

The Philosophers and the Miracle

“Don’t be surprised, Lorenzo, that Marsilio Ficino, passionate about philosophy, speaks of miracles: what we write is true, and the task of the philosopher is to account for individual facts with appropriate arguments. There are the proper explanations of natural events, which take place according to nature, but the explanations of divine realities, which are found above nature, are of a metaphysical order or miracles. God furnishes the proof of His mysteries not so much with words as with His miraculous works, and thus confirms His precepts. Hence that saying: if you don’t want to believe the words, believe the works”.¹

These words, addressed by Marsilio Ficino in De Christiana religione to Lorenzo the Magnificent, are still significant today for those who intend to make miracles the object of philosophical reflection, as is done in this and the next issue of Rosmini Studies.

In the first place, they invite the reader not to be surprised that philosophers are concerned with miracles. Western philosophy, after its encounter with monotheistic religions, has

¹ Cf. M. FICINO, *La religione cristiana* (1473), Città Nuova, Roma 2005, p. 69: «Non ti meravigliare, Lorenzo, che Marsilio Ficino, amante della filosofia, parli di miracoli: ciò che scriviamo è vero, e compito del filosofo è dar ragione dei singoli fatti con argomenti appropriati. Vi sono le spiegazioni proprie degli eventi naturali, che hanno luogo secondo natura, ma le spiegazioni delle realtà divine, che si trovano al di sopra della natura, sono di ordine metafisico oppure miracoli. Dio fornisce la prova dei suoi misteri non tanto con le parole, quanto con le sue opere miracolose, e così conferma i suoi precetti. Donde quel detto: se non volete credere alle parole, credete alle opere».

reflected extensively on the theme of miracles, not only in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but also in the modern era. In fact, modern philosophers themselves have developed a broad and wide-ranging debate on this issue which, both in its critical and apologetic aspects, still represents an essential reference point today. Of course, to those who have become accustomed to engaging in philosophy in a totally secularized context, the topic of miracles may seem outdated and at best the object of historical-antiquarian curiosity, but the resurgence of interest in this subject that has occurred in recent decades in the analytic philosophy of contemporary religion,² as well as the degree of theoretical accuracy with which the problems it raises are treated, indicate that it is by no means liquidated from the philosophical point of view and, on the contrary, is still worthy of being addressed. It is all the more so for the philosophy of religion, because miracles are a fundamental aspect for the understanding of all the great world religions and not only of Western monotheisms.³

Secondly, Marsilio Ficino's words suggest the reasons why it is good to maintain a philosophical interest in miracles. The fundamental prerogative of philosophy is, as he states, to "explain" what happens "with appropriate arguments". What happens in nature can be accounted for through naturalistic explanations, that is, through explanations that do not involve supernatural entities. In providing these kinds of explanations, modern science has vastly outpaced philosophy, to the extent that some see room for the latter to survive only as a reflection on how science comes to formulate its explanations and on their validity. However, it is legitimate to wonder if there is only nature, understood as the totality of what is and happens, and if everything that happens in nature can be explained naturalistically. A negative answer to this double question is philosophically legitimate and represents the condition of possibility of the discourse on miracles; that is, in an inverted perspective, an admission of

² I limit myself here to pointing out only a few more recent works: M. CORNER, *Signs of God. Miracles and their Interpretation*, Routledge, New York 2005; D. CORNER, *The Philosophy of Miracles*, Continuum, London-New York 2007; G. H. TWELFTREE (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2011; R. A. LARMER, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2014; Y. NAGASAWA, *Miracles. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017; D. BASINGER, *Miracles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2018.

³ Cf. D. L. WEDDLE, *Miracles. Wonder and Meaning in World Religions*, New York University Press, New York 2010.

the possibility of a miracle allows us to think that nature is not the totality of experience and that naturalistic explanations do not account for everything that happens. To consider the question of miracles is therefore a way to keep alive the perennial philosophical confrontation between naturalism and theism. The latter, in fact, starts from the assumption, still evident to Marsilio Ficino, that, alongside natural realities, there are “divine realities”, that is realities for which it would be senseless to offer naturalistic explanations, and that there is an interaction between these two types of reality, so that some events that occur in nature cannot be entirely explained by means of nature.

Thirdly, the words of Marsilio Ficino remind not only philosophers but also theologians that the “divine realities” reveal a unitary personal nature, thus, being able to be called “God”, not only through words, but above all through “miraculous works”. In the religious sphere, as in all the other areas of human experience, what counts, ultimately, are not words, but deeds, even though miraculous deeds are such as to convey a meaning and therefore to be, to use one of the terms that biblical language uses to designate miracles, “signs”. The miracle, traditionally understood as an event that suspends or surpasses the order of nature, thus makes the interaction between divine and natural realities manifest to the highest degree, an interaction through which a mystery, or an otherwise hidden purpose, are revealed in a direct way and with special evidence. For Marsilio Ficino, as for other religious thinkers, the evidence is such as to rise to the level of “proof”, but this is one of the many intricate theoretical issues that the problem of the miracle presents and around which this volume of Rosmini Studies invites readers to reflect.

The contributions in the “Focus” section of this issue of the periodical (others will appear in the next issue, including one dedicated to Rosmini) touch on different topics and authors. Massimo Giuliani’s contribution offers an overview of how Jewish thought, in its various historical periods, has dealt with the problem of the miracle, assuming, depending on the authors considered, a rationalistic or fideistic attitude or suggesting interesting intermediate solutions. The contributions of Silvano Zucal on Pascal and Claudio Tugnoli on the Abbé de Houtteville give an account of the apologetic use of miracles in the modern religious context, a use made complicated by the confessional opposition between Catholics and Protestants and by the radical criticism of miracles formulated in Chapter VI of Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670). The contributions of Omar Brino on Schleiermacher and of Gloria Dell’Eva on Jacobi highlight some fundamental theoretical problems connected with the discussion on miracles, such as that between determinism and libertarianism, and, in particular

with Schleiermacher, indicate a conception of the miracle that aspires to integrate and overcome the modern critique of its notion in classical theism. Finally, the contribution of Andrea Aguti, who focuses on the contemporary revival of the debate on miracles, fuelled mostly by the controversial Humean definition of a miracle as a “violation of the laws of nature”, shows the interest in the subject of miracles at the intersection of philosophy, science and theology.

(a.a.)