

Are Miracles Violations of the Laws of Nature?

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Classical theism holds that God rules the world not only indirectly, by the natural laws established with creation, but through actions or direct interventions that interfere with natural processes and human actions. These direct interventions are usually called miracles. Modern Western philosophy, at least starting from Spinoza and Hume, has defined miracles as “violations of the laws of nature” and criticized them on this ground. Actually, if God is the author of the natural laws, it seems contradictory that he violates them performing miracles. In the last decades, analytical philosophy of religion developed a considerable discussion on this topic. This debate has seen, on the one hand, those, like N. Smart and R. Swinburne, who defend the definition of miracle as a violation of natural laws, and those, like K. Ward, R. Larmer, and D. Corner, who reject it and sustain alternative definitions of miracle. In my article, I refer to this debate with the purpose of showing that the notion of miracle as a violation of the natural law is a coherent one from a theistic point of view.

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Introduction

1. Modern Western philosophy has often defined miracles as “violations” or “transgressions” of the laws of nature by God or other

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supernatural agents. In particular, Hume's definition of miracles has become more and more influential (see Hume 1902, section X, "Of Miracles"). According to Hume, a miracle is "a violation of the laws of nature" or, more precisely, "a transgression of a law of nature by particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent" (Hume 1902, 114-15). This definition relies on traditional definitions of miracle offered by ancient and medieval philosophy. According to Thomas Aquinas, for example, miracles are events that "God produces outside the usual order established in the creation" (*Summa contra Gentes*, III, ch. 101*) and they can be defined as supernatural, preternatural, and contrary to the nature of certain things (see* *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*, q. VI, art. 2). Instances of the first and second kind occur when God actualizes either something that is not possible in any way to nature (for example, the resurrection of a dead man) or something that is possible to nature, although it is possible in a way that differs from the one that the miracle is causing to happen (for example, the instant transformation of water into wine). Miracles contrary to nature are those in which, as Aquinas says, "in nature remains a provision which is contrary to the effect that God works" (see *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei*, q. VI, art. 2), as it happens, for example, in the case of the birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary.

Modern Western philosophers have restricted the meaning of miracle to violation of the natural order, and they have criticized miracles on that ground. This criticism is essentially based on two arguments. Spinoza advanced the first argument. In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), Ch. 6, "Of Miracles"), he claims that miracles are ontologically impossible, because the laws of nature are decrees of God following from the necessity and perfection of Divine nature and "nothing happens in nature which is in contradiction with its universal laws" (Spinoza 1951, 84). Then if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he would be compelled to assert that God acted against his own nature, which is an evident absurdity.

The second argument is proposed by Hume. Contrary to Spinoza's view, Hume does not declare the impossibility of miracles from an ontological point of view, but undermines the reliability of the belief in miracles. According to Hume, the evidence in support of a miracle, defined as a violation of the laws of nature, conflicts with the evidence in support of the latter; and the evidence in support of a miracle can never be stronger than that in support of the laws of nature. The evidence for the laws of nature is universal and can be tested at any time by any person, whereas we cannot say the same for the evidence in support of miracles. So, according to Hume, the belief in miracles can never be rationally justified.

The argument of Hume has been strongly criticized by many authors,¹ and in its original form seems inconsistent with his epistemology. However, some contemporary authors revise it as follows: An unusual and amazing event that cannot be explained by natural laws (for example, walking on water) may not be a violation of such laws, because we could be able to explain this event in the future by gaining knowledge of its natural causes. Therefore, such an event is not a violation of the laws of nature; it just shows that our knowledge of natural laws (in this case, those of gravity and hydrostatics) is currently too narrow and needs to be revised and increased. Since this increase of knowledge is in principle unlimited, there is no possibility to define something in nature as miraculous. As Frederick R. Tennant wrote in his book *Miracle & Its Philosophical Presuppositions* (1925), summarizing this argument, "until we shall have arrived at something like omniscience as to Nature's constitution and intrinsic capacities, we cannot affirm any marvel to be beyond them" (Tennant 1925, 33).

This line of reasoning is basically that of naturalism, in which everything that happens in nature can be explained by natural causes. In this view, there is no room for miracles, because there is no room for

1. See, among others, Earman 2000, who considers Hume's argument as largely derivative, unoriginal and even confused.

any kind of supernatural entities; as a consequence, the epistemic argument against miracles is again combined with the ontological one.

2. In his book *The Concept of Miracle* (1970) Richard Swinburne has defined a miracle as “*a violation of a law of nature by a god*” (Swinburne 1970, 11) and defended this definition from a theistic point of view. According to Swinburne, a law of nature is not simply a description of what happens, but a description of what happens in a regular and predictable way. A law of nature is, therefore, a simple formula, compatible with the observation of certain data in a certain field of experience, which allows us to predict what will occur in this field. If a law of nature is universal, it predicts what must happen; if statistical, it predicts what must probably happen. As Swinburne notes, “any proposed law of nature will be corrigible—that is, future observations could show the proposed law not to be a true law. But in so far as a formula survives further tests, that increases the evidence in its favor as a true law” (Swinburne 1970, 25). A series of counter-instances to such a universal law of nature shows that it is not really a law of nature; but is “an occurrence of a non-repeatable counter-instance” (Swinburne, 1970, 26) enough to invalidate the law of nature or does it simply represents a violation of the latter? According to Swinburne, unless we are able to replace the law of nature with one that can predict the occurrence of new phenomena in an equally simple way as the former does, the law remains valid. We are, therefore, justified in saying that a non-repeatable counter-instance is a violation of a law of nature; that is, a non-repeatable counter-instance is “the occurrence of an event that is impossible, given the operation of the actual laws of nature” (Swinburne 2004, 277). Now, if the law is not universal, but statistical, then a non-repeatable counter-instance represents a “quasi-violation,” in the sense of a highly unlikely event given the statistical law taken into account. For example, if the event in question is the resurrection of a dead man and the laws under consideration are Quantum Laws, such resurrection should be evaluated as a quasi-

violation of Quantum Laws, because it is unlikely “that the small indeterminacies allowed by Quantum Theory would permit their occurrence” (Swinburne 2004, 281).

In order to avoid the notion of violation or quasi-violation of a law of nature, one can argue that such events are purely random, but still, as Swinburne observes, “the very fact that there are laws of nature (universal or probabilistic) operative in the relevant field and all other fields of which we know makes this very improbable” (Swinburne 2004, 281-2). This is why the notion of miracle as violation of a natural law appears to be consistent. Today, however, many theistic philosophers of religion criticize regarding miracles as violations of a law of nature. This criticism is usually supported by the following reasons.

First, quantum physics makes the notion of macrophysical natural laws much less obvious than it is commonly assumed. At the quantum level, many events happen that cannot be deterministically and even causally explained. This being the case, it turns out to be unclear what it means to violate a law of nature, and in general what the expression “law of nature” refers to. In his book *The Philosophy of Miracles* (2007), David Corner claims that when we are facing a non-repeatable counter-instance to the laws of nature, it is not necessary to speak of a violation of the laws of nature; actually, we can always understand any law as a statistical generalization which is not necessarily true but only useful in order to expand our knowledge of nature. Accordingly, a non-repeatable event might be produced by unknown natural forces or considered as a random anomaly. As Corner writes, “the universe does not fully conform to deterministic laws of the form ‘All As are Bs’” and “modern physics *already* acknowledges that some events, such as those involving subatomic particles, are not fully determined by physical forces” (Corner 2007, 29).

Second, some theists claim that the notion of a violation of the natural laws is incoherent in itself once you admit that natural laws are working. According to R. Larmer, three types of theories are usually

proposed as accounts of the laws of nature: (a) regularity theories, (b) nomic necessity theories, and (c) causal dispositions theories (see Larmer 2011, 36). Regularity theories say that laws of nature are universal generalizations that describe what actually happens in nature; nomic theories take natural laws as descriptions of the necessary connections between events; and causal disposition theories “hold that physical things have natural tendencies or powers that are a result of their nature and that the laws of nature describe these tendencies or powers” (Larmer 2011, 37). In any case, all these theories claim that talking about a violation of the laws of nature does not make sense, “since laws of nature are taken to express metaphysically necessary truths” (Larmer 2011, 37).

For this reason, according to Robert Larmer, we should make a new evaluation of the explanatory meaning of a law of nature. A law of nature merely states that in nature, given certain conditions, certain events will occur; therefore, if the conditions of nature are changed (e.g., mass and energy of physical bodies), then the laws of nature are changed too. So, as Larmer writes in his book *Water into Wine* (1996), “if God Creates or annihilates a unit or units of mass/energy, He breaks no law of nature, but He does, by creation of new mass/energy, or by the annihilation of previously existing mass/energy, change the material conditions to which the laws of nature apply” (Larmer 1996, 20). In this way, he defends the concept of miracle as “an objective event that is specially caused by God” (Larmer 1996, 40) occurring in complete accordance with the laws of nature.

Such an account by Larmer is in many respects similar to the view of Clive S. Lewis in his famous book *Miracles* (1947). Lewis defines a miracle as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power” (Lewis, 1974, 5) and argues that the natural laws are not violated if God “annihilates or creates or deflects a unit of matter”. In this case “He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately all Nature domiciles this new situation, makes it at home in her realm, adapts all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws” (Lewis, 1974, 63).

In a similar way, David Basinger claims that natural laws tell us that certain natural phenomena will or will not always occur given a specific set of natural conditions and given that there are no other relevant forces acting. Now, we might speak of a violation “only if a non-repeatable counter-instance were to occur under the exact set of *natural* conditions presupposed by such laws,” but a miracle is an event directly caused by God “and events directly caused by God do not, by definition, occur under just that exact set of *natural* conditions presupposed in any set of natural laws” (Basinger 1986, 15). More recently, adopting a causal dispositional theory as an account of the laws of nature, Joel Archer claims that “miracles do not *violate* the laws of nature; rather, they are events whose causal source lies outside the dispositional capacities found in the world” (Archer 2015, 93). More precisely, miracles “would be cases of divine finks and masks” (Archer 2015, 93), which have empirical effects in the world without altering or violating the laws of nature.

Third, the miracle as a violation of a law of nature continues today to suggest the idea, as Nancey Murphy claims, that it is unreasonable “that God should violate the laws he has established” (Murphy 1995, 343). More generally, many theists find the definition of miracle as a violation of a law of nature too narrow. For instance, Keith Ward claims that miracles are better understood when they are defined as “epiphanies of the Spirit,” which have the aim to show in a particular way that nature is not a closed physical system. On the contrary, nature can be interpenetrated and reordered by spiritual agencies (divine or human), becoming the vehicle of the Divine and his purposes. In this sense, as Ward writes, “it is quite unsatisfactory to think of miracles as just rare, highly improbable and physically inexplicable events. The theist has no interest in the claim that anomalous physical events occur. The events in which the theist is interested are acts of God; and Divine acts do not occur arbitrarily or just as anomalous and wholly inexplicable changes in the world” (Ward 1990, 176).

Following this general view on miracles, some authors point out that the definition of a miracle as a violation of law of nature does not have a ground in the Bible or in other holy Scriptures (including the Qur'ān), where miracles are rather seen as “signs”; that is, as events having a religious meaning for believers.¹ According to John Hick, for example, a miracle is “an event through which we become immediately and vividly conscious of God as acting towards us” (Hick 1973, 51). This perspective emphasizes the semiotic nature of miracles and agrees with a contextual approach to them, which is very common among postmodern philosophers and theologians. In this case, a miracle does not possess a symbolic meaning without occurring in a context in which it can be interpreted as having exactly this meaning. Among others, David Corner sustains this perspective by defining a miracle as “an instance of divine agency, connecting in some way with the interests of human beings, and mediating a relationship between humanity and the divine” (Corner 2007, 145).

Finally, some authors link the notion of miracle as a violation of natural law to an “interventionist” concept of the relationship between God and the world—that is, to some occasional and special interventions of God into the world from “outside.” Such authors criticize this concept from a theistic perspective by wondering how God intervenes in some cases rather than in others (a relevant question especially in theodicy) or questioning the very notion of “intervention.” Actually, from a theistic point of view, God is not only “transcendent” to the world but also “immanent.” Aquinas, for example, says that God “is necessarily present in everything, and in an inward way” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 8, art. 1*). So, as noted by Brian Davies, “if God is always present to his creatures as their sustainer and preserver ... therefore it makes sense to deny that he can, strictly speaking, intervene. Thus, it makes sense to deny miracles that should be thought of as cases of divine intervention” (B. Davies 1993, 193).

However, Davies himself acknowledges that “the notion of a violation of a natural law is, surely, in some sense part of what we might call ‘traditional notion of the miraculous’” (B. Davies 1993, 194). The

1. For an overview of this point in the main religious traditions, especially in monotheisms, see Twelftree (ed.), 2011.

traditional notion of the miraculous means that, according to the common understanding, only unusual events that arouse a sense of wonder because they are contrary to the normal course of nature deserve to be called miracles, since a supernatural cause seems the best explanation for them.

3. If we maintain this traditional notion of miracles, the reasons brought against the definition of a miracle as a violation of a natural law are not very strong. With regard to the first objection, a theist may understand natural laws as inductive generalizations and reduce any universal, natural law to a statistical one, on the model of quantum laws, but independently on the evidence that there are many scientists who do not agree with this view,¹ such a view cannot vindicate an ontological commitment to miracles, but to anomalous events in nature only. If you consider natural laws just as inductive generalizations, then they have merely a descriptive meaning, but not a prescriptive and predictive one. An unusual event may occur in this context without violating any law, and such an event may not be an instance of a miracle. In this way, as William Craig observes, “the defender of miracles has ... at least gained a hearing” (Craig 1986, 15), but the evidence in favour of them must be weighed yet.²

1. According to Paul Davies, for example, laws of nature are universal, absolute, eternal, omnipotent, and even, in a loose sense, omniscient (see P. Davies 1992, 82-83). So, laws of nature are not inductive generalizations regarding the way physical events occur, but they are “*in* the behavior of physical things” (P. Davies 1992, 84). Moreover, if physical things are somehow built in the laws of physics, then these laws must have independent existence, and this, as Davies writes, “strongly support the Platonic idea that the laws are ‘out there’, transcending the physical universe” (P. Davies 1992, 91).

2. In my opinion, theists who defend miracles rejecting a deterministic account of the laws of nature, based on quantum mechanics, are overlooking that quantum mechanics does not claim that the principle of causality is overthrown, but the inevitable imprecision of our measurements on the atomic level only (see Jaki 1999, 46-47). In other terms, the fact that at

This kind of objection to miracles as violations of a law of nature often shows the attempt to make compatible the occurring of miracles with a naturalistic worldview. D. Corner, for example, denies a supernatural notion of causation, because it “conceive the supernatural in physical terms, with the result that we are no longer conceiving of it as anything distinct in kind from the natural” (Corner 2007, 47). If this is true, then miracles should be considered as cases of a basic or primitive action by God; namely, an action whose agent does not cause to occur, but just does. However, the notion of basic or primitive action seems unclear if it refers to the relationship between God and the world. How does God act in the world? Corner claims that divine action can supervene on non-determined phenomena at the level of micro-processes in order to bring about events at the level of ordinary human experience, but supervenience or emergence in natural processes is something that can be explained by means of natural causes; that is, in the context of materialism, epiphenomenalism, epistemic emergentism, properties dualism, and so on. In this perspective, the action of God represents a redundant cause that does not deserve to be taken into account. On the contrary, to postulate that God acts (even in a basic way) in supervenient phenomena is not really different from the postulate that he is acting within the gaps of nature.

With regard to the second objection, the thesis of Lewis and Larmer—according to which, under appropriate conditions, if God changes the material properties of some things, then he can act without violating the laws of nature—is questionable. According to the physicist Frank J. Tipler, who is against the idea that miracles are violations of natural laws, the example given by Lewis and worked out by Larmer (i.e., the creation or annihilation of units of matter by God) is not a simple “interference”; it is a real violation of the principle of conservation of mass and energy indeed (see Tipler 2007, ch. 5). It is true that Tipler himself tries to offer a scientific account of such an

quantum level laws of nature can be mainly formulated in a statistical form does not justify the assertion that deterministic laws of any kind are not operating in this field.

event in the case of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, trying to demonstrate that such a miracle is not a violation of the laws of nature, but his account seems quite speculative and many scientists will probably ignore or reject it.

Authors such as D. Basinger and W. L. Craig, who consider the notion of violation of the natural law as inconsistent, propose different definitions for miracle. According to Basinger, a miracle is “an unusual event caused by a god” (Basinger 1986, 3) or an event that is “permanently inexplicable” (Basinger 1986, 15). According to Craig, “the concept of the naturally impossible” must be retained “as the proper characterization of miracle” (Craig 1986, 17). From a general point of view, such definitions make sense; nevertheless, they are questionable in some respects. On the one hand, a permanently inexplicable event is not an event necessarily caused by a god; it may simply be an event that goes beyond our ability to explain it without possessing a supernatural explanation. Our knowledge has many limitations, and it is likely that we will be not able to overcome them in the future. On the other hand, it is true that a miracle is always something which is naturally impossible, but this is a very broad sense of miracle. For theism, nature cannot create itself. So, if we take this definition of miracle, the very creation of nature would be a miracle, maybe the greatest miracle. In a similar way, inorganic matter cannot produce living beings, so the phenomenon of life should be considered as naturally impossible and consequently a miracle. Therefore, the problem with the definition of miracle as a naturally impossible event caused by God is that, potentially, every act of God with regard to the world (e.g., to create the world itself or to order and to sustain it by means of laws of nature) might be called a miracle. However, in this way, the traditional distinction between a general providence of God towards the world and a special one would be insignificant. What exactly is the difference between the conservation of the world by God and the intervention of God in response to contingent events in the world and in human life?

Regarding the third objection, the idea of a god who violates the laws of nature, which he created, may not appear *prima facie* consistent, but we have to consider that violating a law of nature does not imply that nature and its laws should be destroyed or superseded. Miracles are not violations of the overall ontology of nature, and they do not abolish the laws of nature producing a new order and new laws of nature. As noted by Ninian Smart, miracles “are not small-scale laws. Consequently, they do not destroy large-scale laws. Formally, they seem to destroy the “Always” statements of the scientific laws; but they have not the genuine deadly power of the negative instance” (Smart 1969, 37).

Moreover, it is true that the definition of a miracle as a violation of a law of nature is not biblical, but theism supports many claims that are not strictly biblical, without contradicting the Bible or other holy Scriptures. So, if you are a theist you can certainly assume the biblical definition of a miracle as a “sign.” Nevertheless, you should be aware that, as Smart observes, a miracle “could not be a sign unless it were something rather extraordinary” (Smart 1969, 35). Likewise, it is obvious that an event can be defined as a miracle if and only if it is religiously significant, but not every religiously significant event deserves to be called a miracle. If I vividly feel the presence of God by loving my family or looking at a wonderful scenario in nature, I’m not experiencing the occurrence of a miracle, at least in the usual sense of the word.

Finally, regarding the fourth objection, for theism, God is an omnipotent person or at least an omnipotent being that possesses personal attributes. Consequently, he has volitions and acts in order to realize certain ends without finding any kind of obstacle. It follows from such a view the possibility that he directly intervenes in the world, independently of the laws of nature or occasionally in reference to contingent events in the world. So, this possibility should not be regarded at all as strange. On the contrary, it would be strange that an omnipotent and personal God would not do something like that.¹

1. George G. Stokes, a physicist of the late nineteenth century, was right when

Certainly, we are not able to know why God intervenes in some cases and not in others, but this is not a good reason to deny that God can intervene in the world.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the definition of a miracle as a violation of a law of nature is coherent, *pace* those authors who advanced the above considered objections. According to Aquinas' distinction, among three kinds of miracles, which I mentioned at the beginning of my paper, not all miracles are strictly violations of the natural order; some of them may be evaluated very peculiar violations, and this peculiarity should not be ignored if considering the evidential force of miracle as regards to the existence and nature of God. If a miracle is a sign that testifies to the power of God over the world, the more a miracle violates a law of nature, the more the sign vehiculates God's message, because by Augustine's words, miracles remind us that God "is not held back by any difficulties or hindered by any law of nature" (*De civitate Dei*, XXI, 8, 5).

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he said: "Admit the existence of a God, of a personal God, and the possibility of miracle follows at once" (quoted by Jaki 1999, 34).

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