

Was Spinoza Right About Miracles?

By David R. Larson

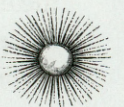
“Whatever happened, happened naturally.”

Benedict de Spinoza

“Spinozism has been unfairly attacked more than any other position in modern thought.”

Philip Clayton

Although it was written in the seventeenth century, and although it is less than twenty pages long, “Of Miracles,” by Benedict de Spinoza, the sixth chapter of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, remains one of the most thought-provoking discussions of this topic. Spinoza began by lamenting the tendency of many to find evidence for God in occurrences that they do not understand. He ended by agreeing with the ancient Jewish historian Josephus that the issue of miracles is a matter about which people should feel free to form their own conclusions. In between this start and finish, he made four assertions that are still worthy of our consideration and comment.



1

Spinoza's first claim was that it is a mistake to think of miracles as events that contradict the laws of nature.

We should think of them as episodes that surpass what we now know about these laws, he held.

Spinoza's primary concern appears to have been what we say about God. If we claim that nature's laws express God's eternal essence, and if we also say that on some occasions God violates, suspends, or surpasses these laws, we thereby say that God sometimes contradicts God's own essence. We also say that God does this with no justification and no possible explanation other than God's arbitrary and perhaps capricious will, assertions that Spinoza rightly found absurd.

It appears as though Spinoza understood the laws of nature as divine prescriptions of what must happen. Today, we increasingly think of them as human descriptions of what actually takes place. If something occurs that does not fit with one of our laws of nature, our task is to reformulate our law so as to make room for what actually happens. What takes place governs our formulation of the laws of nature, not the other way around.

In view of these considerations, I believe that we should agree with Spinoza that we are not at our best when we define miracles as violations of nature's laws. I am not convinced that we should think of them as events that violate what we know about these laws, however. It seems to me that at this point Spinoza moved in the right direction but that he did not go far enough. My reservations are practical, terminological, and scriptural.

Although Spinoza did not intend this, and although at points he sensed the problem, in our practical experience defining miracles as events that contradict what we know about the laws of nature can place a religious premium on ignorance. The less we know about the universe, the more miracles we can experience, if this definition is valid. This may be one reason why some religious leaders do not encourage their followers to study and learn. How unfortunate!

Coming to us as it does from earlier words that refer to events that fill us with feelings such as awe, amazement, and astonishment, the term *miracle* may tell us more about our reactions to certain events than the events themselves. If so, an occurrence is a miracle if it prompts such feelings among us even if the event is common and understandable. Television talk show

host David Letterman recently reported that when his first child was born and placed in his arms, he initially laughed and then burst into tears of uncontrollable joy. Any definition of miracles that omits Letterman's experience and others like it strikes me as deficient.

Scripture does not often use the term *miracle*. Its more frequent expressions are the Hebrew and Greek equivalents for *power*, *sign*, and *wonder*. These terms do not necessarily imply that miracles violate the laws of nature, or even that miracles contradict what we now know about these laws. In Scripture, miracles seem to be occurrences that prompt people to pause, take note, and positively react in emotionally intense ways. Even atheists like Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins in our time freely admit to experiencing such feelings when they ponder the wonders of life. Although these famous scientists deny the actuality of the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, they do experience miracles, at least as I believe we should think of them.

According to this third definition, miracles are events, whether frequent or rare, ordinary or extraordinary, understood or not understood, that evoke in us feelings such as awe, amazement, and astonishment. Because any event that does not prompt such feelings is unworthy of being called a "miracle," this definition is necessary. Because each occurrence that does prompt them is worthy of the term *miracle*, regardless of whether we understand how it came about, this definition is sufficient.

Does this mean that miracles are in the eye of the beholder? Yes! It also means that the more we learn about the universe the more astonished we can be and the more miracles we can experience, an approach that places a religious premium on knowledge, not ignorance.

2

Spinoza's second assertion was that miracles can tell us nothing about God.

Although we often overlook this point, it is as important as it is straightforward.

Although he preferred the second, Spinoza made this claim with respect to two of the three definitions of miracles that we are considering. If an event occurs that actually does violate the true laws of nature, it is unlikely that God exists at all, he wrote. We might amend this to say that if a miracle of this sort takes place, it is improbable that Spinoza's God exists. Far

from supporting theism, a claim that such a miracle has occurred leads straight to atheism, he held.

An event that does not contradict the laws of nature but only our understanding of them is not a reliable basis from which to extrapolate reliable knowledge about God, Spinoza also wrote. Our inferences from anything about anything else depend in part for their validity upon our accurate knowledge of that with which we begin. In all areas of life, we properly reason from the known to the unknown, not from the unknown to the known. Because miracles understood this second way are among the things we do not understand, they can tell us nothing about God or anything else, according to Spinoza.

In view of the frequency over the centuries with which people have based their belief in God upon miracles understood in either of these two ways, Spinoza's point seriously challenged much traditional thinking. My hunch is that he was moving in the right direction. His point does not necessarily pertain to miracles understood in the third sense, however. Patterns of regularity throughout the universe that prompt feelings such as awe, amazement, and astonishment may suggest much about God, I believe.

It is also important to underline that here, perhaps more so than anywhere else in this discussion, Spinoza proved himself to be a citizen of the seventeenth century. Although he denied that the actuality of God is self-evident, he placed much emphasis upon absolute certainty, getting rid of all doubt, clear and distinct ideas, inferences logically deduced from primary ideas, and irrefutable conclusions. In this respect he was like so many others of his era, especially René Descartes. Spinoza was a particular kind of rationalist.

Many of us now live in a different conceptual world. For us, reasoning from our best interpretations of the facts to our most adequate explanations, with no need to banish all doubt or absolutely to prove our conclusions, is as good as it gets. Also, we often prefer a thought process in which the outcomes of deductive and inductive reasoning interact in mutually corrective ways, ever mindful that every conclusion is a temporary and provincial rest stop on our continuing journey.

From the point of view of our own present rest stop, Spinoza's understanding of nature can seem quaint. He portrayed it as governed by laws expressive of God's eternal essence that determine everything that takes place right down to the smallest detail. Nothing could have been other than what it turned out to be, he believed.

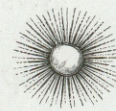
Nature strikes increasing numbers of us as more spontaneous, dynamic, and open-ended than this. Our laws of nature, if we still use the expression, take into account that at the base of things not everything is totally determined. We are no longer as confident, as Spinoza apparently was, that if we precisely understand a set of initial conditions, and if we completely understand the laws that pertain to them, we can predict with total accuracy what all their long-term outcomes will be. To a large extent, this "chaos," as some style it, is due to our permanent inability precisely to determine initial conditions; however, that the more direct study of subatomic actualities also suggests a lack of complete determinacy at the most fundamental level implies that something else is also going on.

What's more, if in everyday living we necessarily presume that we possess at least some capacity for self-determination, as seems to be the case, it makes sense to posit decreasingly powerful expressions of it all the way down the scale of life. Therefore, although it is easy to agree with Spinoza that the laws of nature cannot be broken when they are properly formulated, our understanding of nature increasingly differs from his more static and fixed account. Contrary to what he apparently thought, the dirt of which we are composed is dancing dust!

This requires us to think of God and the universe as more interactive than Spinoza did. Because he was a pantheist who believed that they are one and the same, it made no sense for him to write of their interaction. But if we are theists today, it seems necessary to talk about the interaction of God and the universe because they do not seem identical and because it seems as though not everything is totally determined, which comes close to saying one thing in two ways.

This is why panentheism, the view that God includes but surpasses the universe, not pantheism, which says that God and the universe are identical, increasingly is our preferred doctrine of God. Likewise, libertarian freedom and its primitive precursors, the view that to some extent we can choose between genuine alternatives without being compelled either by external forces or by internal conditions, not complete determinism, increasingly is part of our preferred account of all others.

This also requires us to modify the idea that Spinoza seems to have shared with many of his col-



leagues that God is wholly changeless, a view that seems odd if God and the changing universe are identical. It seems more harmonious with what we otherwise know to hold that in some respects God never changes but that in others God constantly does. We can elaborate and defend this assertion in a variety of ways; however, the primary point remains: God is neither changeless nor changeful but each in different respects. God remains God while interacting with a dynamic and somewhat rambunctious universe.

Although our views of the laws of nature, the universe, and God probably differ from Spinoza's in these important ways, his point that miracles, in the first two meanings of the term, cannot tell us anything reliable about God remains unscathed. We must base our knowledge of God, and everything else, on what we understand, not on what we don't. We will always have gaps in our knowledge, and these unfilled spaces may prompt helpful thoughts about God and the universe; nevertheless, Spinoza properly admonished us to extrapolate from recurring patterns, not from events that we experience as infrequent and perplexing.

Not content to rest his case on philosophical analysis alone, Spinoza appealed to portions of Scripture that cast doubt upon what miracles can tell us about God. One of the most important of these is the warning in the Pentateuch that the people of Israel should not follow a prophet who would lead them away from the true God even if that prophet should successfully perform miracles (Deut. 13). He discussed other passages from the First and Second Testaments as well. Nevertheless, he conceded that his scriptural case must be largely inferential because this is not an issue that the ancient texts directly address.

Spinoza's third assertion was that when Scripture attributes some event to God we should take this to mean that what took place occurred in harmony with the laws of nature, not as a violation, suspension, or transcendence of them.

His point was not that people in biblical times always understood this, but that we should.

Scripture often describes the mundane processes that brought about the events that it attributes to divine action, Spinoza wrote. It declares that God sent Saul to Samuel, for instance; however, its narrative provides no account of an unusual divine commission, only Saul's unexceptional need to find his lost donkeys. Likewise, Scripture says that God changed the attitudes of the Egyptians toward the Israelites; however, the story reports ordinary circumstances that easily account for this transformation. The pattern of attributing things that ordinarily take place to specific divine action is so frequent throughout Scripture that we should presume that it is present even when the texts do not provide all the details, Spinoza held.

Scripture often describes the material resources that the occurrence of miraculous events required, Spinoza also held. Wind caused the waters of the Sea of Reeds to part so that the Israelites could cross the channel, for instance. Similarly, Moses scattered ashes in the air when causing a plague to fall upon the Egyptians; Elisha revived an apparently dead child by warming him with his own body and breathing his own air into the youngster's lungs; and Jesus used mud, saliva, and other things when healing people. Again, this pattern is so frequent in Scripture that we should presume its presence even when it does not detail these tangible media, Spinoza contended.

In at least two ways, Spinoza seems to have made Scripture conform to his expectations instead of letting it speak for itself, however. On the one hand, he did not discuss biblical events like Paul's Damascus Road experience in which ordinary circumstances and means are not merely omitted from the story but apparently denied. On the other hand, at this point his conjectures as to why Scripture often attributes mundane occurrences to specific divine action may have been too dismissive. He suggested that this happened partly because the religious leaders of the time were more interested in encouraging devotion among their followers than in providing accurate accounts of what truly took place. His subsequent explanations seem more charitable and more plausible.

Spinoza's insistence that even the events that Scripture attributes to God occurred naturally is to some extent a matter of definition. If we say that everything that occurs takes place in conformity to laws of nature that express God's eternal essence, and

if we also say that something actually did occur, then it follows that what happened took place in conformity to these laws, or that it happened naturally. Although it is sufficiently valid, this line of reasoning does not seem to advance the discussion very far.

A closer examination of Spinoza's discussion reveals that in this context he said at least three additional and important things, however. One of these is that God's power is present in everything that occurs, not only in the unusual or perplexing events. His second assertion is that we need to reformulate our understanding of divine power so that we do not picture it as akin to the arbitrariness of a capricious human potentate. His third point is that the laws of nature established by God are not exclusively directed toward human welfare. Each of these three additional assertions strikes me as both valid and exceedingly valuable in our own context today.

4 Spinoza's fourth point is that when interpreting Scripture we need to keep in mind certain distinctive features of ancient Hebrew thought and speech.

If we fail to do this, we will misunderstand what these people had in mind and what they said.

Spinoza repeated his earlier assertion that in their fierce struggle against polytheism the people of ancient Israel often attributed everything that happened to God without concerning themselves with secondary or intermediate factors. He then added that the ancient Hebrews often preferred vivid and picturesque thought and language. Instead of saying that there was a heavy rain, they sometimes said that God opened the windows of heaven and through these holes in the sky flooded the earth. Unlike some contemporary historians, Spinoza held that even way back then those who spoke like this did not always take such ways of putting things with wooden literalness.

On some occasions, as in the extra long day that Joshua's warriors attributed to divine intervention, ascribing events directly to God may have also had some strategic value. The ancient Israelites referred to God as often and in the ways that they did for a vari-

ety of reasons, some innocent and others less so, Spinoza contended.

Spinoza cited with approval the willingness of Josephus for people to hold either that a strong wind merely happened to make it possible for the Israelites to cross the Sea of Reeds on its exposed floor when fleeing the Egyptians or that God directly orchestrated this fortunate gale. The same sort of thing occurred in the case of Alexander the Great and the Macedonians when a wind caused the Pamphylian Sea to divide so that they could cross it in their battles against the Persians, Josephus also wrote. Because Spinoza held that there is no difference between saying that something happened naturally and claiming that God did it, it is not surprising that he could be relaxed about which way one describes such events.

I agree with Spinoza that many of the perplexities we encounter when reading Scripture occur because so many of us today are more prosaic than poetic in our thought and speech; therefore, I am willing to give Spinoza the benefit of the doubt on this matter. Also, like Spinoza, I live in a religious community in which people often speak about God doing various things. We do so without necessarily intending to suggest that God intervenes in ways that contradict the laws of nature or even what we now know about them, however. Our common custom of thanking God for providing our food before beginning each meal is evidence of this. Rarely do we believe that God does anything unusual to make our meals possible. We are thankful, exceedingly so, for what God does usually, regularly, and predictably.

Was Spinoza right about miracles? This is a question that we must answer for ourselves. My own view is that each of Spinoza's four claims specifically about miracles is either on target or heading in that direction. Nevertheless, his more general view of things within which he makes these four claims needs to be updated in the direction of an interpretation of God and the universe that is more interactive.

Down with pantheism, up with panentheism, and Amen to Spinoza's four assertions!

David R. Larson, a professor in the Faculty of Religion at Loma Linda University, is president of the Association of Adventist Forums.

