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Edited by Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel

# Idealism and Christian Philosophy

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## Immaterialism, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature

Marc A. Hight

A miracle, at a rough first pass, is an event that is not in principle explicable in terms of natural causes alone. Since miraculous events require something beyond human capabilities to produce, the alleged presence of miracles has traditionally been one powerful reason for endorsing theism. At the same time, those who endorse miracles typically believe that the natural world operates according to universal laws, thus creating a troublesome tension. The presence of a genuine miracle—if one thinks of miracles as violations of natural laws—seems incompatible with the possibility of scientific explanation that requires we treat laws of nature as universal.

Two strategies have been traditionally employed to preserve the coherence of miracles. One might weaken the concept of a natural law, such that they need not be exceptionless, hence allowing for miracles as infrequent violations of the laws of nature. I call this the “traditional” view as it has been historically the more common understanding of miracle. Alternatively, one might preserve the universality of natural laws and argue that miracles are not violations of laws of nature, but rather are acts of creation. This alternative, although less widely accepted, also has a long history, going back at least as far as Augustine. I call this a “creation” theory of miracles.

The primary aim of this endeavor is to assess the impact of one’s ontological views on the plausibility of miracles. After grappling with the concept of miracle and outlining some of the relevant ontological concepts, I argue for several conclusions. First, I contend that if one adopts the traditional view of miracles, ontology is not relevant to the plausibility of the theory. As a result, immaterialists are at no special disadvantage to their materialist rivals. Second, I

argue that there are reasonable concerns independent of ontology that impinge on the plausibility of the traditional account of miracles. I do not argue that the traditional account is incoherent, but endorsing it comes with a cost that intellectually honest individuals must squarely engage. Finally, I contend that the creation view of miracles is importantly impacted by ontological concerns in a manner that makes immaterialism decidedly more attractive. As with the traditional view, there is a price to pay. The resultant picture of miracles is perhaps less intuitive, but I argue that the final picture is coherent and consistent with the basic demands of theism. As a general conclusion, I contend that, on balance, immaterialism has better resources to support rational Christian belief in miracles.

In my argument I draw on the philosophy of George Berkeley for inspiration. Berkeley, an eighteenth-century Irish philosopher and divine, suggests that immaterialism (the denial of the existence of material substance) is more compatible with Christianity than its materialist rival. Berkeley is surprisingly cautious and sober in his few discussions of miracles, tending toward skepticism about many miraculous reports<sup>1</sup> and arguing that miracles must be few in number to preserve their effect.<sup>2</sup> Although he endorses the traditional account of miracles, he appears to recognize limits to the view. Elsewhere he provides the resources suggestive of the alternative that I argue is only open to immaterialists, namely that only acts of creation (and annihilation) are properly speaking miracles. Berkeley provides insights that impact both of the primary views on miracles, helping us to see the advantages of immaterialism with respect to the plausibility of miracles.

## Miracles and materialism

The word *miracle* comes from the Latin *miraculum* (“object of wonder”) and *mirari* (“to wonder”). In the Christian tradition, miracles play at least one critical role in the faith: they inspire it.<sup>3</sup> Miracles are acts of God that generate wonder and, consequently, greater faith. As such, miracles must actually *be* wondrous. If I reach into a bowl of water and lift from it a perfect sphere of water, that might well inspire wonder. But if you learn about surface tension and the pertinent laws of nature, the event becomes merely a curiosity—the wonder at some level has been removed. The same is true for any event where natural or “scientific” explanations can later account for it. As Paul Tillich notes, the term “miracle”

should not be applied to events that produce wonder only for a time since “these cease to produce astonishment after one has become accustomed to them, although a profound admiration of them may remain.”<sup>4</sup> Miracles are reserved for events that *continuously* inspire wonder.

Yet there is another danger: events when too strange can produce incredulity instead of wonder. If I claim to make a sphere that is simultaneously a cube, one suspects a trick or simply refuses to believe. No faith is inspired. For critics of Christianity, there appears to be ample ground for skepticism. How can any contemporary educated person believe that a person walked unaided on water, that illnesses are instantaneously healed, or that storms can be called or calmed immediately on command? The complaint is that these events are inconsistent with other claims we believe to be true. Christians thus ought to emphasize a conception of miracle that meets two requirements.<sup>5</sup> First, miracles must inspire wonder in a fashion unlikely to succumb to advancements in our understanding of the natural world. Second, miracles must be naturally inexplicable without producing absurdity, whether that be outright contradiction or a series of claims that too pointedly conflict with other well-established claims we are loathe to surrender. I do not contest that there might be other conceptions of miracle, but for the purposes of the present argument, I shall confine myself to this one. It is worth noting that the term *miracle* is often employed carelessly, such as in contexts that demand neither lasting wonder nor resist natural explication. For example, “It would be a miracle if [insert favorite sports team here] won the championship this year.” Such common uses of the term I am consciously excluding from this analysis.

Having a sense of what a miracle is for the rational Christian, let us be clear about what materialism does and does not include. A materialist holds that there exist objective, mind-independent substances (i.e., matter and material objects). Christian materialists typically hold that these substances are independent only with respect to finite (created) minds; all substances are technically dependent on God as their creator. The nature of this ontological dependence, however, is seldom made clear. As I argue below, the concept of a material object does not fit well with the claim of ontological dependence. *Materialism* in this context does not preclude there being other substances (minds, spirits, souls, etc.) and thus should not be understood as material monism or as in any way excluding dualistic or pluralistic ontologies. Materialism, for the purposes of this discussion, posits only that the ordinary objects human persons perceive are external to the minds of perceivers and independent of them. Objects have

their own set of laws that govern their behavior and could exist even were all perceiving creatures annihilated. This description is what makes material objects "objective"; such objects do not depend on subjects for their reality.

At this point it is also important to distinguish *material* from *physical*. The former has ontological implications (mind-independence, externality, etc.), but the latter does not. "Physical" refers to anything that might be experienced or sensed. The physical world refers to the world as seen, heard, touched, and so on. Materialists hold that at least some part of the physical world is explainable by appeals to (or, in radical cases, by being identical to) the material world. I distinguish physicalism from materialism to avoid begging the question about ontological issues. Immaterialists deny the existence of mind-independent material substance, but posit a physical world that we all experience. The details that underlie this view (whether it be virtualism, idealism, or some other ontology) lie beyond the scope of this endeavor.

### Miracles and divine contravention: The traditional view

The most common approach to resolve the "tension" between genuine miracles and laws of nature is to deny that natural laws must be actually without exception. They are *naturally* without exception (i.e., nothing in the regular workings of the physical world can violate those laws), but that is no limit to God contravening a law. Aquinas provides the canonical characterization of this conception of miracles: "Those effects are rightly to be termed miracles which are wrought by Divine power apart from the order usually observed in nature."<sup>6</sup> The emphasis is on miracles being supernatural in virtue of being distinct from (or contravening) our understanding of nature.

For the traditional approach, one's underlying ontology is essentially irrelevant. Whether the laws apply to the behavior of mind-independent external objects or to the objects of experience, the key lies with the divinely orchestrated exceptions to regularities. The nature of those regularities is thus not specifically important when it comes to miracles.

Berkeley endorses this view, noting explicitly the point that miracles inspire wonder. He writes:

It may indeed on some occasions be necessary, that the Author of Nature display his overruling power in producing some appearance out of the ordinary series of things. Such exceptions from the general rules of Nature are proper to surprise

and awe men into an acknowledgement of the Divine Being: but then they are to be used but seldom, otherwise there is a plain reason why they should fail of that effect. Besides, God seems to choose the convincing our reason of his attributes by the works of Nature, which discover so much harmony and contrivance in their make, and are such plain indications of wisdom and beneficence in their Author, rather than to astonish us into a belief of his being by anomalous and surprising events.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that the immaterialist has no special problem that would not apply with equal force against the materialist. Suitable inspiration may be had from the exceptions to experienced regularities whether or not the laws divinely contravened are material. If one is willing to accept the concept of a natural law as having exceptions (perhaps singular or unique as Berkeley notes to preserve their inspirational effect), then miracles are in fact no different to the materialist or the immaterialist.

Yet Berkeley displays some hesitance in his account when he emphasizes both how miracles must be infrequent and the regular working of nature. God is the creator of regular and harmonious laws. Berkeley asserts that such creation is better indication of God's existence and power than astonishing us with "anomalous and surprising events." Since Berkeley also wants to demonstrate the superiority of immaterialism with respect to religious belief generally, one might be tempted to suppose that there is something more to the story. Berkeley, I think, implies (but does not state) that there is something dissonant about supposing that God would create regularities only to make exceptions to them, especially since the presence of those regularities seems sufficient to inspire awe. Given that Berkeley was an enthusiast of Augustine, it seems reasonable to suppose that he was aware of a rival account.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine, many centuries earlier, argued that there has been only one miracle, that of creation. Even the resurrection of Christ should be viewed as a corollary of sorts to the one genuine miracle. For Augustine, miracles cannot be supernatural. "For how can an event be contrary to nature when it happens by the will of God, since the will of the great creator assuredly is the nature of every created thing? A portent therefore does not occur contrary to nature but contrary to what is known of nature."<sup>9</sup> Augustinian miracles are, in a sense, a part of nature. Natural laws can retain their universality, on this view, since the miraculous applies to objects *as created* and not the laws that govern their behavior. This view has the added benefit of sharpening the concept of miracle, even given changes in our technology and knowledge. We might think an event

is miraculous at one point in time (lacking the scientific sophistication to explain it) but later learn to account for the event. Christians, following Tillich, want to reserve the adjective “miraculous” for events that cannot *possibly* be explained naturally. Not much wonder is likely to be inspired by events that once appeared to be the result of divine intervention but later turned out to be entirely explicable by natural laws.

## Miracles and natural law

Before we can fully explore the promise of the alternative conception, we first need to get some conceptual clarity about the “tension” that allegedly exists between the traditional account of miracle and natural laws. My purpose here is to charitably present a reasonable challenge that has been posed (in varying forms) to the traditional conception of miracle in order to motivate a serious investigation of the alternative creation view of miracles.

The challenge comes from the concept of *natural law*. There is some dispute (especially among philosophers of science) about the precise meaning of a natural law. Some argue that natural laws must be necessary in addition to being universal, while others merely contend that perfect regularity is sufficient.<sup>10</sup> Among many scientists and philosophers, however, the requirement of universality is prevalent. That is, independently of what we know, a genuine natural law admits no exceptions in the domain where it applies. Practitioners of the scientific method rely on the presumption that a putative scientific law is exceptionless in order to generate both explanations and predictions in the physical world. The traditional conception of miracle *requires* the possibility of exceptions to laws, thus the claim is that advocates of the traditional account of miracles must sacrifice science—too high a price for many to pay.

If the physical universe is governed according to a set of exceptionless and at least theoretically knowable principles, then one might think the inspirational nature of any putative miracle will be automatically undermined. Alastair McKinnon, for instance, argues that theists ought to avoid the concept of miracle altogether, since “*miracle* cannot correctly and consistently describe any event, whether real or alleged.”<sup>11</sup> If one believes that the universe is governed by natural laws, then any event which falls outside of that posited explanatory order will automatically be suspect and labeled as absurd if not impossible. Here one

must be careful. Some commentators argue that there are ontological reasons for supposing that God cannot both establish natural laws and act in miraculous ways that violate those laws. Thus one frequently finds defenders of miracles, such as Alvin Plantinga, carefully analyzing the claim of inconsistency. For instance, after reviewing a number of claims about an alleged science/religion problem, Plantinga writes “These various assertions of a ‘religion/science problem’ do not, however, succeed in making it clear what exactly the problem is supposed to be.”<sup>12</sup> Plantinga then diagnoses the problem for what he calls “classical science” by noting that such an alleged problem only occurs when one adds that the (material) universe is causally closed. And as he notes, “That is a metaphysical or theological add-on, not part of classical science.”<sup>13</sup> He is correct, for the problem is not strictly speaking an ontological one. The present problem raised by the skeptic concerns *explanation*. Science as a methodology does not require a particular ontology, which is precisely why framing the alleged tension in purely metaphysical terms is misleading.

Let us stop and articulate exactly why many think laws must be treated as universal for scientific methodology to work. One might, for instance, argue that, strictly speaking, there are no perfectly regular natural laws. Instead, there are *mostly* regular laws occasionally broken by the intervention of God. If such exceptions occurred, however, the skeptic alleges that the explanatory power of science would be ultimately demolished.<sup>14</sup> Before I attempt to charitably explicate the claim, we must be careful to note its scope. The argument is not that *all* explanations require universal laws. Explanations can also be thought of psychologically, as in removing puzzlement. If I appeal to Zeus’s wrath to explain how lightning struck me, that invocation is certainly explanatory in some sense. It enables me to “make sense of” the world. Many such explanations admit exceptions to regularities in our typical lived experience. A scientific explanation, however, ultimately has as an ideal *predictability*. The power of a scientific explanation lies in the degree to which it enables one to predict (or retrodict) events in the physical world. Such explanations thus require a principled justificatory link, usually one that involves subsuming particulars under general laws. Those laws might only apply to certain domains under certain conditions, but when properly constrained, scientific explanations come with public predictive power. Anyone under those conditions will be able to successfully predict the outcome. One might, perhaps uncharitably, think that the view requires a false dilemma: either the laws are exceptionless or no knowledge is possible at all. The point is only that *scientific* knowledge, along



with its concomitant power of prediction, requires universality. Nothing in this analysis denies that other forms of knowledge exist.

If laws are not universal, such that the posited relations hold only “most of the time” (e.g., that pressure and temperature vary directly most of the time; sometimes they vary inversely or directly but according to a different relation based on divine intervention), then every putative scientific explanation would be subject to the objection that the case in question might be an exception. And such an objection is not one merely posed by the willful skeptic; it is a *principled* objection. But one might nonetheless think this a small price to pay, especially if those exceptions were seen to be vanishingly rare. Yet two problems seem to arise with that strategy. First, no finite mind has any idea what the likelihood for divine intervention in the workings of the world might be (or other kinds of interventions for that matter—one might think, as an example, that the Satan who tortured Job was exercising supernatural interventional powers as well). For all we know, the past few centuries have been an aberration and the “laws” are in fact quite different from how they have held for most of history. The skeptic claims that such suppositions make appeals to laws and hence predictions practically useless.

Second, it is arguable that scientific explanations rely on the presumption of universality in order to gain explanatory power. That is, the very possibility of applying the scientific method to a particular problem starts with the presumption that observables behave in universal ways. This presumption applies independently of whether or not the laws are probabilistic and it is important not to confuse the universal *applicability* of a law with its content. It might be the case that some of the claims of quantum mechanics are correct and that there are irreducible probabilities. Yet what we call those probabilities (such as the probability “spread” of the location of a particle whose velocity we know) are not random nor are they variable (i.e., the probabilities themselves for the same set of circumstances do not change). The judgment of probability applies universally within a certain domain.

Consider Dalton’s Law of partial pressures as an example of how a scientific explanation seems to require the presumption of universality over a restricted domain. Dalton’s “Law” is an *approximation* of the total pressure of a gas in a limited volume. It is an approximation because we know that the law really works only for low-pressure gases that do not interact. Scientists do not use the law for reactive gases or in high-pressure situations: it simply does not apply. But *within the domain for which it is posited to be true*, no scientist *while doing science and invoking the law* can admit the possibility that the law has an exception, whether

that exception be due to divine intervention or otherwise.<sup>15</sup> To do so is to admit that the law is false (in that domain) and then there is no *point* in using the law since it would lose its predictive power. Now some laws range over domains that are more universal than others, but unrestricted domains for scientific explanations are exceedingly rare. The first and second laws of thermodynamics and the law of conservation, for instance, admit of no (known) exceptions in any domain. And thus the skeptic drives home the concern: to suggest that exceptions are possible is to destroy the predictive power of the explanation. There might be a psychological explanation that serves the function of removing some doubt, but the scientific explanation is lost. If a putative exception is discovered, the methodology dictates that we look for error, or failing that, we *reject the law*. It is not an option to simply say, "Well, there are exceptions to the law in the relevant domains." To say so is tantamount to simply rejecting the law.

Richard Swinburne takes a slightly less radical approach, arguing that the concept of a violation to a natural law is coherent, provided that the exception is not a repeatable counterinstance to the law.<sup>16</sup> It is unlikely that the skeptic would be swayed, as Swinburne's suggestion does not evade the underlying problem. Even if miracles are singular violations of laws, the possibility of *scientific* explanation would be fundamentally undermined. Since we would have no way of knowing when a miracle might occur and violate a law, nor which laws might be violated, all laws would lose their explanatory power. We might choose to operate according to less stringent standards and extract explanations from what we commonly or typically experience, but then the charge would be that we have sacrificed science. There would be no arbiter or standard to which one could appeal. Every event could in principle be explained—or explained away—by an appeal to a miraculous intervention, rendering scientific explanations (and predictions) both nonfalsifiable and empty of power.

The underlying point about the importance of perfectly regular laws can be seen from the viewpoint of the theist as well. On the traditional view, in order for an event to be *seen* as miraculous, there must be a regularity that is violated. In essence, what *makes* an event wondrous and miraculous *just is* the violation of the regularity. If the violation is of a law that is only "mostly" regular, the inspiration suffers. This is why no one takes the person seriously who proclaims a miracle when he finds that a "1" comes up upon the roll of a fair one-hundred-sided die. The point has been well made before. C. S. Lewis, for instance, notes, "We must now add that you will equally perceive no miracles until you believe that nature works according to regular laws. If you have not yet noticed that the

sun always rises in the East you will see nothing miraculous about his rising one morning in the West.”<sup>17</sup> We may take Lewis’s point to its logical extreme. *Only* the violation of *perfect* regularities can produce wonder sufficient to be termed a miracle, assuming that one requires that miracles violate natural laws. But what of cases where God intervenes by violating a law that had previously held with perfect regularity? At that point, one may argue that all scientific explanation that relied upon that law would be undermined. From our epistemic standpoint, we cannot tell what previous events might have involved divine intervention just as we cannot predict the same for future events. Since intervention would be a viable alternative for *any* event at that point, admitting the miracle is logically equivalent to denying the relevant law. If God suspended the law of gravity, *there would be no law of gravity* (i.e., the law would be false).

When one invokes a miracle to explain an event, additional context must be provided to elevate it to the status of a miracle, no matter how unlikely the event. Quantum mechanics predicts that some events will occur at *extremely* low probabilities; but they are a part of the natural order nonetheless. No informed physicist would be inspired to faith by such an event alone, since its occurrence is actually predicted by the laws that govern the physicist’s understanding of the universe. Imagine a food pantry that runs out of food, but by coincidence it had been “randomly” selected for a food delivery by a distant charity.<sup>18</sup> To claim that such an event is miraculous overly weakens the concept. The unexpected delivery was a blessing to be sure, but such cases are not sufficient to inspire faith in persons where it is not already present. Miracles require the regularity of natural laws just as the possibility of scientific explanation does.

That the skeptical concern should be taken seriously even by Christians is additionally demonstrated by the fact that a large number of theists strive to *preserve* the integrity of natural law as they defend the coherence of miracles. As Robert Larmer concludes near the end of his work, “[M]iracles, considered as objective events specially caused by God, can conceivably occur in a world which behaves, always and everywhere, completely in accordance with the laws of nature.”<sup>19</sup> Note the emphasis on “always and everywhere.” A key point in Larmer’s defense of miracles is that natural laws must be inviolable.<sup>20</sup> Others defend the universality of natural laws by arguing that the natural world does not exhaust the real. Hence C. S. Lewis contends that the theist holds that there is more to reality than just one nature.<sup>21</sup> The essence of “Supernaturalism,” and the attendant grounds for defending the reality of miracles, depends on the rejection of the claim that the natural, material world is all that exists. Here again,

however, Lewis's position is that laws of nature are not contradicted; they are instead *supplemented* in a dualist or pluralist ontology. And Lewis even candidly asserts that if the natural world is all that exists, then miracles cannot exist. "But if Naturalism is true, then we do know in advance that miracles are impossible."<sup>22</sup> Here by "naturalism" Lewis may be understood to mean material monism. He posits a nonmaterial realm to account for alleged explanatory shortfalls of naturalism. Yet what the skeptic suggests is that posited laws must be inviolable not as a matter of metaphysical, but explanatory necessity. In that case, it does not matter for the present issue what ontology one adopts, supplemented or not. And charitably interpreted, I think Lewis rightly understands the point.

Lewis's solution to the "problem" of natural law and miracles is not to deny either but to argue that natural laws are not by themselves sufficient to explain the universe. Laws *apply* to ontological posits, and no law currently explains why there are things (as opposed to why there is nothing, whether those things are physical objects, minds, or something else). We can use Lewis's insight to motivate serious consideration of the second account of miracles. Miracles do not violate natural laws. Instead they account for the *presence* of objects to which exceptionless laws apply. So to start, we have at least one clear possible example of a genuine miracle: God's act of creation. As briefly noted earlier, this position is certainly not new. Augustine argued that the only miracles possible are acts of creation (and by extension annihilation).

At this point we are faced with what appears to be a credible argument for why we cannot allow miracles that violate laws of nature without the great sacrifice of the possibility of scientific explanation. I am not asserting that the traditional account cannot be defended against this challenge. It strikes me as sufficiently pressing, however, to incentivize investigation of alternatives. If miracles are real, perhaps they can inspire wonder without producing the incredulity of a direct conflict with our use of the laws of nature, the inviolability of which may well be required for scientific explanation. It is at this point that one's ontological beliefs become relevant, since it turns out that materialism is ill-suited to defend acts of creation as miracles.

## The materialist and creation

The difficulty materialists face when defending the reality of miracles is straightforward. Since materialism posits an *independent* and regular objective

reality, a part of the concept of a material object is that its behavior is tied to independent law-like regularities. For example, a part of what it means to be a sphere is that it will behave in certain ways when placed on an inclined plane. The behavior of material objects is also closely tied to both laws of regularity (such as gravity) and what I call ontological laws (e.g., material objects persist even when no minds perceive them). Just as an alleged material sphere is not a *spherical* object if it does not roll in certain cases, if it ceases to exist when not perceived then it is not a *material* object either. Both kinds of laws are constitutive of being a material object.

As soon as one starts to deny the ontological independence of material objects, the “material” part loses coherence. What is the difference between a material object that God causes to not exist when not perceived and an immaterial object whose nature is such that it exists only when perceived? None. The core of the distinction between materialist and immaterialist ontologies lies precisely here.

Troubles arise because material objects are mind-independent. In materialist contexts, precisely what generates the wonder with an alleged miracle is what undermines its credibility. Lot’s wife was transformed into a pillar of salt after turning to watch the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. If God violated the material order in turning her to salt, then incredulity rightly results as the account destroys our very conception of material objects. One might wonder whether she existed at all, since human bodies—material bodies in general—do not behave that way. The point is subtle and easy to overlook. Part of what it *means* for something to be material is that it obeys the laws that govern material reality. When a putative explanation violates those laws, there is an implicit weakening of the concept of a material object (whether we intend it or not) in the course of that explanation. Either one must reject the explanation on the grounds that it is incoherent because it mischaracterizes the nature of material objects, or one must alter (or surrender) the concept of materiality.

What is the *point* of God creating a nominally independent, regular, material order? The obvious (but not often enough invoked) answer is that such an order allows God’s created people to engage, understand, and know creation. Many theists, Berkeley included, were well aware of the point. Berkeley argues that God created the world in a manner that obeys perfect regularities so that creation *as a whole* better functions:

But it is evident that those actions are not adapted to particular views, but all conformed to certain general rules, which, being collected from observation, are by philosophers termed laws of nature. And these indeed are excellently

sued to promote the general well-being of the creation: but, what from casual combinations of events, and what from the voluntary motions of animals, it often falls out, that the natural good not only of private men but of entire cities and nations would be better promoted by a particular suspension, or contradiction, than an exact observation of those laws. Yet, for all that, nature still takes its course; nay, it is plain that plagues, famines, inundations, earthquakes, with an infinite variety of pains and sorrows; in a word, all kinds of calamities public and private, do arise from a uniform steady observation of those general laws, which are once established by the Author of Nature, and which He will not change or deviate from upon any of those accounts, how wise or benevolent soever it may be thought by foolish men to do so.<sup>23</sup>

God acts in law-like ways. And if God does not deviate from the established natural order to prevent calamities, parity of reasoning suggests that God *always* acts in law-like ways, or so Berkeley suggests. Obviously there could be other reasons for positing miracles (drawing attention to God, etc.), but it is worth noting that Augustine can accommodate this challenge by claiming that only creation is miraculous; everything else is a part of the (optimal) natural order. Thus, *of course* God always and only acts in law-like ways. Once past creation, nothing in the material world could possibly *be* miraculous in the Christian worldview without surrendering the coherence and rationality of certain beliefs.

The preceding prepares us to diagnose the difficulty materialists have with miracles. Although the creation of matter might well seem to qualify as miraculous, the very characterization of the concept of matter precludes such creation, let alone its classification as a miracle. Matter is *never* created or destroyed; the law of conservation is as central to the materialist ontology and to materialist science as any law scientists invoke.

Another way to get clear about the point is to evaluate a prominent argument that purports to show that genuine miracles need not violate laws of nature. The goal is to show that theists who defend the reality of miracles: (1) recognize the need to accommodate particular natural laws, and (2) have difficulty doing so within a materialist ontology. Let us examine the argument advanced by Robert Larmer in his book *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle*.<sup>24</sup> In outline the argument runs as follows:

1. Laws of nature are not sufficient to explain the phenomena we experience. In addition to the laws, we need the objects to which those laws apply.
2. The annihilation or *ex nihilo* creation of an object (such as a unit of mass) does not violate a law of nature.

3. Hence, there can be miracles (of the form of annihilation or creation) that do not violate laws of nature.

The obvious problem is with the second premise. Larmer defends the premise by invoking an analogy. He claims that tossing an extra ball into a group of billiard balls in motion would not contravene any laws of motion. Thus he concludes, "Similarly, by creating or annihilating a unit or units of mass/energy, God may produce in nature an event that could not otherwise occur without violating the laws of nature."<sup>25</sup> Larmer proceeds to anticipate objections, most notably for present purposes the charge that his argument implies a violation of the law of the conservation of matter and energy. His response depends on extending the same analogy he initially invokes. The law of conservation applies, he emphasizes, only to closed systems. Since the existence of a divine being would lie outside of the material realm, by definition any miraculous interference would entail that the system is not closed. Hence, it would be a mistake to apply a natural law in such an instance.

Although initially intriguing, this line of argument will not persuade the skeptic. The problem with Larmer's argument is that he confuses the metaphysical status of a law holding (in fact being true) with the epistemological issue of when said law can be explanatory. Invoking a law requires a closed system in order to produce an explanation, since otherwise it is possible that unknown variables (including other laws) might intervene. But the stipulation of a closed system says nothing about whether the laws are *true* or *universal*. The requirement of universality is a *prerequisite* for the possibility of scientific explanation. Unless the law is an exceptionless universal, no scientific explanation can be had. It is an additional epistemic requirement that the context in which we invoke laws is one where the system is closed. Closing a system only precludes other variables from preventing us from determining *which* laws (and other variables) apply. Yet none of that indicates that *any* (true) law is *ever* contravened. In Larmer's example, no laws are actually contravened; adding new billiard balls to a system violates no law—it only alters the descriptive facts of the system. He is right about that, but such a case is *not* the objection. If one were trying to explain *why* the new balls appeared, that would be a different example, and one where few rational persons would accept as an initially plausible answer, "They appeared via an act of *ex nihilo* creation that falsifies the law of conservation." Larmer's analogy simply does not apply as his opponent is arguing that the law of conservation *is* being violated. New matter is being introduced when new billiard balls simply appear on the table.



The argument as a result does not work for the materialist. It is not clear how materialists can avoid falsifying the second premise. The *ex nihilo* creation of a material object absolutely violates the law of conservation. The law is either true or not. If true, then we impose the restriction of a closed system in order to be better able to tell what is going on, but the truth of the law is independent of the scope of our inquiry. If not (and one might coherently simply deny the law), then one has essentially surrendered the materialist ontology.

Larmer provides a response to the challenge advanced here, but it does not help the materialist who wants the traditional conception of miracle. Larmer distinguishes between a “strong” and “weak” version of the principle of conservation. The strong view is that matter and energy can neither be created nor destroyed, only altered in form. The weak view is that in causally isolated systems the total amount of energy must remain constant.<sup>26</sup> He contends that a strong view of natural laws “functions as a defining-postulate of physicalism.”<sup>27</sup> After all, the strong principle rules out the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*. Thus he asserts that the only evidence we have for the principle is in fact evidence for the weak version, which is compatible with creation. The strong principle would help to explain why we experimentally find the weak version to be true, but that does not preclude the possibility of there being other explanations for our experiences.

Unfortunately, Larmer reads the primary challenge to the compatibility of miracles and natural laws as an evidential one. As the skeptic argues, the main concern is of another nature. To review, the argument has two lines of attack. First, laws must be without exception in order to support scientific explanation and prediction. Second, theists need exceptionless laws to genuinely meet the demand that miracles be timelessly wonder-inspiring. Neither of these concerns is about the evidence we have for laws. Scientific explanation requires that the laws (whatever they ultimately are) be universal. Thus, noting that there might be other explanations for why the weak principle of conservation is true is to miss the fundamental problem. I am suggesting that the deeper problem here concerns materialism itself. Materialists are bound, no doubt often unknowingly, to a conception of mind-independent objects that precludes *ex nihilo* creation.<sup>28</sup>

One obvious solution to save the possibility of miracles (and Larmer-style arguments) is to jettison the materialist ontological baggage. If we approach the laws of nature from the perspective of their being *physical* (as opposed to material) laws, the difficulty might be resolved. The key is to recognize that the wonder generated from a miracle does not stem from its violating a law of nature, but



rather from the understanding that the laws were fashioned in such a manner as to produce the kinds of experiences it is possible to have. God works in perfectly regular ways, but we might not understand all of those regularities. Some of them might be in principle beyond our comprehension (revelatory mysteries), *but those regularities are genuine*. That description preserves the possibility of scientific knowledge about the world, preserves the universal nature of laws required for the former, and preserves a coherent conception of miracle. The wonder is to be found in the act of creation coupled with what that creation and the laws fashioned by God could produce in our ordinary course of experience.

### The immaterialist alternative: Miracle as creation

We may now construct a picture of what an immaterialist world might look like on either conception of miracle. As noted earlier, immaterialism faces no special problems (i.e., none beyond what a materialist might encounter) with respect to the traditional view of miracles as violations of nature. And Berkeley himself appears to, albeit cautiously, commit himself to such an account on at least one occasion.<sup>29</sup> However, as I have argued, there is reason to be hesitant about whether miracles are consistent with violations of natural laws on the grounds that such a view seems to conflict with the possibility of scientific explanation. Given that immaterialists typically admit the reality of natural laws in the experienced world, we must delve deeper to find an alternative. The difference lies in how immaterialists characterize reality. Since the world as experienced is the real world, mind-independence is not built into the concept of common-sense objects. As a result, the immaterialist is free to posit that God governs the world in perfectly regular ways (allowing for scientific understanding) while allowing that the world is nonetheless ontologically dependent on the divine.

Despite his earlier claims, we can here draw inspiration from Berkeley, who saw the issue in a slightly different context. He was challenged about whether immaterialism was consistent with the Mosaic account of creation, and in his *Three Dialogues* he addresses the concern this way:

Why, I imagine that if I had been present at the Creation, I should have seen things produced into being; that is, become perceptible, in the order described by the sacred historian . . . When things are said to begin or end their existence, we do not mean this with regard to God, but His creatures. All objects are eternally known by God, or which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in

his mind: but when things before imperceptible to creatures, are by a decree of God, made perceptible to them; then are they said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds. Upon reading therefore the Mosaic account of the Creation, I understand that the several parts of the world became gradually perceivable to finite spirits, endowed with proper faculties; so that whoever such were present, they were in truth perceived by them. This is the literal obvious sense suggested to me, by the words of the Holy Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

For materialists, the creation of a material world by an immaterial being requires creation that is literally *ex nihilo*. Immaterialists, however, need not labor under that restriction. For the immaterialist, common-sense objects are eternally dependent on the mind of God. Thus, when we finite minds speak of “creation,” that is in a derivative sense. When we speak of the creation of the universe, we mean from the standpoint of finite minds. Thus, Berkeley notes that the biblical creation concerns how “the several parts of the world became gradually perceivable to finite spirits.” God’s knowledge of the universe is eternal. Technically speaking, it makes no sense to say *from the divine perspective* that anything was ever created; God is an eternal being. The critical factor in creation is when God chose to make it public: that from our finite perspective the universe as we know it came into being. And this was not creation from nothing; it was the rendering perceptible of ideas that God sustains eternally. The materialist must explain literal creation from nothing.<sup>31</sup> It is more palatable to argue that God literally created nothing, but “created” the world in the derivative sense of making his ideas known to his people.<sup>32</sup>

We can extrapolate from this conception of creation to other miracles. The miracle of bodily resurrection, for instance, stems not from contravening a law, but from understanding how amazing it is that laws that permit such wonders are possible. Consider Berkeley’s account of resurrection as the renewal of bodies from the earth. Berkeley argues that the doctrine of bodily resurrection is both plausible (i.e., need not generate incredulity) and inspirational precisely because it follows a physical regularity.<sup>33</sup> Just as wheat dies in the winter to be reborn in the spring, so too may persons die only to be later reborn.<sup>34</sup> And such a conception meets the requirements of miracles nicely. The event inspires timeless wonder without producing incredulity through contradiction of natural law. In fact, miracles gain *support* from comparing them to regularities in our experience.

One might object that immaterialism in fact undermines the wonder required for miracles. Resurrections, the parting of seas, manna from heaven—if they are

just tricks of ideas, then there are no miracles. There is nothing extranatural about those events to inspire faith. Berkeley anticipates this concern.

But it will be urged, that miracles do, at least, lose much of their stress and import by our principles. What must we think of Moses's rod, was it not really turned into a serpent, or was there only a change of ideas in the minds of the spectators? And can it be supposed, that our Saviour did no more at the marriage-feast in Cana, than impose on the sight, and smell, and taste of the guests, so as to create in them the appearance or idea only of wine? The same may be said of all other miracles: which, in consequence of the foregoing principles, must be looked upon only as so many cheats, or illusions of fancy. To this I reply, that the rod was changed into a real serpent, and the water into real wine. . . I shall only observe, that if at table all who were present should see, and smell, and taste, and drink wine, and find the effects of it, with me there could be no doubt of its reality. So that, at bottom, the scruple concerning real miracles hath no place at all on ours, but only on the received principles, and consequently maketh rather for, than against what hath been said.<sup>35</sup>

Berkeley's point is that immaterialism forces one to recast what is meant by *real*. There is no trick when it comes to miracles. The serpent and the wine are, on immaterialist principles, at least as real as if they were material beings. The materialist needs *real* to encompass a strong form of ontological independence. The immaterialist can secure a sense of the independence of the world (to avoid solipsism) by invoking *volitional* independence. We do not control the ideas we perceive because God is responsible for *what* we perceive (the order of nature). Yet we can have that sort of independence without ontological independence, allowing the miraculous changes we experience to be fully "real" and wondrous.

Nonetheless, one might press the objection further. On the account I am suggesting here, only creation is truly miraculous. Other alleged miracles in the Bible (such as turning water into wine) will be "demoted" in a sense. Furthermore, everything that exists in nature will, in some sense, be miraculous. The concern is that such will gut the inspirational force of miracles. Herein lies the cost of this alternative reading: it requires that we recalibrate our understanding of miracle. The turning of water into wine *should* produce less wonder than creation. Theists have, in a sense, become profligate with their miracles, allowing the word to lose much of its meaning. People interpret *any* unusual event as miraculous; but doing so undermines more generally the *timeless* wonder miracles represent. Only the act of creation is truly and timelessly wondrous. Immaterialism

captures the inspirational nature of miracles better than materialism while preserving the perfect regularity of the perceived world in a manner that allows us to explore and explain the natural world. I would go so far as to suggest that we might discover that there is a natural process that explained the water-wine conversion. Such a discovery need not undermine faith, since the presence in the world of a set of natural laws that could accommodate such an otherwise unusual occurrence is itself deserving of some appreciation.

As a result of this analysis, we may conclude that immaterialists are at a minimum no worse off than materialists when it comes to the defense of the possibility of miracles. If one accepts the traditional view, ontology is not relevant and hence immaterialists can defend the same account. And if one takes seriously the skeptical challenge that traditional miracles are not compatible with the possibility of scientific explanation, then the immaterialist has the option of endorsing the creation view of miracles, providing her with resources not available to the materialist. Either way, there seems to be an affinity between immaterialism and theism, one that extends far enough to allow for a coherent concept of miracles.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

- 1 See "Berkeley to James," in *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, ed. Marc Hight (New York: Cambridge, 2013), 428 (letter 282, June 7, 1741).
- 2 George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957), III: Sect. 63 and George Berkeley, *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher. The Works of George Berkeley*, Vol. III, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955), IV:15.
- 3 I do not assert that inspiring faith is the *only* role miracles play. They might occur for reasons unrelated to our faith. One might argue that the miracle of Christ's resurrection was because he could not be contained by death. That the event also inspires faith is not relevant to why it occurred.
- 4 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol I. (London: Nisbet, 1986), 129, quoted in *God in Action: A Reader*, ed. Jeff Astley, David Browb, and Ann Loades (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 37.
- 5 For a discussion of some relatively recent views on the concept of a miracle, see David Basinger and Randall Basinger, *Philosophy and Miracle: The Contemporary Debate* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon, 1986).

- 6 *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, cii. See *Summa Theologica* I:102:4. Miracles are “beyond the order or laws of the whole created nature.”
- 7 *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Sect. 63.
- 8 See *Siris* 359, where Berkeley cites Augustine as endorsing the Plotinian view that, strictly speaking, God is not the direct cause of creation. God produced the Word, and all created things were made by the Word.
- 9 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 21.8. For an overview of the Augustinian position, see Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), esp. Ch. 1.
- 10 See, for instance, David Armstrong, *What Is a Law of Nature?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 11 Alastair McKinnon, “‘Miracle’ and ‘Paradox,’” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4.4 (October 1967): 308.
- 12 Alvin Plantinga, “Divine Action in the World (Synopsis),” *Ratio* XIX (December 2006): 497.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 501.
- 14 For a representative discussion of why scientific explanation cannot allow for exception or irregularity (especially in the context of miracles), see Guy Robinson, “Miracles,” *Ratio* 9 (1967): 155–166, esp. 159, where Robinson notes what would happen if irregularities were admitted to science. “Scientific development would either be stopped or else made completely capricious, because it would necessarily be a matter of whim whether one invoked the concept of miracle or irregularity to explain an awkward result, or on the other hand accepted the result as evidence of the need to modify the theory one was investigating.”
- 15 Scientists are persons as well. Thus, a scientist could admit exceptions to laws while not doing science. But *qua* scientist (while engaging in the scientific method and doing science) she cannot.
- 16 Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 26–28.
- 17 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 47. One might object that Lewis probably did not mean “regular” to entail exceptionless. Perhaps so, but the point remains. What makes the event *miraculous* is the degree to which a regularity is violated.
- 18 I did not invent this example, but I have heard it so many times I am simply unaware of to whom to attribute it.
- 19 Robert Larmer, *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), 100.
- 20 See also Ward, who similarly argues that reality is not a closed system and hence miracles need not violate natural laws (Keith Ward, *Divine Action*, [London: Collins, 1990], 179–181). Basinger and Basinger explore (without explicitly endorsing) similar options (see Basinger and Basinger, *Philosophy and Miracle*, 11).

- 21 Lewis, *Miracles*, 8–11.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 10. It is worth noting that I think Lewis is mistaken about this point.
- 23 George Berkeley, *Passive Obedience*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957), VI: 24.
- 24 Larmer, *Water into Wine?* The main argument is outlined in chapter 2, the outline below reflects Larmer’s claims on pp. 19–20.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 28 Even positing a “Big Bang” does not escape the concern. Nothing in that theory actually posits the creation of matter and/or energy *ex nihilo*. It is an explanatory starting point, not an ontological one.
- 29 See *Principles of Human Knowledge*, I.63.
- 30 *Three Dialogues in The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957), III:251–252.
- 31 One might conjecture that God created matter from ideas and hence such creation was not technically *ex nihilo*. Given that substance dualists tend to think of matter and mind/spirit as incommensurable, it is not clear that such creation—using ideas as a “blueprint”—is still not *ex nihilo*. However, if one believes it makes sense to suppose that mental substances were converted by God into material substance, I grant the point can be blunted. My thanks to Steven Cowan for raising this possibility.
- 32 See again *Siris* 359. There is a tradition of which Berkeley was aware that took a more nuanced approach to divine creation.
- 33 See Marc Hight, “Berkeley and Bodily Resurrection,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45.3 (July 2007): 443–458. It is worth noting that if we take Berkeley seriously, one ought to consider the cycles of life just as miraculous as our promised bodily resurrection. My thanks to Michael Allen for this insight.
- 34 See *Alciphron*, VI:11.
- 35 *Principles of Human Knowledge*, I.84.
- 36 I would like to thank Michael Allen, Roomet Jakapi, James Janowski, Jeffrey Vogel, Patrick Wilson, and the editors James Spiegel and Steven Cowan for their helpful insights on this chapter.

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