

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation
Lecture 14
Arguments Against Miracles

The roots of the 19th century collapse in the belief in miracles among biblical theologians lay in the 18th century and even earlier. The skepticism of modern man with regard to miracles arose during the Enlightenment, or the so-called Age of Reason, which dawned in Europe in the 17th century. The attack upon miracles was led by the Deists. Deists believed in the existence of God as well as his conservation of the world in being and his general revelation in nature, but they denied that he had revealed himself in any special way in the world. They were therefore very exercised to demonstrate the impossibility of the occurrence of miracle, or at least of the identification of miracle. They were, in turn, countered by a barrage of Christian apologetic literature defending the possibility and evidential value of miracle. Today we want to examine some of the principal arguments used by the Deists against miracles.

First, the Newtonian world-machine. Although the most important philosophical opponents of the belief in miracles were Benedict de Spinoza and David Hume, much of the debate was conducted against the backdrop of the mechanical worldview of Newtonian physics. Isaac Newton in his *Philosophiæ naturalis principia mathematica*, or *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (that is to say, of science – in the 17th century and 18th century science was called natural philosophy). Newton's treatise published in 1687 was on the mathematical principles of natural philosophy. By explaining the world in terms of his famous three laws of motion together with some definitions, Newton was able to deduce the corollaries and theorems of his physics. By treating the world in terms of masses, motions, and forces operating according to these laws, the need for God's providence seemed to be eliminated by Newton's physics, and it gave rise to a picture of the universe that has been appropriately characterized as the Newtonian world-machine.

Newton's model of mechanical explanation was enthusiastically received as the paradigm for explanation in all fields. This attitude was epitomized by the claim of the French scientist Pierre Simone de Laplace that a supreme intelligence equipped with Newton's *Principia* and with knowledge of the present position and velocity of every particle in the universe could predict the exact state of the universe at any other point in time. When the Emperor Napoleon remarked to Laplace on the failure to mention God anywhere in his treatise, a non-plussed Laplace retorted, "Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis."¹ This worldview promoted the Deist conception of God as the creator of the world-machine

¹ For an account of this famous exchange see Roger Hahn, *Pierre Simon Laplace 1749-1827: A Determined Scientist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 172.

who wound it up like a clock and set it running under the laws of matter and motion, never to interfere with it again.

In fact, this harmoniously functioning world-machine was thought to provide the best evidence for the existence of God. The 18th century French *philosophe* Denis Diderot exclaimed, “Thanks to the work of these great men, the world is no longer a God, it is a machine with its wheels, its chords, its pulleys, its springs, and its weights.”² But it was equally thought that this world system also made it incredible that God should interfere with the operation of this world-machine via miraculous interventions. Diderot’s contemporary Voltaire said that it was absurd and insulting to God to think that he would interrupt the operations of what he called “this immense machine” since God designed it from the beginning to run according to his divinely decreed, immutable laws.³ For these 18th century Newtonians, such miraculous interventions could only be described as violations of the laws of nature and therefore were impossible.

Let’s turn to our first philosophical figure which is Benedict de Spinoza. The philosophical attack upon miracles actually preceded Newton’s *Principia*. The philosopher Benedict de Spinoza in his work *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (or *Theological-Political Treatise*), published in 1670, argued against both the possibility of miracles and the evidential value of miracles. Two of Spinoza’s arguments, I think, are of special significance for our discussion.

First, he argued that miracles violate the unchangeable order of nature. Spinoza argues that nothing happens contrary to the eternal and unchangeable order of nature. He maintains that all that God wills is characterized by eternal necessity and truth. For there is no difference between God’s understanding and his will, so it’s the same thing to say that God knows a thing or to say that God wills a thing. The same necessity that characterizes God’s knowledge also characterizes his will. Therefore, the laws of nature flow from the necessity and the perfection of the divine nature. If some event contrary to these natural laws could occur, then the divine will and knowledge would stand in contradiction to nature, which is impossible. To say that God does something contrary to the laws of nature is to say that God does something contrary to his own nature. Therefore, miracles are impossible.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What did they believe about the theory of chaos and possible potential?

² Denis Diderot, “Philosophical Thoughts,” in *Diderot’s Philosophical Works*, trans. M. Jourdain (Chicago: Open Court, 1916), p. 18.

³ *A Philosophical Dictionary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), s.v. “Miracles,” by Marie Francois Arouet de Voltaire.

Dr. Craig: OK. Good point. That question actually would have been more appropriately posed with respect to the Newtonian world-machine. She's saying, *What about chaos theory?*, which suggests that certain macroscopic systems like the weather or insect populations are inherently unpredictable. The simple answer is: during this time they didn't know about that. This is extremely early on, as I say, 17th century physics. We'll say something later about contemporary physics and how that affects the view of the world as a Newtonian world-machine. But at this time they were unaware of these factors.

Student: I'm wondering – were there Thomastic influences going on? Because when I hear two things are identical, the first thing I think is . . .

Dr. Craig: You know, I think that's a perceptive remark. Let me explain what he means by this. Spinoza was a pantheist. He thought that God and nature are identical. So in one sense, of course to violate the laws of nature is to violate God's own nature because for Spinoza nature and God are co-terminous – they are the same reality. But as you, I think, sees, the *Tractatus* is not a pantheistic work. It's from the early work of Spinoza and is really a deistic work. Here he seems to be appealing to the traditional concept of God and the doctrine of divine simplicity which says that God's knowledge is his will and is his essence which would mean that the will of God would be characterized by the same sort of necessity as the divine essence. I do think you're right that this does seem to stick behind this objection. He's using here a sort of classical or medieval concept of God which would identify all of God's attributes with his essence and therefore think of them as necessary, whereas for persons who don't hold to that doctrine God's knowledge of the world as well as his will for this world is contingent. God could have created other worlds in which case he would have different knowledge and different will. So I think you're right that this Thomastic doctrine of divine simplicity seems to lodge somewhere behind this objection by Spinoza.

Student: Accordingly, would it also be correct to say that they adhere to a constituent sort of ontology as opposed to a relational one going on?

Dr. Craig: This is really getting into the weeds now. It seems to me that on the Thomastic view (that is, Thomas Aquinas' view) he doesn't think of God as composed in any way. Rather God just is his act of existence. For every contingent thing there is an ontological composition. There's the essence (which is the essential nature of a thing) and there is the act of being that instantiates that essence and makes a real concrete object. But in God's case, for St. Thomas, in one sense God has no essence. He simply is the act of being subsisting. God is the pure act of being. Now, if you find that difficult to grasp, join the club! Thomists tend to admit that this is unintelligible because we only grasp things by grasping their essence or their nature, and we can have no conception therefore of the

pure act of being. So this view of Aquinas leads to a sort of profound agnosticism about God. We really only can say what God is not, not what he is. But to draw our attention back to Spinoza again, lest we get too far afield, Spinoza does seem to want to say that God's will and hence the laws of nature that he wills are characterized with the same sort of necessity that his knowledge is and that these are the same as his essence.

Student: It seems to me, and in the last couple of years I've had quite a bit of experience with it, in talking to the doctors they have now come up with a term for it – it's called spontaneous remission. That is to say, we don't know why it happened or what had happened, it just disappeared. It seems to me that is more threatening to the concept of God than any of these others were. They're just basically saying it is a universal part that these things happen - that doesn't indicate God.

Dr. Craig: Right, and we will see in just a moment that Spinoza makes this very point, so this objection has been around for a long time. I'll say something about that in the next section.

Student: Even if what Spinoza assumed – that it's God's will and everything – without claiming to know all of God's will, you can't know that's not true (that there cannot be miracles). There's more of God's attributes than you know. It is all embedded in his will. But we are judging God by saying we know enough and he can't do that.

Dr. Craig: Interesting point. This is a point that some of these 18th and 19th century apologists made in response to Spinoza. They said the miracles can be willed by God just as much as the laws. They can all be expressions of his immutable will – the exceptions as well as the rules. So the argument fails to show that miracles could not occur.

Student: Do these people just not believe in free will? Because it seems like if there was free will then humans could effectively mess up the machine that God worked so hard to put into place.

Dr. Craig: That's a very good point. This would be a kind of deterministic view of the world in which human beings are so complicated that we can't predict what they're going to do. But nevertheless, as Laplace said, if we knew the precise position and velocity of every particle in the universe (including every particle in a person's brain and nervous system) then given the laws of nature we could predict exactly what he's going to do. It's simply the complexity that makes it inaccessible to us. Someone like Spinoza was also a determinist. So you're quite right about that, I think, in saying that this would deny not simply miracles but freedom of the will.

Student: Back on the machine that we were talking about earlier – how do modern theists rectify the sort of Copenhagen interpretation?

Dr. Craig: Again, that's related to the question concerning chaos theory. I'll say something about that when we get to the assessment part and respond to this argument. Contemporary physics in a couple of different respects is much less deterministic than Newtonian physics was.

Student: There's a good five minutes with Ravi Zacharias getting a question at the University of Michigan about this where the criticism that was couched in the question was that Christians were deterministic because of God's sovereignty ultimately. He turned that around by saying, *Well, are you determined to come and ask the question that you asked and to be here?* So it turned out that from the materialistic point of view they were much more the determinist than the Christian was.

Dr. Craig: Yes, I think that's quite right. If you're a physicalist, determinism is going to be more difficult to ward off than if you're a dualist who believes that there is a soul that is united with the body but nevertheless distinct from it and able to have a causal influence upon the body.

END DISCUSSION

Let me move on at this point to the next argument by Spinoza, and that is to say that miracles are in any case insufficient to prove God's existence. Spinoza believed that a proof of God's existence must be absolutely certain. It is by the unchangeable order of nature that we know that God exists. By admitting miracles, Spinoza warns, we break the laws of nature and this will create doubts then about the existence of God thus leading us right into the arms of atheism. So he thought that miracles would actually promote atheism because it would lead us to doubt the unchangeable order of nature's laws.

Spinoza also develops two sub-points under this objection. First, a miracle would not in any case prove God's existence because a lesser being such as an angel or a demon could be the cause of the event. The second sub-point is that a so-called miracle is simply a work of nature not yet discovered by man. Our knowledge of nature's laws is limited, and just because *we* cannot explain the cause of a particular event doesn't imply that it is a miracle having God as it's supernatural cause. One might say in a case of a supposedly miraculous healing it was just a spontaneous remission of the disease. It has a natural explanation, but our knowledge is too limited for us to know what it is.

This objection to the identification of miracles has come to be known as the god-of-the-gaps objection. This is the notion that it's illegitimate to appeal to God to plug up the gaps in our scientific knowledge because the explanation could always be some as-yet-undiscovered aspect of the natural world. And as those gaps are progressively closed with the advance of science, God gets squeezed out of nature. Therefore, the god-of-the-gaps is almost universally vilified today. One should not use God simply as a stopgap for scientific ignorance.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Am I making this too simplistic? Was this a confusion between how and why at this stage – this is the 1600s?

Dr. Craig: I think I understand the question. The “how” question might be, “Did the cancer actually disappear that was detected?” The “why” question would be, “Why did the cancer disappear?” Was it the result of miraculous action or was it just a spontaneous remission? Was it just a scientific anomaly? I think that that is a legitimate distinction. Sometimes you could establish that an event occurred, but you wouldn't know whether or not it was miraculous because you're not sure if there might not be some unknown natural cause for it. So that's why I say that when the Deists could not prove that miracles are impossible they would content themselves with saying that a miracle is unidentifiable. Spinoza argues against both, doesn't he? The first argument he gives is that miracles are impossible, but this second argument is that a miracle, even if it occurred, would not be identifiable because it could always be the product of an unknown natural cause. That's sort of this distinction between perhaps what and why something occurs.

Student: The argument against god-of-the-gaps is that God is a better explanation for what we do know, not for what we don't know. If the critic says, *Well, what happens is a scientific anomaly*, that itself is a gap theory.

Dr. Craig: I think it is in a sense appealing to a kind of naturalism-of-the-gaps. We'll get into these sorts of questions later when we come to the assessment of these objections. I'm going to respond to all of these objections, but for now we want to at least just get them on the table.

Student: I've heard some people equate the universe existing as a miracle itself. Would that put it in Spinoza's view on a different level of existence than a miracle? How could he explain creation *ex nihilo*?

Dr. Craig: In what sense do these folks mean that the universe itself is a miracle?

Student: I guess essentially “inexplicable” like something coming from nothing or not explicable through modern science.

Dr. Craig: OK. I think that an argument like the *Kalam* cosmological argument (whatever begins to exist has a cause; the universe began to exist; therefore the universe has a cause) just is an argument for miracles writ large. It is taking the universe, as you say, as the product of a supernatural cause, and so I think that's quite right. The fine-tuning argument as well; that the initial constants and quantities of nature seemed to have been improbably fine-tuned for the existence of embodied intelligent life like ourselves cries out for a supernatural explanation. I think you're right. The argument for miracles needn't concern particular events within history but can have a kind of universal scope –

the origin of the universe itself, the fine-tuning of the universe, could be taken to be arguments for the existence of God from miracles.

Student: Did Spinoza ever come to realize later and is like pantheism that his argument for total determinism removes all guilt of sin and free will?

Dr. Craig: I do not know what Spinoza thought about sin, so I can't answer that question. But, as I say, he was a pantheist and determinist, and that would seem to be incompatible with moral responsibility, wouldn't it?

END DISCUSSION

Alright, let's then move to our next figure in this debate which is the Scottish skeptic and philosopher David Hume. In 1748, Hume published his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* which includes a chapter called "Of Miracles." While Spinoza had attacked the possibility of the *occurrence* of a miracle, Hume attacked the possibility of the *identification* of a miracle. He presents a sort of two-pronged attack upon the identification of miracles which we could characterize as an "even if . . . but in fact . . ." argument; that is to say, in the first part of the argument he argues on the basis of certain concessions that he's willing to grant, but then in the second part of the argument he argues on the basis of what he thinks is in fact the case. We can refer to this first argument as his "in principle" argument and the second half of the argument as his "in fact" argument.

Let's look first at the "in principle" argument. Here Hume maintains that it is impossible in principle to prove that a miracle has occurred. A wise man, he says, proportions his belief to the evidence. If the evidence makes a conclusion virtually certain, then we may call this a "proof," and the wise man will give whole-hearted assent to that conclusion. If the evidence makes a conclusion simply more likely than not, then we may speak of a "probability," and the wise man will accept the conclusion with a degree of confidence that is proportionate to the probability. Now, Hume argues, *even if* we concede that the evidence in favor of a particular miracle amounts to a *full proof*, it is still impossible in principle to identify that event as a miracle. Why? Because standing opposed to this proof is an equally full proof, namely the evidence for the unchangeable laws of nature, and that is a proof that the event in question is not a miracle.

Hume seems to imagine a scale in which the evidence is being weighed. On one side of the scale is the evidence for a particular miracle and (he's willing to concede for the sake of argument) that the evidence for that miracle amounts to a full proof. But on the other side of the scale is the evidence of all the people of all the ages for the regularity of the laws of nature, which also amounts to a full proof. Thus he writes,

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, a proof against miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.⁴

So proof stands against proof, and the scales are evenly balanced. Since the evidence doesn't incline in either direction, the wise man cannot hold to a miracle with any degree of confidence.

Indeed, Hume says, in order to prove that a miracle has taken place one would have to show that it would be an even *greater* miracle for the testimony in support of the event to be false. So with regard to the resurrection, Hume asks, which would be the greater miracle: that a man should rise from the dead or that the witnesses should be deceived or try to deceive?⁵ He leaves no doubt as to his answer: he asserts that even if all historians agreed that on January 1, 1600, Queen Elizabeth publicly died and was buried and her successor installed on the throne, but that a month later she reappeared, resumed the throne, and ruled England for three more years, Hume says he would not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. He would accept the most extraordinary hypothesis for her pretended death and burial rather than admit so striking a violation of the laws of nature. Thus, even if the evidence for a miracle constituted a full proof, the wise man should not believe in miracles.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What is the actual definition of the word “miracle?”

Dr. Craig: Ah, OK! You are putting your finger on the very pulse of the question. For these Deists and Newtonians, a miracle is defined as a violation of the laws of nature. That's going to be critical, I think, in assessing whether miracles are possible. We'll come back to that. But the way they define it, as we saw with Voltaire and we see with Hume, a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.

Student: How does the American Standard Dictionary define it today?

Dr. Craig: I haven't looked.

Student: If they define a miracle as something that just violates the natural laws of nature, how do they know that it's a violation of the laws and not them misunderstanding the laws?

Dr. Craig: That's kind of related to Spinoza's objection, isn't it? If some event occurs which appears to be in violation of nature's laws, he would say rather than admit that a

⁴ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 10.1.90

⁵ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, “Of Miracles”, Part II

miracle has occurred you just failed to formulate the law correctly. It really is a natural event, and the occurrence of something like that would just force you to revise the law to take account of it. So if the laws of nature are just inductive generalizations of whatever happens in the world then it's by definition impossible that there could be a violation of the laws of nature. Miracles are ruled out by definition because as inductive generalizations of whatever happens, if something really happens then the laws of nature need to be revised to accommodate it.

Student: Doesn't that logic seem a little circular though?

Dr. Craig: Yes! Yes, it does. You're just defining miracles in such a way as to render them impossible, to rule them out. Quite right.

END DISCUSSION

Let me say something to conclude about Hume's in-fact argument. We've seen he argues that even if the evidence for a miracle amounts to a full proof, the wise man will not believe in miracles. But, in fact, says Hume, the evidence for miracles does not amount to a full proof. Indeed, the evidence is so poor, it doesn't even amount to a probability. Therefore, the decisive weight falls on the side of the scale containing the full proof for the regularity of nature, a weight which is so heavy that no evidence for a miracle could ever hope to counter-balance it.

Hume gives four reasons why in fact the evidence for miracles is negligible. First, no miracle in history is attested by a sufficient number of educated and honest men, who are of such social standing that they would have a great deal to lose by lying. Secondly, people crave the miraculous and will believe the most absurd stories as the abundance of false tales of miracles proves. Third, miracles occur only among barbarous peoples. Finally, number four, miracles occur in all religions and thereby cancel each other out, since they support contradictory doctrines. For those four reasons Hume concludes that the evidence for miracles is not even a probability.

He concludes that miracles can never be the foundation for any system of religion. "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason," pontificates Hume, all the while laughing up his sleeve. He says,

. . . the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.⁶

⁶ Ibid., 10.2.101

In other words, it's a miracle that anybody could be stupid enough to believe in Christianity!

What we'll do next time is have some assessment of these arguments. These arguments of Spinoza and Hume are still very much at the center of contemporary discussions of miracles. For example, the New Testament critic, Bart Ehrman, basically repeats warmed-over versions of Hume's argument against miracles as the reason that he thinks no proof or evidence of the resurrection of Jesus is possible. He does so, I think, without ever having read Hume himself. So these arguments continue to be of contemporary relevance and will merit our discussion next time.⁷

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