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1 Miracles As Special Divine Actions

Hitler's forces, including legions of soldiers, panzers, and notorious combat planes known as the Luftwaffe, closed in upon the retreating Allied forces. The situation was dire. More than 300,000 French, Belgian, and Dutch troops were trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk, with no hope of survival unless an evacuation team could transport them across the raging waters of the English Channel. British military experts gave a grim projection, estimating that only 25 percent of the stranded soldiers would survive the Nazi onslaught. King George VI declared a national day of prayer on May 26, 1940. As the massive evacuation began, a series of fortuitous events favored the Allies. The waters of the Channel were unusually calm, allowing hundreds of small private boats to participate in the evacuation. In addition, a heavy fog and cloudy weather prevented the Luftwaffe from carrying out its dive-bombings effectively. Nearly 340,000 soldiers were evacuated to safety. This event in the early stages of World War II is commonly known as the "Dunkirk Miracle."[1]

The major monotheistic religions of the world, and indeed most human beings who have lived, believe that God has acted (and continues to act) in history. The *nature* of divine action, however, is not a simple matter. The term "divine action" can refer to a wide range of ideas, such as creation, conservation, concurrence, providence, and miracles. On the one hand, it is unsurprising that those who do not believe that God exists also deny that there are acts of God. On the other, it is striking that many *theologians* declare that miracles are impossible. According to these theologians, God neither performs miracles today nor has he done so before.

Several important questions arise in this debate: What exactly *is* a miracle? Are miracles violations of the laws of nature? What are the laws of nature in general such that they can be violated? Moreover, it seems one can be forgiven for *some* skepticism about miracles. We are all familiar with hoaxes, magic tricks, misunderstandings, and claims that eventually turn out to be spurious. But is an unqualified, universal skepticism the appropriate response to such "false positives"? Supposing that God exists, are we ever justified in thinking that a miracle has taken place? If so, what sort of evidence is required to establish its occurrence? Moreover, what is the function of miracles? What is their significance?

This Element is a philosophical and theological introduction to these topics. It consists of four sections. In Section 1, I begin by providing some terminological clarity. Although divine action encompasses a range of theologically

[1] For an engaging account of the Dunkirk miracle, see Lord (2017). Peterson et al. (2013: chap. 8) also open with this example.

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rich concepts, the primary focus of this Element is on miracles. Miracles are commonly referred to as *special divine acts*, which I distinguish from the other related concepts. In the remainder of Section 1, I respond to several common theological arguments against the possibility of miracles.

Section 2 discusses scientific and metaphysical objections to miracles. Some maintain, for instance, that miracles would violate well-established scientific principles such as the conservation of energy or the causal closure of the physical. Others raise a more general complaint: miracles would violate the laws of nature. This point takes us into deeper philosophical terrain and raises the question of what the "laws of nature" are in the first place. Should special divine actions be characterized this way? For instance, according to some metaphysical models, the laws of nature are simply descriptions of the capacities and powers of entities in the universe. On these views, the laws of nature do not "govern" anything, and therefore miracles would not violate such laws.

In Section 3, I discuss epistemological objections to miracles, with a focus on David Hume's influential argument that belief in miracles can never be rationally justified through testimony. I maintain that several core features of Hume's argument are problematic and that a closer analysis of his argument through the lens of Bayesian probability theory reveals the weaknesses in his position.

Section 4 contains two parts. In the first, I address some objections biblical historians have raised against the possibility of investigating miracles historically. In the second part, I consider a subject that is sometimes neglected in related discussions, namely the *significance* of miracles. If we suppose that God is a personal agent who sometimes acts in the world uniquely and specially, then the question arises as to *why* he does so. What is God's purpose in bringing about miracles? Here, we begin to explore the function of miracles as *signs* (in the Greek, *semeia*) – events that point to something or someone beyond themselves.

An initial disclaimer is in order. The world's great monotheistic traditions all affirm that God acts in nature. Much of what I say in this Element, therefore, is immediately applicable to Islam, Judaism, and certain varieties of Buddhism (Talim 2002; Seeskin 2011; Thomas 2011). However, my own background and research are rooted in the Christian tradition. To a certain extent, therefore, my examples and the framework of my arguments will reflect this fact. The Christian tradition involves many different important claims. But at its core, the truth or falsity of Christianity depends on an instance of special divine action, namely the resurrection of Jesus.[2] For that

[2] According to 1 Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." I will use the New Revised Standard Version unless noted otherwise.

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reason, special divine action is a topic of utmost importance to the Christian: an entire worldview hinges upon it.

1.1 Initial Distinctions

Because "divine action" encompasses a range of meanings, it is important to make some distinctions in the interest of clarity. These distinctions will prepare us to address theological objections to miracles later.

1.1.1 Creation

A common conviction among monotheistic religions is that God is the creator of all things besides himself. As such, there is a clear ontological dividing line between God and everything else that exists (Bauckham 2008). Most theists have understood God's creation to be a free act: he could have refrained from creating in the first place. Had he so chosen, nothing but God would exist. Moreover, creation has typically been understood as God's bringing about the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). It is not, as some of the ancient Greeks believed, that God used prior "stuff" to make the world. Instead, matter, energy, time, and space themselves appeared by God's will alone. John 1:3a puts it this way: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

Throughout history, many philosophers and scientists, influenced by Greek thought, believed that the universe was eternal, without beginning or end. However, in a radical ideological shift, astrophysical discoveries over the past century have uncovered impressive evidence that the universe most likely had a beginning around 13.7 billion years ago. For some, the beginning of the universe points to God's first great act (Craig and Sinclair 2009). The beginning of the universe *ex nihilo* is one direct way of understanding God's role as creator of the cosmos.

1.1.2 Conservation

Another concept related to divine action is *conservation*. Theists have often affirmed that in addition to creating the world, God also conserves or sustains it in existence at every point in time. Without God's conserving activity moment by moment, the universe would simply cease to exist. As an illustration, consider a billiard table: the activity of the billiard balls – their rolling, colliding with each other, bouncing off edges – takes place on the surface of the table. None of these activities, however, would be possible without the table itself. The table "conserves" or "sustains" the game in existence moment by moment.

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If the billiard table were suddenly to disappear, the game would be over. Similarly, God conserves the world throughout its existence, and without this sustaining activity, it would cease to be.

Some philosophers and theologians have thought that creation and conservation amount to the same thing (e.g., Quinn 1988; Suárez 2002). One way to understand this is to imagine a flip-book that produces an animation when someone quickly shuffles through the pages. The author draws a picture on each page, giving the image an appearance of continued identity. One could say that the author "conserves" the animation in being and that this conservation involves nothing more than the author's "creating" each page. Similarly, one might think that God's act of conserving the world in existence does not differ in kind from his creative work. It is beyond the scope of this project to adjudicate between these understandings of conservation.[3] For the purposes of this Element, however, I will assume that God's initial creative act and his subsequent conservation of the world are two different categories of divine activity.

1.1.3 Concurrence

The concept of *concurrence* becomes relevant when thinking about the causal role of created entities. Some thinkers, especially during the Middle Ages, grappled with the following problem. On the one hand, they wished to affirm that God is the ultimate cause of everything that happens in the universe. On the other, they maintained that creatures have their own causal powers – their own abilities to act. How can both be true? One prominent answer was that God "concurs" with creaturely causes. That is to say: God and creatures bring about effects together but in different ways. The tricky part is specifying what these "different ways" are. Thomas Aquinas thought that one could understand the relationship between divine and creaturely activity in terms of primary and secondary causation.[4] To borrow an example from Ignacio Silva (2022: 99–100), imagine someone who is cutting a piece of bread with a knife. The knife has its own causal powers by virtue of its slender shape, hardness, sharp edge, and so forth. When someone cuts the bread, the knife is therefore a cause, but it

[3] For a discussion, see Vander Laan (2022).

[4] We should note, however, that Aquinas himself distinguishes between God's general concurrence and special divine acts (miracles), such as those described in Scripture (Silva 2022: 102–5). He writes that

> divine power can sometimes produce an effect . . . apart from the order implanted in natural things by God. In fact, he does this at times to manifest his power. For it can be manifested in no better way . . . than by the fact that sometimes he does something outside the order of nature. Indeed, this makes it evident that the order of things has proceeded from him, not by natural necessity, but by free will (1956: 79).

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is only a secondary cause. The primary cause is the person who uses the knife as an instrument. Similarly, God is the primary cause who works through all the secondary causes we find in nature.

Concurrentists are drawn to this picture because it preserves God's causal role in everything that occurs. They see concurrentism as a middle position between two objectionable views, *occasionalism* and *mere conservationism*. According to occasionalism, there is no causation between natural entities. Instead, every apparent instance of causation is, in fact, divine causation. When two billiard balls collide, it may appear that one is setting the other into motion. But in reality, when the billiard balls meet, this is an "occasion" when God acts: he causes the first ball to stop and then sends the next ball on its trajectory. Some philosophers during the modern period, most notably Nicholas Malebranche, accepted varieties of this view. From the concurrentists' perspective, occasionalism is unacceptable because it prioritizes God's causal role to the exclusion of creaturely causation.

Mere conservationism is the position that God's activity (setting aside miracles for the moment) is restricted to his initial act of creation and his subsequent conservation of the universe. On this view, God allows natural entities and their own causal powers to "play out" throughout time. Of course, mere conservationists may affirm that God performs miracles throughout history (for that reason, mere conservationism does not imply deism since deists additionally reject miracles). Concurrentists, however, find mere conservationism objectionable on the basis that it detracts from God's role as primary cause.

The viability of the concurrentist position depends on how one thinks that primary and secondary causation work together. Some philosophers and theologians argue that concurrentism ultimately leads to untenable consequences (Frost 2014; Kittle 2022).[5] That debate, however, falls beyond the scope of this Element. For now, we will proceed on the assumption that God and creatures are related as primary and secondary causes, even if we cannot settle on the exact nature of this relationship here.

1.1.4 Special Divine Action

The final category, the one that will occupy us throughout the rest of the Element, is that of special divine actions, which I will use interchangeably

[5] In my view, the challenges to concurrentism are important. For instance, humans often cause evil actions, which seems to imply that God, as the primary cause, is also responsible for evil. Moreover, it is unclear whether concurrentism is necessary in addition to other types of divine action. Plantinga (2008: 396n2) describes the suspicion of Peter van Inwagen that concurrence "is no more than a matter of paying God superfluous metaphysical complements; why add this to all the rest?"

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More Information

with the term "miracles." The qualification "special" is meant, somewhat artificially, to distinguish such events from "general" divine actions. Now that we've discussed creation, conservation, and concurrence (the three Cs), we can think of these as falling under the category of God's general acts. Special divine actions, by contrast, are those acts of God beyond his creation of the world, his conserving it in being, and his concurring with natural causes.

To approach it differently, we might think of some paradigmatic instances of special divine actions: the parting of the Red Sea, water turning into wine, instantaneous restorations of sight, and Jesus' resurrection from the dead. These are events that most plausibly go beyond the domain of the three Cs. They are cases in which God goes "above and beyond" his usual activity in the world and does something new for specific reasons and in specific circumstances. For now, this will provide us with a working description of special divine actions.

1.1.5 Providence

The idea of *providence* is conceptually separate from special divine actions, though the two are related (Luck 2016: 274–5). Providence is a broader notion having to do with God's benevolent guidance, control, and plan for the world. Debates about divine providence typically center around the *mechanism* of God's sovereign influence: Does God bring about his beneficent ends by determining everything that occurs throughout history? Or does he allow "room" in the unfolding universe for various events – for instance, the free responses of humans? Providence can also simply refer to God's act of taking care of people as parents take care of their children. It is evident that special divine acts may fit into a broader understanding of providence. God may, for instance, bring about his purposes in history by virtue of performing miracles. Nevertheless, providence and special divine acts are two conceptually distinct ideas, and my discussion will focus on the latter.

1.2 Theological Arguments against Miracles

We may now proceed to ask more substantial questions about miracles themselves. A surprising number of theologians, often working from assumptions born in the Enlightenment, deny that special divine acts are possible. Such theologians typically acknowledge God's role as creator and sustainer of the universe, but for various reasons regard as unpalatable the idea that God would act *specially* – in a manner that goes against the usual, regular course of nature. In this section, I will examine and respond to five such arguments.

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1.2.1 The Argument from Self-Contradiction

According to one line of thought, God doesn't perform miracles because doing so would involve God's working against himself or his own activity. He would be engaged in a type of self-undermining behavior. The influential theologian Paul Tillich, for instance, asserts, "Miracles cannot be interpreted in terms of supranatural interference in natural processes. If such an interpretation were true, the manifestation of the ground of being would destroy the structure of being; God would be split within himself" (1953: 129).

Tillich, in typical enigmatic fashion, seems to object to the idea of an "interference" in the natural world. In Section 2, I will discuss whether this term reflects the appropriate language to use for special divine acts. But let that pass for now. What might we say about Tillich's claim that "the manifestation of the ground of being would destroy the structure of being"? It's difficult to know exactly what Tillich means here. But if we frame the objection in terms of the distinctions we made earlier, Tillich seems to be suggesting that God's activity as creator and sustainer of the universe (i.e., God as the ground of being) implies that no more divine activity is needed or allowed. If God were to cause miracles, this would disrupt the "structure of being" that has been established by his creative and sustaining roles. In that sense, God would be "split."

The same reasoning also appears in the literature of the eighteenth-century deists (though Tillich would resist such a label himself). Thomas Morgan, for example, explains that God never suspends or alters the laws of nature because "[s]uch a supposition would be unworthy of God, as the creator and governor of the world, and the universal cause, preserver, and director of nature" (1741: 76).

This argument (if it is an argument) has little to commend it. Why believe that once a particular "structure" has been set in place – once God has created and continues to sustain the universe – God cannot act in ways that go beyond that structure (Larmer 2013: 116)? Perhaps Tillich thinks that God imposes a kind of self-limitation by virtue of causing and sustaining the universe. If so, then we would need an additional argument for that conclusion. Moreover, it is far from clear why divine activity beyond creation and conservation would be "unworthy of God" as Morgan suggests. Does "unworthy" in this context mean inconsistent? Where is the inconsistency? Does it simply mean undignified or beneath God? If so, then once again, this assertion needs to be supported.

Indeed, it's somewhat easy to imagine why special divine actions might in fact be worthy of God. If God's universe contains free, rational agents capable of relating to and interacting with God himself, then he might occasionally choose to intervene in the natural world in order to reveal himself, answer

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