

ARISTOTELIAN FRAMEWORK OF
SHAH WALIULLAH'S THEORY OF
MIRACLES IN *TAWIL-UL-AHADITH*

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ABSTRACT

Miracles are an intriguing subject of introspection not only in the religious but also the philosophical arena. They are considered to be the proof of religion, for within them is a vigor that aids in validating the existence of the supernatural realm, deity, and the deity's pulsating relation to humans. It is pertinent to note that amidst all religious symbols, miracles enjoy a special and distinct status. Owing to their supernatural and divine nature (as the textual evidence suggests), it has been generally believed that Miracles are inexplicable. Nevertheless, people of all ages and religions have tried to offer a framework to help explain, understand, and contextualize the wide range of miracles across the traditions. A variety of explanations ranging from naturalistic to mystical are readily available. Shah Waliullah of Dehli also tries to offer an explanation in this regard which is Aristotelian and naturalistic in spirit. The present study is an attempt to highlight the Aristotelian substructure of Shah Waliullah's theory of Miracles in his *Tawil-ul-Ahadith*. It tries to reveal how Waliullah's theory of miracles is a close ally of Aristotelian theory of causation, which is evident from its harmony with Aristotle's principle of reason, theory of causation, and God. Furthermore, an evaluation has been made to determine the status of Waliullah's theory particularly with reference to its consistency and explanatory power to unleash its problems.

Considering thought to be an ongoing process makes it possible for the world to evolve. The assumption of the continuity of thought aids in finding new insights from the available body of knowledge, thereby assisting epistemic evolution. Methodologically, it has been a common practice amongst all the phenomenal thinkers including Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, Kant, Sadra, Suhrawardy, Heidegger, and many others to build on the available knowledge base. Despite their criticism of each other's thought these monumental thinkers never appeared to have made an attempt to uproot the entire system of thought. Instead, the great thinkers have always taken special care not to negate the process of epistemic evolution in favor of blind faith and fundamentalism. Endorsement and adoption of whatever is good and acceptable has been a norm amongst them. The *Love of Wisdom*, rather than dogma, has guided and evolved humanity through ages. Appreciation, respect, continuity, unity and evolution are the virtues of the path of love, which ultimately lead to wisdom. Being guarded by truth, the path that leads to wisdom is perennial, beyond geographical, temporal, and religious boundaries and is one.

The eighteenth century Muslim mystic, theologian, thinker, and reformer Shah Waliullah of Dehli appears to be in line with this attitude, at least practically.¹

A testimony to this is given by a person who is considered to be the most profound scholar of Waliullahi thought, i.e., Ubaidullah Sindhi. Sindhi used to deliver lectures on Shah Waliullah's Magnum Opus *Hujjatullabul Baligha (The Conclusive Argument)*. In his explanatory book on the major work of Shah Waliullah he has outlined all the philosophical sources of his thought. According to Sindhi, apart from few innovations, Waliullah's thought is a synthesis of the four major Philosophical strains of thought prevalent in the Muslim intellectual world, which include:

1. Platonic Philosophy
2. Peripatetic Philosophy
3. Illuminationist Philosophy
4. Mysticism/ Sufism

He makes it clear in his *Study Guide to the Conclusive Argument* in the following words;

Philosophy of Imam Waliullah does not resemble with any of its predecessors. Many of his concepts resemble with Platonic philosophers. Some of them resemble with Peripatetic philosophers as well. Apart from this, he takes after all the mystic philosophers of Islam especially Sheikh e Akbar Muhayyuddin Ibn-e-Arabi and Imam-e-Rabbani Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi. However, he has his distinct flavor in some matters as well.²

A little later in the text he makes the point even more explicit by saying;

After the demise of Imam (Shah Waliullah) his elder son Shah Abdul Aziz inherited all his scholarship. Likewise, Shah Abdul Aziz's younger brother Shah Rafiuddin (Younger son of Shah Waliullah) was also a scholar of Waliullahi thought. Under the guidance of these two scholars there emerged in Delhi a large group of scholars who were well versed with the Philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Illuminationist Philosopher Shihabuddin Suhrawardy and Sheikh e Akbar Muhayyuddin Ibn-e-Arabi. After understanding all these philosophies they were able to become scholars of Waliullahi thought.³

With this backdrop of collective epistemic evolution- irrespective of the geographical, temporal or religious boundaries-this paper attempts to trace the linkages between Aristotelian theory of causation and Waliullah's theory of miracles. The text under consideration is *'The Interpretation of Dreams' (Ta'wil ul-Abadith)* by Waliullah. The task of delineating an affinity between Aristotelian causation and Waliullah's theory of miracles will be carried out by highlighting how Waliullah implicitly borrows Aristotelian tools such as 'the principle of reason' and theory of four causes in his framework and their extension to the realm of miracles. Owing to Waliullah's allegiance to Aristotle's causation, he falls into the trap of limiting God as will become evident during the course of this study. Finally, an exploration will be made to reveal how Waliullah's effort to naturalize mysticism and religion makes his theory of miracles not only inconsistent but also how it reduces its explanatory power and intellectual appeal.

The Principle of Reason

'The Interpretation of Dreams' (Tawil-ul-Abadith), according to Waliullah, aims at citing a natural cause for every event.⁴ In this sense, the text gives a causal explanation of whatever happens in the universe. Waliullah builds this thesis on *The Principle of Reason*⁵, according to which, *nothing happens in the world without a cause*.⁶ Waliullah universalizes this principle by making it a property of man

(in the Aristotelian sense of the word) by saying, “*man by his nature is disposed to think that there is a cause for every happening.*”⁷

The principle, however, is not new with Waliullah as it is at the heart of the whole Aristotelian project. Right from the beginning of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle explicitly states ‘the principle of reason’ to be the main explanatory principle. The aim of *Metaphysics* (for Aristotle) is to show that nothing happens in the universe randomly, and/or without a cause. Importantly, in causal and naturalistic Aristotelian setup, knowledge becomes possible only by knowing the causes *in toto*. For Aristotle, even ‘chance’ is a part of causal structure and is itself an incidental cause. While explaining the difference between spontaneity and chance, Aristotle unveils their causal nature in the following words in *Physics*;

Both belong to the mode of causation ‘source of change’, for wither some natural or some intelligent agent is always the cause; but in this sort of causation the number of possible causes is infinite.

Spontaneity and chance are causes of effects which, though they might result from intelligence or nature, have in fact been caused by something incidentally. Now since nothing which is incidental is prior to what is per se, it is clear that no incidental cause can be prior to intelligence and nature.⁸

Causation is so central in Aristotelian philosophy that the relation between truth and causation is of necessity, for Aristotle, as “*we do not know a truth without its cause.*”⁹ (993b-23) Waliullah, however, extends this principle quite unconventionally to the realm of miracles too by saying that ‘*even miracles have their causes.*’¹⁰ If we replace the term ‘chance’ with the term ‘miracles’ in Aristotelian system, Waliullah’s theory of miracles begins to emerge. The position is quite anti-theological by normal religious standards and is not a new one as the causation (and its limits) was the main point of contention between Philosophers (principally between Ghazali and Ibn Rushd), historically.

Four causes

In the Philosophy of Aristotle, theory of four causes applies not only to every entity that *is* but to every process of change and becoming. Moreover, causation, according to Aristotle, is not only limited to the changes taking place on the sublunary world but is relevant even to the ethereal realm. The four causes, according to Aristotle, which govern the universe in its entirety, are:

- Material cause
- Efficient cause
- Formal cause
- Final cause

Aristotle outlines this classification of causes in his *Metaphysics* in the following words;

...causes are spoken in four senses. In one of these we mean the substance, i.e. the essence (for the 'why' is reducible finally to the definition and the ultimate 'why' is a cause and principle); in another the matter or substratum, in a third the source of change, and in a fourth the cause opposed to this, the purpose and the good (for this is the end of all generation and change).¹¹

Upon analysis, this theory of four causes becomes explicit in Waliullah's explanatory framework of miracles. A general outlining of this schema becomes visible in the following excerpt of *Tawil-ul-Ahadith*;

When God intends to do a certain thing, He effects expansion or contraction in the Sublime assembly and thereby, completes His intention¹².

In the above quoted reference the intention of God is the Final cause for which everything else is there for. This shows the teleological inclinations (which is the hallmark of Aristotelian system) of Waliullah's system on the whole. Whereas '*expansion and contraction in the sublime assembly*' is the formal cause as owing to the influence of these forces all the changes on the earth take place. The notion of '*sublime assembly*' is the Aristotelian equivalent of 'the fixed stars'. The last of the two causes, i.e. efficient and material causes are implicit in the last three words of the reference quoted above. They become explicit on joining these three words with another reference from the same book;

when the settlement of the people of the Thamud were in the mountains and their caves, the nearest possible chastisement for them was the earthquake and the roar. Then Salih prayed for their destruction.¹³

The above quoted is the equivalent of the completion of God's intention. Here we find the nature of the earthquake as the efficient cause, as wherever earthquake occurs, it leads to destruction (it is the nature of earthquake). While to be amongst the mountains and the caves amounts to be the material cause as being in such an environment makes the earthquakes even more fatal.

The Limitless God

An entity which has limits cannot qualify as God in the religious and theological sense. The notion of God is central to Aristotle's teleological worldview. However, Aristotelian God contrary to religious viewpoint is inert, passive and limited. Adoption of Aristotelian understanding of God resulted in never ending religious, theological, and philosophical disputes in Muslim intellectual world. Aristotelian scheme, being naturalistic, had no room for Miracles.

Miracles, at best, can be seen as chance (which is embedded in the causal nexus and is not over and above it) in Aristotelian philosophy.

Waliullah, interestingly, tries to incorporate such exclusive properties of God as limitless and always active in his causal framework for the explanation of Miracles that is problematic. Few principles in *Tawil-ul-Ahadith* that not only point towards this difficulty but also pose serious questions about the validity of his framework in a religious setup are listed below.

- “God chooses that form of punishment which happens to be the nearest to the natural causes on that day.”¹⁴
- “The Divine Laws (Nawamis, pertaining to Shara’i) depend upon the Universal Laws and the occasions indicative of wisdom, while the causes (Tarqibat) are based on the particular expediencies and the decree (Qada) comes into effect at every suitable time.”¹⁵
- “...the selection of the nearest and the easiest causes at every time.”¹⁶
- “This is the Divine course which will continue as such, if there is no obstruction.”¹⁷

Miracles, in the religious sense, are exemplification of God’s might and power. Miracles signify the ultimate and infinite control that God has over everything, which is not in need of anything. God at *Will* can change the course of happenings and brings things out of naught. Contrarily, according to the above cited Waliullahi principles, it appears that Miracles are not instances of God’s might or an objective free choice of God. Making God’s choice dependent upon ‘the nearest to the natural causes’, and ‘suitable time’ along with the possibility of obstruction and dependence of Divine laws on the Universal laws, makes God a limited entity. The textual evidence and the mainstream view of God sharply contrasts with this schema as it limits God. This kind of approach to explain the miracles (which potentially threatens the status of God), consequently, seems to lower the status of Deity.

The problem of consistency

Despite taking a naturalistic stance (alone) to explain Miracles, Waliullah adds a religious flavor to it. This becomes evident when he outlines the criterion of becoming knowledgeable (which amounts to knowing all the causes). His approach, however, raises questions on the consistency of his explanatory scheme. To start with, the prerequisites of knowing all the explanatory causes of every phenomenon (including miracles) include the knowledge of Physics

and Astronomy- as heavenly bodies are also considered to be an important agent in this causal framework. In his own words;

These causes, however, are known to him who has thoroughly comprehended the science of the working system of the whole universe and has properly understood both the earthly and the heavenly causes working in it.¹⁸

This knowledge, though necessary, is not sufficient to know all explanatory causes. Waliullah adds the religio-mystic flavor to this naturalistic effort to know explanatory causes by qualifying only the chosen one to yield all the explanatory causes of every phenomenon by saying;

... Understood only by those whom He has chosen and whom He has taught the science of the interpretation of dreams (*Tawil-ul-Ahadith*), and by those whose hearts He had expanded with both the acquired and the hereditary knowledge.¹⁹

The acquired knowledge in the above mentioned reference points to the knowledge of Physics and Astronomy. The hereditary knowledge, however, complicates the framework being subjective as opposed to the acquired knowledge that is objective in nature. It is bafflingly difficult (if not impossible) to balance effectively and fairly the phenomenon of '*being a chosen one*' in a causal explanatory framework. The hereditary knowledge is subjective and problematic as even though considered foundational in mystical sciences, it is transferred from the masters to the disciples (either through inspiration or oral tradition and is not testable). In this ambiguous scheme of qualifications he further adds '*the science of interpretation of dreams*' which has the mystical connotation of being connected to a higher power that inspires the believer with the truth related to all the happenings, which are unknown otherwise.

How to adjust and justify the above mentioned mystico-religious subjective list of qualities (as a person principally has no control over them because they are not acquired) is itself problematic in a causal framework. Instead of providing a satisfactory explanation, the framework adds to the already existing absurdity related to the miracles. This effort to wed the contradictory positions like naturalism and mysticism causes serious issues of consistency. Due to this paradox, Waliullahi system lands in the confused land between the two extremes of naturalism and mysticism where the problems related to demarcation and prioritization between the two start to emerge.

Evaluating the explanatory power of Waliullah's theory

When we see the list of miracles provided by Waliullah in *Tawil-ul-Ahadith*, it includes the prophetic tales from all the major religions.

However, the explanatory power of his framework is by no means satisfactory as it fails to tear off the mysteriously fictional character of a number of such miraculous phenomena. For example, while explaining the miraculous blessings which God had bestowed upon Mary, Waliullah says;

God showed many signs to Mary. He created fruits for her with the word *Kun* (Be) without any elemental cause...²⁰

What needs an explanation in all this is the possibility of creation without elemental causes. In other words, we are interested in finding out those causes (incidental or otherwise) that may result in such a miraculous phenomenon. The answer, however, that Waliullah gives is that “*the creation those days did not depend upon an elemental cause*”²¹ The explanatory power of this reply is highly questionable on factual basis. Furthermore, is it a satisfactory answer at all? Waliullah extends the unknown variable to the whole instead of explaining it. According to the reply, either nothing needs an explanation as nothing is problematic, or everything is in need of explanation as everything was problematic and abnormal in those days. But if we consider abnormality (associated with the miracles) to be normal with reference to any specific time then the novelty of miracles becomes dull as it must have happened to a number of other people or could have happened, potentially, at the least. If we take this as a framework for the explanation of miracles, then they somehow lose the status of being the sign of God. This paradox is similar to what Nietzsche highlights while criticizing Kant in *‘Beyond Good and Evil’* by stating;

But is that- an answer? An explanation? Or is it not rather merely a repetition of the question?²²

This type of explanation is comparable to Ghazali’s explanation of miracles. Ghazali, in the same vain expounds that the whole universe is miraculous in order to explain miracles. In the above mentioned explanation Waliullah is unintentionally saying the same although his intention is to go in the opposite direction to that of Ghazali. We can simplify this comparison as;

The whole nature is Miraculous = “The creation of those days did not depend upon elemental cause.”

Waliullah by offering an explanatory framework for miracles was supposed to explain the reason behind the creation not involving elemental causes (in the case of Mary). Paradoxically, nevertheless, he comes up by declaring it to be just one amongst the other, thereby, rendering the whole universe abnormal, mysterious and inexplicable. This is the principle path that he has taken in explaining the causality of miracles (i.e. the abnormality was the normality of that era). Instead of enlightening about the nature of miracles he has made it

even more obscure by increasing the number of variables that need explanation.

Conclusion

Considering knowledge to be perennial and evolutionary, it is argued in the present study that Waliullah's theory of miracles in his *Tawil-ul-Abadith* is Aristotelian in nature. It is seen that by grounding his explanatory framework of miracles in Aristotle's *principle of reason* which is considered to be the backbone of his theory of causation, Waliullah makes explicit use of the famous four causes (i.e. material, formal, efficient and final) as have been expounded by Aristotle in his works. These four causes help Waliullah to naturalize the miracles to make them worthy of explanation just like the ordinary and routine working of the universe. This step is important in that from this it is possible to infer quite in line with Newtonian Modern Physics, that both natural and supernatural phenomena (but not the deity and sacred entities) are of the same nature upon which the same laws apply. However, his effort to unite naturalism to mysticism and theology drives his framework to imbalance owing to increase of unknown variables by declaring the supernatural as natural of the specified time. This declaration not only undermines the status of miracles but also is in contrast to the factual evidence. Furthermore, it appears to offer no explanation at all as if everything was of the same abnormal nature at some point in time, then either a miracle was not a miracle at all or everything was miraculous. But by saying that everything was miraculous in nature at some particular point in time, we cannot do any good in explaining the miracles (as the aim of any explanatory framework is to reduce the unknown variables by rendering the understandable elucidation of the phenomenon by keeping all other things constant). This does no service to his project of making comprehensible an obscure area of religious thought. It at best reduces the explanatory power as well seriously dents the consistency of his explanatory framework.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- ¹ Theoretically, however, he possibly differs on it and offers disfavorable opinion about Philosophy in his important work *Khair-e-Katbeer*. For details see *Khair-e-Katbeer*, Dar-ul-Ishaat, Karachi, 1992, p.288. Waliullah offers the following arguments about the philosophers:
Those who call themselves Philosophers should not be taken seriously at all as they are the accursed. Allah has willfully left them astray. They are the captives of their limited and ignorant reason and they do not know how to get out of it. If you are in search of the Real their knowledge and arguments are of no utility. (*Khair-e-Katbeer*-p.288)

- ² Sindhi, Ubaidullah, *Sbarah Hujjat Ullah al-Baligha*, Sind Sagar Academy, Lahore, 2010, p.48. The text is translated by the author himself.
- ³ Ibid, p.49.
- ⁴ Waliyullah, Shah, *Tawil ul-Abadiith*, Kitab Bhavan, New Dehli, 2011, p.v.
- ⁵ As Martin Heidegger names it so.
- ⁶ Waliyullah, *Tawil ul-Abadiith*, p.v.
- ⁷ Ibid, p. 5
- ⁸ McKeon, Richard, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Modern Library, New York, 2001, p.247.
- ⁹ Ibid, p.712.
- ¹⁰ Waliyullah, *Tawil ul-Abadiith*, p.v.
- ¹¹ McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, p.693.
- ¹² Waliyullah, *Tawil ul-Abadiith*, p.26.
- ¹³ Ibid, p. 22.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p.49.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p.51.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p.52.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p.53.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p.v.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, p.4.
- ²⁰ Ibid, p.66.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Vintage Books, New York, 1966, p.18-19.

