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## TWO UNSUCCESSFUL OBJECTIONS TO THE APOLOGETIC WORTH OF MIRACLES

**Abstract.** In this article I examine two common, widely used, objections to the apologetic worth of miracles and argue that they are unsuccessful. These are: (1) the objection that it would take an inordinate amount of evidence to establish the occurrence of certain events such as the Resurrection of Jesus, and (2) the objection that even if such events could justifiably be held to have occurred, it would be more rational to attribute them to unknown natural causes rather than supernatural intervention. Using the views of David Basinger, found in his 2018 Cambridge Elements monograph *Miracles*, as a foil, I argue that both objections are mistaken.

**Keywords:** miracle; apology; David Basinger; laws of nature

1. Introduction. 2. Miracles and the laws of nature. 3. Miracles and the unknown natural causes objection. 4. Conclusion.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

From the inception of Christianity, the argument from miracle has played a central role in Christians' defense of their faith. As F.F. Bruce demonstrated in his *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, (the British edition being titled *The Apostolic Defense of the Gospel*): "the argument from prophecy and the argument from miracle were regarded by first-century Christians, as by their successors in the second and many following centuries, as the strongest evidence for the truth of the gospel ... In the proclamation of the apostles the argument from prophecy and the argument from miracle coincided and culminated in the resurrection of Jesus" (Bruce, 1977, 16-17).

Through succeeding centuries this argument continued to play a central role. We find, for example, Joseph Butler, one of the finest Christian apologists of the 18th century, arguing that "miracles and

fulfilled prophecy are Christianity's "direct and fundamental proofs... [and other evidence for Christianity – R.L.] however considerable they are, yet ought never to be urged apart from its direct proof" (Butler, 1736, 236).

Given its long history and the primacy accorded to it by the apostles, one might expect that the argument from miracle would feature prominently in contemporary defenses of Christian faith. This is not always the case, however, even for theologically conservative Christians. Alvin Plantinga, for example, is sceptical that testimony can justify belief in Christ's Resurrection, writing that "if in fact there are good arguments [from public evidence – R.L.] for Christian belief ... I don't *know* of any such arguments" (Plantinga, 2001, 398).<sup>1</sup> Instead, Plantinga holds that belief in the Resurrection should be grounded in the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Whereas Plantinga does not think that belief in Jesus's return to life can be justified based on public evidence, Stephen Wykstra, argues that even if public evidence justifies the belief that Jesus arose from death, there is no justification for believing it to be a miracle, namely an event involving supernatural intervention overriding what would otherwise occur. According to Wykstra, anyone employing the argument from miracle "must adopt a policy of systematic inconsistency with respect to ... probability-estimating procedures ... [employing] the normal procedures when appraising the possibilities envisioned by naturalistic alternatives to the resurrection hypothesis, ... [but abstaining – R.L.] from these procedures when gauging the probability of the resurrection" (Wykstra, 1978, 161).<sup>2</sup> More recently, David Basinger similarly argues that "we will never be in a position to claim that a miracle, defined as the type of event for which a natural explanation could never be given, has actually occurred" (Basinger, 2018, 27). He goes on to claim that it is as equally rational for a non-theist to believe

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1 For a criticism of Plantinga's "dwindling probabilities" argument, see Colwell, 2003.

2 In this passage, Wykstra takes the term 'resurrection' to signify a miraculous event.

that if Jesus returned to life after three days of being dead this was a result of natural causes, as it is for a theist to believe that it was the result of divine intervention (Basinger, 2018, 52).

In what follows, I shall argue that such dismissals of the argument from miracle are mistaken. I shall make my case by examining two fundamental questions; first, the question of whether we can have good reason to believe certain highly unusual events have occurred, and second, the question of whether, having occurred, such events are properly understood as being miracles, rather than events with yet unknown natural causes. Since I have already published extensively on the first question, my treatment of it here will be comparatively brief. I shall spend more time on the second question and will use the arguments of David Basinger as found in his recent monograph *Miracles* as a foil.

## 2. MIRACLES AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

As regards the first question, many philosophers have followed Hume in defining miracles as violating the laws of nature, then going on to develop a balance of probabilities argument whereby the evidence for the laws of nature is opposed to the evidence for miracles, concluding that because there is an enormous amount of evidence for the laws of nature the evidence needed to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle would have to be extraordinarily strong. So strong that it is either impossible or extremely unlikely belief in a miracle could ever be justified.<sup>3</sup>

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3 G. Colwell points out that “the relative numerical smallness of a class of events has little to do with the likelihood that a particular member of the class has or has not occurred” (1982, 330) and that “one cannot establish anything about the truth of an alleged miracle merely by attending ... to the relatively great rarity of miraculous events” (1982, 331). Contra Hume, “the existential status of a conceivable event can never be determined *a priori* by considering only the numerical significance of the class to which it belongs but can only be determined *a posteriori* by considering all the evidence relevant to that event” (1982, 332) Hume, it appears, is guilty of the fallacy of division (1982, 331).

Such arguments, however, rely on the assumption that supernatural intervention requires violating some law(s) of nature. This assumption is mistaken. Laws of nature do not in themselves allow the prediction of any event, but only in conjunction with a set of material conditions and only then assuming no intervening cause. Consider by way of analogy, my rolling an extra ball onto the table just as someone is making a billiard shot, or my throwing an apple into the air. I change what would otherwise happen, but at no moment do I render Newton's Laws of Motion inoperative or falsify the fact that there exists gravitational attraction between the mass of the earth and the mass of the apple.

Similarly, if God creates or annihilates units of mass or energy or simply causes some of these units to occupy a different position, then He produces an event that would not otherwise have occurred without altering or violating any laws of nature, including it should be stressed the Principle of the Conservation of Energy, since the Principle "says nothing at all about conservation of energy in systems that are *not* [causally] closed" (Plantinga, 2011, 79).<sup>4</sup> God can bring about a miracle not by violating the laws of nature, but rather by altering the material conditions to which the laws apply. As Jeffrey Koperski notes, "changes to nonnomic conditions do not violate the laws of nature. Nature allows for change that the laws can seamlessly adapt to... Once the laws of nature are distinguished from behavior that is the *result* of those laws and nonnomic conditions, we find a vast space of contingency in which God can act [without violating any laws of nature – R.L.]" (Koperski, 2020, 135).

This being the case, the critic is in no position to claim that the evidence for the laws of nature must be pitted against the evidence for a miracle. Given the inability to construct such a balance of probabilities argument, it will not do to claim that belief in miracles requires an extraordinary amount of evidence to be justified. Justified belief

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4 For further discussion of this important point see Larmer (2014, 41-46 and 2025, 129-135).

in miracles may require good evidence both in quality and quantity, but it does not require extraordinary evidence. John Henry Newman put the point nicely when he wrote that “a miracle ... calls for no distinct species of testimony from that offered for other events ... it is as impossible to draw any line, or to determine how much is required, as to define the quantity and quality of evidence to prove the occurrence of an earthquake, or the appearance of any meteoric phenomenon ... the testimony cannot turn out to be more than that of competent and honest men; and an inquiry must not be prosecuted under the idea of finding something beyond this, but to obtain proofs of this” (Newman, 1886, 73).

This is not to deny, however, that extraordinarily strong evidence well beyond what is needed to justify belief is available in many instances.

### 3. MIRACLES AND THE UNKNOWN NATURAL CAUSES OBJECTION

Regarding the second question of whether certain unusual events are properly understood as being miracles, rather than events with yet unknown natural causes, it is useful to examine the view of David Basinger, as given in his recent Cambridge Elements monograph, *Miracles*.

Basinger provides what he terms a “working definition” of a miracle; namely that a miracle is an “unusual, unexpected, observable event due in part to the intentional direct interventive activity of God” (Basinger, 2018, 17). So far, so good; the definition apparently avoids making part of the definition of a miracle that it violates the laws of nature.

Basinger, however, muddies the waters when he explicitly considers the question of whether a miracle, so defined, would violate laws of nature. On the one hand, he acknowledges that the conceptual problem of whether miracles violate laws of nature dissolves once it is realized that “to claim that natural laws accurately describe

the natural order is to say only that such laws correctly predict what will occur under a specified set of natural conditions” (Basinger, 2018, 20) and not what will happen when “some non-natural [i.e., supernatural – R.L.] causal factor was also involved” (Basinger, 2018, 21). This is correct, since as has already been noted, the laws of nature do not in themselves allow the prediction or explanation of any event, but only in conjunction with a set of material conditions and only then assuming no intervening cause.

On the other hand, Basinger surprisingly claims that such an account doesn’t adequately account for what theists “have in mind when they claim that miracles can’t be given a fully natural explanation” (Basinger, 2018, 21). Rather, he asserts, they “want to press the point that the events they consider miracles are true counterinstances to, [that is to say violations of – R.L.] true natural laws. And they mean by this something stronger than simply the fact that if the event in question is a true miracle – and, thus, is in part the result of non-natural factors – this event cannot be given a fully natural explanation” (Basinger, 2018, 21).

I find this assertion by Basinger unconvincing. I think it is precisely the intention of those asserting the occurrence of a miracle that it is an event which, being at least partially the result of supernatural intervention, can never be given a fully natural explanation. To the extent that they are inclined to claim that a miracle violates the laws of nature, it is only because they, like Basinger, hold the mistaken belief that supernatural intervention can only take place by violating a law of nature. Clearly, their primary commitment is to the view that miracles are supernaturally caused and only secondarily to the view that miracles violate the laws of nature. Once they realize that supernatural intervention does not imply violation of the laws of nature, their secondary belief that miracles violate the laws of nature is easily abandoned. Quite clearly then, as Basinger earlier admitted, the seeming conceptual problem of miracles violating the laws of nature, to use his own wording, “dissolves” (Basinger, 2018, 21).

Basinger's insistence that this is not what those asserting the occurrence of a miracle mean leads him to give an account, which he terms a clarification, of what he thinks they mean to assert. I take him to be mistaken in this insistence and consequently think that his "clarification" is not needed and, indeed, amounts to confusing the issue.

Basinger begins by introducing a distinction between *event tokens* and *event types* (Basinger, 2018, 21). Given that a miracle results at least partially from supernatural intervention, it, "as an event token, cannot have a totally natural explanation" (Basinger, 2018, 21). Having said this, in something of a non sequitur, he devotes the rest of the paragraph to making the case that "the primary purpose of natural science... is not to determine what nature has in fact produced ... [but rather] to determine what nature is capable of producing under solely natural conditions" (Basinger, 2018, 21). Thus, for example, "with respect to an instance of cancer remission in an individual, ... the primary purpose of natural science is not to decide whether natural factors alone were actually responsible for any specific person's remission ... [but] to determine whether natural factors alone could have produced this type of event" (Basinger, 2018, 21).

This leads him to claim that those who assert the occurrence of a miracle intend to claim that miracles are not only *token* events that defy natural explanation, but a *type* of event that "could never be given a fully natural explanation" (Basinger, 2018, 22). He goes to say that this raises the question of "whether we could ever be in a position to maintain justifiably that an event of this type could not have been produced by natural factors alone" (Basinger, 2018, 22). He answers in the negative, asserting that since we should always leave the natural explicability of an event type an open question, we can never "be in a position to claim that a miracle, defined as the type of event for which a natural explanation could never be given, has actually occurred" (Basinger, 2018, 27).

Basinger, nevertheless, argues that his distinction between ‘token’ and ‘type’ “doesn’t in any sense entail that certain event tokens can’t be held justifiably... to be occurrences for which no fully natural explanation could be forthcoming and, thus, considered candidates for the miraculous” (Basinger, 2018, 26). He attempts to ground such justification in being able to view such event tokens as instantiations of recognized divine action patterns. Given, however, his insistence that we have no objective criteria by which to “determine the comparative strength of the evidence for and against God’s existence” (Basinger, 2018, 44), and his acknowledgement that theists differ quite considerably as to what they consider divine action patterns (Basinger, 2018, 45, 47), the ‘justification’ he espouses appear to have little grounding and is thus problematically subjective. Even more worrisome is the fact that a divine action pattern held to justify belief in an event being a miracle might well be grounded in prior events taken to be instances of the miraculous.

Before proceeding further, it is appropriate to note two concerns as regards Basinger’s account of science’s primary goal and his use of the term “type.” First, it is far from clear that the primary goal of science is simply to determine what could possibly happen due to natural causes, but not to determine what does happen due to natural causes. Biologists, for example, claim not only that the sun could provide energy promoting the growth of plants, but that it does provide energy promoting the growth of plants. Geologists do not simply claim that plate tectonics could cause mountains to form, but that plate tectonics do cause mountains to form. Other examples can be easily adduced making it clear that scientists routinely aim to explain specific events occurring in the world.

Second, the term ‘type’ can be used in either a very coarse-grained or a much more fine-grained multi-levelled categorical way. Dogs are a certain type of mammal, but we may also speak of a certain type of dog. Similarly, recovery from cancer is a type of event, but we may speak of different types of recovery from cancers of different types at

a much more fine-grained level. It might be easily possible to explain a slow recovery from a specific type of cancer through consideration of natural causes, but much more difficult, indeed impossible, to explain an instantaneous recovery from a different type of cancer, say stage four pancreatic cancer, through consideration of natural causes.

Further, not all events claimed to be miracles admit of having any kind of corresponding natural type. Human virgins giving birth,<sup>5</sup> water instantaneously becoming wine,<sup>6</sup> and persons returning to life after three days being dead,<sup>7</sup> do not appear to be the typical result of natural causes. Other examples, taken from the accounts of the New Testament gospels, can easily be given.

Basinger is certainly aware that such types of events are currently inexplicable in terms of natural causes. Indeed, because he holds the mistaken view that supernatural intervention must involve violation of the laws of nature, he maintains that “well-established natural laws... count strongly against the veracity of... [reports of events claimed by believers to be miracles – R.L.]” (Basinger, 2018, 37). Allowing, as he does, that there might possibly be sufficient evidence to accept their occurrence, he nevertheless holds that “there is no conceivable situation in which we would be required to decide whether a currently inexplicable event type could or could not ever be given a fully natural explanation” (Basinger, 2018, 22).

His attempted justification for claiming this is that it would “be the height of scientific provincialism for anyone to ever decide, solely on the basis of the data presently available, that it was at this time justifiable to label a given event permanently inexplicable by natural causal factors alone” (Basinger, 2018, 22). He maintains that it would “always be more reasonable for scientists, given our necessarily limited understanding of the natural order, to respond to even the most

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5 Lk 1:26-38, Lk 2:6-7. Any suggestion of parthenogenesis fails since Jesus was male.

6 Jn 2:6-10.

7 Matt 28:1-10.

unusual of incongruities by continuing to run tests indefinitely or by simply labeling the occurrence an anomaly and waiting for the occurrence of similar phenomena before seriously investigating further” (Basinger, 2018, 27).<sup>8</sup>

But is it the height of scientific provincialism to claim that if certain events did in fact occur – say Jesus turning water instantaneously into wine, multiplying loaves and fishes, returning to life after three days of being dead – we may justifiably believe them permanently inexplicable by natural causal factors alone? Faced with Jesus’s prediction that he would return from death<sup>9</sup> and his fulfillment of that prediction should one simply label the events anomalies and wait for the occurrence of similar phenomena before seriously investigating further, all the while ignoring Jesus’s claims concerning his identity and the source of his power?

Although he does not label it as such, Basinger appears to be appealing to an objection known as the ‘God of the gaps’ fallacy, a version of the fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantium*, which arises when one claims either that: 1. there is no proof (or you have not proven) that  $p$  is false. Therefore,  $p$  is true. Or 2. there is no proof (or you have not proven) that  $p$  is true. Therefore,  $p$  is false.

Basinger appears to view those claiming divine intervention in nature to be in danger of fallaciously arguing that since it has not been shown that an event claimed to be a miracle has a natural cause, then this is proof that it does not have a natural cause.

In response, I begin by making two points. The first is that if supernatural intervention is ever a factor, then there will be gaps in any genuine explanation of the event solely in terms of natural causes. To suggest that we should always posit the explanation of an event – no

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<sup>8</sup> Basinger makes these claims by posing them as rhetorical questions, but it is evident that he takes them to justify his assertion that it is impossible to ever be “in a position to claim that a miracle, defined as the type of event for which a natural explanation could never be given, has actually occurred.”

<sup>9</sup> Matt 16:21-23, Mk 8:31-33, Lk 9:22.

matter the event or the context in which it occurs – to be the result of natural causes is to commit a ‘naturalism of the gaps’ that makes naturalistic explanations invincible ever to being challenged.

Second, presumed examples of the fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantium* often need to be redescribed, such redescription demonstrating that they are not arguments from ignorance at all. As Douglas Walton notes, “redescription or transformation turns an argument from ignorance into a more positive-appearing kind of argumentation using *modus tollens*, and an implicit conditional assumption. ... The transformation is based on the condition that if you have looked for something, and clearly it is not there, then this observation can count as a kind of positive evidence that it is not there” (Walton, 1996, 134-135).

Suppose, for example, that I am told that there is a large Great Dane in my upstairs bathroom. I go look and carefully look but find no evidence of such a dog and conclude that there is in fact no Great Dane in my bathroom. It would make no sense to accuse me of committing the fallacy of *ad ignorantium* in such an instance. Clearly there are circumstances where the absence of evidence can count as a conclusive reason that something is indeed absent.

So long as this condition is either made explicit or can reasonably be assumed to be implicit, gap arguments cannot be viewed as logically suspect. Del Ratzsch is, therefore, correct to observe that “[gap] arguments have no formal logical problems ... if neither nature nor finite agency can produce some phenomenon inarguably before us, then supernatural agency is about the only option left” (Ratzsch, 2001, 47). He goes on to note that “if God-of-the-gaps explanations are *scientifically* illegitimate, it will have to be solely due to their reference to the supernatural – not because their logical structure violates any other canon of science or rationality” (Ratzsch, 2001, 48). The real issue, therefore, is not whether gap arguments should be viewed as invariably poor, but rather whether enough can known

about how nature operates to warrant the belief that some types of event require explanation in terms of supernatural intervention.

Basinger's insistence that one could never be justified in making such a claim appears to be based on an inductive argument to the effect that the progress of science has frequently demonstrated that types of events which were regarded as miraculous in the past have been shown to have natural explanations. We are far less likely in the twenty-first century to attribute disease, crop failures or drought to supernatural intervention in nature. Leaving aside the fact that it is far from clear that such types of events were ever invariably credited to supernatural causation, several points need to be made in reply.<sup>10</sup>

First, even if some types of events have in the past been mistakenly viewed as requiring supernatural intervention to occur, this does not provide a strong inductive argument that all types of events viewed as miraculous have possible natural explanations. Making such a claim is analogous to asserting that because pigeons are easy to catch, likewise cheetahs will be easy to catch. Just as the great difference between pigeons and cheetahs undermines any prediction that cheetahs will be easy to capture, the enormous difference between crop failures and Jesus's return from death after three days undermines any prediction that his resurrection is a type of event that can possibly be explained in terms of natural causes.

Second, the suggestion that the progress of science may invalidate types of events deemed miraculous is double-edged. To claim that a type of event is miraculous is to claim that we know enough about the operation of natural causes to conclude that the event type cannot be explained in terms of the operation of such causes. Such a claim can be undermined if, as science progresses, a plausible explanation

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10 It should be noted that Jesus distinguishes between physical ailments that are naturally caused and those that are not. In John 9:1-3, he refuses to view a man's blindness as punishment for sin, but in Luke 13:10-16 he views a woman's condition of being crippled as the result of spiritual oppression.

in terms of natural causes becomes available. It deserves emphasis, however, that the warrant for believing an event type miraculous is strengthened if as science progresses it becomes ever more difficult to provide a natural explanation.

Indeed, there is a strong inductive argument that our increased knowledge of how natural causes operate has not made it easier but much more difficult to explain naturalistically certain types of events claimed to be miraculous. We know vastly more about the chemistry of wine and the complexities of human physiology than we did two thousand years ago, but this increased knowledge has only made it harder, not easier, to explain in terms of natural causes Jesus turning water into wine or his returning to life three days after being killed.

Third, Basinger's claim that event types which appear to be best understood as miraculous can nevertheless legitimately be viewed as resulting from unknown natural causes does not provide an alternative explanation accounting for the possibility of such a natural type, but rather to the issuing of a promissory note which, as just mentioned, lacks inductive backing.

By contrast, explaining such event types as the result of supernatural intervention does not commit one to such questionable speculation. That this is the case can be seen by the fact that we easily and unproblematically recognize that human agents – without violating any laws of nature – induce counterflow<sup>11</sup> to natural processes to bring about events and artefacts<sup>12</sup> that would not otherwise occur. There exists, therefore, no reason to deny that supernatural activity could “produce recognizable counterflow, recognizable artifactuality, and even recognizable design... [and that] even within the scientific context, acknowledgement of such counterflow, artifactuality and design is perfectly legitimate” (Ratzsch, 2001, 30). One can admit miracles

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11 Ratzsch defines counterflow as “things running contrary to what, in the relevant sense, would (or might) have resulted or occurred had nature operated freely” (Ratzsch, 2001, 5).

12 Ratzsch defines an artefact as “anything embodying counterflow” (Ratzsch, 2001, 6).

yet avoid an unwarranted scepticism regarding our knowledge of how nature operates. Acknowledging the existence of miracles does not threaten our knowledge of how nature operates when not intervened upon by something other than itself, but rather recognizing evidence of supernatural agency bringing about events that nature would not otherwise produce.

Consider, by way of illustration, the following thought experiment. Suppose a man decides to invest in gold but has a distrust of banks. He purchases several gold bars, puts them in a locked lead-lined safe and buries the safe in a remote area of his property, believing that no one knows the combination of the safe or the location where the safe is buried. After a time in which gold has made substantial gains in value, the man decides to cash out his investment and goes and digs up the safe. When he uses the combination to open the safe, he finds to his surprise that the gold bars are gone.

There are two hypotheses the man could consider. The first is that some unknown natural circumstances have caused the gold to diffuse through the walls of the safe, its atoms spreading out so widely in the surrounding environment that there remains no gold discernible to the naked eye. The second is that despite his believing that no one knew the location of the safe, someone either knew or happened upon the safe and knew or was able to crack the combination and took the gold.

The second hypothesis that the disappearance of the gold is due to the action of an intelligent agent is by far the more rational hypothesis. Its rationality is so much superior to the first hypothesis that the man probably will not even consider the first hypothesis. By analogy, if certain events have in fact occurred, say the resurrection of Jesus, it is more rational to explain such events in terms of intelligent agency, even if that agency is best understood to be supernatural.

The point, of course, is that it is important to distinguish bare logical possibility from what is probable. That two hypotheses might both be logically possible in no way implies that they are equally probable

or that it is irrational to come to accept one as rationally justified, but the other not. This is true not only in cases of reasoning concerning events best understood as miracles but in general. It might, perhaps,<sup>13</sup> be possible with enough ingenuity, to develop a hypothesis that “explained” ocean tides without any reference to the influence of the moon’s gravitational pull. Even if this be granted, however, there is no justification for claiming that whether one accepts that the moon’s gravitational pull influences ocean tides should remain in practice an open question. Analogously, as regards miracles, John Henry Newman writes that “it is impossible from the nature of the case, absolutely to disprove any, even the wildest, hypothesis which may be framed ... It becomes, then, a balance of opposite probabilities, whether gratuitously to suppose a multitude of perfectly unknown causes, and these, moreover, meeting in one and the same history, or to have recourse to one [cause] ... miraculously exerted for an extraordinary and worthy object” (Newman, 1886, 54-55).

Basinger is thus wrong to claim that it should always be left an open question whether an event type should be understood as miraculous (Basinger, 2018, 26-27).

In the immediately preceding paragraphs, I have been conceding the implicit assumption that no matter the type of event or the material circumstances in which it occurs there always exists the bare logical possibility of an explanation in terms of natural causes. However, that this assumption is justified is far from clear. As Ratzsch notes, “science, in fact, is littered with impossibility claims ... scientific justification for the claim that nature does not or cannot produce some specific phenomenon turns out to be a routine, unproblematic aspect of scientific activity” (Ratzsch, 2001, 48).

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13 I say “perhaps” because I do not think it is evident that, given the actual material conditions obtaining, it is in fact logically possible to provide an alternative explanation of ocean tides makes no reference to the moon’s gravitational pull.

Suppose by way of thought experiment that in the very early stages of our universe, before the existence of hydrogen or oxygen, there suddenly appears a barrel of water. It would appear logically impossible to explain in terms of natural causes how such an event came to occur since the material conditions are such that no hydrogen or oxygen would be available to make possible the natural formation of water, never mind the existence of the barrel.

Just as it is the case that we know enough about nature to say that the natural formation of water under such material circumstances just described is impossible, it seems equally the case that we know enough about water to justifiably claim that its spontaneous transformation into wine is not naturally possible, and that we know enough about dead bodies to justifiably claim that it is not naturally possible for them to return to life after three days of death. The fact that there are some things in nature about which we must acknowledge ignorance, does not negate the fact that there are other things we do know.

Fourth, Basinger's speculative suggestion that new or modified laws might allow a natural explanation of events paradigmatically viewed as miracles - for example, Jesus' multiplication of loaves and fishes,<sup>14</sup> or his return to life after being dead for three days - his insistence that there is no scientific need to claim that the event type will never be explicable naturally" appears misguided (Basinger, 2018, 26).<sup>15</sup> Laws are invoked as helping to explain events that regularly occur. Paradigm miraculous event types, however, by their very nature resist explanation in terms of lawful regularity. What law of regularity, for example, would explain how Jesus, at a spoken word, could multiply loaves and fishes, yet not apply to any one else's

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<sup>14</sup> Mk 6:35-42.

<sup>15</sup> It is unclear why Basinger feels the adjective "scientific" should modify "need." If it is genuinely the case that a type of event is inexplicable in terms of natural causes, then scientists, no less than other individuals need to recognize that fact and let it inform any inferences they draw as scientists.

speech? What law of regularity would explain Jesus's return to life after being dead three days, but not yield any insight as to why other people experience no such return to life? As Richard Swinburne comments, the laws of nature: "describe what happens in a regular and predictable way. When what happens is entirely irregular and unpredictable, its occurrence is not something describable by natural laws. Speculating as to the existence of unknown laws of nature is, therefore, no help in providing a naturalistic explanation of such events (Swinburne, 1970, 26).

Given that the appeal to unknown natural laws provides no help in providing an explanation of such types of events, it appears that those holding to the possibility of a natural explanation have no option but to attribute such events to chance. Consideration, however, of what would be required in terms of the spontaneous natural formation of loaves and fishes or a body naturally returning to life after three days of death places such event types well beyond the capacity of chance to accomplish.

It appears clear, therefore, that such types of events are best understood as arising from counterflow to natural processes, produced by supernatural agency. Just as in the case of human agency, the recognition of this counterflow takes place "against the background of and in contrast with our understanding of the normal flows of nature" (Ratzsch, 2001, 9).

Fifth, anyone putting forth the possibility of explanation in terms of natural causes must be prepared to explain not only the event type itself, but also the teleological contexts in which it occurs. The New Testament reports that Jesus did not simply rise from the dead but that he predicted he would rise from the dead.<sup>16</sup> Paul is not only struck blind; he is instructed to go to Damascus and wait; meanwhile Ananias in prayer, is given specific instructions to go to a certain address

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<sup>16</sup> Mk 9:30-32.

where he will meet Paul and heal him of his blindness.<sup>17</sup> Modern day events best explained as miracles also exhibit this embeddedness in a teleological context.<sup>18</sup> The fact that certain unusual event types can be reasonably viewed as furthering God's purposes plays a role in the argument that they are best explained as miraculous.<sup>19</sup> This means that the context in which these events occur is an important element to consider. As Burns notes, "to believe in a miracle is not simply to believe in a freak occurrence, but in an event regarded as rendered intelligible and credible by the use of teleological explanation with reference to divine intentions" (Burns, 1981, 231).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Two points emerge from our discussion. First, given that miracles should not be defined as violating any laws of nature, and that the common objection that the occurrence of a miracle is inconsistent with the truth of the principle of the conservation of energy is mistaken, no balance of probabilities argument based on a conflict between the evidence for the laws of nature and the evidence for a miracle is possible. This means that Hume's argument of part one of his *Of Miracles* based as it is on a presumed conflict between these two bodies of evidence, can find no purchase as regards the task of assessing the rationality of belief in a reported miracle.

Second, the claim that the progress of science provides a strong inductive argument against ever believing an event to be a miracle is mistaken. Rather, the progress of science provides a strong inductive argument that the occurrence of certain event types would best be understood as instances of supernatural intervention. If as time goes on our increased scientific knowledge makes it ever more difficult

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<sup>17</sup> Acts 9:3-19.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Larmer, 2014, 200-202.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Houston, 1994, 149.

to provide an explanation of an event in terms of natural causes, and if the event can be seen as furthering what we reasonably take to be God's purposes, then this provides even stronger warrant for believing the event to be the result of supernatural intervention, i.e., a miracle. The claim that the progress of science undermines the rationality of belief in miracles appears, therefore, mistaken. Given good reason to believe that certain events have in fact happened, for example the resurrection of Jesus, the progress of science has strengthened rather than weakened the claim that these events are in fact miracles.

The argument from miracle, therefore, deserves, as it has in the past, to play an ongoing central role in Christian apologetics.

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