and as beings joined to and adjacent to their effects, in reality there is a great distance between them. The distance from the cause to the creation of effect is so great that the Divine Names each rise like stars.²³

After this passage, Nursi likens the distance between apparent causes and effects to the horizon where the mountains seem to be joined and contiguous with the sky. In the same way that there is a vast distance between the mountains and the stars in the sky, there is also a huge distance between causes and effects. Their apparent adjacency is misleading. Giving an example from the Qur’an, Nursi refers to the verse where it is said that water is sent and fruits and plants are produced for the use and convenience of people and their cattle.²⁴ Nursi points out that this verse draws our attention to the aim of the rain and the growth of fruits and plants which are all relevant phenomena to human beings and their cattle. He thinks this purposeful aim “dismisses all the causes from the ability to create.”²⁵ As he sees it, since the causes are unintelligent, they cannot act with an intention to fulfill a purpose. However, the effects are purposeful and require intelligence if they are to take place. This opposition between apparent causes and effects makes Nursi think that the phenomenal causes are unable to create their adjacent effects. As a result, he calls them “miracles of divine power.”²⁶

22 Nursi, *The Words*, p. 696.

23 Nursi, *The Words*, p. 435.

24 Qur’an; 8: 24-32.

25 Nursi, *The Words*, p. 436.

26 Nursi, *The Words*, p. 436.

I will not discuss the strength of Nursi's argument here, because in this paper, I am focusing on the problem of defining miracles rather than justifying their actual occurrence in the world. However, it is worth noticing how he arrives at the characterization of ordinary phenomena as wonderful and miraculous. According to Nursi, even though cause-effect links in the universe are regularly manifested, there is a huge gap, even an opposition between these regularly connected events. To recognize this unexpected aspect of phenomena which cannot be seen with a superficial glance, produces wonder and leads us to interpret what we have regarded as causes to be causally impotent, and the effects adjacent to them to be miracles. What we hold to be causes might be regarded as the effects of some other causes and can be considered to be miracles when compared to these other causes. So every event can be regarded as miraculous.

Nursi's characterization of miracles as events that are unable to be produced by natural causes due to the huge, observable, gap between them is in line with occasionalism but does not sufficiently reflect an occasionalist insight. According to occasionalism, every finite being either actual or possible, and which has a beginning cannot be an effect of another finite being. The only possible causal agent is a being with omnipotent power, or God. Occasionalism makes a modal claim and rejects all possible secondary causality. However, Nursi's interpretation of miracles relies on observations of the actual cases. In this world, according to Nursi, we can observe a huge gap between phenomenal causes and effects. His remarks do not apply to other possible worlds. In some possible worlds, there might be natural cause-and-effect correlations in which there would not be the same huge gap or opposition that exists in the actual world. An occasionalist interpretation of miracles needs to examine such possible cases as well.

In addition to the ordinary cases, Nursi considers extraordinary cases to be miracles and widely discusses them within the context of prophetic miracles. With respect to extraordinary cases, he makes several categorizations such as *irhasat*, *karamah*, *istidraj*, *sihr* (sorcery, magic) and *mu'jiza*, mainly in line with the classical Sunni understanding of these terms. *Irhasat* are paranormal cases that happened before the birth of Prophet Muhammad.²⁷ "*Karamah*" refers to unusual cases that take place in association with sincere and devout Muslims.²⁸ However, if people consider the source of such extraordinary cases they encountered to be themselves rather than God, then these unusual cases

27 Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati (RNK)*, vol: 1, (Istanbul: Nesil Yayinlari, 2001), p. 389.

28 Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 359.

are called “*istidraj*.”²⁹ “*Sihr*” refers to the abnormal and bizarre events with evil intentions behind them such as those of deceiving people.³⁰ *Mu’jiza* is God’s confirmation of a prophetic claim by changing His manner of creation (*adat Allah*).³¹ These categorizations reflect the importance of the contextual factors relevant to extraordinary events. The concept of miracle, when defined in this way, is quite different from its earlier characterizations, even though there are some connections between them. For instance, Prophet Muhammad split the moon into two with a gesture of his finger as a reply to the challenge of the unbelievers. As I interpret Nursi’s remarks, this extraordinary event is a miracle in terms of its support of Muhammad’s claim of prophecy. It is also a miracle in the sense that such an action cannot be performed with the gesture of a finger. It seems that, according to Nursi, there are two different senses of miracle at work here. Let me clarify these two senses in the following way: the first one becomes apparent within a context in which a prophetic claim is made. The second sense is independent of such a context, and is an instance of the cause-effect relationship; here there is a huge gap between cause and effect. I call the first sense “the pragmatic aspect” in characterizing miracles, and the second sense “the epistemological-metaphysical aspect.”

It is not clear to me exactly what Nursi’s view is of the epistemological-metaphysical status of prophetic miracles. Are extraordinary events ascribed to the prophets within the phenomenal order or not? Nursi does not clearly answer this question, but he hints at it in several passages. For instance, when he compares the prophetic miracles with the new scientific and technological discoveries, Nursi states that these miracles trace the “final limits of man’s science and industry” and indicates their “final goal.”³² According to Nursi, not only are prophets the spiritual leaders of human beings, they are also “the masters and foremen of mankind’s material progress.”³³ With their miracles prophets are regarded as patrons of a certain craft. For instance, Noah is the master of all seamen and indicated the upper limit of ship-building craft with his miraculous ship. Nursi’s interpretation of the prophetic miracles as the final limit of technological and scientific progress is open to interpretation. They are either at the highest point within the phenomenal order or at a point just beyond that order. Although it is not clear what he means by this expression, Nursi does not explicitly reject the possibility of miracles out of the phenomenal order. Nevertheless,

29 Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 359.

30 Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 388.

31 Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 388.

32 Nursi, *The Words*, p. 261.

33 Nursi, *The Words*, p. 261.

he does not accept the possibility of cases that contravene the providential order or the logical rules. For example, in discussing the necessity of an afterlife, he draws attention to the fact that some people who are oppressed by others die without taking their revenge. According to him, this fact necessitates the existence of an afterlife in which everybody will receive what they deserve as the non-existence of such an afterlife would contravene God's essential attributes of justice and mercy; this would be unacceptable.³⁴ Neither does Nursi consider the combination of two opposites to be possible.³⁵ That is to say, he considers the violation of logical laws to be impossible.

The Fundamentals of the Occasionalist Approach to Miracles

By extending Augustine's and Nursi's insights regarding miracles, we can reach a more systematic occasionalist characterization of miracles. The observation of the huge gap and the opposition between natural causes and effects leads us to wonder about the perfection of the effect in comparison with the imperfection of the cause. This wonder leads us to seek a possible explanation. In an occasionalist framework, an examination of these actual cases will result in the observation that they are finite and limited. Whether we ponder on events or objects or some other ontologically distinct items, we come to realize that they all have a beginning. That which has a beginning is finite; according to occasionalism all possible finite beings must have an omnipotent cause to be existent. In other words, finite beings have no power to cause any other finite being. So, all finite beings are created. In this sense, they are miracles of divine power. This is an occasionalist interpretation of the actual state in the world. In addition, in any possible scenario, finite beings can only be explained if God is their sole efficient cause. Thus, in principle all possible creation can be treated as miraculous. In this characterization of miracles wonder is not an essential aspect of the definition of miracles; however, it is an important psychological factor that enables us to fix our attention beneath the superficiality of the observed regularities in nature and to ponder on the meaning behind them. It paves the way to an explanation of natural phenomena, and to an occasionalist interpretation within this framework.

This occasionalist approach must be able to explain how ordinary and extraordinary miracles differ from each other. I suggest a hierarchy of miracles to

³⁴ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, pp. 25-40.

³⁵ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 31.

do this. Ordinary events are in the first category. They are miracles in the sense that they are created by God and nothing else has the power to create them. Since such phenomena indicate regular patterns with their advent, they are the most available type of miracles. It is for this reason that I suggest they be called “first order miracles.” The second category consists of events that are extraordinary, yet within the phenomenal order. For instance, I cannot fly to Turkey from the USA in 5 minutes, but this is physically possible, because as light speed, the highest velocity we know, could cover this distance in a matter of seconds. So this is a case which is practically impossible, but physically possible. This event is again miraculous in the sense that it can be brought about only by God. We can call these “second order miracles.” The third category includes events that are extraordinary but are out of the phenomenal order. Let us call them “third order miracles.” It is quite difficult to exemplify this category, because with new scientific discoveries what we have termed as “the laws of nature” may turn out to be just particular generalizations of more intricate laws. Newtonian laws were supposed to be universally valid; this came to an end with the discovery of the laws of quantum mechanics. Now, most scientists consider the laws of quantum mechanics to be deeper laws from which the Newtonian laws can be derived, but the reverse is not true. Thus, an event which contravenes Newtonian physics might be consistent within quantum mechanics. In addition, the prophetic miracles, such as Prophet Muhammad’s splitting of the moon into two or Prophet Moses’s parting of the Red Sea might be able to be explained by some laws which have as yet not been discovered. Who can guarantee that these events are not part of the phenomenal order?

The third order miracles are in the highest level of the hierarchy. I accept the possibility of miracles out of the phenomenal order, but they must be within the providential order. There cannot be cases that violate the providential order which is a necessary manifestation of God’s essential attributes. Neither are contradictory cases acceptable. I do not regard metaphysically impossible cases as miracles of a higher order. Here, I consider metaphysical possibility to be broadly logical possibility. Mathematical truths, truths concerning the nature of God, and logical tautologies fall into this category. The violations of these truths cannot be regarded as genuine possibilities insofar as the concepts they involve are clear and distinct.

So far, I have outlined the main features of the metaphysical-epistemological aspect in characterizing miracles. As far as the pragmatic aspect is concerned, a miracle is God’s confirmation of a claim to prophecy; as Nursi says God does this

by changing His manner of creation (*adat Allah*). In my opinion, the same extraordinary event might be regarded differently from context to context. It might be regarded as magic if associated with evil intentions, or it could be considered to be a *karamah* if associated with the sincere intention of a pious Muslim. These two aspects should not be confused in analyzing extraordinary events. For instance, a magical event can be treated as a miracle in terms of its metaphysical status as an event that can be brought about only by God. However, it is magic in terms of the evil intention of the person who uses it to deceive people. That is to say, this event is not a miracle in its pragmatic aspect.

I think these two different aspects of miracles also differ in terms of what they aim to establish. While miracles in terms of their epistemological-metaphysical aspect purport to indicate the existence of God as the only agent who can bring about any event, miracles in terms of their pragmatic aspect aim to prove the prophecy of the person in question, by presuming the first aspect in which the existence of God is indicated by the impotent character of the phenomena. In order to take his claim seriously, the existence of God must already be presupposed. The prophecy claim depends on the existence of God who is able to change His manner of creation to affirm the message of a prophet.

Problems

As I have said, I am not aiming to prove the actuality of miracles. However, in order to establish a coherent and plausible concept of miracles, the occasionalist approach must respond to the objections which threaten the very possibility and plausibility of miracles as understood in this way. The main criticisms that might be applicable to this account of miracles are as follows.

Firstly, a common empiricist objection threatens the intelligibility and meaningfulness of the notions of absolute power, that of God and that of divine agency on the universe. Since these concepts are about a transcendent reality that is beyond any possible experience, it is not possible either to confirm or disconfirm them via experience. As the objection goes, we cannot meaningfully talk about what we cannot experience in principle. So, there is no rational ground either to prove or disprove the existence of God and His agency on earth. In this respect, I will specifically consider David Hume's criticism as the main root of this type of objection. According to Hume, God is not something we can rationally accept. This is an explicit implication of his analysis of causality of God. When Hume was looking for the source of the concept of causation, he

rejected the idea of “power” as its real ground. For Hume, we do not have an intelligible idea of “power” that we get either from external senses or from internal observation.³⁶ According to his empirical criterion of meaning, if the source of any idea cannot be found in experience, we should not regard it as meaningful.³⁷ So the idea of power is not meaningful according to Hume. He follows the implication of this analysis of the idea of power and comes to the conclusion that the idea of absolute power is not intelligible either. In brief, the idea of an omnipotent being, namely God is not meaningful and we cannot base any rational argument on this unintelligible idea.³⁸

Secondly, according to Hume it seems to be very implausible to believe in events that cannot be explained by natural mechanisms; because these are contrary to our regular past experiences. Hume defines a miracle as “a violation of natural law” or as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.”³⁹ Then he draws attention to the fact that the evidence that supports any miracle is extremely low in comparison to the evidence supporting a law of nature; a law of nature is established by uniform and regular experience which has been repeated many times. In contrast, a supposed miracle is assumed to occur at a given time. Since there is a conflict here, the plausible attitude is to accept the alternative, which has a greatly superior justification compared to the other option. Thus, the content of a miracle report indicates its implausibility. In Hume’s words,

There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of fact, against the existence of any miracle, nor can such a proof be destroyed or the miracle rendered credible but by an opposite proof which is superior.⁴⁰

I do not completely embrace Hume’s definition of miracles or all the implications of this definition, but the main point of his objection is worth considering. On the one hand, there is a testimony about a unique case. On the other hand, we have an ongoing and regular experience of its opposite. If there is no other factor affecting our judgment in this case, it is apparently very implausible to

36 Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 50.

37 Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 30.

38 Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 83.

39 David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1955), p. 123.

40 Hume, *An Inquiry*, pp. 122-123.

believe in the former. So, a belief in the prophetic miracles such as the splitting of the moon or parting of the Red Sea seems to be very implausible.

Thirdly, another objection might be directed against the scope of the notion of omnipotence. Why are miracles of a higher order than the third order not allowed? If God is omnipotent who can create everything, then do not we limit His power with such restrictions? For example, Descartes thinks that God could have changed the logico-mathematical rules, but, since He determined them in this way, He would not do that because of His immutability.⁴¹ Whether God could have acted against His nature is a matter of discussion among Cartesian scholars. Nevertheless, Descartes indicates the possibility that logico-mathematical contradictions could have occurred, but they did not take place because God has chosen this order and will not change His own decision.

Peter Damian comes up with a more radical claim, stating that not only can God make a woman a virgin after defloration but also that He can make the defloration never to have occurred.⁴² So this is a case where God is capable of causing an event to have occurred and to not have occurred at the same time, thus implying a logical contradiction. The reason behind such a proposal is Damian's assumption that God is not subject to the laws according to which He creates nature. Logical rules are also a kind of law in that sense and within the control of God's power.⁴³ In contrast to Descartes, Damian indicates a possibility that can be realized in this actual universe. So can we expect such miracles to happen according to this framework?

Possibilities

As far as the first criticism is concerned, it should be admitted that taking experience as an essential standard to judge what is meaningful or not is an ungrounded presumption of any empiricist philosophy. It is a beginning point which seems to be self-evident to many philosophers as well as being insufficient for capturing all intelligible discourse for many other philosophers. Although it is a common tendency to ground the intelligibility of ideas about reality on the basis of experience, this is just one option offered among many

41 Descartes, Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630; CSMK, p. 25 and Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630; CSMK, p. 23.

42 Peter Damian, *De Divina Omnipotentia*, Paolo Brezzi (ed). (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1943), pp. 402-406.

43 Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), II, p. 1153.

others. In addition, this option has some limitations in itself. When we look at Hume's own philosophy, we see that with his analysis of causality he arrives at paradoxical conclusions.

Hume's analysis of causality has two important levels. On the first level, he analyses two particular events which always occur in a regular manner and as a result rejects an objectively necessary connection between any particular events. On the second level, he rejects the objectivity of the universal principle of causality which maintains that whatever begins to exist must have a cause of its existence. Regarding the first level of Hume's analysis of causality, he examines two specific events which always occur in a regular manner. Hume questions whether there is a causal connection between these events in the sense that the first one necessitates the second one. If the causal relation between these events is a necessary connection, then it is impossible to think of a case in which the first event occurs and the second one does not. Hume does not accept the idea of the necessary connection between events because it is unjustified. First of all, the events considered above are logically distinct from one another. In other words, to think of the first event and not the second in a possible case that would not lead to a contradiction. So, by mere reason it is not possible to infer the second event from the first.⁴⁴ As the second point, Hume examines whether the idea of causality comes from our experience. We do not observe that the first event produces the other or that there is a necessary relationship between them. According to Hume, what we observe between two regular events is only that they are merely regular correlations, namely constant conjunctions.⁴⁵ The second level of Hume's analysis of causality is a corollary of the first level. If we cannot make universal generalizations on the basis of experience, we also cannot claim that whatever exists must have a cause of its existence.⁴⁶ Hume also adds that the ideas of cause and effect are logically distinct, separable from one another as we can "conceive any object to be non-existent this moment and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or a productive principle."⁴⁷

However, just a few pages after these remarks Hume says the following:

Every effect necessarily presupposes a cause; effect being a relative term, of which cause is the correlative. But this does not prove, that every being must be preceded by a cause; no more than it follows, because every husband must have

44 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 65.

45 Hume, *An Inquiry*, p. 63.

46 David Hume (1975), pp. 80-81.

47 Hume, *A Treatise*, p. 79.

a wife, that therefore every man must be married. The true state of the question is, whether every object, which begins to exist, must owe its existence to a cause; and this I assert neither to be intuitively nor demonstratively certain.⁴⁸

Hume seems to contradict himself in this passage if he is still adhering to his empirical criterion of meaning. Here, he approves of the statement that “every effect necessarily presupposes a cause” and tries to distinguish it from the statement that “every object which begins to exist must owe its existence to a cause.” In doing this, Hume makes use of the necessary link between correlative terms, as exemplified between husband and wife. According to him, “cause” and “effect” are correlative terms and are necessarily connected but “that which begins to exist” and the “cause” are not correlative. Firstly, just a few pages before he had considered cause and effect to be logically distinct. How can he now relate these ideas in a necessary way to one another? Secondly, his contention *that every man must be married does not follow from the fact that every husband must have a wife* does not actually exemplify the logical relation between the two formulations of the universal principle of causality. The definition of a “husband” is a *married* male, and of course every male is not married. However, what is the definition of an “effect” according to Hume? Is it not something that begins to exist? Hume seems to reject the identification of an effect with something that begins to exist in the passage quoted above. He does not clearly give a definition of an effect except to say that it is a correlative of a cause. If he characterizes effects just as correlative terms of causes, then anything can be defined in this way. I can define “widget” as the correlative term of “gadget” just by stipulation without defining them properly. However, this would contradict Hume’s empirical criterion of meaning. According to this principle, ideas which are not derived from experience cannot be treated as meaningful. They cannot be subjected to a rational discourse. Thus, according to Hume’s own standard of meaning the term “effect” used in the statement that every effect necessarily presupposes a cause cannot be treated as intelligible if it is not identified with something that begins to exist. And when this identification is made, then Hume contradicts himself in the quoted passage. Both ways are dead-ends for Hume and he ends up in a dilemma.

In my view, the contingency of each object (the fact that they begin to exist at a certain time) shows that they can be properly regarded as “effects” and thus we need “a cause” to explain the effect. Since Hume rejects the meaningfulness of the idea of God, he does not regard the cause in question as being

48 Hume, *A Treatise*, p. 82.

God. However, this rejection is dependent on his empirical criterion of meaning. I do not see any convincing reason to apply this criterion to all ideas. The idea of God can be considered to be meaningful when it is conceived as the idea of the uncaused cause which must be infinite. Finite beings point to an infinite cause. Although this cannot be exhibited in experience, it can be inferred as a necessary conclusion from the experience. As a result, I think we can have an intelligible idea of God and explain the effects we observe by His causation.

Let us come to the second criticism. The possibility of an extraordinary event which should take place just once or a very few times is extremely low in comparison to the regularly occurring events that are opposed to it. Nevertheless, low probability does not mean impossibility. Even in Hume's system, extraordinary events, such as the sun's rising from the west tomorrow are possibilities, although improbable. In addition, I argue that such extraordinary events might be rendered more probable within some specific contexts. The prophetic miracles are examples of this. In order to see this point, we should understand how the pragmatic aspect regarding miracles affects the plausibility of miracle reports.

Some contemporary scholars draw attention to the significance of the context with respect to miracles. For instance, Richard Swinburne points to the role of the context by claiming that events must have religious significance to be miracle. If an event does not significantly contribute toward a holy divine purpose for the world it cannot be considered to be a miracle. Swinburne calls attention to the Biblical story of Elijah and the prophets of the Baal. Elijah challenged them, saying: "Call ye on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the god that answereth by fire let him be God." The prayer of the prophets of Baal was not answered but Elijah's prayer was answered in an extraordinary manner.⁴⁹

I think Swinburne has made a crucial insight in his analysis of miracles. What is important here is that a reported miracle ascribed to a prophet should not be evaluated independently of its context. In evaluating reports of miracles we should also consider the contextual factors that affect the event.

As far as the prophetic miracles are concerned, the classical Sunni contention that they are associated with a claim of prophecy render them more probable. It is very plausible to believe that God changed his manner of creation to confirm the prophecy claim of His messengers against any challenge, thus

49 R. Swinburne, "Introduction", in *Miracles*, ed. by R. Swinburne, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1989), pp. 6-7.

allowing them to be perceived by others as the messenger of the Creator of this universe. But the plausibility in question presupposes the existence of God, Who is already indicated by the finitude of beings. The prophetic miracles do not aim to prove the existence of God; rather they are intended to establish the prophecy of the person in question. In fact, John Mackie, toward the end of his discussion on miracles in the “Miracles and Testimony” chapter of his book *Miracle and Theism*, admits that the plausibility of miracles differs from theistic and atheistic contexts. We can summarize this discussion in his words:

If one were already a theist and a Christian, it would not be unreasonable to weigh seriously the evidence of alleged miracles as some indication whether the Jansenists or the Jesuits enjoyed more of the favor of the Almighty. But it is a very different matter if the context is that of fundamental debate about the truth of theism itself. Here one party to the debate is initially at least agnostic, and does not yet concede that there is a supernatural power at all. From this point of view, the intrinsic improbability of a genuine miracle, as defined above, is very great, and one or other of the alternative explanations in our fork will always much more likely—that is, either that the alleged event is not miraculous, or that it did not occur, that the testimony is faulty some way.⁵⁰

As a reply to the third criticism, allowing violations of the logical rules and of some metaphysical truths within the scope of divine power will result in an undermining of the very concept of God. For instance, an implication of this view is to accept that God can kill Himself. If God can kill Himself, then He could not be accepted as God anymore because God is essentially eternal by definition. In order to have an intelligible idea of God, the scope of divine power must exclude such absurdities. What it includes is only genuine possibilities. However, this does not contradict the idea of omnipotence, i.e. to have power over everything. “Thing” in this context is specified as “possible things” and “omnipotent” means the being who has power over every possible thing. However, it would not be proper to say that God cannot perform such absurdities. This type of expression presupposes that the absurdities in question fall under the scope of divine power, but He does not have enough power to bring them about. This presumption is false. So, we cannot say that God cannot create them nor is it correct to say that God can create them. The correct expression is that divine power is not applicable to them. The other two formulations involve category mistakes. To say that God can create round squares or logically contradictory cases is a category mistake like saying that the number 2 is green. Numbers are not things to which color-predicates apply. In other words, color-predicates have a certain

⁵⁰ John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 27.

range or extension of applicability that excludes numbers. On the other hand, the properties of “being odd” or “being even” apply to numbers but not to material objects. Saying that this chair is even is another category mistake. So each predicate has a certain extension to which this predicate legitimately applies. Things or expressions which are not within the scope (extension) of a certain predicate lead to a category mistake if they are associated with this predicate. So, the sentence “God cannot do something” includes a category mistake if that thing in question, for instance, is a contradiction; contradictions are not within the scope of divine power.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to outline the basic features of an occasionalist approach to miracles by improving Augustine’s and Said Nursi’s approaches. I have emphasized two aspects that are relevant to their characterization. The epistemological-metaphysical aspect deals with characterizing miracles independent of specific contexts. The fundamental tenet behind this aspect is that every finite being is a miracle in the sense that finite beings have no power to cause any other finite being and that they can only be brought about by the infinite power of God. Based on this tenet, miracles can be categorized into three different groups as ordinary ones, extraordinary ones within the phenomenal order and extraordinary ones out of the phenomenal order. However, there is no other category that allows for violations of metaphysical or logical truths.

The pragmatic aspect concerns the specific contextual factors that affect the plausibility of miracle reports. An extraordinary or unique event might be rendered more probable within a context in which a claim to prophecy is made. It is plausible to think that God may change His manner of creation to confirm His messengers.

This characterization of miracles is not an arbitrary stipulation. I have indicated the plausibility and coherence of the occasionalist approach by responding to three major criticisms that might be applicable. The first objection was directed towards the meaningfulness of the idea of God and His agency in the universe. The second one was derived from Hume’s argument against the plausibility of believing in miracle reports. The third criticism was concerned with the scope of divine power which excludes contradictory and absurd cases.

Özet

Bu makale mucize konusunda okazyonalist yaklaşımın temel doktrinini ortaya koymayı hedeflemektedir. Mucize ile ilgili St. Augustine ve Said Nursî'nin anlayışlarını da değerlendirerek, her mümkün ve sonlu varlığın mucize telakki edildiği tutarlı, makul ve sistematik bir mucize anlayışı geliştirmeye teşebbüs etmektedir. Bunlara ilaveten, bu nitelermeye uygulanabilecek üç temel itiraz da bu bağlamda tartışılmaktadır. Bu makale, bu yaklaşımın kavramsal bir analizini ortaya koymakta ve bu çerçevede yapılacak daha köklü çalışmalar için yoldaki engelleri temizlemektedir.