

Does the Existence of Natural Laws Mean that Miracles are Impossible?

By [David P. Diaz, Ed.D.](#)

Background



Many people believe that the laws of physics control everything in our universe. If this is true, these laws must govern everything that happens, and therefore, the miracles described in the Bible are not possible.

Several definitions of miracles are consistent with Christian theism. For example, the late Christian apologist C. S. Lewis defined miracles as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power.”[\[1\]](#) The question that naturally arises from such a definition is: Can God interfere with the laws of nature or are the laws fixed, thereby rendering miracles impossible?

Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) understood miracles as *violations* of natural law.[\[2\]](#) He argued as follows: (1) Nothing can violate the laws of nature since they are immutable (i.e., fixed, set, unchanging); (2) Purported miracles violate the laws of nature; Therefore, (3) miracles are impossible.

The first problem is that *Spinoza's argument begs the question*.[\[3\]](#) If Spinoza knew in advance that natural laws are immutable, then he would know it to be impossible for miracles to violate those laws. However, there was no way for

Spinoza to know that natural laws are immutable. Unless one knows everything there is to know, one cannot know with certainty that natural laws are immutable and, thus, that miracles violate natural laws. Instead, Spinoza *assumed* that natural laws are unchanging and, therefore, miracles must be impossible. So, when he asserted that miracles are impossible, he was begging the question. Assumptions cannot justify themselves.

Natural Laws are not Causal

“*Laws are mere descriptions of behavior patterns and have no causal powers.*”

C. S. Lewis distinguished between the laws of nature and the events that conform to the laws. Events are the things that obey laws, and laws are the patterns to which the events conform.[\[4\]](#) When one billiard ball sets another in motion, Newton’s laws *describe* and *predict* the relationship between the motion and forces acting on the balls. However, the law does nothing to put the balls in motion; a man with a cue stick does that. Thus, as we look around nature, we find that natural laws never produce a single event.[\[5\]](#) Laws are mere *descriptions* of behavior patterns and have *no causal powers*. Something besides the laws of nature causes the events, and if a miracle is an event, then something other than natural law is involved in causation.

Miracles May be Interventions into Nature

The laws of nature tell us what a billiard ball will do when struck, *provided no one interferes*. But what if someone impedes the path of the ball as it moves across the table, causing it to deflect? In such a case, no law was violated. Instead, there was interference from *within* the system. Similarly, God may intervene *indirectly* from within (using secondary causes), or he may intervene *directly* from outside the system. In either case, unless one shows that a system

is causally closed, one cannot argue against the possibility of miracles.[\[6\]](#)

Moreover, *interfering* with natural law is not the same as *violating* a law. John Lennox uses the example of a man who puts \$1,000 in his dresser drawer one day and then adds another \$1,000 the following week. The laws of arithmetic allow him to predict that he will have \$2,000 in his drawer. But suppose the next time he looks in the drawer, there is only \$500. Clearly, someone has intervened and stolen \$1,500! Does he complain that the laws of arithmetic have been broken? No, although he may very well complain that the laws of the United States were broken.[\[7\]](#)

Were Ancient Humans Ignorant of Natural Laws?

Some would have us believe that people in biblical times were more apt to trust in miracles simply because they were ignorant of the laws of nature. In other words, had they understood natural laws, they would have correctly attributed all supposed supernatural events to natural causes.[\[8\]](#) However, it seems abundantly clear that people in ancient times *did* understand the natural order and could readily see the difference between the uniform features in nature and exceptions to such patterns. It is only because of the regularity of nature that biblical characters could interpret miracles as *interventions* by God into the natural laws He created. Any claim of a “miracle” would have no relevance outside of the consistency, regularity, and patterns described by the rules that operate in the world. The point here is that *a miracle claim presupposes the knowledge of natural laws*.

“*His mistaken notion was not that he didn’t understand natural law but that he didn’t realize that God had intervened.*”

In New Testament times, Joseph vividly displayed his understanding of natural law through his reaction to the unexpected pregnancy of Mary. Joseph rightly

understood that according to the regularities observed in nature, conception and pregnancy required intercourse.[\[9\]](#) The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Mary “was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:18-19 [NASB]). The fact that Joseph had not come together with Mary could, in his mind, mean only one thing: infidelity. Thus, Joseph desired to divorce Mary quietly. His mistaken notion was not that he didn’t understand natural law but that he didn’t realize that God had intervened. Though early man’s knowledge of the laws of nature was, no doubt, incomplete, he nevertheless knew enough to understand that there were recurring patterns in nature and that any interruption of these patterns was an exception to the rule.

Conclusion

Miracles represent an interference with Nature by supernatural power. Natural laws have no causal powers; therefore, if miracles do occur, they are not caused by natural laws. Moreover, there is no indication that miraculous events violate physical laws. An omnipotent God could only break the laws of nature if He was somehow subject to the laws. However, the Creator cannot be held hostage by His creation. Thus, there is no incompatibility between supernatural miracles and natural laws. The doubter of miracles must look somewhere other than ancient man’s lack of understanding of natural laws or the assumed incompatibility between natural law and miracles.

About the Author

David P. Diaz, Ed.D., is an independent researcher, retired college professor, and publisher of *Things I Believe Project*. His writings have ranged from peer-reviewed technical articles to his memoir, which won the 2006 American Book Award. Dr. Diaz holds a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in Science from California Polytechnic State University, a Master’s of Arts in Philosophical Apologetics from Houston Christian University, and a Doctor of Education specializing in Computing and Information Technology from Nova Southeastern University. [[back to top](#)]

Footnotes

[1] C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* Digital Edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), 5.

[2] Baruch Spinoza, *Letters to Friend and Foe* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1996).

[3] The fallacy of *begging the question* (*petitio principii*) occurs when one's conclusion is unwittingly (or wittingly) assumed. This occurs when a premise cannot be known to be true unless the conclusion is known to be true. So, in making the argument, the conclusion is assumed true from the beginning. From Hans Hansen, "Fallacies," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/fallacies/>>.

[4] C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 77-78.

[5] *Ibid.*, 77.

[6] John C. Lennox, "Do the Laws of Nature Preclude the Possibility of Miracles?" YouTube video, September 9, 2012, <https://youtu.be/Gm5JXJGFw2k>.

[7] Adapted from John C. Lennox, "Do the Laws of Nature Preclude the Possibility of Miracles?" YouTube video, September 9, 2012, <https://youtu.be/Gm5JXJGFw2k>. Lennox credits C. S. Lewis as the originator of this example, which was adapted by Lennox.

[8] C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 72-75.

[9] *Ibid.*, 72-73.