

THE CONCEPT OF MIRACLE

by *Wolffhart Pannenberg*

Abstract. The concept of miracle has often been regarded as irreconcilable with the concept of natural law. But this contradiction applies only to an understanding of a miracle as a break of natural law. Such a violation would destroy the assertion of natural law, because its universal claim does not permit exceptions. However, the idea of miracle need not be conceived in this way, though it has often been done since medieval times. Augustine thought of miracles simply as unusual events that contradict our accustomed views of the course of nature but not nature itself. According to that definition of miracle, no contradiction of natural laws need be assumed. It is sufficient to regard unusual occurrences as “signs” of God’s special activity in creation.

Keywords: Augustine; contingency; *contra naturam*; David Hume; natural law; regularities; Friedrich Schleiermacher; sign; Baruch Spinoza; unusual event; violation of natural law.

In the modern history of the dispute between scientists or philosophers calling upon the authority of science on the one hand and Christian theologians on the other, the concept of miracle has become one of the more intricate problems, because miracles are said to involve a violation of the laws of nature, as David Hume asserted in the section on miracles in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). This is a self-defeating notion of miracle, of course, because the logic of the concept of natural law requires that there be no exceptions—otherwise the pretended law in question would turn out not to be truly a law of nature. The concept of miracle as a violation of natural law subverts the very concept of law and in effect exposes the futility of the assertion of miracles.

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This was not the meaning of the concept of miracle in Christian theology, however. In the biblical writings, the word *miracle* refers to extraordinary events that function as “signs” of God’s sovereign power. Therefore, the biblical language often speaks of “signs and wonders” (Daniel 6:27; John 4:48). A wonder, or miracle, is basically an unusual—in fact, extraordinary—event. Augustine said, “Whatever is unusual, is a miracle” (*quae sunt rara, ipsa sunt mira*; *De civ. Dei* 21,8,3). Explicitly he emphasized that events of that type do not occur contrary to the nature of things. To us they may appear contrary, because of our limited knowledge of the “course of nature.” But God’s point of view is different, because he is the Creator of the nature of things as well as of the events that appear unusual to us (*De gen. ad. litt.* VI,13,24, PL 34,349).

In medieval theology the conception of miracles changed, because the nature of things was now conceived of objectively, not in relation to the limitations of our knowledge. Thomas Aquinas described a miraculous action of God as occurring *praeter naturam*, different from what would be expected from the nature of things, though not *contra naturam*, contrary to their nature. In some places, though, in his *Questiones de potentia*, Thomas could also admit that miracles may occur *contra naturam*, contrary to the usual course of nature (*De pot.* 6,a 2 ad 2). The description of a miracle as *contra naturam* applies, then, when an experiential concept of nature is used rather than the theological concept of nature as constituted by God’s creative action.

Later, the view of miracles as occurring *contra naturam* became more generally accepted, as did a concept of nature and of the order of nature based on human experience. This development finally led to the idea that a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. Before that idea could emerge, however, the concept of nature and of its order had to be reconceived in terms of the concept of laws that govern the course of events, laws that are unchangeable in principle. That the order of nature, once created, is unchangeable had been affirmed already by René Descartes as a consequence of God’s immutability, and Baruch Spinoza concluded that miracles therefore cannot occur. Spinoza believed that the perfection of the Creator requires us to affirm that the order of creation is never in need of repair or of later improvement. The deists followed in that line. It was a small step, then, to conceive of the order of nature in terms of laws that permit no exceptions. The idea of miracles, then, is excluded by definition, as we have it in Hume.

Considering this development, theology should avoid purely objective concepts of miracles as occurring *praeter naturam* or *contra naturam* and return to Augustine’s idea of miracle as related to the subjectivity of our human experience of nature, especially to the limitations of our knowledge. The Augustinian concept of miracle is subjective in that it is related

to what we experience as unusual and exceptional in contrast to the accustomed patterns of events. The objective basis of this experience is the contingency of events. Unusual events really happen. Sometimes they are very unusual, including unusual effects produced by human persons. There are no clear indications of their divine authorization, however. The Egyptian “sorcerers” of the pharaoh were able to produce some of the same “miracles” as Moses did (Exodus 7:22), and the animal of Revelation 13 is said to produce many “signs,” such as fire falling from heaven (13:13). Therefore, miracles are ambivalent, and that is one reason that the Bible warns against asking for signs as legitimation. It does not belong to the nature of a miracle that it is an action of God, although God does work the greatest miracles. A miracle is just an unusual event or action, and religious interpretation identifies it as an act of God. It is at this point that faith enters the picture. To those who believe in God the Creator, the world is full of miracles. Friedrich Schleiermacher said (in his second speech on religion, 1799) that miracle is the religious name for event. The religious mind takes nothing as simply a matter of fact. It is aware of the contingency of every single event and experiences everything that happens as a manifestation of the contingency of the world of creation, especially the gift of each new day. Human beings are not always aware of the extent to which our life depends on contingencies, because in our everyday life we tend to take for granted that the world, the order of nature, is going on as usual. Once in a while, however, contingencies occur that make people aware of the basic contingency that permeates all reality. Such an unusual occurrence may be experienced as a “miracle,” and religious persons will take it as an act of God, a “sign” of the continuing activity of the Creator in creation and perhaps of new things to come.

Miracles in this sense are not opposed to the order of nature or to the concept of natural law. Rather, the order of nature itself by natural law is one of the greatest miracles, in view of the basic contingency of events and of their sequence. Laws describe repetitive patterns in the sequence of events, and the emergence of such patterns and, therefore, of the order of nature by natural law is not self-evident but a miracle indeed, basic as it is for the emergence and existence of all complex creatures. The applicability of a formula of law presupposes that something is contingently given and that some sequence of events occurs. Thus, the contingency of events is required in all the regularities described by formulas of natural law. It is only that we are accustomed to those regularities to such a degree that we are not aware of the contingent substructure of the processes. Only when something unusual happens do we become aware of it. But unusual occurrences may in fact follow other patterns of law that we do not know about. Even if some events or phenomena may not be explainable by the laws of nature known at a given time, they may be explainable in the future, when a more comprehensive understanding of natural processes

emerges. Even the resurrection of Jesus, the central miracle of the Christian faith, need not defy such explanation in principle, although at present it certainly does. If the Christian hope for a future resurrection of the dead is fulfilled sometime in the future, the resurrection of Jesus will no longer be completely exceptional, although its occurrence in the midst of history will still remain particular.

The concept of miracle in the Augustinian sense of the term, then, does not involve any opposition to the order of nature described in terms of natural law. It only requires us to admit that we do not know everything about how the processes of nature work. Therefore, there can be unusual events, some of which, though uncommon, are explainable on the basis of our present knowledge of natural law, and some of which are not but may be understood better in the future. In any event, the awareness of the limitations of our knowledge may keep us from denying on principle the possibility of unusual events, even if they are extremely unusual. That their occurrence is "against all custom and (former) experience" is no sufficient reason, as Hume thought, to deny their possibility on principle; that would be a form of dogmatism and not consonant with the empirical attitude of science.