
THREE CONCEPTIONS ON THE NATURE OF A MIRACLE

Sergey Astapov*

National Research Nuclear University, 31 Kashirskoe shosse, Moscow 115409, Russia

(Received 5 March 2015, revised 3 January 2016)

Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of the conceptions of the nature of a miracle, which were formed in history of the European philosophy. Three conceptions and criticism of them are evolved in the article: the supernatural, the psychological and the symbolistical ones. The first conception states that a miracle is an interruption of the natural laws by a god. The psychological conception considers a miracle as a phenomenon of a believer's consciousness. It denies objectiveness of a miracle. The symbolistical conception considers a miracle as a sign of the religious purpose of a person. This conception has its roots in patristics. According to it a miracle is a meeting of the imperfect person of a man and its perfect prototype in Divine sphere. A miracle does not necessarily break the natural laws in this case. The thesis that the personalistic symbolical conception of the nature of a miracle is robust towards the scientific criticism, although it remains in the limits of the theistic consciousness, is defended in the article.

Keywords: miracle, person, religious symbolism

1. Introduction

A miracle, at the first approximation, is an impressive and a wonderful event (the Latin word *miraculum* was derived from the verb *mirari* – to wonder), which supports, confirms and justifies the religious faith. Faith in miracles is one of the features of the religious consciousness. For religious people a miracle is a manifestation of the supernatural power, which breaks the stable order of things, course of events, laws and regularities of the world. This conception was formed in the depths of the religious and mythological consciousness and can be named supernaturalistic. However, it is not a single conception on the nature of miracles. The alternative conceptions toward it are psychological and symbolistical ones. Each of these three conceptions is analysed in the article. The statement that the symbolical conception of the nature of miracles is robust

*E-mail and additional information: Southern Federal University, 105/2 Bolshaya Sadovaya str., Rostov-on-Don 344006, Russia, seastapov@yandex.ru, tel.: +79885335244

toward the scientific criticism, although it remains in the limits of the theistic consciousness, is defended in it.

This analysis determines the structure of the ‘Discussion’ part. The first section of this part is devoted to the examination of the supernaturalistic conception and the main positions of criticism toward it, the second section – to examination of the psychological conception of the nature of miracles, which is a contradictory conception to the previous one, and the third section – to analysis of the symbolical conception.

2. Discussion

2.1. *The supernatural conception of nature of a miracle*

The supernatural conception of the nature of a miracle claims, in the general sense, that a miracle is an interruption of the order or the course of the natural processes. This general sense is concretized in the different theological doctrines. For example, Thomas Aquinas claims: “When an effect of natural causes is produced outside the order of the natural cause, we call it a miracle” [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. I, q. 110, a. 4, arg. 3]. Thomas Aquinas, who thinks that God is the cause and creator of the miracles, does not appeal to the supernatural agents in this proposition, but makes a phenomenalistic conclusion about a miracle: it is an event in the natural world, however, it is an extraordinary and an unexpected event and its unexpectedness consists in the fact that we meet some other effect instead of the effect expected in these circumstances. We ascribe the appearance of the unexpected effect to the activity of some supernatural power, but often this ascribing is a mistake, since we cannot know all natural powers. In this case arises the problem of distinction between true and imaginary miracles. Thomas Aquinas solves this problem and asserts that a true miracle is an event occurred outside the order of the *whole* created nature. He states that the ascribing miracles to the activity of the angels, demons, saints, magicians is a mistake, since nobody except God can change the whole natural order.

The other way to define the nature of miracles can be found in ‘An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding’ of David Hume. The definition of miracles, which Hume brings forward in order to criticize, states that a miracle is “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent” [D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, The Project Gutenberg EBook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm>, footnote 22]. The essence of Hume’s criticism is that the laws of nature cannot be violated, since they are stated as generalization of the empiric data. Miracles are not the facts, contradicting to the laws of nature, they are the evidences. More likely, these evidences are false, since the witnesses are mistaken, because they don’t know the laws of nature or their belief induces to a fallacy. Moreover, Hume claims: “Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these

religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system” [<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm>, passage 95].

Hume’s criticism demonstrates the important problems, which are produced by the supernaturalistic conception of the nature of miracles. Here are these problems.

1. A researcher of religion, indeed, has no facts of miracles as the material of his researches, but the evidence about them. Therefore, the question on competence and objectivity of the witnesses takes place.

2. The absence of contradiction among the evidences of miracles in different religions does not remove the statements on falseness of miracles of any religions, which are expressed by believers of other religion.

Both of these problems can be illustrated by the example of the Holy Fire (Holy Light), which occurs every year at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on Great Saturday, the day preceding Orthodox Easter. The investigations by precision instruments could give a good reason to believe in the miraculous occurrence of the Holy Fire, if the scientists were asked. However, the evidences about occurrence of the Holy Fire remain only the evidences of the witnesses, the majority of whom are Orthodox pilgrims. At the same time the clergy of the Armenian Church does not acknowledge that the occurrence at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Great Saturday is a miracle. The believers of the Armenian Church headed by Patriarch participate in the celebration of occurrence of the Holy Light at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Armenian archimandrite enters together with the Greek Patriarch into cubiculum, where the candles are lighted from the Holy Light. But the Armenian clergy says that the candles are lit by the fire of the lampion. The claims of the Armenian clergy do not lower the belief of the Orthodox in the miraculous occurrence of the Holy Fire, but strengthen the position of the agnostics.

3. It is difficult to find a miracle non-repeated in different religions. According to the Christian hagiography saints made many miracles, but the most part of them are identical phenomena, having the biblical miracles as their pattern. The world history of religions demonstrated a great number of the evidences about miracles (as phenomena, if the theological meanings are not taken into consideration), which are similar to the Christian evidences and among themselves.

4. The supernaturalistic conception meets difficulties in religions, where the doctrine of predestination takes place. The main difficulty is that God’s miracles break the order, which he predestines. However, it is possible that God in his providence predestined miracles too. Augustine was, perhaps, the first of the Christian authors who wrote that possibility of miracles was laid in nature by God in the beginning. Thus, miracles are the natural occurrences like any event in the world; they differ from other events only by their rareness and power of influence upon the religious consciousness.

Likewise miracles (if they are non-accidental) become compatible with the cosmological argument of God's being. The cosmological argument is reliable in the frames of hard determinism: each object has a certain cause of its existence. The chain of the causes and consequences can stretch far away, but it can't be the actual infinite, since infinity can't increase; consequently, we must think of the first cause of all being; this cause is named God. The other condition for reliability of the cosmological argument is the conception that the first cause of the world is external to the world. Both of these conditions are woundable for criticism, especially from the position of the modern science, because the modern science denies mechanistic determinism, which was inherent to Metaphysics of the 17th–18th centuries, and asserts the dialectics of cause and consequence, necessity and accident, possibility and actuality.

However, the investigation of the cosmological argument is not the aim of this article. It is important to demonstrate that the conception of a miracle as a non-repeated violation of the laws of nature contradicts the cosmological argument, and this contradiction is removed in the conception including possibility of miracles into the Divine providence.

Negation of the supernatural nature of miracles by the philosophers of the 18th–19th centuries brought Philosophy to two other conceptions of the nature of miracles. The first of these conceptions claims that the nature of miracles is incomprehensible. A miracle is beyond human understanding, paradoxical; it is aimed at presenting the inscrutable will of God (S. Kierkegaard, K. Barth). Thus it is not the religious belief that is based on miracles, but miracles that are based on belief. The religious consciousness doesn't demand any rational explanations of a miracle, on the contrary, such explanations are negatively considered by the religious people. Since this conception denies understanding of the nature of miracles, it is non-productive for the Theology and Philosophy of religion.

2.2. The psychological conception of nature of a miracle

According to the second conception of the nature of a miracle, which may be named psychological, a miracle is one of the phenomena of the religious consciousness. This conception is represented in two variants: the variant of rationalistic criticism (D. Hume, D. Diderot and other philosophers of Enlightenment, L. Feuerbach and the further line of atheism and among theologians – D. Strauss, B. Bauer, A. Harnack, E. Troeltsch) and the variant of the psychologists explanations (W. Wundt, S. Freud, C.G. Jung and others). According to the first variant a miracle is an effect of the inability to explain the event through the natural regularities and of the effects. According to the second variant, a miracle is an effect either of the transference of inner experiences onto the natural and cultural objects or of the suggestion (hypnotic suggestion, self-suggestion, etc.). Thus, both variants state that miracles are produced by consciousness, in the first place – by the religious belief.

Adolf von Harnack distinguishes five groups of the evidences ('stories') of miracles and in this way qualifies all aspects of the nature of miracles from the position of psychological conception. There are:

- 1) stories which had their origin in an exaggerated view of natural events of an impressive character;
- 2) stories which had their origin in sayings or parables, or in the projection of inner experiences on the external world;
- 3) stories which arose from the interests of the fulfilment of Old Testament sayings;
- 4) stories of surprising cures effected by Jesus' spiritual force;
- 5) stories of which we cannot fathom the secret [A. Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter-Term 1899-1900, Christian Classic Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/harnack/christianity>, p. 20].

The psychological conception has a positivistic character and cannot be accepted by the religious consciousness. It profanes miracles, since it equates them to the event, evoking astonishment, admiration. A miracle, according to this conception, is a sudden event, which produces intense positive emotions. To be more exact, a miracle is an interpretation of this sudden event. The psychological conception is the conception, which asserts that miracles just don't happen as real, objective events, and considers them as specific interpretation of certain facts.

The criticism of the psychological conception of the miracles nature was made by the Russian religious philosopher Aleksey Losev in the book 'Dialectics of a myth' [1]. Firstly, Losev states that a miracle isn't an attempt to explain strangeness, an unusual case, since an individual feels a miracle first and foremost, he sees it and understands: here is a miracle; he will attempt to explain the occurrence after some period of time has elapsed. Secondly, Losev considers that only an external researcher can think a miracle to be a transference of inner experiences onto the external objects. An individual, experiencing a miracle, has the sense of being a passive object, but not a source, a producer of miraculous activity. He believes a miracle bursting into his subjective world and demands to acknowledge it.

The statement that a miracle is the psychical suggestion, as Losev sees, explains nothing for the scientific analysis of its nature. If a miracle is a hypnotic suggestion or self-suggestion or madness, then what are the features of this suggestion or madness? But it is impossible to consider each suggestion or madness to be a miracle.

2.3. The symbolistical conception of nature of a miracle

The approaches to the symbolistical conception of the nature of a miracle are found in the philosophy of G. Hegel and F. Schleiermacher. The concept of miracle, according to Hegel, is a sort of comprehension of God (the Absolute Spirit), which is a feature of the religious level in the evolution of human

consciousness (the subjective spirit). It is the comprehension of God's relation to the world "as his appearing immediately in these things, any such appearance is a singular, individual event, for a definite purpose in a particular sphere" [2]. A definite purpose is the signification of an event. At the same time Hegel points out that the miraculous appearing of God "is contrary both to the character of the thing and to the concept of God himself" [2, p. 432]. The appearance of spirit in the thing tears the spirit apart and gives a non-adequate comprehension of it. Therefore, it is only the beginning of comprehension of God. The adequate comprehension takes place only through ascertainment of the laws of nature as ways of God's activity. Thus, Hegel calls to mind Augustine: "God, the creator and founder of all the natural things, does nothing against nature" [Augustinus Aurelius, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, XXVI, III]. But religious consciousness in its historical forms cannot rise over sensual representation, since it cannot exist without miracles.

F. Schleiermacher considers that a miracle is a sign indicating infinity. According to him, each phenomenon, not only something astonishing and mysterious can be perceived as a miraculous phenomenon, but exclusively by the religious consciousness [3]. The similar Schleiermacher's or Hegel's conceptions of miracle bring about the idea that the concept 'miracle' loses its features ('differentia specifica') and its definiteness. A miracle is profaned in this case like the psychological conception of the nature of miracles. However, as a whole the symbolistical conception of the nature of miracles allows to understand that miracles are wonderful, astonishing and sudden. The shock, which miracles produce, has its nature in an encounter with something supreme, transcendent, absolute, etc.

Thus, the symbolistical conception sees nature of miracles not in violation of the laws of nature by the supernatural power, not in consciousness, but in the encounter of a believer with an event manifesting the supernatural. According to the Christian doctrine a man is an image and likeness of God. In this case a miracle is a meeting of the imperfect person of a man and its perfect prototype in the Divine sphere. A miracle is the realization of its prototype by a person. This realization is sudden, extraordinary, wonderful and astonishing. It breaks the way of 'normal life' and signifies the necessity of life changing.

The prime example of the symbolistical conception can be found in Aleksey Losev's philosophy. This philosopher considers a miracle to be an encounter of two personal plans in one individual: the external historical plan and the internal meaning plan. Losev constructed the multidimensional model of a person, which consists of five plans (the dialectical points). Nobody is born as a person, but becomes a person during his life. Losev believes that the life of a man is a fulfilment of the idea of a person, and that the idea of a person is premised to each individual. This idea is his meaning and purpose. Losev's views at this point are the Platonic views and, at the same time, they reproduce the Christian doctrine of Divine logoi (especially Maxim Confessor's doctrine), which was reproduced in 20th century by some other Russian religious

philosophers (Eugeniy Trubetskoy, for example), Paul Tillich and Christos Yannaras too.

So, the idea of a person is the first dialectical point of a person, which is denied by the second point – by the natural life of an individual, evolution of a person in an individual or ‘historical person’ (Losev’s term). The synthesis of this binary opposition is an actual person, which is the extreme fulfilment of the idea of a person (the third point). The dialectical correlation of the third point to the first moment is an ideal of a person (the fourth point). Opposition between the third and the second points is synthesized in the real-life image of a person (the fifth point). When this real-life image of person finds in itself an ideal and through the ideal finds the idea of a person, a miracle occurs: “When the fifth and the third points coincide completely, we say: this is a miracle; and through the fourth point we review and enumerate the wonderful facts and ideas, in which the first moment of a person expressed itself while it started being fulfilled in the second point” [1]. In other words, when an individual finds the ideal of his person through a sudden occurrence, and this occurrence is a sign to fulfil the ideal mission of the person, an individual has the feeling of a miracle.

Alexey Losev specially marks that a miracle is a sphere of the whole person; finding of the ideal of separate properties and qualities of a person is not a miracle. In the opposite case the concept of a miracle is reduced to a wonderful occurrence. We can see a musician-virtuoso, Losev gives example. The idea of a musician manifests itself in mastery of the virtuoso, the empirical case of his life (this is musical learning) coincides with the ideal mission of a musician (the handling an instrument), but this is not a miracle. This is a coincidence of some functions of the individual with their ideal. The other example, according to Losev, can be a were-animal. Every were-animal is a case of a miracle, since the transformation of a man into a beast, a bird, or a fish symbolizes the universal task or mission of a person. It does not matter, that the beliefs of the were-animals have to do with mythology and do not have to do with the Christian doctrine. Firstly, there are folk, which believe in the were-animals and have many rites directed at or against were-animals. Secondly, Losev’s scheme of transformation of a person is described by this example. But a problem arises from it: the becoming of were-animal is not realization of the Divine idea of a perfect person. However, it is possible that God allows transformation of a man into a were-animal as a stage for fulfilment of a supreme purpose of a person.

Losev asserts that a miracle cannot be considered as a result of volitional acts or merits of a man. For example, it is false to say: this man got the healing since he had been praying diligently. In this case the moral norms are brought into the ontological sphere of a person. This is a sphere of the levels of being and relations among them. It is far from the moral regulation, which has to do with social life. The healing is not the prize for the praying, but it is the transformation of being, the recovering of being, undamaged by illness. A miracle is absent, if a fact is examined from the logical, practical, esthetical points of view. But if this fact is examined for its correlation to ideal and

personal being it becomes a miracle. Thus, all of the world can be interpreted as a true miracle.

Losev's conception of a miracle has a firm side, which consists of three positions.

1. His conception explains a miracle on the basis of studying of a human being (a real object), but not on postulated statements of being and activity of the supernatural being.
2. The rational scheme of the features of a miracle and of the process of its forming and arising is represented in the Losev's conception.
3. The reasons for a miracle as a phenomenon being possible for religious and mythological consciousness and impossible for the scientific one are explained. The first consciousness operating with images can look at an event from the point of its 'blissful and personal' mission or purpose; the second consciousness looks at an event logically or pragmatically and from this point of view cannot understand a miracle.

3. Conclusions

One might consent with Hume that the empirical experiences cannot be an argument for miracles. One occurrence will be for a religious man – a miracle, for a sceptic – a wonderful event. Therefore, a miracle is not an empirical fact, but an interpretation. The comprehending of the particular empirical facts is made on the basis of general sense of an interpreter. This sense can be called 'meaning of life', 'life point', 'supreme purpose', etc. Even if its contents are illusory, it is a real program of the real life of a real individual. An individual will interpret an event as a miracle, if this event opens him the sense of the extreme points of his existence. This opening does not take place in everyday life: a lot of petty (in comparison to general sense) troubles and deeds impede to it. By this reason a miracle is experienced as a sudden event which breaks everydayness, as a bright and sharp event. Hume told the truth by the proposition: miracles bring about the pleasing senses. These emotions are connected with the finding of the ultimate senses, with a sudden solution of difficult life problems.

In this case the difference among Hegel's, Losev's and Thomas' conceptions of a miracle is a difference among the descriptions of the way of the ultimate senses finding. Transcension of an individual, a person leap, revaluation of his positions occur in this case.

The symbolistical conception of the nature of miracles answers the question of the collective experience of the miraculous events. The life positions and world outlook of different individuals can be equal or closely approximated. Consequently one occurrence can be a significant, miraculous event for different individuals and groups of them.

The question of the source of miracles is settled on the basis of the world outlook principles, too. The interpretations of a significant event can be expressed in an abstract form, but quite often they are personified in the images

of living beings. It is known that the variant of personification through the attribution of a source of miracles to some real beings – the images of the were-animals, sorcerers, miracle-working objects, etc. appears in this way.

Thus, a miracle is an extraordinary, unusual occurrence, which brings about the emotional shock and is connected with the sudden finding of the ultimate senses of the person existence by the symbols of these senses. The symbolistical conception of the nature of miracles is robust towards the scientific criticism, but at the same time it remains in the limits of the theistic consciousness.

References

- [1] A.F. Losev, *Dialektika Mifa (Dialectics of a Myth)*, Izdatelstvo politicheskoy literatury, Moscow, 1991, 148.
- [2] G. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. II, P.C. Hodgson (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, 431.
- [3] F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, Harper, New York, 1956, 84-85.