



Spinoza on miracles

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A longstanding critical consensus dating back to the seventeenth century has it that Spinoza denies the existence of miracles in chapter six of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.¹ Some think he is the first major philosopher to do so. He can not be the first, however, or indeed anywhere in the succession, if he never denied their existence at all, which is what I shall contend. After briefly outlining what the consensus about Spinoza's view of miracles is, I shall argue that the consensus is mistaken. Next, after presenting what I take his real understanding of miracles to be, I shall offer a conjecture as to why, despite the intense study that has been made of Spinoza's philosophy, his view of miracles has been systematically misunderstood for more than three hundred years.

The critical consensus

No other element of Spinoza's philosophy provoked as much consternation and outrage in his own time as his sweeping denial of miracles and the supernatural. In fact, Spinoza stands completely alone among the major European thinkers before the mid-eighteenth century in ruling out miracles.²

So Jonathan Israel expresses the virtually unanimous verdict of contemporary scholarship. E.E. Harris puts it this way:

Spinoza totally rejects belief in miracles as supernatural wonders. That the disciples believed in them and thought them to be evidence of Christ's divinity he had no doubt. But, he says, it would be no detriment to their teaching to hold that their belief in the miraculous was mistaken. As to what the churches have added in later times, most of this he finds unintelligible and ridiculous.³

Seymour Feldman agrees: "Given [Spinoza's] metaphysical infrastructure, the biblical doctrine of miracles, as traditionally understood, turns out to be an illusion."⁴

Manfred Walther devotes an interesting article to explaining how miracles represent a particular challenge for Spinoza's hermeneutics. On the one hand they occur in the Bible, which Spinoza has undertaken to expound "from premises accepted by those at whom it is aimed." On the other hand "belief in miracles represents a negation of the very principle of Spinoza's philosophy."⁵ The biblical miracle-stories are thus "the test of any philosophy or science that pretends to universal explanatory power."⁶ Spinoza's ability to meet the challenge of miracles is what Walther calls "a miracle of criticism." But he takes the standard line of contemporary scholarship when it comes to Spinoza's view of whether miracles exist: "Miracles are concepts of reflection derived from a pre-scientific consciousness," he writes. "They denote nothing in the thing itself and are thus without cognitive content."⁷

Beneath their surface unanimity, there are of course some important differences in the sample passages I have quoted. Some say *tout court* that Spinoza rejects miracles; others that he rejects traditional, biblical or supernatural miracles. But none of the authors attributes to Spinoza any positive doctrine regarding miracles. For all of them the key aspect is rejection. And that is the point I am holding up for scrutiny.

The controversial Spinoza commentator Leo Strauss is an exception to the rule. He detects what he calls uneasiness in Spinoza's critique of miracles, particularly in a passage of the TTP⁸ in which Spinoza questions the authenticity of any biblical miracle stories that appear to deny natural causation. They must be interpolations of sacrilegious meddlers, Spinoza says.

How little Spinoza finds himself at ease in this critique of miracles which is based on Scripture is made apparent by his remark that those passages in Scripture that unhesitatingly report on miracles as contra-natural or supernatural events must have been interpolated in the holy book by sacrilegious men. This remark directly opposes his whole principle of interpretation, that objective truth may not be used as the key for interpreting Scripture.⁹

Strauss thinks Spinoza's reaction is explained by the clash between his method and his private view of miracles. The method does not compel him to reject miracles; his private beliefs do. Spinoza therefore chooses to override the method.

Reason devoid of faith, engaged in the pursuit of scientific inquiry, shows itself as immune to miracles. The assertion of miracles, as trespassing beyond the bounds set to strict experience that can be tested, is rejected as asserting too much. . . . So it is not the advancing positive method, proceeding from point to point, but only the reflection of the positive mind on itself, the recognition by the positive mind

that it represents a progress beyond the previously prevailing form of consciousness (a finding that first takes the form of the crude antithesis between superstition, prejudice, ignorance, barbarism, benightedness on the one hand, and reason, freedom, culture, enlightenment on the other) which creates a position impregnable to proof by miracles.¹⁰

Strauss's characterization of the anti-miraculous turn of mind is perceptive, but its target is wrong. It is not Spinoza who rejects miracles out of hand. It is his readers – a long succession of them stretching back to the Enlightenment and including Strauss himself.

The text that Strauss presents as indicative of Spinoza's uneasiness can be explained without difficulty in another way. What Spinoza rejects are biblical texts that depict miracles as defying the natural order. His warrant for rejecting them is provided by that very "principle of interpretation" to which Strauss refers, namely the proposition that the Bible is self-interpreting. Texts depicting supernatural miracles are disqualified, Spinoza thinks, by more and better biblical texts saying the opposite.¹¹ Spinoza's mind is not hardened against miracles as such, though his readers' minds often are.

What Spinoza says about miracles

The miracles chapter concerns an error to which common people (*vulgi*) are prone. Common people, both Jews and Gentiles, misunderstand nature, because they think of it as force and impetus and of God as controlling it with the majesty of a ruler in his realm.¹² This misunderstanding leads to others. People think they see most evidence of God's majesty amid apparently unnatural events, for they imagine that in them God seizes control of nature's forces. This in turn leads them to believe God's sole purpose in taking control of events must be to compel nature to gratify the wishes of his human subjects.¹³

It is possible that the word "*vulgi*", which I have been translating as "common people", really aims at, or at least includes, another target. The seventeenth century sometimes used the same term to refer to the scholastic philosophers. Scholastics were responsible for what is called the "traditional" understanding of miracles. So it will also be worth investigating to what degree Spinoza's account of miracles contradicts theirs, once Spinoza's own position has been ascertained.

Against this common, but erroneous, view of nature and nature's God, Spinoza sets out four propositions that he aims to demonstrate:

- 1) That nothing can happen against nature, but that nature keeps to a fixed and immutable order (*fixum et immutabilem ordinem*).

- 2) That miracles teach us nothing about God's essence, his existence or his providence, while the natural order does.
- 3) That Scripture means by providence nothing but nature's order.
- 4) That the miracle stories found in Scripture require a new interpretation.

Of these the first is the only one that could be thought to endorse the rejection of miracles alleged by the Spinoza literature. But does it? In support of that proposition Spinoza advances a more general one which I will call "the Miracle Axiom," abbreviated "MA."

MA: Nothing happens in nature that (a) contravenes (*repugnet*) nature's universal laws, (b) that does not agree (*convenit*) with those laws or (c) follow (*sequitur*) from them.¹⁴

Spinoza attaches to MA a note on the word 'nature' that is of crucial importance. It is meant to ward off a potential misunderstanding. He tells us that nature includes "infinitely more than merely matter and its affections." The practised reader of Spinoza will see here an allusion to his theory of the infinite attributes of God. Thus MA does not say that we must explain miracles exclusively in terms of extended things, but rather in terms of extension plus thought plus all the other unnamed (and to us incomprehensible) attributes of the divine being. In other words, Spinoza is saying that miracles are due to God. True, God is nothing more than nature, according to Spinoza. But it is no less true that nature here means something as exalted as God. And so understood MA contains nothing that religiously orthodox philosophers would want to repudiate.

Next Spinoza proposes two definitions of miracles, a weak one and a strong one. The weak one (WM) runs as follows:

WM: a miracle is a deed (*opus*) whose natural cause *we* (or the narrator) cannot explain by appeal to the example of some everyday thing.¹⁵ (My emphasis)

The strong definition (SM) is more restrictive:

SM: a miracle is that whose cause can never be explained with reference to natural principles known to us by the natural light.¹⁶

WM is weak because it allows for something's being miraculous to one person, but not to another. SM, by contrast, guarantees that an event is miraculous for one person only if it is so for all.

Miracles of the weak sort obviously abound. WM allows us to describe as miraculous any event for which we have no explanation. And the existence of such things in no way contravenes the Miracle Axiom, MA. You or I may be unable to explain many events that are fully in agreement with nature's laws. We may simply be ignorant of the natural laws which were operating in bringing that event about.

The strong definition (SM) envisages the possibility of events that are beyond any human intellect to explain. But they do not for that reason become unnatural or supernatural events. SM is therefore not in conflict with the Miracle Axiom either. Thus miracles both weak and strong, as Spinoza defines them, are possible.

Possible, yes. But are there any miracles of the SM variety in fact? If so, they must be events of such subtlety, depth or complexity as to be beyond the scope of a human intellect. But Spinoza commits himself to the existence of such things when he reminds us that “nature is not confined by the laws of human reason . . . but by an infinite number of others, which pertain to the eternal order of the whole of nature, of which man is but a small part.”¹⁷

He is also prepared to give instances of miracles. He implies that the establishment of the Jews in the Promised Land was miraculous¹⁸ and states plainly that the apostles worked miracles when they established the Christian faith.¹⁹

Spinoza does not say whether these miracles are of the weak or strong variety. Neither should he be expected to. Of unexplained events it would rarely be possible to know which are in principle beyond the human capacity to explain, and therefore strongly miraculous, and which are merely temporarily inexplicable or inexplicable by those who happen to know of their existence. However the examples he offers together with his theoretical commitment to the existence of strong miracles are sufficient to show that the chapter on miracles does not aim to deny the existence of miracles at all, but only to explain what they are.

Someone might perhaps argue that Spinoza’s explanation of miracles is itself a subtle form of denial, since it conflicts with the traditional scholastic conception of them. What would St. Thomas, for example, say to Spinoza’s Miracle Axiom, MA?

The surprising answer to that question is that St. Thomas would endorse it. He writes: “If the order of things is considered from the point of view of its primary cause, then God can do nothing against the order of natural things.”²⁰ What Thomas means by the “primary cause” is of course God himself. He distinguished between ‘primary causality,’ the direct action of God upon his creatures, and ‘secondary causality,’ causal relations of creatures among themselves. In the light of this distinction, causal transactions wholly dependent on secondary (i.e., creaturely) causality would be called ‘natural.’ Those in which God, the primary cause, intervenes directly, would be called supernatural, or miraculous. On the Thomistic picture the natural order, that of secondary causes, functions for the most part autonomously. But its creator, the primary cause, is capable of intervening in it at his discretion. Such interventions are called miracles and they may take several

different forms, depending on how much interference with secondary causes is necessary in order to bring them about.

The least remarkable miracles are those in which God merely hurries natural processes along, as in a speedy recovery from an illness. A higher grade of miracles are those in which natural processes are made to operate in unnatural places, as when the dead are brought back to life. It is not miraculous for new life to appear, but it is miraculous when it appears in people who have been dead. Most miraculous of all are those events in which wholly unnatural things are accomplished, as when two bodies are made to occupy the same place at the same time.²¹

The Thomistic conception of nature as a realm of autonomously functioning “secondary causes” had about it an undeniable charm and is still most people’s unofficial picture of how the world works. It imagines the universe as an extended, inorganic structure housing a community of organic creatures, including plants, animals and human beings. These creatures possess characteristic powers some of which can be exercised or not at their discretion. And since they help compose the realm of secondary causes, they insure that it is essentially unpredictable because of the latitude they enjoy in exercising their powers. The dog may or may not chase the rabbit; the rabbit may run or dive for his hole. The Thomistic world is far from the ideal of predictability so prized by early modern physics. Future states of the world are not uniquely determinable on the basis of prior ones, even if God does not intervene. But since God can intervene at any time, the realm of secondary causes is not even “closed,” in the sense of being immune to interference from outside.

This scholastic picture of nature was rejected by Spinoza, as by all the other major modern philosophers with the exception of Leibniz.²² They thought of nature more simply – as inanimate matter in motion.²³ It is true that an echo of the doctrine of secondary causes exists in Spinoza’s distinction between the causality of finite modes and that of God.²⁴ But finite modes have no spontaneity, no power that they can either exercise or not. They are not secondary causes in the scholastic sense.

But miracles do not go away just because the modern picture of the universe is adopted. They return in the form of epistemic notions. We no longer have to ask whether or not events have mechanical explanations – they always do. But whether something is a miracle or not depends on whether we human observers know what its explanation is. Miracles become fundamentally things which astonish *us*, just as they are in Spinoza’s weak and strong definitions.

Once again, however, this would come as no surprise to the traditional understanding of miracles or to St. Thomas in particular. He traces the root of

the word 'miracle' to the original meaning of 'admiration,' namely "wonder." "It should be noted," he writes, "that the word 'miracle' derives from 'admiration.' But admiration arises when an effect is manifest, but the cause is hidden." And since what is hidden to one observer may be apparent to another, "something may be a miracle to one that is not a miracle to another."²⁵ This is precisely the possibility for which Spinoza's weak definition of miracles, WM, allows.

If St Thomas had become convinced that there was no realm of secondary causes, if he had adopted the early modern conception of nature, he could still have preserved his theory of miracles. Lower grades of miracles would be explained as those events whose causes were unknown to us; higher grades would be explained as those whose causes were unknowable by us. Had they agreed about nature St. Thomas and Spinoza would also have agreed on all points about miracles.

Leibniz, who prided himself on his religious orthodoxy approaches miracles in a way little different from Spinoza's. Leibniz distinguishes between ordinary events which are in conformity with the "subalternate maxims of nature" and miraculous events, which are not. The latter, however, still conform to what Leibniz calls the general order of things (*l'ordre général*).²⁶ Commenting on Spinoza in another place he says "I believe it is possible to reconcile miracles to philosophy, provided we understand miracles not as supernatural events, but as events that are above the nature of sensible bodies."²⁷ Though it may be intended as an alternative, Leibniz appears to be adopting a version of Spinoza's own solution.

Leibniz leaves open the possibility of miracles occurring at any time. So do both Spinoza's Miracle Axiom and his strong and weak definitions. As a matter of personal belief, however, Spinoza seems to think that there have been no miracles since the apostolic age. I infer this from his warning to those who are intent on starting new religions.

If someone asks, by what right the disciples of Christ, who were private citizens, were empowered to preach religion, I say they did it by right of the power which they received from Christ against impure spirits . . . For I expressly pointed out . . . that everyone is obliged to keep faith with a tyrant unless he has received God's promise of aid against the tyrant in the form of an incontestable, unique revelation. For that reason no one is entitled to apply to himself the example [of the disciples of Christ] unless he also has the power of working miracles . . . It therefore must necessarily be conceded that the authority which Christ gave to his disciples was given to them alone and that no others can apply the example to themselves.²⁸

Now if Spinoza held that miracles ceased in the apostolic age, then his view was at that point in conflict with traditional scholasticism and, more generally, with Roman Catholicism. But it would not be a denial of the possibility of miracles as such. Nor would it even place him outside the fold of Christian theologians. It would be in perfect agreement with the views of Protestant Christians, to which Spinoza often inclines.²⁹ Thus Calvin wrote: “The gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles, which the Lord willed to be brought forth for a time, has vanished away in order to make the new preaching of the gospel marvellous forever.”³⁰ Calvin resented the fact that his Roman Catholic detractors reproached the reformers for their lack of miraculous confirmation. “In demanding miracles of us,” he wrote, “they act dishonestly. For we are not forging some new gospel, but are retaining that very gospel whose truth all the miracles that Jesus Christ and his disciples ever wrought serve to confirm.”³¹ And Luther, in his commentary on Galatians 4:6 says that the visible signs of the Holy Spirit ceased once the Church had been established and properly advertised by such miracles.³²

Of Spinoza’s four goals in the miracle chapter only the first, that of showing that nothing happens contrary to nature, seemed likely to be in conflict with the common or scholastic view of miracles. But upon examination there turns out to be no conflict at all, not even when Spinoza’s Miracle Axiom or his strong and weak definitions are added to the mix.

The origin of the misunderstanding

If Spinoza did not reject miracles, why have several centuries of commentators taken for granted that he did? Three factors seem to me to have contributed. First, as was seen in the discussion of Spinoza and scholasticism above, although there is a point-by-point agreement about miracles as such, it is easily overlooked because of a real disagreement about the nature of *nature*. For Thomistic scholasticism nature coincides with the realm of secondary causes. God is outside it and able to act upon it. Not so for Spinoza. For him, nature includes both what Thomas called the realm of secondary causes and the primary cause, God. Again for Spinoza, nature, whether considered as the sum of its effects (*natura naturata*) or as the ultimate source of these effects (*natura naturans*) simply *is* God. Given his different understanding of nature, Spinoza’s affirmation that all events have natural causes does not contradict Thomas’s denial of it.

It could be urged that my claim of compatibility overlooks one point at which Spinozistic and scholastic nature really do conflict. For Spinoza there are no events that, in scholastic terms, lack secondary causes. That is, in his

own terms, Spinoza recognizes no states of finite modes which are not the necessary product of previous states of finite modes of the same attribute.³³ On the other hand Thomas speaks of miracles in precisely those cases where events are either not produced by secondary causes at all, or at least not wholly accounted for by them.

Once again, however, this is a disagreement about nature, rather than miracles. Spinoza and Thomas would agree that events in which secondary causality (or the action of finite modes) is undetected or undetectable are rightly called miracles and that God is a causal factor in their coming to be. They disagree only in that Spinoza claims, what Thomas denies, that there are always secondary factors (finite modes) causally at play. Misunderstanding has arisen because Spinoza's insistence on the causal role of finite modes has been taken to be an attack on the existence of miracles rather than just an affirmation of the regularity of God or nature.

In the second place there is the misunderstanding bequeathed to us by two generations of bad readers of Spinoza. First came the pious readers of his own day who greeted the publication of his works with howls of condemnation. Those who denounced him as "the prince of atheists," "Christendom's chief foe" or "the new Mahomet"³⁴ were scarcely trying to produce careful scholarly assessments. However Jonathan Israel shows how across Europe a radical philosophy was growing for which this fictitious "Spinozism" became a sort of *nom de guerre*. Here again scholarly principle was not an issue. As Israel puts it:

Admittedly, the term 'Spinosisme' as used in the French Enlightenment, or *Spinozisterey*, as it was called in Germany, was frequently employed, as in the campaign against Montesquieu, rather broadly to denote virtually the whole of the Radical Enlightenment, that is all deistic, Naturalistic, and atheistic systems that exclude divine Providence, Revelation, and miracles, . . .³⁵

The final factor is the surprising way in which that legacy of bad reading of Spinoza's doctrine of miracles came to be taken for granted by contemporary scholars. In large part it may have been due to the fact that since the Enlightenment the question of miracles has not been a pressing one in Spinoza research. As Strauss rightly points out, belief in miracles has largely been classified as superstition, prejudice, ignorance, barbarism etc., and it has been assumed that Spinoza, who opposed such things, must also have opposed miracles. By these historical accidents we have come to credit Spinoza with taking the Enlightenment view on miracles, when in fact he was, in a manner of speaking, on the side of the angels.

Notes

1. The original Latin of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is found in Spinoza [1999] (= *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* ed. Fokke Akkerman Paris: Presses Universitaires de France) and in volume 3 of Spinoza [1925] (= *Opera* ed. C. Gebhardt 4 vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter). Direct citations are according to [1999], but references to the more familiar [1925], volume 3, are included as well. I also provide references to Samuel Shirley's translation (Spinoza [1991] *Theological-Political Treatise*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Introduction by Seymour Feldman. Indianapolis: Hackett). I shall use the standard abbreviation "TTP" and all translations will be my own. I cite the *Ethics* by part, and proposition. Thus "2Ep9" is the 9th proposition of the *Ethics*, part 2.
2. Jonathan Israel [2001], *Radical Enlightenment* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 218.
3. E.E. Harris [1992], *Spinoza's Philosophy: An Outline* Atlantic Highlands, N.J./London: Humanities Press, 111.
4. Spinoza [1991], xv.
5. Walther [1994], "Spinoza's Critique of Miracles: A Miracle of Criticism," in *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions* ed. G. Hunter, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 100f.
6. Walther [1994], 102.
7. Walther [1994], 103.
8. The passage Strauss is referring to is found at Spinoza [1999] 264 = [1925] 3, 91 = [1991], 80 = TTP, 6.
9. Strauss [1965] *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* New York: Schocken Books, 129.
10. Strauss [1965], 136.
11. Spinoza [1999] 242 = [1925] 3, 82 = [1991] 72 = TTP 6: "Ex aliquot Scripturae exemplis ostendam ipsam Scripturam per Dei decreta et volitiones, et consequenter providentiam nihil aliud intelligere quam ipsum naturae ordinem, qui ex ejus aeternis legibus necessario sequitur."
12. Spinoza [1999] 238f = [1925] 3, 81 = [1991] 71 = TTP 6.
13. Spinoza [1999] 241 = [1925] 3, 82 = [1991] 71f = TTP 6.
14. Spinoza [1999] 244 = [1925] 3, 83 = [1991] 73 = TTP 6.
15. Spinoza [1999] 244 = [1925] 3, 84 = [1991] 73 = TTP 6: "... nomen miraculi . . . nihil aliud significare quam opus, cujus causam naturalem exemplo alterius rei solitae explicare non possumus, vel saltem ipse non potest, qui miraculum scribit aut narrat."
16. Spinoza [1999] 244f = [1925] 3, 84 = [1991] 73 = TTP 6: "Possem quidem dicere miraculum esse id, cujus causa ex principiis rerum naturalium lumine naturali notis explicari nequit."
17. Spinoza [1999] 508 = [1925] 3, 190f = [1991] 174 = TTP 16.
18. Spinoza [1999] 156 = [1925] 3, 47 = [1991], 37f = TTP 3.
19. Spinoza [1999] 618 = [1925] 3, 233 = [1991], 216f = TTP 19.
20. *Summa Theologica* I, q105, a6, resp.
21. *Summa Theologica* I, q105, a8, resp.
22. See Hunter [1988] "Leibniz and Secondary Causes," in *Leibniz: Tradition und Aktualität. Proceedings of the V. International Leibniz Congress* Hanover: Leibniz-Gesellschaft, pp. 374–380.
23. See Klever [1988] "Moles in Motu: Principles of Spinoza's Physics," in *Studia Spinozana* 4 pp. 165–194.
24. See 1Ep16 and corollaries, 1Ep33 and 2Ep9.
25. *Summa Theologica* I, q105, a7, resp.

26. Leibniz [1978] *Die philosophischen Schriften* 7 vols. ed. C.I. Gerhardt Hildesheim: Olms [Reprint of 1875–90], vol. 2, 12.
27. Leibniz [1978] vol. 1, 124.
28. Spinoza [1999] 616f = [1925] 3, 233f = [1991] 216f = TTP, 19.
29. Hunter [2001] “Spinoza: A Radical Protestant?” in *Evil in Early Modern Philosophy* eds. E. Kremer/ M. Latzer, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 55ff. Spinoza’s debt to radical Protestantism is more fully developed in Hunter [2005] *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza’s Thought* Aldershot: Ashgate.
30. Calvin [1960] *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2 volumes. ed. John T. McNeill. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, vol. 2, 1467.
31. Calvin [1960] vol. 1, 16.
32. Locatable by chapter and verse in any of the multiple editions and translations of the commentary.
33. 2Ep9.
34. Israel [2001], 161.
35. Israel [2001], 13.

