

Sam N. Fischman
Spring 2018
The Belkin Judaic Studies Award

Miracles as “Pre-Programmed” Into the Laws of Nature

Introduction

It seems that Maimonides, at least in his youth, believed that the supernatural events that are documented in the Bible were “pre-programmed” into the laws of nature.¹ While it seems likely that Maimonides changed his position later on, I would like to address certain ramifications of such a position. In this paper, I will first argue that non-miracle arguments for God’s existence, even if they are good arguments, are inferior to arguments from miracles understood in a more conventional way as reasons to believe in any particular religion. In the second part of this paper, I will raise several issues with the view that miracles are “pre-programmed” into the laws of nature.

Maimonides’ View on Miracles

Maimonides in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* asserts that miracles were pre-programmed into the laws of nature. Therefore, technically, they do not violate nature but are part of it. Here are Maimonides’ words (which are similar to his words elsewhere in the commentary):²

[We hold that] God already expressed His will in the course of the six days of creation, and that things act in accordance with their nature from then on...

That explains why the Sages found it necessary to say that all the supernatural miracles that have occurred [in the past] and all those that we are promised will come about [in the future] were already designated to come about in the course of the six days of creation, when the miraculous events were implanted in the nature of the things involved in them.

Maimonides’ words are clear enough. When he says that after Creation, “that things act in accordance with their nature from then on,” he seems to be saying that there are universal and nonprobabilistic generalizations which are true.³ These generalizations explain things that happen in our universe. And when Maimonides says that “all the supernatural miracles ... were already designated to come about in the course of the six days of creation,” he seems to be saying that even those things that seem to violate laws of nature can in fact be explained by laws of nature.

But in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, which he wrote later in his life, he seems to adopt a different view:⁴

¹ Student, Gil. “Rambam on Miracles.” *Hirhurim – Musings*, 14 Apr. 2010, hirhurim.blogspot.com/2010/04/rambam-on-miracles.html.

² Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction (“Shemonah Perakim”), translation by R. Yaakov Feldman.

³ See David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 9.

⁴ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:29. Translation by Shlomo Pines (p. 345).

The *Sages, may their memory be blessed*, have made a very strange statement about miracles ... They say that when God created that which exists and stamped upon it the existing natures, He put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred. According to this opinion, the sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and thereupon a certain thing is effected according to what was put into its nature when first it received its particular impress.

Maimonides' judgment that this purported position of the Sages is "very strange" suggests that he in fact believed otherwise. Perhaps Maimonides adopted a view of miracles similar to the one that Johnson defines:⁵

[F]or any person x, for any time t, for any possible event m, m is a miracle for x at t if and only if m actually occurs at some time and m is a violation of (an exception to) something which is for x at t exceedingly well established, relative to a body of inductive evidence, as being a law of nature.

But regardless of the position that Maimonides took with him to the grave, he seems to have held in his youth, and to have acknowledged the existence in his later years, of a view of miracles that sees miracles as "pre-programmed" into nature. Proponents of this view would likely be extremely cautious to label events miracles, and, when looking at historical miracles (such as those documented in the Bible), would prefer to understand them as having deviated from norms of nature as little as possible.⁶ Let us place all of these beliefs into the "miracles as 'pre-programmed' into the laws of nature" camp.

Since, in my experience, this "miracles as 'pre-programmed' into the laws of nature" view is at least somewhat prevalent in the Orthodox Jewish community today, I will analyze its implications in the remainder of this paper.

Miracles as a Reason to Believe in Religion

To begin, I will argue that miracles understood as "pre-programmed" into the laws of nature might render miracles as an inferior reason to believe in any particular religion, compared to miracles understood in a more conventional way as violations of a law of nature.

Famous arguments for the existence of God include various types of ontological arguments, cosmological arguments, and teleological arguments. However, even if any of these are good arguments, they prove only the existence of God, not any particular religion. Said otherwise, these arguments may prove that God exists, but not that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob exists. Arguments from miracles, on the other hand, might properly lead to belief in a particular religion.

⁵ Johnson, 9.

⁶ See the remainder of Student's article.

Consider miracles understood in a conventional way, as violations of a law of nature. There is no good logical argument that uses miracles to formally prove that a particular religion is true. Rather, the arguments are non-deductive arguments to believe the best explanation. For example, miracles such as the Sea of Reeds parting, or the plagues in Egypt. Many people are convinced by Moses' explanation for these miracles as being sufficiently simple, natural, non-bizarre, and non-ad hoc. None of these properties can be defined, but people appeal to them very often and find them meaningful. They come to accept the religious explanation.

This being the case, it at least seems to me that miracles, when explained as being “pre-programmed” into the laws of nature, are less convincing as reasons to believe in religion (I am particularly thinking about Judaism). To me, miracles that break laws of nature seem to beg for some supernatural explanation, and Moses' testimony to explain the miracle seems correct. But, when miracles are viewed as being “pre-programmed” into laws of nature, it seems more likely that someone would be able to predict the event in advance and make up his own non-prophetic, non-religious, false explanation for the event. Like any arguments from miracles, I cannot prove so deductively, but it is the case that miracles viewed in this “pre-programmed” sort of way are less compelling to me.

More Issues with the “Miracles as ‘Pre-Programmed’ into the Laws of Nature” View

Viewing miracles as “pre-programmed” into laws of nature, in my experience, often stems from people's belief that there is a Hume-type problem with miracles understood in the conventional way. Let us state Hume's conclusion as Johnson does:⁷

Where *m* is a possible event, allegedly actual and allegedly witnessed, and where *L* is (for us, now) an apparent law, which any actual occurrence of *m* would have violated, and where (thus) *L* is (for us, now) exceedingly well established, relative to a body of inductive evidence, as being a law of nature, then, at the very least, the testimony of *one* human witness (not identical to any of us) who claims to have observed *m*'s occurrence can never rightly convince us that *m* has occurred—the testimony of *one* such supposed witness to *m*'s occurrence will always be “outweighed” by the inductive evidence which so strongly supports *L*.

Based on conversations that I have had with people and based on various essays that I've read, it seems to me that many people who subscribe to a “pre-programmed” view of miracles do so because of a concern like Hume's concern above. They think that Hume's reasoning poses a problem to miracles as understood as violations of laws of nature, so they choose to understand miracles instead as “pre-programmed” into laws of nature.

Allow me to attack this view in three ways.

Firstly, this view purports that Hume presents a problem to miracles as they are conventionally understood. But Hume in fact presents no problem to miracles understood as such. I refer the reader to Johnson's *Hume, Holism, and Miracles*; in particular, chapter 4 titled “Hume's Argument as

⁷ Johnson, 10.

Reconstructed by J.L. Mackie.”⁸ I also refer the reader to where Johnson explains how laws of nature need not, by definition, rule out miracles. The idea, in short, is that the flawed thinker might assume that “since we know a priori that there are no exceptions to exceptionless regularities, we know a priori that there are no miracles, if we know a priori that a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.” This problem is solved by defining laws of nature as not being exceptionless, as we did above in this paper (“exceedingly well established, relative to a body of inductive evidence”).⁹

Secondly, defining miracles as “pre-programmed” into laws of nature is a nearly equivalent definition to the more standard definition of miracles. Consider Mackie’s view of miracles, which suggests that “the antecedent improbability of [a miracle] is as high as it could be, hence that, apart from the testimony, we have the strongest possible grounds for believing that the alleged event did not occur. ... It is this maximal improbability that the weight of the testimony would have to overcome.”¹⁰ It seems to me that Mackie’s attack on miracles is equally as strong, whether miracles are understood conventionally as violations of laws of nature, or as “pre-programmed” into laws of nature. Either way, a miracle is an event about which there is high “antecedent improbability.” So if Hume presents a real problem for miracles, then the problem would be significant for either understanding of miracles. So viewing miracles as “pre-programmed” into nature does not offer the believer any special defense against Hume-type attacks.

Thirdly, assuming that we are interested in the miracles attested to by the Bible, I believe that a literal reading of the Bible suggests that these miracles are meant to be understood as violations of laws of nature, rather than as “pre-programmed” into laws of nature. For example, the verses describing the blood miracle in Egypt state that “all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood” (Exodus 7:20), and the verses describing the miracle at the Sea of Reeds state that “the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left” (Exodus 14:22).¹¹ Much metaphorical reading is necessary in order to interpret these miracles as being “pre-programmed” into laws of nature or as being only small breaches of nature (I have heard people claim that the blood miracle was caused by a heavy flow of red sediment into the Nile, and that the sea-parting was caused by a rare weather pattern). The more natural reading is to see these miracles as being violations of laws of nature.

Conclusion

Whether or not Maimonides adopted the belief that miracles are “pre-programmed” into nature, the belief has supporters, both historically and in the present. In this paper I argued that, insofar as miracles are used as a reason to believe in particular religions, they are more convincing when understood as violations of nature than when understood as “pre-programmed” into laws of nature. I then asserted that people who subscribe to the “miracles as ‘pre-programmed’ into laws of nature” view often do so because of what they perceive to be a Hume-type flaw with miracles understood in a conventional way. Finally, I argued against such a belief because there is no Hume problem,

⁸ Johnson, 22-27.

⁹ Johnson, 6.

¹⁰ Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, 25.

¹¹ Translations by *Jewish Publication Society Bible*, 1917.

because such a view of miracles is nearly equivalent to the more standard definition of miracles, and because a literal reading of the Bible lends itself to a conventional definition of miracles.