Studia Philosophiae Christianae
UKSW
62(2026)1

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THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE: A RESPONSE TO MARCIN WALCZAK

Abstract. Marcin Walczak has paid me the compliment of engaging with the Polish translation of my book, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*. Although he finds my work "clear, insightful and rigorous" he is nevertheless convinced that my position detracts from Christian theology rather than supporting it. He offers six criticisms, three of these being philosophical in nature and three theological. In this response, I examine these criticisms and argue that they are unconvincing.

Keywords: miracle; laws of nature; problem of evil; supernaturalism; biblical exegesis

1. Introduction. 2. Walczak's presentation of my position. 3. Walczak's exposition of my position. 4. Walczak's criticisms of my position. 4.1. Walczak's philosophical criticisms. 4.2. Walczak's theological criticisms. 5. Final thoughts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marcin Walczak has recently offered an exposition and critique of the Polish translation of my book, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*. Unfortunately, I do not speak Polish, so I can only read his article in translation. Nevertheless, it is my hope that in this article I accurately represent his criticisms of my position, so that I may provide a response to his criticisms.

Walczak divides his article into four parts: 1. an introduction, 2. an exposition of my book chapter by chapter, 3. his critical observations concerning my position, three of these being what he terms philosophical criticisms and three being what he terms theological criticisms, and 4. a conclusion in which he summarizes his disagreements with my position.

2. WALCZAK'S PRESENTATION OF MY POSITION

In his Introduction, Walczak pays me the compliment of describing my work as "clear, insightful and rigorous" (Walczak, 2025, 158). He correctly notes that I maintain that miracles "ought to be understood as specific interventions by God in the world" and that such interventions "do not contravene the laws of nature but merely modify certain conditions of the world, which from the moment the miracle occurs, again operate under those laws" (Walczak, 2025, 158).

Despite this compliment, Walczak's judgment is that my proposal is decidedly unconvincing (Walczak, 2025, 158). In his view, my position "fits into a qualitatively weak current of rationalist apologetics, which while attempting to support theology, in fact detracts from it. Larmer's theses, … are meant to make Christian faith appear more rational in the eyes of contemporary man; however, in reality, they distort this faith and may even subject it to ridicule" (Walczak, 2025, 159).

3. WALCZAK'S EXPOSITION OF MY POSITION

Walczak's exposition of the various chapters of my book is largely accurate. He cannot resist, however, interjecting critical comments at certain points, even though he reserves the third part of his article for criticism of my position. Thus, for example, after correctly noting that a fundamental thesis of the book is that a miracle does not imply violation of the laws of nature, he insists that a miracle constitutes a "significant problem for the contemporary worldview shaped by the exact sciences, even if we elegantly argue that this does not thereby violate the laws of nature" (Walczak, 2025, 160). He insists that "it makes no difference whether the law of nature changed or merely the physical conditions … we are dealing with an event which – if actually acknowledged as having actually occurred – completely contradicts the scientific worldview" (Walczak, 2025, 163).

Similarly, in describing my claim in chapter four that adopting methodological naturalism is not definitional of what it means to do science, he asserts that my claim "could be commented on somewhat maliciously … the fact that the spectacular development of the exact sciences occurred precisely when methodological naturalism emerged is, presumably, a 'miraculous' coincidence" (Walczak, 2025, 166).

Nevertheless, despite in his exposition largely ignoring the arguments by which I support my claims, and at points simply asserting that I am mistaken, Walczak is correct in discerning the fundamental claims I defend in *The Legitimacy of Miracle*. The real issue between us, therefore, is not whether he has misinterpreted what I have written, but whether his criticisms of my position as developed in part three of his article are cogent. It is to these criticisms that I now turn.

4. WALCZAK'S CRITICISMS OF MY POSITION

4.1. WALCZAK'S PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISMS

Walczak divides his criticisms into two types: philosophical and theological. He begins his philosophical criticisms by claiming that my argument that miracles need not be conceived as violating the laws of nature "borders on a sophistical trick" (Walczak, 2025, 173). My argument, put very briefly, is that God could bring about an event that nature would not otherwise produce, not by violating the laws of nature, but by altering the material conditions to which the laws apply. There is no point at which the laws of nature are suspended or violated and thus there arises no necessary conflict between the evidence supporting belief in the laws of nature and the evidence supporting belief in miracles understood as divine interventions in nature. Humean-type balance-of-probabilities arguments, depending upon a presumed conflict between the two bodies of evidence, cannot, therefore, be generated.

It is noteworthy that Walczak provides no refutation of this argument as it is developed in *The Legitimacy of Miracle.* Rather, he simply asserts that material reality must be conceived as "a closed whole whose elements are explained scientifically" (Walczak, 2025, 174). This being true, "it is irrelevant whether something breaks the laws of nature or spectacularly changes the arrangement of matter in the world" (Walczak, 2025, 174).

Much could be said regarding this criticism, but I will confine myself to making two brief points. First, Walczak appears guilty of "shifting the goal posts." Typically, testimonial evidence for miracles has been dismissed based on the claim that miracles must be conceived as violating the laws of nature and that the evidence for the laws of nature far outweighs the evidence for miracles. Belief in miracles is typically deemed as unscientific based on their presumed conflict with the laws of nature. If miracles need not be conceived as violating the laws of nature, then Walczak needs to provide some other basis upon which to view belief in the occurrence of miracles as unscientific.

He attempts to do so by asserting that material reality is a closed whole (Walczak, 2025, 175). His assertion conveniently ignores that within the physical universe there are no completely causally isolated systems, yet scientific investigation of its reality is in no way hindered. The only completely causally closed system ever proposed is the universe itself. This, however, is to beg the question of whether the universe is causally closed and thus not subject to divine intervention.

Divine interventions, so long as they are not overwhelmingly frequent, need in no way undermine belief in an orderly reality that science can fruitfully investigate. The fact that miracles need not be considered as violating any laws of nature, including the Principle of the Conservation of Energy, precisely supports such a conclusion. It will not do, therefore, for Walczak to insist, presumably on the basis that science requires such a claim, that material reality is a closed whole (Larmer, 2014, 37-46).

Walczak's second philosophical criticism is that "science itself can easily discredit claims to … miraculousness" (Walczak, 2025, 187). His argument for this is that, "science continually develops, and human knowledge about the world constantly increases. Therefore, certain events may be considered miraculous at a given time, only to later turn out to be fully explainable within the framework of a newer state of scientific knowledge" (Walczak, 2025, 175).

Further, if an explanation is not available in terms of natural causes, "the most appropriate solution … remain[s] the conviction that, as human knowledge of the world progresses further, this phenomenon too will be explainable through scientific research" (Walczak, 2025, 175).

Again, much could be said regarding this criticism, but again I will confine myself to making two brief points. The first is that Walczak, by insisting that one never contemplate the possibility of divine intervention as an explanation of an event taking place in the world, has made his contention that such intervention never occurs unfalsifiable. Such insistence amounts not to truth-seeking, but dogmatism. It guarantees that if miracles do in fact occur, they can never be recognized as such.

Second, although it is true that scientific progress might conceivably undermine the legitimacy of deeming an event a miracle, it is equally true that it can strengthen the claim that the occurrence of certain events should be deemed miraculous. Should Jesus have turned water into wine or multiplied loaves and fishes, our increased scientific knowledge makes it harder, not easier, to think that such events can ever be explained naturalistically. The issue, of course, is not one of logical possibility – it is a bare logical possibility that some future natural explanation might exist, just as it is a logical possibility that it may not – but one of probability. Our increased scientific knowledge of the chemistry of wine and the physical makeup of fish makes it harder not easier to explain how such events could ever be explained naturalistically. Note too, that the issue at hand is not

whether the events in question have in fact occurred – that should be a matter of historical investigation freed from a priori assumptions such as those espoused by Walczak – but whether such events, if they do occur, should be judged miracles.

I find Walczak's third philosophical objection puzzling, even though he admits that it is less significant than his first two objections. He notes that in the appendix I included in the book, I give four examples of healings that I would consider miraculous and goes on to say that "healings … constitute the weakest example of a miracle and are most prone to natural explanations, even if not yet today, then in the future" (Walczak, 2025, 180). He criticizes me on this account, saying that I use dramatic examples such as the raising of Lazarus or the multiplication of loaves and fishes when discussing whether certain events should be judged miraculous if they occur, but confine myself to accounts of healing when I "discuss miracles actually occurring today" (Walczak, 2025, 180).

This appears a very weak objection. First, the appendix records events I have personally investigated and think have a strong claim to be considered miraculous in the sense of being divine interventions. Walczak, based on the existence of psychosomatic influences, does not regard these events as miraculous. It should be noted, however, that, as Walczak admits, "we already know much about psychosomatic influences" and that the healings I describe far exceed what psychosomatic influences are known to be capable of producing. Walczak, of course, is free to issue a promissory note that such events will be shown to have a natural explanation, but the backing of such a note remains suspect (Walczak, 2025, 180).

Indeed, Walczak's assertion that "a person's mental state (including their faith) can influence their physical state in even remarkably spectacular ways" appears at odds with the methodological naturalism upon which he insists (Walczak, 2025, 180). A methodological naturalist must treat the mind-body problem just the same as would an ontological naturalist. Thus, the methodological naturalist, no less

than the ontological naturalist, finds themself wedded to the view that mental events are epiphenomenal, "existing in total causal isolation from the rest of the world, even from other mental events" (Kim, 2006, 180).

Second, although it is true that, as in the New Testament, healings are the most prevalent of events typically viewed as miraculous, there are numerous well-evidenced accounts of the multiplication of food and raising dead individuals that are of the same type as those recorded in the New Testament. Walczak would do well to consult Craig Keener's two-volume work on miracles (Keener, 2011, 508--599). Walczak is free to investigate the reliability of such reports, but it is simply mistaken for him to suggest that such events are not contemporarily reported.

4.2. WALCZAK'S THEOLOGICAL CRITICISMS

Moving from philosophical criticism to theological criticism, Walczak argues that the claim that God has both created and constantly upholds the universe is at odds with the claim that God acts in history (Walczak, 2025, 181). He admits these two claims do not contradict one another but immediately attempts to argue that they are in fact incompatible, claiming that divine intervention "reduces God … to the level of creation" (Walczak, 2025, 181). He goes on to assert that "interventionist supernaturalism … reduces God … to the level of creation. … By attributing to God interventionist actions in the world … one conceives of … God as an element within a broader reality, wherein various agents perform their acts. Consequently, God is here equated with creation, which is not only a theological error but also, from a religious point of view, idolatry. Seeing God as the source of intervention in the world inevitably leads to such idolatry" (Walczak, 2025, 182). (Emphasis added)

I am puzzled by this criticism. Walczak, as noted, admits there exists no contradiction between the claim that God is the transcendent, sustaining Creator of the universe and the claim that God intervenes at times to change what would otherwise occur in the universe (Walczak, 2025, 181). He nevertheless insists that for God to intervene in the universe would make God an element of the universe, "for whoever performs actions within created reality is an element of it" (Walczak, 2025, 181). He cannot, however, have it both ways. If there is no contradiction between the claim that God is the transcendent Creator of the universe and the claim that God intervenes at times to change what would otherwise occur, then he is not entitled to claim that miracles, understood as divine interventions, require conceiving God to be part of the created world.

Common experience teaches us that there is no reason to think that an agent who intervenes to change something in what they have created therefore becomes part of that which they created. I may create a software game, only to subsequently make some changes in the game, without in any way becoming part of the game or losing my identity as creator of the game. I might build a house and subsequently make some changes in that house, but my making such changes does not require that I be understood as an element of the house. Agents frequently make changes to that which they create, and no one suggests that they lose their identity, becoming an element of what they have created. I conclude that Walczak is mistaken in his claim that affirming the existence of miracle is incompatible with affirming God's transcendence as creator and sustainer of the universe.

Walczak's second theological criticism is that an interventionist conception of miracle poses the question of "why miracles occur at some times and not others", giving "rise to the accusation of God's injustice" (Walczak, 2025, 183). He goes on to assert that such a concept inevitably leads in Christian theory and practice to the conclusion that if one does not receive a miracle then one lacks sufficient faith (Walczak, 2025, 183). In his view, my discussion of such concerns

is "cursory and superficial" (Walczak, 2025, 183). Several responses to his charges are in order.

First, it is simply not the case that an interventionist conception of miracle inevitably leads in Christian theory and practice to the conclusion that if one does not receive a miracle then one lacks sufficient faith. It is true that some individuals erroneously draw such a conclusion, but they are very much a minority and are hardly representative of the many Christians who take divine intervention seriously. *Abusus non tollit usum*. New Testament scholar Craig Keener, for example, having written a two-volume work defending the concept and reality of miracles understood as divine interventions, has recently written a book on suffering, in which he rejects any facile assumption that the lack of a miracle is the result of a lack of faith (Keener, 2011; 2025).

Second, the question of why miracles understood as divine interventions occur in one instance and not another is a form of the problem of evil. Walczak ignores that I provide reasons why such might sometimes be the case – reasons he neglects to mention or discuss. I am clear, however, that these reasons do not constitute a complete fully satisfactory answer to the question and that the question of why a miracle would occur in one instance, but not in an apparently similar instance is not easy to answer. Walczak takes me to task for saying this, insisting that "appealing to the mysterious designs of God, which we cannot fathom, does not seem to be fully satisfactory" (Walczak, 2025, 184). Walczak, in making this remark, ignores that no one has a fully satisfactory answer to the problem of evil and all theists must in the final analysis make reference to the mysterious designs of God in discussing the problem of evil.

Third, a world in which some people are miraculously healed or come to believe in God because of what Walczak derisively calls 'propagandistic' miracles contains less evil than a world in which miracles never occur. Such a world absolves God of the charge that He is an absentee landlord. In such a world, it is true that we cannot answer why a miracle occurs in some cases but not other. To insist,

however, that because we cannot say why in one instance a miracle occurred but did not in another, God must therefore be thought arbitrary and capricious - and thus no God at all – seems a mark of intellectual hubris. Rather, the proper response is to realize that "anyone else's miracle is also a gift to the rest of us" (Keener, 2025, 113). Even if I am not healed myself, I can rejoice that others are.

Walczak's third theological criticism is that I am guilty of faulty biblical exegesis. He writes that, "Larmer … insists on a completely literal reading of the Gospels' text, as if they were historical reportage. … [He] completely disregards the context of the origins of the Gospels, the development of their contained theological thought, and the differences between the individual Gospels regarding the description of the same events. This is a *de facto* fundamentalist approach, and moreover, one in no way justified by the author. … Accepting the descriptions of miracles from the New Testament as accounts of factual events is a significant shortcoming of Larmer's work …" (Walczak, 2025, 185).

This is a very strange criticism for Walczak to raise, especially given his admission that "Larmer's exegetical views are not central to the book, which is fundamentally a philosophical theory of the miracle" (Walczak, 2025, 185). Throughout the book, I make it clear that I am analyzing conceptual issues: for example, questions of whether miracles must be conceived as violating the laws of nature, how much testimonial evidence is required to justify belief in unusual events, in what circumstances should an unusual event be understood to be a divine intervention. My examples, drawn from Christian Scripture, take the form of hypotheticals: if such events occurred must we think of them as violating the laws of nature, what amount of testimonial evidence should we require to accept that such events occurred, and should such events be recognized as miracles, rather than events with unknown natural causes?

It is true that in chapter eight, I make the claim that "there is strong evidence that New Testament accounts, as well as many

contemporary reports, of events best understood to be miracles are accurate" and go on to say that "it is irresponsible for contemporary Christian philosophers and theologians to ignore the apologetic import of such events" (Larmer, 2014, 168, 169). Yet my very next sentence reads that "an unconvinced reader may, however, if he or she wishes, treat my argument as hypothetically demonstrating what follows if I am correct in my claim that there is in fact such a strong case" (Larmer, 2014, 169).

This third "theological" criticism of Walczak's is, therefore, a red herring, since it bears not on the philosophical arguments developed in *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, but rather amounts to Walczak taking issue with what he thinks is my naïve fundamentalist approach to reading and exegeting Christian Scripture.

I happen to think that Walczak's dismissal of the Gospel accounts as accurate descriptions of historical facts depends on a priori philosophical assumptions that cannot withstand scrutiny. Equally, I am prepared to provide positive reasons why I take them to be accurate.[1] This difference, however, is beside the point. It will not do for Walczak to dismiss my philosophical arguments based on his dislike of my taking the historical accuracy of the Gospels seriously, any more than it will do for me to dismiss his philosophical and theological criticisms based on my view that the historical-critical exegesis he espouses is riddled with a priori assumptions that prevent proper assessment of the evidence.

5. FINAL THOUGHTS

In Walczak's view, my book *The Legitimacy of Miracle* distorts Christian faith making such faith vulnerable to ridicule (Walczak, 2025, 159). Regarding his first philosophical criticism, he asserts that my argument that miracles need not be conceived as violating the laws

1 See, for example, McGrew (2017; 2019; 2021). Also Williams (2018).

of nature "borders on a sophistical trick" (Walczak, 2025, 173). Unfortunately, he provides no reason for saying this, other than a question-begging assertion that science requires us to view physical reality as causally closed.

Walczak's second philosophical criticism is that events, no matter how unusual or the context in which they occur, must always be regarded as having a natural explanation even if such an explanation is unknown. He provides, however, no detailed response to my argument that if certain events occurred it would be more rational to view them as miracles rather than issuing a promissory note that we will someday have a natural explanation for their occurrence.

Finally, his third philosophical criticism is extremely weak. It is true that in my book's appendix I mention only instances of healing. This is because I was reporting events I have personally investigated. As I have already mentioned, however, this in no way means that I think healings are the only examples of contemporary miracles.

Walczak's first theological criticism that one cannot hold both that God is the ground and sustainer of physical reality and that God on occasion intervenes in physical reality, appears simply false. Walczak admits these two claims do not contradict one another, but then makes the strange, and clearly false, claim that those accepting both claims will inevitably come to believe that God is part of creation (Walczak, 2025, 181).

Walczak's second theological criticism is that God must be conceived as unjust if miracles are given to some individual but not others. Significantly, he avoids discussing the possible reasons I give why a miracle might occur in one instance but not another. Nevertheless, I make no claim to answer fully the question of why God performs a miracle in one instance but not another. Walczak's insistence that, short of such an answer, the occurrence of a miracle cannot be accepted, seems, however, a mark of intellectual hubris. Miracles, if they occur, absolve God of the charge of being an absentee landlord. The proper response is to see them as a gift to faith, not a detraction from faith.

Walczak's third "theological" criticism is that I employ a naïve and fundamentalist approach to interpreting the Gospels. This criticism entirely misses the mark, since Walczak himself observes that my arguments are philosophical in nature rather than exegetical. His third criticism, therefore, amounts to a red herring rather than an actual engagement with my position.

I conclude that Walczak's criticisms in no way undermine the arguments I develop in *The Legitimacy of Miracle*. Given the failure of these criticisms, I dare to think that they support Christian faith as opposed to making it vulnerable to ridicule.

STATEMENTS

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

AI Tools Declaration: I declare that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript other than paying a translation service to translate Dr. Walczak's article from Polish to English, so that I could respond to his criticism of my book *The Legitimacy of Miracle*.

Conflicts of Interest: I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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10.21697/spch.2026.62.P.01

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Received: 14/06/2026. Reviewed: 01/07/2026. Accepted: 06/07/2026.