

Miracles and the Laws of Nature

Are miracles excluded by the idea of laws of nature in general, or by specific laws such as the conservation of energy? What are the strongest arguments to show that miracles are excluded? What are the best responses? Can we show that belief in miracles does not require abandoning commitment to the laws of nature?

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I. Definitions

A. Miracle

B. Law

II. The Case Against Miracles

A. Metaphysical arguments:

1. Causal closure of the natural world

2. Laws as necessary connections

B. Epistemological arguments:

1. Hume's "in principle" argument: we could never have sufficient evidence to believe miracle testimony

2. Hume's "in fact" argument: we do not have credible miracle testimony

C. Scientific arguments:

1. Miracles would violate specific (e.g. thermodynamic) laws

2. Miracles would violate the conservation of energy

III. In Defense of Miracles

A. Metaphysical arguments against miracles fail:

1. Causal closure is question begging
2. Laws may not be necessary connections
3. Spinoza's fallacy: necessary connections do not exclude miracles

B. Epistemological arguments also fail:

1. Hume's "in principle" argument: we could not have sufficient evidence
 - a. Hume confuses inductive and abductive logic
2. Hume's "in fact" argument: we do not have credible evidence
 - a. Hume fails to seriously investigate the evidence

C. Scientific arguments also fail:

1. Miracles need not violate specific (e.g. thermodynamic) laws
 - a. Failure to observe the role of initial and *ceteris paribus* conditions
2. Miracles need not violate the conservation of energy
 - a. The principle holds only in closed systems
 - b. The principle is inapplicable in some domains
 - c. The evidence is derived from purely physical interactions
 - d. Popular statements to the contrary, the precise statement of the conservation principle does *not* deny that energy can be created
 - e. No theist should deny that energy can be created

Suggested Readings:

- Collins, Robin. 2011. "The Energy of the Soul," in *The Soul Hypothesis: Investigations into the Existence of the Soul*, eds. Mark C. Baker and Stewart Goetz. New York: Continuum.
- Earman, John. 2000. *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Geivett, Douglas and Gary Habermas, eds. 1997. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- Keener, Craig S. 2011. *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*. 2 volumes. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Larmer, Robert. 2014. *The Legitimacy of Miracle*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Lewis, C. S. 1960. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. New York: Macmillan Publishing.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2011. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Swinburne, Richard. 2013. *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.