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## THE CONCEPT OF MIRACLE AS AN “EXTRAORDINARY EVENT”

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “miracle”, when used by ordinary people, who do not bother themselves to make it precise, may describe wide range of events. Sometimes, it is used simply to talk about some unexpected situation, e.g. when someone passes a difficult exam unexpectedly (‘It is a miracle that I passed!’); or about the sudden change of someone’s behavior (‘That’s a miracle! He stopped drinking!’).

Also, people talk about the miracle with respect to the results of the developments in science and technology (‘a wonderful invention’) or an outstanding piece of art (‘wonderful music’)<sup>1</sup>. We encounter another, narrower use of the term “miracle”, when talking about the events which are extraordinary, because they do not conform to our knowledge of the world and its regularities, (e.g. when someone survives a plane crash in a plane falling down from a few thousand meters<sup>2</sup>, or when someone fully recovers from the final stage of cancer disease<sup>3</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> R. Swinburne calls such kind of statements “the secondary understanding of miracle”. See: R. Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, Macmillan – St Martin’s Press, London 1970, p. 10. P. Tillich, in turn, totally refuses to call those events “miracles”, because they lack the features of the religious experience. See: P. Tillich, *Revelation and Miracle*, in: *Miracles*, ed. R. Swinburne, Macmillan, New York – London 1989, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> For example the case of the 14-year-old Baya Bakari who survived the plane crash at Comores coast on the 30. June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> I Pyysiäinen suggests calling such events the miracles “in the weaker sense of the word”. These are the events which contradict our intuitive expectations towards the reality. However, the miracle “in a strong sense of the word” is, in his opinion, the theological notion, directly associated with the religious experience and the attitude of religious faith. See: I. Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles, and Religion. A Scientist’s Perspective*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek – Lanham – New York – Toronto – Oxford 2004, pp. 84-86.

Most often, however, the word “miracle” is used in a religious sense. It means that when describing an event as a miracle, we accept not only its extraordinariness but also the fact that it is the result of God’s action. The very religious (theological) concept of miracle is still a matter of debate and of numerous discussions.

Indicated meaning “miracle” refers to its religious understanding. But we can distinguish the second one which could be described as a-religious understanding of that term, i.e., one which does not take into account God and acting of God or the religious importance of event. In both religious and non-religious sense of the word “miracle” we have the combination of words which require more detailed explanation<sup>4</sup>. The situation is similar with respect to the dictionary definitions of the term “miracle”. Numerous and not always precisely defined expressions, such as: “an extraordinary phenomenon”, “exceptional”, “transcendental”, “mysterious”, “inexplicable”, “beyond the forces and abilities of nature”, and so on and so forth, they all contain a wide range of problems concerning understanding the miracle<sup>5</sup>.

When trying to provide a more detailed description of what the miracle is, we should start with a clear presentation of the fundamental content of this notion, attributed to it by most philosophers and theologians<sup>6</sup>. Despite various differences

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<sup>4</sup> Non-religious sense of the term “miracle” could be ignored because of its casual, imprecise and too broad use. It seems, however, that the characteristics attributed to the miracle in its non-religious sense are also present in a religious one, although they do not play a crucial role. So they will be taken into account, when we try to explain in greater detail the sense of the term “miracle” understood as an extraordinary event.

<sup>5</sup> We can distinguish the following sample definitions of the miracle: (1) “... An unusual phenomenon ..., through which God shows something to people, and makes them full of admiration” (*Miracle*, in: X. L é o n - D u f o u r, *Dictionnaire du Nouveau Testament*, Seuil Livre de Vie, Paris 1977, p. 201); (2) „An event caused by special God’s intervention, which is beyond the normal laws of nature and brings some religious message for the believers, both for the present and the future” (*Miracle*, in: G. O’C o l l i n s, E.G. F a r r u g i a, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, Paulist Press, Mahwah 1991, p. 55); (3) „a marvel wrought by God, who as a Creator is able to interrupt the operation of ordinary natural laws. In popular speech a miracle is an event in the physical world that cannot be explained by the known laws of nature” (*Miracle*, in: *New Standard Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, Chicago 1998, p. 402). We can also recall the definition of miracle proposed by D. Hume: “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as an argument from experience can possibly be imagine” (D. H u m e, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1975, p. 114).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: N.L. G e i s l e r, *Miracles and Modern Thought*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1982; C. B r o w n, *Miracles and the Critical Mind*, Eerdmans – Paternoster Press, Grand Rapids – Exeter 1984; T.C. W i l l i a m s, *The Idea of the Miraculous: The Challenge to Science and*

between the definitions of miracle provided by the literature, we can find a few elements which are common for them. These very elements constitute the crucial, fundamental and irreducible factors of the notion in question. Because, shortly speaking, we usually describe the miracle as an “extraordinary event caused by God”<sup>7</sup>, we should start with defining the extraordinariness of the miracle. The closer analysis of the notion of extraordinariness leads us to two other features of the miracle, i.e. its supernaturality and scientific inexplicability. And considering the notion of the miracle as an event caused by God’s action requires distinguishing an additional element of its sense, namely, its religious significance<sup>8</sup>.

Distinguishing and presenting the first two primary characteristics of a “miraculous event”, i.e. the supernaturality and scientific inexplicability, which are present, although not always expressed in the same way, in the definitions of the miracle, proposed by the literature, may be useful in pointing to fundamental directions of further analysis of the issue in question. We should also signal the main problems, which appear in connection with adopting the expressions mentioned above. These problems concern diverse issues contained in particular senses of the term “miracle” so they require rethinking the crucial sense of this notion.

While analyzing the definition of the miracle as an “extraordinary event”, I am going to justify the proposition that the miracle as an “extraordinary event” is understood in two ways: (1) as a supernatural event and (2) as an event inexplicable by science. Then I will seek to show that in the case (1) we can talk about a supernatural event as a miraculous one, only when we mean the fact that it is caused by a supernatural cause (God) and not when we mean that the very event (the way it proceeds) is supernatural. And with respect to the case (2) I suggest the attitude that talking about the scientific inexplicability of a miraculous event doesn’t make sense, because it results from understanding the miracle as a violation of the laws of nature and that cannot be proven (and there is no need to do so). Yet, we can claim that a miraculous event is the one which must be inexplicable from the scientific viewpoint at the very moment it takes place.

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*Religion*, St. Martin’s Press, New York 1990; D. C o r n e r, *The Philosophy of Miracles*, Continuum, London – New York 2007; *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. G.H. Twelftree, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011.

<sup>7</sup> See: D. B a s i n g e r, R. B a s i n g e r, *Philosophy and Miracle. The Contemporary Debate*, (*Problems in Contemporary Philosophy*, Volume 2), The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston – Queens-  
ton 1986, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> The religious significance of the miracle and the problem of God as its cause are beyond the scope of this article. I confine myself only to the question of the extraordinariness of the miracle.

## 2. THE MIRACLE AS A SUPERNATURAL EVENT

The definition of the miraculous event as a “supernatural” one contains in itself the reference to what is natural. The supernaturality of the event means, therefore, that it exceeds (transcends) the naturality. Moreover, this transcendence includes some kind of opposition to what is natural. It is not an absolute opposition, though, because “supernatural” is not fully equivalent to “not natural”. The supernatural event has something natural as its base and it neither contradicts the existence of the naturality nor negates it. As the supernatural event occurs also in the realm of what is natural, but in the different way than the natural events do. Although the supernaturality of the event is a kind of unnaturality but that which is natural is not totally destroyed in it. Rather, we should say that in the case of supernatural event we have the transformation of what is natural into the supernatural.

In order to show in a right way the sense of the miracle as a supernatural event, we should first explain how we can understand the naturality, which is surpassed in the miracle. It seems that “natural” means in this case related to the natural world, to the natural environment, and being subject to its regularities. The nature lies in the scope of natural sciences and these sciences are competent to establish the regularities in question.

Hence, natural events are the ones which interest natural scientists and are subject to their cognitive operations performed by means of the methods available to them. For the natural sciences, anything happening within the nature is natural, i.e. nothing happens “beside”, “beyond” or “against” the nature. The naturality of events and processes depends on whether they occur in the right way, namely, whether they conform to the predictions and expectations the scholars worked out on the basis of the knowledge of the world so far. All the phenomena which depart from the regularities established by the natural scientists in any way, require further scientific investigation in order to place them within the structure of scientific explanations. So, for the natural scientists, there are no supernatural events, even if they are unable to explain them. It is sufficient that they take place in the nature and can be observed.

So the miracle treated as a supernatural event should be regarded as the transcendence of the regularities attributed to the nature by natural scientists. Yet, the transcendence in question doesn’t mean only the insufficient human knowledge of the world and its processes, but it also means that the miracle transcends a certain state of the nature, i.e. its internal regularities which are independent of human knowledge. The supernatural event should, therefore, be understood as the

one surpassing the laws of nature, namely, the ontological structure of the material reality. Because the miraculous event surpasses the laws of nature, it is also regarded as inexplicable within the methods and explanations provided by natural sciences.

In the statements concerning the nature of the miraculous event, we can distinguish three fundamental tendencies of understanding the way this event transcends the laws of the nature:

- (1) breaking (violating) the law of nature<sup>9</sup>;
- (2) suspending the operation of the law of nature;
- (3) surpassing the law of nature.

The difference between the three ways of understanding mentioned above lies particularly in the degree of transcendence of the natural and also in the role which is attributed to the nature (its regularities) in this transcendence.

Breaking (violating) the law of the nature in the supernatural event means a complete subordination of the natural processes to the power which transcends these processes by acting in a way directly contradicting them. Although the laws of the nature are still in force, when facing the power transcending them, they are totally meaningless and they do not bring the results which would be visible in the natural course of a given phenomenon. So we can say that the transcending power seems powerful enough to subordinate and overcome the laws of the nature. Hence they have no power and they are sort of hampered by the process of transcending them and they are not strong enough to accomplish a certain event in a natural, usual way.

Suspending the laws of the nature in the supernatural event can be understood as a momentary invalidation of these laws. So they are not destroyed but rather “frozen” or “put to sleep” in order to enable the transcendence of the natural course of the event. This kind of suspension creates the gap in a certain field of the natural laws’ operation, and this, in turn, allows for their transcendence.

Surpassing the laws of the nature in the supernatural event is the most “mild” way of transcending the things which are natural. In this case, the laws of the nature are not deprived of their ability to function; rather, they are enriched, i.e. they gain new abilities. Surpassing the laws of the nature adds, therefore, new ways of their operation, and provides new means and methods of handling phenomena without destroying the previous ones. In this way of transcendence,

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<sup>9</sup> This type of the transcendence of the laws of nature is most often a matter of debate between the supporters and opponents of the so-called interventionistic conception of the miracle. See: R.A. L a r m e r, *Questions of the Miracle*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal – Kingston – London – Buffalo 1996, pp. 3-100.

the role attributed to the natural regularities turns out to be the most significant, because the transcendence expands and enriches them.

Understanding miraculous events as surpassing the laws of nature is, to a great extent, the consequence of the picture of the world, brought by the development of natural sciences. The era of mechanistic and strictly deterministic attitude towards nature, mainly the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, strengthened the conviction that the events and processes which do not conform to the established scientific laws, violate them. Yet, further development of natural sciences questioned such a view of phenomena, which couldn't be explained within accepted scientific theories. The significant example of this change is the development of quantum mechanics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because its laws are not deterministic but statistical in nature. As contemporary natural sciences rejected the strictly deterministic picture of the reality, their status changed; they are no longer able to determine correctly what is and what is not possible in the nature. They turned out, and still turn out, to be subject to both partial modifications and questioning them totally<sup>10</sup>. The move from Newton's physics to the quantum one and the development of the deterministic chaos theory, and others, did not affect understanding the miraculous events significantly. They are still considered as the events, which, by their very nature, are beyond the scope of the regularities of the natural world. The fact that there is no clearly formulated idea of the regularities of the nature, makes the problem of the supernaturalness of miraculous event be a matter of serious discussions and controversy<sup>11</sup>.

The most significant attempt of questioning the idea of the laws of nature was the interpretation made by David Hume, who regarded them as nothing more than the psychologically felt regularity of the occurrence of the events, actually having no necessary connection with one another. Such an interpretation actually excludes the possibility of the events being the violation of the laws of nature, because each event which doesn't conform to the regularity postulated is, in fact, the same as other phenomena and it can't be in conflict with them<sup>12</sup>.

In considering the miracle understood as breaking, violating or suspending the regularities of nature, we can encounter the opinion that the very conception of "violating" and "suspending" any regularity is internally contradictory. If the true event *Z* occurs inconsistently with a nomological principle concerning the course

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<sup>10</sup> The example from the field of cosmology can be the steady-state theory, which was rejected due to new empirical findings concerning the expansion of the cosmos.

<sup>11</sup> See: D. C o r n e r, *The Philosophy of Miracles*.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this subject see: D. J o h n s o n, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca – London 1999.

of phenomena, it means that the principle *N* doesn't define correctly that "which can't happen", and that's why this principle can no longer be regarded as a nomological one.

On the other hand, if the principle *N* is a nomological one, the event *Z* cannot be considered as its violation. Hence, the event *Z* cannot be understood as an actual "violation" of the regularity. A nomological principle is regarded as an universal and necessary law<sup>13</sup>. Other authors, however, disagree with this view point and claim that the fundamental problem with the conception of the miracle as an event violating the regularities of the nature involves the fact that it is used to defend the supernaturalistic viewpoint within the theistic apologetics<sup>14</sup>.

The controversies just signaled follow from diverse ways of understanding the laws of nature, adopted by the supporters of the opposite views concerning the relationship between these laws and the miracle. So, the key problem that should be analyzed is the ontological status of the laws of nature and their actual relationship with our knowledge of the world.

The acceptance of the existence of the supernatural events as the ones surpassing in some way the laws of nature calls for the adequate justification, namely determining their efficient cause. Therefore, if we introduce the notion of the supernatural event, we inevitably have to introduce the notion of the supernatural cause, which would justify the occurrence of the events in question. And this, in turn, requires the more detailed definition of the ontological structure of the supernatural event; moreover, it subsequently requires considering the validity of defining the miracle as a supernatural event. We can treat the miraculous event "breaking" the laws of nature as an exception to them. In this case, we should consider whether such an event is natural or supernatural in character. The answer will depend on the accepted type of the cause of a given event. Let's assume that the event *X* is inconsistent with the law *P* confirmed several times. There are three possible explanations for the event *X* taking place: (1) the event *X* was brought about by some unknown (and maybe unknowable) natural cause; (2) the event *X*

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<sup>13</sup> See: A. M c K i n n o n, 'Miracles' and 'Paradox', *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1967) 4, pp. 309-312; A. F l e w, 'Parapsychology Revisited: Laws, Miracles and Repeatability', *The Humanist* 36 (1976), pp. 28-30.

<sup>14</sup> "... there is no incoherence involved in saying that an event has occurred which cannot be subsumed under the laws of nature, where these laws are understood as fully determined regularities. I do not, however, see why such an event should be thought as a violation — as somehow inconsistent with the real structure of nature, or as requiring us to acknowledge the existence of anything transcending nature" (D. C o r n e r, *The Philosophy of Miracles*, p. 2). Cf. P. B y r n e, *Miracles and the Philosophy of Science*, *Heythrop Journal* 19 (1978), pp. 166-169; J. K e l l e n - b e r g e r, *Miracles*, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10 (1979), pp. 152-153.

was caused by the operation of the supernatural cause; and (3) the event  $X$  doesn't have its natural or supernatural cause – it can be regarded as a single, unique anomaly<sup>15</sup>. The first option doesn't justify the claim that the event should be understood as “violating” the law of nature and hence treated as a supernatural one. In the second case, however, some authors say that the event is the violation of the laws of nature, so it is a supernatural event. Yet, others claim that if the laws of nature determine what may (or may not) happen in certain natural circumstances, they cannot be used to explain what happens when the supernatural cause operates. Hence, even if there occurred the event, inconsistent with the law of nature and caused by the operation of the supernatural cause, it wouldn't be possible to claim correctly that it violates the laws of nature and hence it is a supernatural event. Finally, the third option presupposes that the law of nature in question is well-established and confirmed and the event taking place is a single, unique event. Then, we can say that in this case, both the principle and the exception to it are present simultaneously, the events of the type  $X$  happen and do not happen in the same natural circumstances. Such a situation would mean that we wouldn't have to choose between the rejection of the event  $X$  and the modification or the rejection of the law  $P$ . Therefore, some authors express the opinion that only such events can be regarded as violating the laws of nature<sup>16</sup>. So, such an event would be a supernatural one not because of its supernatural cause but rather because of the fact that it violates the laws of nature (the supernatural course of the event). Yet, this event wouldn't be defined as the miracle because it excludes the presence of the supernatural cause and hence the presence and action of God.

In the above considerations, we can see that the supernaturality of the event may concern both its cause and course. Then, three possibilities should be presented here: (1) the event is supernatural (it can be qualified as violating the laws of nature), but, at the same time, it isn't caused by God; (2) the event is not supernatural (it is not the violation of the laws of nature), but it can be caused directly by God and because of that it can be regarded as a supernatural one; (3) the event is supernatural both because it violates the laws of nature and because it is caused by God. Nevertheless, only the supernaturality associated with the supernatural cause, namely with God is a necessary factor for the event

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<sup>15</sup> We distinguish the first case in order to show that there is no empirical method to distinguish the event caused by the supernatural cause from the one defined as the anomaly. It doesn't mean, however, that we could somehow “discover” that the event had no cause at all.

<sup>16</sup> See: D. Basinger, R. Basinger, *Philosophy and Miracle. The Contemporary Debate*, pp. 13-14.



to meet the criteria of the miraculous one. The supernatural event is the miracle not because it involves violation of the laws of nature, but due to its supernatural cause (God), who caused it.

### 3. THE MIRACLE AS AN EVENT SCIENTIFICALLY INEXPLICABLE

Understanding the miracle as a supernatural event provides the basis for regarding it as a scientifically inexplicable event, namely, the one which will never be explained through the reference to the natural explanations. This usually happens when direct God's act is claimed to be the cause of this event. However, the fact that the event is scientifically inexplicable doesn't necessarily mean that it is supernatural. As the event may be scientifically inexplicable because: (1) results from the direct God's action; (2) science will never be able to identify all natural factors functioning in the natural world; and (3) that which usually happens in certain natural circumstances, did not happen in a single case – the anomaly.

The statement that the miracle is scientifically inexplicable doesn't mean only that we assume the existence of a certain group of events, which although took place, were not explained by science (the events, which were never observed or those which never interested the scientists). The permanent inexplicability of a certain event means that science will never be able to include this event into the field of its findings concerning the regularities of nature, namely to formulate the law of nature which would justify a given natural fact. So, it raises the question whether the inexplicability of the event, understood in this way, may ever be determined in the irrefutable way.

A. Flew claims that there are the reasons for our inability to prove the permanent scientific inexplicability of the event. In his opinion, the event can be qualified as inexplicable only when it is possible to make a well-founded statement that scientists will never be able to include it into any nomological rule. It is possible, however, that new scientific research will provide us with the new data which will force us to reformulate the existing set of natural laws. That's why, in Flew's opinion, we can never say for sure that the event, now scientifically inexplicable, won't be included in the new set of natural laws in the future. Hence, we are unable to provide the sufficient evidence that a given event is permanently scientifically inexplicable<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See: A. Flew, *Miracles*, in: *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, Macmillan, New York 1972, pp. 348-349.

The crucial element of Flew's argumentation is the assumption that the scientific knowledge is in the process of continual development and the natural scientists are able to gain new information concerning the way the nature functions and finally, they can also formulate new laws of various natural phenomena. Such a conviction could be rejected only if we gained the certainty that the theories proposed by scientists make use of all possible ways of describing the material world, i.e. these theories constitute the fixed set which cannot be expanded with new elements, and that this set doesn't contain the theory which would explain the fact in question. It seems, however, that there is no reason to accept the validity of any of the above objections<sup>18</sup>.

Yet, not all authors share Flew's argumentation in which he opts for the necessity of rejecting the thesis of the scientific inexplicability of miraculous event. They neither say that our knowledge of the way the nature functions is complete, nor claim that the laws of nature already established cannot be reformulated, revised or developed in accordance with the new data gained through new scientific research. However, they express the opinion that even if our knowledge of the way the world functions expands significantly, and we expand the set of the natural laws in accordance with the new knowledge, it still will be possible to think of the events, which, if they appear, won't be capable of being included into the new or modified set of laws.

R. Swinburne claims that the key to diagnosing the miraculous event as permanently scientifically inexplicable lies in our ability or inability to establish new natural laws, which would enable the explanation of the events inexplicable within the laws already existing. For example, let us assume that we affirm the occurrence of the event  $X$  – the exception to the established law of nature  $P$ . If we managed to formulate a new law  $P_n$ , which explained the occurrence of the event  $X$  and also were simpler and enabled making new, more precise predictions, we would be able to replace the law  $P$ , now in force, with the new one, i.e.  $P_n$ . Then the event  $X$  would no longer be an exception to the established laws of nature. Yet, if we were unable to propose a new law  $P_n$ , having the characteristics just mentioned, the event  $X$  should be regarded as the unique exception to the laws of nature known to us. Such a unique exception, in Swinburne's opinion, couldn't be subject to the scientific laws<sup>19</sup>.

Swinburne makes it clear that "the status of uniqueness" of the event, exceptional to the natural laws is not its invariable feature. So, it is doubtful whether we will ever be able to determine for sure that the current exception is the unique

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<sup>18</sup> G. R o b i n s o n, *Miracles*, *Ratio* 9 (1967), pp. 155-162.

<sup>19</sup> See: R. S w i n b u r n e, *The Concept of Miracle*, pp. 29-32.

and permanently inexplicable one. Swinburne claims, however, that all the propositions concerning our knowledge are potentially adjustable, so we have to be satisfied with their contemporary status, compatible with the knowledge available to us at a given moment. Moreover, he states that it is clear for us, at least to some extent, what the regularities in the nature are and some laws are so longstanding and well-established that any attempts to modify them in accordance with the exception to them, would be the ad hoc activity, capable of ruining the structure of science<sup>20</sup>. So, when such exceptions occur, they should be regarded as permanently scientifically inexplicable.

M. Boden says similar things. She claims that the phenomena observed cannot normally be regarded as lying beyond the scope of scientific explanation. Yet, sometimes, an event should be regarded as the exception to a given law of nature. Let's imagine that a person ill with leprosy and, as a result, deprived of his or her fingers, regains them unexpectedly and suddenly. Moreover, the event takes place in the presence of qualified doctors and it is recorded with a video camera. Such a case would contradict various well-established natural laws, confirmed by many scientists. Any attempts of modifying these laws in order to explain such an event would deprive the established laws of their predicative force and, in consequence, of any practical value. Therefore, in Boden's opinion, if the event just mentioned took place now, the scientists would, by necessity, have to qualify it as the permanently inexplicable phenomenon<sup>21</sup>.

M. Boden's and R. Swinburne's position concerning the scientific inexplicability of miraculous events seems convincing at first glance. Yet, it causes some difficulties. If, as the authors in question admit, the scientific activity continually leads to getting new information about the world and the way it functions, and this information is sometimes unexpected or even surprising, as well as it sometimes reveals some exceptions to the well established natural laws, leading, in turn, to the modification of these laws, then it seems that the proposition concerning the permanent scientific inexplicability of certain events is not adequately justified<sup>22</sup>. It

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<sup>20</sup> As the example of such situations Swinburne quotes the hypothetical case of the resurrection of a man whose heart hasn't been working for 24 hours and who is considered as being dead according to the commonly accepted criteria of death and also hypothetical turning the water into wine without the use of any chemical substances or special devices. In the situations of this type the natural laws are so well-established that they do not allow for any significant modifications let alone rejecting them. See: R. Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, p.32.

<sup>21</sup> See: M. Boden, *Miracles and Scientific Explanation*, *Ratio* 11 (1969), pp. 137-141.

<sup>22</sup> D. Basinger and R. Basinger define the attitude of the supporters of permanent scientific inexplicability of a miraculous event as "the height of scientific provincialism". See: D. Basinger, R. Basinger, *Philosophy and Miracle. The Contemporary Debate*, p. 63.

seems that the main reason for accepting the treatment of a miraculous event as permanently scientifically inexplicable is not merely the conviction about the existence of a “true nature of reality”, which is unknowable for natural sciences, but rather the restricted attitude towards this issue. When the exception to the well-established and confirmed laws of nature is recognized, the authors in question see only two alternative solutions: (1) modification of a given law in order for it to explain the event; and (2) maintaining the conviction about the adequacy of the law and, in consequence, regarding the event as permanently inexplicable. According to the views presented by the authors mentioned above, the second solution seems more rational.

However, there exists still another possibility. Even if the advanced scientific investigation fails to provide the explanation for a given event and it is impossible to find the law of nature which would allow to incorporate this event into the scope of known natural regularities, then why not continue the investigation of the fact in question or not leave this “freak of nature” in the hope of another similar one taking place, and then resume the investigation. There is no need of either modifying the laws of nature immediately or regarding the event as permanently inexplicable. Continuing the scientific investigation or suspending it until another similar phenomenon appears are, therefore the views alternative to the attitude of the authors who opt for the acceptance of permanent inexplicability of the event. Such an attitude of the lack of ultimate decision concerning the nature of the event seems to weaken the explicative force of the scientific method. However, as Swinburne himself admits, only the repeatedly appearing exceptions falsify the scientific law. As long as the observed exception, even the most extraordinary, is the unique one, it isn't necessary to build the hypothesis competing with the laws already established.

It seems, therefore, that the acceptance of the claim about the permanent scientific inexplicability of a miraculous event is the result of an attempt to solve the false dilemma. If one thinks that in the face of recognizing the exception to the correctly established and well confirmed natural laws one should necessarily either modify (possibly reject) these laws or regard the event in question as a permanently inexplicable one, then choosing the second option may seem the most rational solution. Yet, there appears to exist still the third possible solution: until the exception just mentioned doesn't appear again (i.e. until it is unique), it is valid to maintain the conviction about the adequacy of natural laws and, simultaneously, to continue the scientific search for the new or modified laws, which would allow to include into the scope of their applicability the events, so to say, “resisting” to our current knowledge.

Some contemporary theistic philosophers express the opinion that questioning the conception of the permanent scientific inexplicability of the miracle ignores certain important argument. They emphasize the fact that although our current inability to determine the restrictions of scientific explicability makes it impossible to regard a given event as permanently inexplicable, this is not the case with the events which we know as being caused by God. D. Erlandson points out that believers in God tend to think that the natural scientists have their own autonomous field of investigation. There are also a lot of anomalies in the nature, which a natural scientist is free to investigate. Yet, natural scientists themselves claim that there are some which are for ever beyond the scope of scientific investigation. In Erlandson's opinion, when the events of this kind conform to the paradigms of God's activity, which can be defined on the basis other than scientific (on the basis of religious context of the event), then we have the miracles which science will never explain<sup>23</sup>.

G. Jantzen, in turn, draws our attention to the limitations of the natural analysis of a given phenomenon, which provides only empirical determinant allowing for recognizing the event as inexplicable. Yet, taking into account God's intervention allows for recognizing the event as a miraculous one and, consequently, permanently inexplicable on the ground of science and with the use of natural sciences' methods. In her opinion, the miraculous element of the event (God's intervention) and the element of its inexplicability cannot be separated from each other<sup>24</sup>.

Hence, the philosophers, who seek to justify the possibility (or even the necessity) of treating the miraculous events as the permanently scientifically inexplicable ones, refer to this element of the conception of miracle, which concerns God's action; and they claim that God's intervention must be scientifically inexplicable. In this case, God's action is treated as a direct one. This action is regarded as a necessary and sufficient condition for a given event to happen. God's action is, by its very nature, non-empirical, so people can't discover it directly because, in the process of acquiring knowledge of the world, they use their senses and the tools supporting them. The event, which is regarded as a result of God's action has only one cause, namely, the non-empirical one. In turn, the scientific explanation of the event is complete and adequate, when it provides both necessary and sufficient conditions for this event to happen and when, by definition, this explanation confines itself to pointing to the empirical factors.

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<sup>23</sup> See: D. Erlandson, New Look at Miracles, *Religious Studies* 13 (1977), p. 425.

<sup>24</sup> See: G. Jantzen, Hume on Miracles. History and Politics, *Christian Scholar's Review* 8 (1979) 4, p. 325.

Therefore, if the event is caused directly by God, it will never be adequately explained on the scientific ground. So it will remain unexplained for ever because it is, by its very nature, inexplicable.

The above viewpoint is criticized by another opponent of the claim that miraculous events must necessarily be regarded as permanently scientifically inexplicable, i.e. by P. Nowell-Smith. He says that the fact that no scientist is able to explain the event now doesn't necessarily mean that this event is inexplicable within the framework of natural sciences. It is possible that science will offer, in the future, the adequate explanation of a given empirical fact. If a scientist regarded a given event as permanently scientifically inexplicable, he would go beyond his competence. "... we may believe him [a scientist], when he says that no scientific method or hypothesis known to him will explain it. But to say that it is inexplicable as a result of natural agents is already beyond his competence as a scientist ..."<sup>25</sup>. In his argument with Lunn, Nowell-Smith remarks that natural science shouldn't be treated as if their results constituted the invariable and impossible to modify sets of theorems. Scientific theories are open to modifications and the scientific terminology is constantly being expanded with new notions. Moreover, science is still under development as a result of the appearance of sometimes radically new theories, which change the human picture of the world significantly<sup>26</sup>. In Nowell-Smith's opinion, the most characteristic feature of science is its method, which although is not necessarily the only method of knowing the world, as a method of examining the nature, allows to distinguish the scientific explanation from other types of explanations. So, he points out that science, neither now nor in the future, has to explain every single event taking place in the world.

Yet, the changes in the scientific knowledge suggest that the future explanations may be based on the completely different and new terminology, which will still be the strictly scientific one. Hence, science cannot be identified with its contemporary theories and the notions contained in them. The explanations will still be scientific, even if the terms used are completely different from the contemporary ones, as the most important thing is that the method used in the explanations should always be the method of natural sciences. Therefore, in Nowell-Smith's opinion, the problem of explicability or inexplicability of miracles concerns the answer to the question whether explaining the miraculous event requires the method completely different from the scientific one. For we

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<sup>25</sup> Zob. P. Nowell-Smith, *Miracles*, in: *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. Flew, A. MacIntyre, SCM Press, London 1955, s. 245.

<sup>26</sup> See: A. Lunn, *Miracles – The Scientific Approach*, *Hibbert Journal* 48 (1950), pp. 240-246.

cannot determine for sure that a given event requires for its explanation the method different from the one of natural sciences, the feature of the permanent scientific inexplicability shouldn't be attributed to the miraculous event<sup>27</sup>.

Moreover, we should note that the above reasoning of the people supporting the permanent scientific inexplicability of miraculous events ignores the fact that natural sciences are not, in the first place, interested in the causal nature of single events taking place in the world. As the tasks of natural scientists involve identifying the regularities and making "the map" of permanent relationships between some kind of phenomena and the sequence of causal conditions preceding them. Subsequently, the regularities concerning the course of phenomena are organized into the formulas known as the laws of nature, which are the basic way of explaining the events scientifically.

It means that scientists are particularly interested in searching for the explanations of certain types of events; they are not interested in investigating the anomalies, which cannot conform to any known regularities. For example, the birth of a given child is scientifically explicable not because a scientist provides the adequate explanation of this single birth, but because he or she is able to define the set of causal conditions, according to which the birth of each human being (as a certain type of event) can be explained.

Consequently, the event which cannot be scientifically explained as a single case, can, either now or in the future, be so explained as a certain type of events. Hence, the claim that the miraculous events, as the ones caused by God, are permanently scientifically inexplicable, is at least misleading, if not simply wrong. If a certain event is a direct result of God's action, we should accept the fact that natural sciences will never be able to provide its full explanation as the single, peculiar and exceptional one. Yet, determining the inexplicability of such an event doesn't mean that it is, either now or in the future, impossible to explain as a certain type of events. So, even the conviction that God's direct action caused a given single phenomenon, doesn't itself allow for regarding this phenomenon as permanently scientifically inexplicable in the sense more important for science.

D. Basinger and R. Basinger also point out that sometimes Christian philosophers make the distinction between the direct miraculous God's actions, which are, in their opinion, scientifically inexplicable, and the coincidence miracles, which also were caused By God but which are possible to explain within the natural sciences. If we adopt this distinction, we can see clearly that the knowledge that a certain event is caused by God doesn't suffice to regard it as scientifically

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<sup>27</sup> See: P. Nowell-Smith, *Miracles*, pp. 246-248.

inexplicable. Hence, if someone rejects the attitude that any scientific explanations of direct God's action are automatically excluded, he or she can claim that a given event falls into the category of coincidence miracles. Coincidence miracles are possible to explain, although they are the results of direct God's actions<sup>28</sup>.

We should, therefore, say that because of the impossibility of determining the violation of natural regularities and because of the fact that anomalies do not invalidate the established natural laws, it is impossible to justify adequately the thesis about the permanent scientific inexplicability of miraculous event. Even if there occur the miraculous events, which are scientifically inexplicable (now and in the future), we cannot identify them on the basis of regarding them as the violation of natural laws. Hence, we may wonder whether characterizing miraculous events in such a way is useful for us. It seems that it would be reasonable to ignore completely the explanation of the miracle in reference to its scientific inexplicability. Yet, if we still want to maintain such a definition of the miracle, we should narrow down the conception of its inexplicability to the inexplicability at the moment of the occurrence of this event, without expanding this inexplicability for the future in the permanent and absolute way<sup>29</sup>.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The definition of the miracle as an "extraordinary event" contains two different perspectives of understanding the "extraordinariness": the ontological one (the event is supernatural) and the epistemological one (the event is scientifically inexplicable). However, the most popular definitions of the miracle emphasize that a phenomenon can be defined as the miraculous one, only when it occurs beyond the usual order of nature or when it contradicts this natural order. Consequently, the miraculous event can never be naturally explained. It seems, therefore, that the feature of supernaturality, expressing the ontology of the miracle, is regarded as the irreducible basis for affirming its absolute inexplicability in natural terms<sup>30</sup>.

Yet, the question of the extent, to which miraculous events transcend the natural things is still the source of the controversies among the authors dealing

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<sup>28</sup> See: D. Basinger, R. Basinger, *Philosophy and Miracle. The Contemporary Debate*, p. 70.

<sup>29</sup> So the miracle should be defined as the event, which is incapable of being scientifically explained at the moment when it takes place, yet it shouldn't be defined as the event absolutely scientifically inexplicable.

<sup>30</sup> Such an attitude towards the miraculous events is characteristic of apologetics (fundamental theology) and it is expressed in various statements describing these events as "violating the laws of nature".



with the problem of miracles<sup>31</sup>. The authors generally agree that the miracle is the result of God's action, but they have different opinions with regard to the way of determining sufficient basis for affirming God's intervention into the nature. Some of them think that the miraculous phenomenon must be the one which hasn't been explained by science yet<sup>32</sup>. Others require even more, saying that in order for a certain event to be defined as a miracle, it must be proved not only impossible to be explained now, but also inexplicable at all<sup>33</sup>. Still others say that even the event which has a natural explanation, can be regarded as the miracle but only when we know for sure that it was actually performed by God.

Hence, we are unable to prove beyond all doubt that the extraordinariness of an event must mean that it surpasses the laws of nature<sup>34</sup>. The only thing we can establish is the fact of surpassing the rules of natural sciences by a certain event. However, if we regard such an event as supernatural, then we understand this "supernaturality" in a way different from understanding it when we associated it with the event surpassing the laws of nature. We transfer the term "supernaturality" from the level of ontological considerations, concerning the relationship between the miraculous events and the laws of nature, into level of epistemological ones (the problem of our knowledge about the regularities of nature, the question of the possibility of recognizing the miracle and of the criteria of such recognition, and so on). Then the idea of the extraordinariness-supernaturality of the miracle, understood as the act of surpassing the laws of nature, is replaced with the conception of the extraordinariness of the event, but in the sense of its natural inexplicability<sup>35</sup>. And the lack of the natural explanation for the event does not necessarily mean its supernaturality, i.e. its being contrary to the regularities

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<sup>31</sup> "The fundamental problem is not about miracle, but about transcendence" (M. H e s s e, *Miracles and the laws of nature*, in: *Miracles. Cambridge studies in their philosophy and history*, ed. C.F.D. Moule, A.R. Mowbray, London 1965, p. 42).

<sup>32</sup> Yet, some authors think that in such attitude towards the miracle there is the danger that the phenomenon which is, in accordance with the now available knowledge, regarded as the miraculous one, can later on turn out to be the natural one.

<sup>33</sup> "We can only speak of a miracle when the event occurs outside and against the known order of nature. This event must not be open to any natural explanation whatsoever, and it must also never be capable of explanation in any natural way whatsoever" (R. L o o s, *The Miracle of Jesus*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1965, p. 46).

<sup>34</sup> Even if a miraculous event was the act of surpassing the laws of nature, we are still unable to determine that. So we reject the conviction that we can talk about the miracle only when it takes place beyond any order of nature, because only in this case it would be inexplicable for ever and in any possible way.

<sup>35</sup> So there is no reason to require of the miracle that it should surpass the forces, abilities or laws of nature. It is sufficient for the miracle to surpass the laws of natural sciences, which, nevertheless, are still in force.

of nature. We would be able to arrive at such a radical conclusion, only with the assumption that our knowledge about the order of nature is perfect and that the process of acquiring it is already finished. Yet, the methodology of natural sciences denies the first part of this assumption and the continual development of natural sciences denies the second one. As when a natural scientist recognizes the exception to the law of natural sciences, i.e. the extraordinariness of an event, he or she looks for some incidental factor responsible for the occurrence of this exception. And in the case when the phenomenon surpassing the laws of nature could be the result of both natural and supernatural factor, it must be proved which of the two factors actually caused it<sup>36</sup>. However, the possibility of looking for the incidental factor (supernatural cause) follows not from the supernatural course of a phenomenon, which, as shown here, we are unable to recognize, but rather from the supposition that this incidental factor belongs to the sphere of religion. This supposition, in turn, is conditioned by determining the religious context, from which an extraordinary event arises, and it is determined, to a great extent, by the theological research.

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<sup>36</sup> Let's assume that there is an event  $Z$ , which occurs in accordance with the known law of natural sciences  $P$ , and that there is a phenomenon  $Z_n$ , which is the exception to the law  $P$ , caused by the secondary factor  $P_n$ . If the secondary factor  $P_n$  occurs constantly, a natural scientist modifies the law  $P$  by incorporating the  $P_n$  factor into it. As a result of this modification, there emerges a new law  $P'$ . The phenomena  $Z$  and  $Z_n$  occur in accordance with the new law  $P'$ , and then neither of them is an exception. Yet, when the  $P_n$  factors occurs very rarely, the modification of the law  $P$  is not reasonable, because, although we explain the very rare phenomenon  $Z_n$ , the frequent phenomenon  $Z$  will be left unexplained. In such a case, a natural scientist treats the law  $P$  as a conditional one (if there doesn't occur the secondary factor  $P_n$ , then the phenomenon  $Z$  will occur, in accordance with the law  $P$ ; and if  $P_n$  does occur, then the phenomenon  $Z_n$  will take place, in accordance with the law  $P$ , and with the factor  $P_n$  taken into account). In such a case,  $Z_n$  is an exception to  $P$ , whether  $P_n$  is a natural or supernatural factor. As the exception to the law is possible only when it is a conditional, not an absolute one, and this is the case with the laws of natural sciences. Cf. D. Basinger, R. Basinger, *Philosophy and Miracle. The Contemporary Debate*, pp. 10-11.

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## KONCEPCJA CUDU JAKO „ZDARZENIA NIEZWYKŁEGO”

### Summary

Zazwyczaj, najkrócej rzecz ujmując, określa się cud jako „niezwykłe zdarzenie spowodowane przez Boga”. Bliższa analiza pojęcia niezwykłości prowadzi do wyróżnienia dwóch innych cech cudu – ponadnaturalności i naukowej niewyjaśnialności. Wyodrębnienie i przedstawienie dwóch podstawowych charakterystyk zdarzenia cudownego (ponadnaturalność i naukowa niewyjaśnialność), które występują (choć nie zawsze w jednakowy sposób wyrażone) w definicjach i okreś-

leniach cudu proponowanych w literaturze przedmiotu, może posłużyć do wskazania zasadniczych kierunków, w których powinny być prowadzone dalsze analizy tytułowego zagadnienia. Warto także zasygnalizować główne problemy, jakie pojawiają się w związku z przyjęciem wspomnianych określeń. Problemy te dotyczą różnorodnej treści podkładanej pod poszczególne rozumienia cudu i dlatego wymagają ponownego przemyślenia istotnego znaczenia tego pojęcia. W trakcie analizy określenia cudu jako „zdarzenia niezwykłego” zamierzam więc uzasadnić twierdzenie, że cud jako „zdarzenie niezwykłe” jest rozumiany na dwa sposoby: (1) jako zdarzenie ponadnaturalne i (2) jako zdarzenie naukowo niewyjaśnialne. Następnie będę starał się pokazać, że w przypadku (1) można mówić o zdarzeniu ponadnaturalnym jako o zdarzeniu cudownym tylko wtedy, gdy ma się na myśli to, że jest ono spowodowane ponadnaturalną przyczyną (za którą uznaje się Boga), a nie wtedy, gdy za ponadnaturalny uznaje się jego przebieg. Z kolei odnośnie do przypadku (2) proponuję przyjąć pogląd, że mówienie o naukowej niewyjaśnialności zdarzenia cudownego nie ma sensu, gdyż twierdzenie to jest konsekwencją rozumienia cudu jako pogwałcenia prawidłowości przyrody, a tego nie można wykazać (i nie ma takiej potrzeby). Można natomiast utrzymywać, że zdarzenie cudowne to takie zdarzenie, które musi być niewyjaśnione naukowo w momencie, gdy zachodzi.

*Streścił Adam Świeżyński*

**Key words:** miracle, laws of nature, extraordinary event, laws of science.

**Słowa kluczowe:** cud, prawa przyrody, zdarzenie niezwykłe, prawa przyrodnicze.

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