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Miracles and the Laws of Nature

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Abstract: A definition of miracle is developed and the claim that miracles, in the strong sense of supernatural intervention in nature, imply violation of the laws of nature is rejected on the basis that such intervention can occur not by violating the laws of nature but by altering the material conditions to which the laws apply.

The core contention lying behind this mini-series of articles is that whether it is rational to believe that events best understood as miracles actually occur is not to be decided on the basis of armchair theorizing, but rather on the basis of meticulous examination of evidence. Such examination, however, needs to be set free from unwarranted assumptions that miracles are “impossible, improbable, or improper.” To this end, philosophical analysis can play an important role in clearing away conceptual underbrush and question-begging presuppositions, such that the evidence gets a fair hearing. It is with this goal in mind that I intend over a number of web articles to examine standard philosophical objections to the rationality of belief in miracles. I consider these objections and others in much greater detail in my recent book, [*The Legitimacy of Miracle*](#) (Lexington, 2014).

Miracles and the Laws of Nature

It is, I suggest, fair to define a miracle as an unusual event which reveals and furthers God’s purposes, is beyond the power of physical nature to produce, and is caused by an agent who transcends physical nature. Many philosophers, however, would insist that this definition is incomplete, inasmuch as it makes no mention of miracles being violations of the laws of nature.

The view that violation of the laws of nature is a *conditio sine qua non* for an event being a miracle stems from Hume’s influential essay ‘*Of Miracles*.’ Hume’s claim is based on the assumption that miracles, defined as events which would not occur except through a transcendent agent intervening in nature to produce an event which would not otherwise happen, can only take place through violating the laws of nature. The claim that miracles must violate the laws of nature is thus advanced as a presumed logical implication of the

more fundamental claim that miracles are the result of supernatural intervention in nature.

If such a logical implication exists two concerns immediately arise. The first is whether the concept of a miracle is logically coherent. Typically, laws of nature are conceived as exceptionless. Defining miracles as involving violation of the laws of nature appears to commit one to the claim that miracles are logically impossible, inasmuch as they have to be conceived as exceptions to exceptionless regularities. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find certain philosophers insisting that the term ‘miracle’ cannot consistently name or describe any real or alleged event.

Second, even supposing that sense can be made of the idea of violation of the laws of nature, the claim that a miracle implies such violation opens the door to Humean ‘balance of probabilities’ type arguments which pit the evidence supporting belief in the laws of nature against the evidence supporting belief in miracle, with the accompanying claim that, by the very nature of the case, the evidence in favor of the laws of nature must inevitably outweigh the evidence in favor of miracles.

Given these two objections, it is important to note that the presumption that divine intervention in the natural order can only take place by violating a law of nature is mistaken. That it is mistaken can be seen by reflecting on the fact that the laws of nature do not by themselves allow the prediction or explanation of any event. Scientific explanations must make reference not only to laws of nature but also to the material conditions to which the laws apply.

It is, for example, impossible to predict what will happen on a billiard table by making reference solely to Newton’s laws of motion. One must also make reference to the number of balls on the table, their initial position, the condition of the felt, the angle the cue stick is held at, and so on. This means that, although we often speak as though the laws of nature in and of themselves explain the occurrence of an event, this is not the case.¹

This basic distinction between the laws of nature and the ‘stuff’ of nature makes clear that miracles can occur without violating any laws of nature. If God creates or annihilates a unit of mass/energy, or simply causes some of these units to occupy a different position, then He changes the material conditions to which the laws of nature apply. He thereby produces an event that nature would not have produced on its own but breaks no laws of nature. One would not violate or suspend the laws of motion if one were to introduce an extra ball into a group of billiard balls on a billiard table or alter the position

¹ See, for example, C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947) 71.

of one of the balls already on the table, yet that action would alter the outcome of what would otherwise be expected to happen. Similarly, if God were to create *ex nihilo* a spermatozoon which fertilized an egg in the body of a virgin no laws of nature would be broken, yet the usual course of nature would have been overridden in such a way as to bring about an event nature would not otherwise have produced.

It should be emphasized that to hold that a miracle is an event which nature is incapable of producing on its own, is not to claim that natural processes are not involved in any way. Thus, for example, the miracle of the Virgin Birth can be seen as an event in which divine intervention combined with existent natural processes, namely the normal growth and development of a fetus during pregnancy. C.S. Lewis puts this point very helpfully when he writes that

if events ever come from beyond Nature . . . the moment [they] enter her realm they obey all her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. The divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern. It does not violate the law's proviso, 'If A, then B': it says 'But this time instead of A, A₂, and Nature, speaking through all her laws, replies, 'Then B₂' and naturalises the immigrant, as she well knows how.²

It is thus clear that miracles, as events at least partially caused by the direct intervention of a supernatural agent, in no way imply that the laws of nature are violated. Such intervention, *ceteris paribus*, alters the material conditions to which they apply and thus changes the outcome of what would have otherwise happened, but in no way violates those laws.

An objection liable to be raised at this point is that on the account of miracle that has been given at least one law of nature must be broken, since the creation, annihilation, or moving of material entities by a nonphysical agent, involves the creation or destruction of energy and thus violates the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. William Stoeger, takes such a position, claiming that "direct divine intervention ... would involve an immaterial agent acting on or within a material context as a cause ... This is not possible ... if it were ... energy ... would be added to a system spontaneously and mysteriously, contravening the conservation of energy."³

² Ibid. 72.

³ Stoeger, William, "Describing God's Action in the World in Light of Scientific Knowledge of Reality." In *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*. Edited

Consideration of this objection will be the subject of my next web article.

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Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, Arthur Peacocke, 239-261. (Jointly published by the Vatican Observatory Foundation and The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1995) 244.