

**§ 8. Doctrine of Creation**  
**Lecture 16**  
**Rebutting Spinoza's Objections to Miracles**

The last time we looked at an assessment of the Newtonian world-machine and the challenge that that posed for belief in miracles. Today I want to turn to the objections of Benedict de Spinoza.

You'll remember that Spinoza's first objection to the occurrence of miracles was his objection based upon the immutability of nature. It would be tempting to simply dismiss Spinoza's objection on the grounds that he was a pantheist, for whom the terms "God" and "Nature" were synonymous terms. He would use the expression, in Latin, *Deus sive Natura*, "God or Nature." So, of course, miracles would be impossible on a pantheistic view – a violation of the laws of nature would be a violation of God's nature because they are identical. The question is not whether miracles would be possible on a pantheistic view, but whether they would be possible on a theistic view.

But such a refutation of Spinoza would be far too easy. The *Tractatus* where this objection is to be found is a deistic, not a pantheistic, work, and Spinoza presupposes the traditional understanding of God. In particular, his argument is based upon the classic doctrine of divine simplicity which states that God's knowledge, will, goodness, power, and so forth are all really identical and one with his essence. The question that Spinoza raises, in effect, is if God's knowledge is identical to God's will then how can God's knowledge be necessary and his will be contingent? They cannot have different properties since they are the same.

Contrary to Spinoza, classical theology did not claim that God's knowledge is characterized by necessity. For example, God knows the truth "The universe exists." But this knowledge is not necessary to God. God was under no obligation to create the universe. Since creation is a free act, he could have refrained from creating anything at all, and if God had not created the world then he would instead know the truth "No universe exists." So, necessarily, whatever God knows is true; but it is not necessary that the content of God's knowledge be what it is. If God had created a different world or even no world at all, then the content of his knowledge would be different. Therefore, just as God is free to will differently than he does, he is able to have different knowledge than he does.

It follows that the laws of nature, then, are not known by God necessarily because they depend upon God's will. Even if we hold that the laws of nature are necessary truths, God could have willed to create a different universe operating according to a different set of natural laws by creating things that have different natures from the things that he has

created. By the same token, the miracles that God performs could have been willed by God just as eternally and immutably as the laws. There's just no reason to think that when God causes a naturally impossible event that God's knowledge and will somehow come into conflict.

Having said that, Spinoza's objection does raise one important point, though. It's very difficult to see how God's knowledge, for example, can be contingent and yet be identical with his essence, which includes necessary existence. How can God be utterly simple if he is in some respects necessary and in other respects contingent? What this calls into question, however, is not the possibility of miracles, but the doctrine of divine simplicity. This is a doctrine which is fortunately extra-biblical and is rejected as incoherent by the majority of Christian philosophers today.<sup>1</sup> So I do not think that an objection to miracles based upon the strong doctrine of divine simplicity is one that is very troubling.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I'm certain that I don't understand fully what I'm about to ask you, but are you familiar with the *ad intra* versus *ad extra* distinction that adherents of divine simplicity make?

*Dr. Craig:* I'm familiar with a distinction like that with regard to God's works and God's nature. The works that God does externally would be, for example, as miracles in the world, but the things that he does inwardly would be things like the procession of the divine persons – the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit. There's a claim that God's inner works are distinct but the outward ones are just all the result of a single action. I think the expression is *opera ad extra sunt indivisa, opera ad intra sunt divisa*. The inner works are divided – the procession of the Spirit is not the same as the beginning of the Son. But they think of his external works as undivided, as just the result of a simple action. Why do you raise that in this connection?

*Student:* I've talked with, for example, adherents of divine simplicity, and I've heard them appeal to that distinction in an attempt to circumvent . . .

*Dr. Craig:* I don't know how that would help because, as I say, on this schema the inner works – the *opera ad intra sunt divisa* – they are divided. So in implying that there is a fundamental distinction between begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit, that would seem to deny divine simplicity. I would think you would do quite the opposite and say that these inner works of God are not divided; that they're somehow one. But that's not the classical formulation because they don't want to have more than one Son. So the procession of the Spirit has to be different from the begetting of the Son or you would

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief discussion see my and J.P. Moreland's *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 2000), pp. 524-6.

have siblings which they don't want to have. It's difficult for me to see how that would be of much help, quite honestly.

*Student:* I was going to ask for a definition of that – what is the simplistic nature? But after having that, it seems like simplicity defines that the internal works and external works are really one in the same.

*Dr. Craig:* Look at our discussion of the attributes of God in Defenders class which is probably now a couple of years ago. When we did the attributes of God we talked about divine simplicity, and those are on the Reasonable Faith website under the Defenders lessons. The doctrine of divine simplicity states that God does not have a plurality of properties – that his omnipotence is his omniscience and that his omniscience is his goodness and that his goodness is his timelessness. Now, that's very difficult to make sense of. It seems clear that omnipotence is a different property than moral goodness, but the doctrine of divine simplicity says that God doesn't have a multiplicity of properties. He just is simple and uncompounded. Then to make it even more difficult, it identifies all of these properties with his essence; that his essence is existence, for example. It just is the act of being. So this is a very, very difficult doctrine, and this seems to be what's presupposed by Spinoza in this objection. He's saying that if God's knowledge is his essence and is one with his existence, well, since God has necessary existence, his knowledge would be necessary and therefore his will would be necessary and therefore he could not break the laws of nature which are produced by his will. And I think we can just cut this argument off at the ankles by rejecting the doctrine of divine simplicity which is, as I say, an extra-biblical doctrine and one that I think is just rife with philosophical difficulties.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's turn, secondly, to Spinoza's objection based on the insufficiency of miracles. You remember that his second objection was that miracles are insufficient to prove the existence of God. As stated, the objection is simply irrelevant, for virtually all Christian theologians used miracles not as proofs of the existence of God, but rather as proof of God's action in the world. Miracles belong to the field or discipline called Christian evidences – not to natural theology, which is arguments for God's existence. On the basis of the arguments of natural theology (like the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments), natural theologians sought to prove that God exists. Then, on the basis of Christian evidences (such as fulfilled prophecy and miracles), they sought to show that the God whose existence had been proved by the arguments of natural theology had revealed himself decisively in Jesus Christ and that therefore Christian theism is true. Therefore, Spinoza was just attacking a straw man. Miracles were not part of natural theology. They weren't used to prove God's existence.

Nevertheless, the supporting reasoning of Spinoza's objection was, I think, relevant to the Christian's position. You'll remember that Spinoza's first sub-point was that a proof for God must be absolutely certain. Since we infer God's existence from the immutable laws of nature, anything that casts doubt upon those laws thereby casts doubt upon God's existence. Now, two questionable assumptions seemed to underlie Spinoza's reasoning: first, he assumes that a proof of God's existence must be demonstratively certain; and second, he presupposes that God's existence is inferred from natural laws. But the Christian apologists of Spinoza's day denied both of those assumptions. The more empirically-minded of them held that a cogent argument for God's existence need not be demonstratively certain. One thinks, for example, in this connection of William Paley's famous argument for design – his watchmaker argument (as it has sometimes been called). While not reaching absolute certainty, Paley claimed that the argument makes it more plausible to believe in God than not. I think contemporary philosophers agree that if we were justified only in accepting conclusions that were proved with demonstrative certainty, then we should know very, very little indeed. So that first assumption, I think, is quite unjustified – that arguments for God's existence must be demonstratively certain. But what about that second assumption that God's existence is inferred from natural laws? Well, again, that assumption fails to take account of the fact that there are other arguments for God's existence which are not based on natural laws. For example, one of the Christian thinkers of this era, Samuel Clarke, shared Spinoza's concern for demonstrative certainty, but he nevertheless believed that the ontological and the cosmological arguments provided rational grounds for inferring God's existence. So even if natural laws were somehow rendered uncertain, for Clarke that would have no impact whatsoever upon his natural theology and would not call into question God's existence. So I don't think that either of these supporting assumptions that are underlying this first sub-point is true.

But is Spinoza's claim about the consequence of admitting miracles in fact true? He seems to think that the admission of a genuine miracle would overthrow the natural law that the miracle violates. Now, we've already seen that properly speaking miracles do not violate natural laws and so they do not cast doubt upon their truth. The natural laws, remember, include these *ceteris paribus* conditions such that if those conditions don't obtain then the law doesn't apply anymore, and therefore miracles do not violate natural laws. Now, maybe Spinoza would insist that if it were proven that some event occurred which under our current understanding of natural law is thought to be naturally impossible, then rather than admit that a miracle has happened we should instead revise the natural law so as to permit the natural occurrence of the event in question. Do you see the possible response here on Spinoza's part? He might say, *OK. Define miracles as naturally impossible events, but if you claim that one has occurred, what that forces you*

*to do is just revise the natural law so as to be able to accommodate it and treat it as natural.* But I think that this would be mistaken. The admission of a genuine miracle does not need to overthrow the general regularity of nature. As Richard Swinburne, the Oxford philosopher, points out, a natural law is not abandoned just because of one exception to it. The exception must occur repeatedly whenever the conditions for it are present. But if the event will not occur again under identical circumstances then the law will not be abandoned. A natural law will not be reformulated unless a new version would yield better predictability of future events without being more complicated than the original law. But if the new law doesn't do any better in predicting the phenomena and explaining the event in question, then the event will simply remain an unexplained exception to the natural law – an anomaly. Therefore, Spinoza's fear that miracles would somehow destroy the fabric of natural law seems to be unjustified. Rather than leading us into the arms of atheism, such exceptions to the natural laws could lead us to discern the action of God in the world at that point.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Just a point of clarification, when you use the term “demonstrative certainty” I think that can be a point where terms can get really conflated. You're talking about Cartesian certainty as opposed to psychological certainty.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes. He is referring to the French philosopher Rene Descartes who embarked upon a skeptical experiment of trying to doubt everything that he had formerly believed, and anything that was possible to doubt Descartes would set it to the side. And so he doubted the existence of the external world, he doubted the existence of his own body, and finally attempted to achieve a body of indubitable truths that could then be built into a worldview that would include the existence of God. He thought that the ontological argument and the cosmological argument would give you the existence of God with this kind of absolute certainty. Spinoza and Descartes, as well as Clarke, all come out of this rationalist era where mathematics was taken to be the sort of paradigm and model for knowledge. Spinoza's later work, *The Ethics*, is built like a geometrical treatise. He begins with his axioms just like a geometrical discourse, and then he derives all of his theorems from these basic axioms. So this model of explanation was taken for mathematics, and he and Descartes felt that you had to have the sort of mathematical demonstrability for these foundational and most important truths.

*Student:* Right. And that would be distinct from, say, psychological certainty. A lot of people tend to conflate the two. They think if you have Cartesian certainty or something then you also have . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Well, now, wouldn't you say if you do have a demonstration of a conclusion and that demonstration is mathematically rigorous then that would give you psychological certainty. Would it not?

*Student:* I could imagine people being irrational about it, for example.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, I think what he's suggesting is that you would have certain sort of indubitable axioms or premises from which certain things logically follow, and therefore on pain of irrationality you're obligated to believe these conclusions. Spinoza felt that arguments for God's existence ought to be characterized by that sort of demonstrability.

*Student:* What would he do with something like Kurt Gödel . . . I don't think they're contemporary but Gödel's incompleteness theories about math? You don't have that certainty of certainties.

*Dr. Craig:* I think that you are raising a good point. Modern mathematicians, like the 20th century mathematician Kurt Gödel, showed that in fact there will be truths that we know to be true but which cannot be derived from a finite set of axioms, contrary to Spinoza's assumption and the assumptions of classical mathematics. So you're quite right that would be a further reason to call into question this model of knowledge and explanation.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's look at Spinoza's second sub-point – that miracles could not be used to prove the existence of God because perhaps a lesser being like an angel or a demon was responsible for the miraculous act. Again, this objection did not strike against most of the Christian apologists of that day because, again, they were not trying to prove the existence of God by miracles. Having proved God's existence by the arguments of natural theology or presupposing or assuming God's existence, they used miracles chiefly to show that *Christian* theism was true. The miracles showed God's intervention or action in the world. It wasn't used to prove God's existence.

Nevertheless, the Christian apologists were very concerned about how to show in any particular case that the miracle was divine rather than demonic. I think that their answer to this question constitutes one of the most important and enduring contributions to the discussion of miracles. They held that it is the doctrinal context in which the miracle occurs that makes it evident if the miracle is truly from God. In this way they drew attention to the religio-historical context in which the miracle occurs as the key to the interpretation of that miracle. I think that this is very significant because a miracle without a context is inherently ambiguous. I think that's the problem with Hume's example of the revivification of Queen Elizabeth. The event lacks any religious context and appears as a bald and unexplained anomaly. So one feels a good deal of sympathy for



Hume's skepticism about the revivification of Queen Elizabeth. But how different it is with respect to the resurrection of Jesus! It occurs in the context of and as the climax to Jesus' own unparalleled life and teachings and it produced so profound an effect upon his followers that they called him Lord and proclaimed salvation for all men in his name. Therefore, I think that this event ought to give us serious pause, whereas the resuscitation of Queen Elizabeth would only occasion perplexity. The religio-historical context is crucial to the interpretation of a miraculous event.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I question the Christian response claim that all miracles are the act of God. They're all within his sovereignty. But look at the miracles done in Egypt, and remember the magicians or whatever you call them. They weren't tricks. Because when they got to the point where they could not duplicate it, they said, *That is the God*. Remember, if you read the Hebrew, it says God told Moses, *I made you God to Pharaoh*. So they had the concepts of gods, but there's only one real God. Plus, I have experiences where I see, when I'm witnessing to people that . . . one lady has been, since she was a little kid, she's a Christian, having voices. You deal with them. They are all real spirit bodies that we're fighting against. God uses . . . remember when he sent . . . *I need a lying spirit to bring this cane to go into battle so he can die*. Remember when God did that in the Old Testament?

*Dr. Craig:* Say it again?

*Student:* I think it was – which king was it? – of Israel that God said, *I need a lying spirit to convince him to come to battle*. And he said . . . so there are evil spirits and they do . . . God is sovereign. He makes everything work together for our good to those that love the Lord. Not to be afraid of, but there are spirit bodies we're fighting.

*Dr. Craig:* And that isn't denied by these Christian apologists. Remember what their concern was was how do you distinguish between a demonic miracle (one of these spirits) and a divine miracle? And they said the tip-off will be the religio-historical context in which it occurs. For example, these lying miracles of Pharaoh's court occurred in the context of pagan Egyptian polytheism and therefore were not plausibly attributed to God, whereas the acts produced by Moses occurred in the context of Israelite monotheism and therefore were plausibly attributed to God. So they're not at all denying that there can be miracles that would be produced by spirit beings or demons, but they would say the way you could tell the difference (or that you should try to tell the difference – there may be ambiguous cases) you would look at the religio-historical context in which it occurs and that would help you to discern whether the miracle is divine or demonic. I think all of us have probably heard stories of people who get involved in the occult, in seances, in Ouija boards, in magic, who then begin to have

these sort of occult experiences that are plausibly not from God because the religio-historical context in which these events take place makes it plausible that these would be demonic rather than divine.

## END DISCUSSION

Spinoza's concern with lesser spiritual beings like angels and demons would probably not trouble very many contemporary secular thinkers. Such beings are part of the furniture, so to speak, of a wider theistic view, so no atheist today would seriously concede the historicity of the Gospel miracles and yet maintain that they were wrought by angels. It would not be, I think, unwarranted to have inferred that if such events are genuine miracles then these are miracles that have been wrought by God.

Spinoza's final sub-point, that a supposed miracle may really be the effect of an unknown law of nature, isn't really an objection against the occurrence of miracles, but rather it's an objection against the identification of miracles. Granted that miracles are possible, how can we know when one has occurred? This problem has been persuasively formulated in our own day by the philosopher Antony Flew. Flew writes:

We simply do not have, and could not have, any natural . . . criterion which enables us to say, when faced with something which is found to have actually happened, that here we have an achievement which nature, left to her own unaided devices, could never encompass. The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden!<sup>2</sup>

This is the very problem that someone here raised a couple of weeks ago with regard to spontaneous remissions of diseases. How do we know when a genuine miracle has occurred as opposed to a purely natural event that is the product of unknown laws of nature – unknown causes? Well, here I want to refer to Stephen Bilynskyj's criteria for identifying some event E as a miracle. This is from Bilynskyj's doctoral dissertation at the University of Notre Dame on "God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle."<sup>3</sup> Bilynskyj lists the following four criteria for the discernment of miracles:

- (1) The evidence for the occurrence of E is at least as good as it is for other acceptable but unusual events similarly distant in time and space from the point of the inquiry;
- (2) An account of the natures and/or powers of the causally relevant natural agents, such that they could account for E, would be clumsy and *ad hoc*; [*ad hoc* means contrived or just made up for that purpose.]

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<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Miracles," by Antony Flew.

<sup>3</sup> Bilynskyj, "God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle," p. 222.



(3) There is no evidence except the inexplicability of E for one or more natural agents which could produce E;

(4) There is some justification for a supernatural explanation of E, independent of the inexplicability of E.

Now, with regard to point (4), classical Christian apologists were quite correct in pointing to the religio-historical context as providing that justification for discerning a genuine miracle as opposed to a merely anomalous event: when the miracles occur at a momentous time (for example, a man's leprosy vanishing when Jesus speaks the words "Be clean") and do not recur regularly in history, as they would if they were the product of natural causes, and when the miracles are numerous and various, as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth (healings, exorcisms, feeding of the five thousand, walking on the water, preternatural knowledge, and so forth), then their chance of being the result of unknown natural causes is minimal.

Furthermore, even if we leave Jesus' miracles aside and focus our attention on his resurrection from the dead, I think that the supernatural nature of that event alone may be successfully defended. We're not asking here whether the facts of the case, such as the empty tomb or the post-mortem appearances, might be explained in a natural manner. Rather, the question is, if Jesus actually did rise from the dead, would we then be justified in inferring a supernatural cause for that event? Here I think the overwhelming majority of people would say yes. Those who argue against the resurrection try to explain the facts of the case without allowing that Jesus rose from the dead, but I know of no critic who argues that the best explanation of the facts is that Jesus rose from the dead but his resurrection was a purely natural occurrence. That would appear to be a somewhat desperate obstinacy.

Two factors, I think, undergird this reasoning. First, the resurrection so exceeds what we know of natural causes that it seems most reasonable to attribute it to a supernatural cause. Hume himself admitted that it is never in the history of the world been heard of that a truly dead man has been raised from the dead. Given the length of time that Jesus had been dead (a night, a day, and a night) it would be idle to compare his resurrection with the resuscitation of persons pronounced to be clinically dead in hospitals. But more than that: it's important to keep in mind that the resurrection was more than just the resuscitation of a corpse. It was not a return to the earthly life, but rather it was the transformation of the body to a new mode of existence, which Paul described as powerful, glorious, imperishable, and Spirit-directed (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). It is inconceivable that such an event could be the result of natural causes. Moreover, if it were the result of natural causes, then its singularity in the history of mankind would be very difficult to understand – why hasn't it happened again? Why does this not happen

regularly? In the nearly two thousand years that have elapsed since that event, no natural causes have been discovered that could explain it. On the contrary, the advance of science has only served to confirm that such an event is naturally impossible.

The second point is that the supernatural explanation is given immediately, once again, in the religio-historical context in which the event occurred. Jesus' resurrection was not merely an anomalous event occurring without a context; it came as the climax to Jesus' own life and ministry. As the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (who was my doctoral mentor in Munich) explains,

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone or anyone has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews because he had blasphemed against God.

Jesus' claim to authority, through which he put himself in God's place, was . . . blasphemous for Jewish ears. Because of this Jesus was then also slandered before the Roman Governor as a rebel. If Jesus really has been raised, this claim has been visibly and unambiguously confirmed by the God of Israel, who was allegedly blasphemed by Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the religio-historical context as well as the inexplicability of the event itself furnishes us with the key to discerning the supernatural character of that event.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. L.L. Wilkins and D.A. Priebe (London: SCM, 1968), p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Total Running Time: 39:28 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)