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Title of extract: **Miracles and Christian Theism**

Name of Author: **Cover, J.A.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Reason for Hope Within. Murray, M.J.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **W.B. Eerdmans**

Pages scanned: **345 - 374**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Philosophy of Religion CSPH7023**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning: *E.L. Harris*

Date authorised: 13.08.18.

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Miracles and Christian Theism

J. A. Cover

I. Introduction

Most Christians read their Bibles in a way that makes “believing in miracles” a pretty natural thing to do. Indeed most would regard belief in miracles to be part and parcel of embracing the Christian faith, echoing St. Paul’s judgment that the bodily resurrection of Christ is an unnegotiable part of it (1 Cor. 15:17). If his resurrection is not just one more occurrence in the natural order of things, but instead an occurrence *contra natura* — as our Church Fathers would have described an exception to the stable and lawful order of nature — then so too, presumably, is Christ’s revival of Lazarus’ corpse after four days in the grave, and his turning water into wine at Cana, and his feeding a multitude in the wilderness from a few loaves and fishes. For most Christians, these and many other events recorded in Scripture are genuine miracles, accepted as such with the same readiness as they accept the biblical record to be an account of God’s sovereign omnipotence generally and the divinity of Christ in particular.

There’s no news in any of that. If the existence of miracles is what one would expect in a world into which God reaches down to make him-

I am very grateful to Michael Murray for working patiently to turn a difficult ancestor of this chapter into something less difficult. If it is still too hard, that is entirely my fault. I’m also indebted to my colleagues Mike Bergmann (a thinking Christian) and Martin Curd (a thinking skeptic) for talking with me at length about miracles.

self known, there seems at first glance little about miracles for the contemporary Christian to fuss over. *Philosophers* are of course free to puzzle over them. But armchair philosophizing aside, what of any consequence arises for the believer in respect to miracles?

Well, Christians aren't alone in the world. While Christians find believing in miracles a pretty natural thing to do, many others will express a good deal more skepticism about miracles. Some have claimed that belief in miracles is *irrational*, or more severely that miracles are *impossible*. And here the believer may well confess to being rather at a loss to explain such an attitude: what exactly is the source of such skeptical doubts about miracles, and what could motivate the claim that "believing in miracles is irrational" or that "miracles are impossible"? No doubt the parties to such doubts and claims as these are not believers. But to many thinking Christians this renders such doubts and claims all the more puzzling. For by their reckoning, miracles look to offer a veritable *argument* for God's existence, or at very least they serve as good evidence for it: miracles (the thinking Christian might say) point to God in just the way that any effect points to its cause.

These are the broader issues of concern to us in this chapter. To get a feel for things, let's consider straight off that last item — the simple idea that since miracles point to God, they serve as good grounds for believing (good evidence) that there is a divine being.

The idea is in a way too simple. Miracles point to God only if *there are* miracles. While the existence of miracles is pretty much what is to be expected by someone believing that ours is a world into which God has reached down to make himself known, the atheist or agnostic — who does not (yet) believe there exists any such God — can scarcely be supposed to share that expectation. So if anything like an "argument from miracles" is legitimately to play a role in Christian evidences (and this is something we have yet to determine), the reasons a believer might offer to the skeptic for judging this or that event to be miraculous oughtn't depend on a *prior commitment* to the existence of God. For such an argument to be successful, it must be possible to determine that something is indeed a miracle without first supposing that God exists. The thinking Christian, then, will know what conditions must be met if one is reasonably to believe that some event is indeed miraculous.¹ But one cannot evaluate the

1. That is to say, the thinking Christian will have paid some attention to the *epistemology* of miracles. "Epistemology" is just the complicated-sounding (but etymologically well-deserved) word that philosophers have long attached to the study of

reasonableness of believing that some event is a miracle unless one knows what a miracle *is* — that is, knows what conditions an event must satisfy if it is to count as miraculous. The thinking Christian, then, will know what a miracle is.²

Three points about this little exercise we've just conducted: First, it is clearly an exercise in armchair philosophizing, and just as clearly it is the sort of thing we'd better not set aside. If the Christian faith is a reasonable one, then it will satisfy the objective demands of rational inquiry that believers and nonbelievers of intellectual good will and honesty alike strive to meet. Whatever our beliefs, it's no good defending them with bad arguments. This isn't to claim, of course, that some ivory-tower method of purely *a priori* theorizing (thinking hard with our eyes and ears closed) can settle the issue between believers and unbelievers. Nor is it to insist on what is sometimes called an "evidentialist" apologetics — according to which we are rational in believing some bit of the Christian faith only if we are in possession of some other belief or beliefs serving as evidence for them. Historically, thinking Christians have differed in their views about whether such an evidentialist approach is or isn't the best way to go. But *whatever* stance we might choose to take on the role of miracles in supporting the fundamental beliefs of Christianity, miracles are important not simply because they might help us defend the faith. And that is a second point: miracles have found a central place in Christian thought from St. Augustine down to the present day because they figure crucially in the larger story of God's relation to us, his creatures. The thinking Christian will want to understand that story, and to be able intelligently to express the place of miracles within it. Our little exercise above is a first step in that direction. It takes that step by slowing down long enough to distinguish carefully, as Augustine himself did, two central questions — arguably *the* two central questions — about miracles: (A) What are miracles? (that is the metaphysical question) and (B) On what grounds would one be rationally warranted in believing that there are miracles? (that is the epistemo-

knowledge — to the study of what makes a true belief sufficiently warranted or justified (well-earned, you might say) to count as knowledge. Given its currency in apologetic discussions, we might as well have it in our vocabulary.

2. That is to say, the thinking Christian will have paid some attention to the *metaphysics* of miracles. 'Metaphysics' is just a complicated-sounding (and etymologically not-very-well-deserved) title that philosophers have long attached to the study of what there is and the nature of what there is. Given its currency, we might as well have this word in our vocabulary too.

logical question). Here then is the third point about our little exercise above. It sets for us something of an agenda, a pair of questions that must be added to those bothering many thinking Christians about the skeptical view of miracles generally.

We shan't aim for complete answers to all of these questions (alas there are many others) about the nature and evidential value of miracles, in this chapter. But since miracles are a fundamental part of the Christian faith, and since thinking Christians seek to clarify and defend the rationality of its most fundamental commitments, let's see what progress can be made in addressing some of them. Our ultimate goals are to determine to what extent some strong apologetic strategy — some argument from miracles to the existence of God — is workable, and to defend the rationality of believing in miracles. Along the way, we'll be able to address some important subsidiary questions that both believers and unbelievers are led to ask when thinking about miracles.

II. What Is a Miracle? The Standard Conception

It's a fact about language that words often get used in various ways. The deployment of "miracle" in common usage has come to permit such expressions as "her recovery was a miracle" or "it was a miracle that he wasn't seriously injured." Descriptions of this sort typically highlight the remarkable, unexpected nature of the event. Unbelievers and Christians alike admit that in a universe as complex and complicated as ours, there will arise remarkable and unexpected occurrences: those with welcome consequences may invite this loose description of "miracle" without any implication of religious significance or divine intervention. Where for many believers such usage will underscore the providential character of an event, serving perhaps to confirm or strengthen one's faith, the event in question (the astounding recovery or amazing lack of injury) might still be viewed as admitting of some explanation — however complicated, however elusive — in terms of natural causes. Such welcome but remarkable events, no less than an unexpected tragedy or unfortunate freak of nature, will have their place in the divine economy, an economy that God in his wisdom and power has woven into the fabric of nature itself.

So not all providential events are miracles. Let's stick with what would seem to be a clear case. A man of seeming good health suddenly takes seriously ill. Despite the prayers of his sisters, he soon thereafter

ceases breathing, his heart stops, and he dies. He is buried in an earthen grave. Four days later, as the body begins to manifest signs of decay, a religious figure of devoted following arrives at the graveside. He weeps, but then declares with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." The man emerges whole and living from the earthen grave.

Supposing (as believers do) that such an event occurs, what sort of special event is this?

On the *standard conception*, an event is a miracle only if it is contrary to the natural order. To say that an event is "contrary to the natural order" is simply to say that it is an exception to the regular order of natural occurrences. Dead people do not, in the natural course of events, come back to life. In the words of David Hume, the eighteenth-century skeptic and outspoken opponent of miracles, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature."³

If being a violation of at least one law of nature is necessary for an event's being a miracle, it is not enough. An event is a miracle, one is inclined to say, only if it is caused directly by God. That might prove to be a bit too strong, leaving no room for (say) Peter's healing the lame man (Acts 3:1-9) to count as the performance of a miracle. Let's say that an event is a miracle only if it is *caused by God either directly or through some divine agency*, leaving further details aside. (From such details it may well emerge that another condition will prove to be necessary: perhaps an event is a miracle only if it *serves as a sign to rational creatures that God is acting*, or more weakly only if it has some religious significance. To make our task manageable, we won't include this final condition in our working "definition" of a miracle below. No doubt it's very important.)

So we have at least two conditions that must be met in order for an event to count as a miracle, on the standard conception. To state it carefully:

An event *e* is a miracle only if:

3. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 3rd ed., edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 114. From the same paragraph: "It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden. . . . But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life. . . ." We'll encounter presently Hume's reason for claiming that one should never believe such accounts as the Lazarus story. (What we called an "exception" Hume has called a "violation." Those mean the same thing. Don't think of a violation of a law as something *naughty*. Think of it as an exception.)

- (1) *e* violates at least one law of nature, and
- (2) *e* is caused by God either directly or through some divine agency.⁴

III. What Does Reasonable Belief in Miracles Require?

Conditions (1) and (2) serve as our working definition of "miracle," on the standard construal. Now it's obvious that defining something — e.g. "dog," "Santa Claus," "water," "extraterrestrial" — doesn't get the thing (or things) into existence. The skeptic doubts that there *are* any miraculous events: she doubts that there are (or have been) any events satisfying our defining conditions (1) and (2). And believers think otherwise. Suppose, then, that the believer is confronted with (or is otherwise considering, perhaps in the form of historical testimony or an eyewitness report) some event that she takes to be a miracle. From our discussion so far, it is pretty clear that she will need to answer two questions concerning that event: (a) Is the event a violation of a law of nature (i.e., is it what we'll call an *anomalous event*)?⁵ and (b) Is the event caused by God? That is, with our standard conception of a miraculous event in hand, a miracle will have to meet the Anomalous Event condition (AE) and the Divine Cause condition (DC). An event *e* is a miracle only if

- (AE) *e* is an anomalous event, and
- (DC) *e* is caused by God either directly or through some divine agency.

Now in the introduction to this chapter, we encountered two pressing concerns: the concern of many believers to deploy miracles in the role of a positive argument for the existence of God, and the concern of all thinking Christians to better understand the skeptical attitude of unbelievers. Let's set aside for now the most severe skeptical attitude, according to which miracles are impossible. If miracles are to figure in a strong

4. Thus David Hume's "accurate definition" includes both conditions: a miracle is "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent" (*An Enquiry*, 115, n. 1). Don't fret over the little "*e*" in our formulation, needed to render the definition perfectly general. It's just a placeholder, to be filled in by any event whatsoever. It functions rather like "something" and "it" in English when we define (say) "dog" by claiming that "Something is a dog if and only if it is a member of the family *canidea*."

5. "Anomalous" literally means non-lawful, from *a-* ("not-") and *nomos* ("law").

Christian apologetic, in the form of an "argument from miracles," then the believer must acknowledge that even if the skeptic grants that miracles are *possible*, there may yet be challenges to believing rationally that miracles are *actual*. Here's a little challenge to the aim of giving an argument from miracles, just to get things started: notice that according to the divine cause condition (DC), there can be no miracles unless God exists. As a result, we can imagine one objecting that "there cannot be miracles which are evidence for God's existence, because accepting a description of an event as a miracle commits a man to accept[ing] the existence of God."⁶ Our definition itself looks to beg the question against the unbelieving skeptic about miracles.

But is that right? Surely we can define "miracle" in a way that, should any occur, entails the existence of God, without begging the question in favor of theism generally or Christianity in particular. What is at issue between the believer and unbelieving skeptic, presumably, isn't *whether miracles are good evidence for theism or Christianity*, but *whether there is good evidence for miracles in the first place*. And traditionally, it is precisely (AE) — the existence of what we are calling an anomalous event — that is offered *as evidence for (DC)* — the existence of a divine cause. What the above objection teaches us, then, if it teaches us anything, turns out to be a reminder of something we encountered in our little opening exercise: if the believer aims to deploy a strong apologetic strategy, arguing from miracles to the existence of a divine being, then it must be possible for the skeptic to recognize evidence for, and form a reasonable belief about, the truth of (AE) without requiring prior evidence for the truth of (DC). The strong apologetic strategy requires unbiased — one might say "theistically neutral" — grounds for claiming that some event is anomalous.

So what evidential value *can* the believer fairly expect miracles to contribute in the Christian apologetic? The answer to this question, as we can now see, depends on how the Christian confronts a serious challenge from the skeptic. The challenge is twofold, directed at two distinct tasks in the effort to bring miracles into some strong apologetic service. One task is giving reasons for judging that an anomalous event has occurred; another task is showing that such an anomalous event points to God. So

6. Apparently one needn't imagine this objection: the quoted misgiving is offered on p. 7 of Richard Swinburne's *The Concept of Miracles* (London: SCM Press, 1964), as grounds for taking seriously the claim that such a definition of "miracle" "... seems to place a restriction on the use of the term not justified in general by practice."

(AE) figures in the strong project of justifying Christian religious belief in two ways. For given some candidate-event e , one confronts two questions: first, Is (AE) indeed true? and second, Does the truth of (AE) establish the truth of (DC)? More carefully:

- (I) Are there (theistically neutral) grounds on which to justify the belief that (AE) is true?
- (II) Does the truth of (AE) serve as (theistically neutral) evidence for believing that (DC) is true?

The issue before us is whether the believer is well-placed to deploy miracles as evidence for believing in the existence of God. If the strong apologetic undertaking is to be workable, these central questions must each receive the answer "yes."

IV. Three Objections to Miracles

The stage is now properly set for confronting our two concerns — the concern of many believers to deploy miracles in arguing for the existence of God, and the concern of all thinking Christians to better understand the skeptical attitude of unbelievers. There are three basic objections that skeptics might raise in an attempt to explain why we are not (ever) able to answer "yes" to our two central questions above. The first two argue that we can never expect an affirmative answer to the first question. The latter argues that we cannot get an affirmative answer to the second question. In this section, we'll have a look at the objections themselves. The task of sections V and VI is to evaluate the prospects for a Christian apologetic of miracles in light of them.

(1) The Humean Objection

In his famous essay "Of Miracles,"⁷ David Hume argued that it is never reasonable to believe that a miraculous violation of law has occurred. His argument begins with a reminder of how we do in fact seem to justify (to fairly *earn*, so to speak) our belief that something counts as a law of nature: observing that two kinds of objects or events repeatedly and regu-

7. The essay comprises Section X of Hume's *An Enquiry*, 109-31.

larly occur together (unsuspended objects and falling, say, or deaths and irreversible decay) counts as very strong evidence that "All Fs are Gs" is a genuine law (of gravity, or of irreversible biological decay).⁸ Indeed the constant and repeated co-occurrence of such events amounts to what Hume would call a "proof" of the law. And that seems to be right; for surely we can't discover the laws of nature *a priori*, that is by simply thinking hard with our eyes and ears closed. Rather, we must do so empirically. Observing the uniform and regular behavior of objects and events provides the strongest evidence one could possibly have for judging some generalization of the form "All Fs are Gs" to be a law of nature.

What, then, should the rational person believe if confronted with testimony for an alleged miraculous rising from the dead (say) — an eyewitness report of even the strongest credentials amounting to its own "proof"? Well, we must weigh evidence against evidence, proof against proof. And here the evidence for it being true that all Fs are Gs must inevitably outweigh the evidence for it being true that there is an F that is not a G; for against the testimony of our witness stands the whole host of repeated experiences to the contrary, of regular and constant co-occurrences of Fs and Gs. Since (as Hume puts it) "the wise man always proportions his belief to the evidence," and since the testimonial evidence for a miracle can never outweigh the repeated observational evidence for a law of nature, no evidence will ever allow us rationally to believe a reported violation of law.⁹ In short, one is never justified (warranted) in be-

8. Here again, don't fret over the "Fs" and "Gs." They're just placeholders, needed to render the form in which we state a law of nature perfectly general, to be filled in with descriptions of objects or events. "All Fs are Gs" is thus a sort of shorthand for "All metals are conductors," or for "All unsupported bodies are falling bodies," or the like.

9. Hume's argument begins with "a reminder of how we justify our belief that some generalization of the form 'All Fs are Gs' is a law of nature," namely by repeated observation of the regular conjunction of Fs with Gs. Leaving an assessment of Hume's argument for a later section, two points are worth noting here. First, it may be objected that Hume is just wrong about this "reminder" — that in fact scientists don't proceed in this way at all, and that his argument is fundamentally flawed from the outset. The objection is correct this far: while it is agreed on nearly all hands that Hume is right to say that our justification for postulating some candidate L as a law of nature is nondeductive in character, it remains a point of controversy to what extent scientists rely on the form of "enumerative induction" that Hume offers here — as opposed to some alternative "abductive" inference to the best explanation. (The matter is complicated in part by the difficulty of always clearly distinguishing methods of discovery from methods of justification, and by the fact that the formulation of many laws involves idealizations relative to actual data.) But, second, even if we can't rely on Hume

believing that (AE) is true for some event. The answer to our Question (I) is "no." That is Hume's Objection.

(2) *The Wrong Laws Objection*

But suppose that we can answer the Humean Objection, so that it's still an open question whether one might reasonably believe that a law of nature has been violated. Suppose that a candidate for such a case is in fact offered, i.e., that we have good grounds for believing some distinctive and unexpected event to have occurred. Shall we claim that the anomalous event condition (AE) is true and that some law is violated? Well, even if we are confronted with such evidence that *e* violates some accepted law of nature, the skeptic will encourage us to see that the most reasonable conclusion to draw — or anyway, an equally good conclusion to draw from the evidence — is *not* that a law of nature is violated, but rather that *what we took to be a law turns out not to be a genuine law of nature after all*. Remember: there is no *a priori* method of determining the correct laws of nature. Since the method of all working scientists is an empirical one, it must remain open to the empirical scientist to recognize evidence against proposed laws when it arises. And just as science itself works in part by rejecting supposed laws when the evidence no longer fits them, so the skeptic will argue that this unexpected event — the supposed miracle — is simply good evidence that *we have not understood the relevant laws of nature correctly*. Indeed, if we had properly latched on to the true laws of nature, then we should no longer judge the actual event *e* as contrary to them. *Nothing that actually happens is contrary to the truth*. So if the man really was dead and really did come to life, then surely there is something about the difficult and complex biology of human organisms we have yet to learn. Of course, were someone (the believer, say) *already* disposed to anticipate supernatural intrusions into the natural order — were one already inclined to see remarkable events like *e* as divine interventions — then they would more readily judge events

(who was no philosopher of science) to accurately describe scientists' warrant for proposing the laws they do, he is still very much correct in claiming that we do indeed possess the evidence of repeated and regular conjunction of Fs with Gs: and this provides the force of his point that such evidence always outweighs the single-case evidence for it being true that there is an F that is not a G. For more on laws of nature, including Humean and competing accounts, see chapter 7, "Laws of Nature" (pp. 805-901) of Martin Curd and J. A. Cover, *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues* (New York & London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998).

of that remarkable sort to be genuinely anomalous violations of law. But the conditions for judging an event as genuinely anomalous must (recall) be unbiased, theistically neutral. So the skeptic is under no obligation whatever to do otherwise than regard an unexpected, heretofore unobserved event precisely as any empirical scientist would: *e* is at best evidence for the need to reconsider our present understanding of the powers in nature and the laws governing them. Once again, we cannot conclude that (AE) is true; again, the answer to our central Question (I) is "no." That is the Wrong Laws Objection.

(3) *The Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection*

But suppose that we can adequately address both of these objections, so that the anomalous event condition (AE) is acknowledged to be true. That is, suppose we are warranted in believing *e* to be an event that violates a law of nature, and so can answer "yes" to Question (I). From the existence of such an anomalous event, can we infer the existence of a divine cause? Not at all straightaway, we can't. From the truth of (AE) we can infer the truth of (DC) *only if we are sure that every anomalous event must have a divine cause*. But since, for all we know, some events are anomalous precisely because they are radically spontaneous or otherwise uncaused events, there may be anomalous events that are not miracles.¹⁰ Such events would be "non-miraculous anomalies." The skeptical worry here is an important one; for it is not at all clear on what grounds the believer could argue that such non-miraculous anomalies are impossible. An event's lacking a natural cause does not entail its having a supernatural cause. If non-miraculous anomalous events are possible, and if there is no unbiased, theistically neutral reason for saying "it's more likely that *e* has a supernatural cause than that *e* is radically spontaneous (random) or otherwise uncaused," then the evidential value of *e* emerges to be practically nil. A man rose from the dead. So? So it scarcely follows that God did it. We are thus without any good reason for judging the anomalous event to be evidence of the existence and activity of a divine being. (DC) cannot be thereby reckoned true, and the answer to our Question (II) is "no." That is the Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection.

10. Alternatively, for all we know the event *was* caused — but by Satan or some angel. That is another problem we shan't dwell on, in this chapter: we'll suppose that non-miraculous anomalies are uncaused events. Sort of like flukes of nature.

Here then are three significant challenges to the strong apologetic strategy of offering a positive "argument from miracles" in defense of the Christian faith. In the course of assessing these objections, we shall be able to consider again the nature of miracles (the metaphysical question), and to reevaluate the evidential worth of miracles in justifying Christian religious belief (the epistemological question). Let's begin with the Humean Objection, since it leads us pretty quickly to rethinking the first, metaphysical question — the one about *what miracles are*.

V. The Metaphysical Question:

A Response to Hume and a New Conception of Miracles

A. A Response to Hume's Objection

Recall again Hume's Objection. Miracles, if any there be, are violations of at least one law of nature — violations of at least one generalization about the course of events that we've expressed in the form "All Fs are Gs." The evidence we have for any law of nature, consisting in our empirical observation of the repeated and regular occurrence of Fs followed by Gs, amounts to what Hume calls a "proof" of the law. What then of someone's claim that (say) a person rose from the dead? Says Hume, we weigh evidence against evidence, proof against proof. And over against this testimony of our witness that there is some F that is not a G, stands all the weight of repeated experiences to the contrary, of that very evidence of regular and constant concurrence of Fs with Gs which proves our law that all Fs are Gs. Since the evidence of a violation will never be strong enough to outweigh the evidence for the law, and since the rational person is obliged to judge on the side of the greatest evidence, one is never justified in believing that the anomalous event *e* occurred: we are never in a position to assert that (AE) is true.

There are two things to point out about Hume's challenge, two important weaknesses. Let's consider these, approached here in the form of two objections: doing so will lead us readily into a more potent sort of Humean challenge — one providing us with a chance to think more clearly about the nature of miracles and laws.

First, Hume's Objection supposes that the only evidence one might have for a miracle is the testimony of someone's claim to direct observation. But there may be — indeed, typically will be — evidence of another, *indirect* sort; and such indirect evidence may well be strong enough to

warrant our supposing the existence of a genuinely anomalous event as its best explanation. Let's consider a simple, more familiar example first. Imagine that a good friend and family man, Jones (as philosophers inevitably call him), is found lying dead on his bedroom floor. Here is a surprising event that we ache to have explained. Suppose someone tells us and the authorities that they saw Jones commit suicide. No detective worth his salt (nor you or I, for that matter) would stop with evidence of that sort, and call it a day. After all, the witness might be lying, or deluded, or have poor eyesight. Rather, the detective will seek out indirect evidence — Jones's own fingerprints on a gun lying nearby, a suicide note on the table, a host of antidepressant drugs in the medicine cabinet, and so on. Where the direct testimony of our witness might prove insufficient, further indirect evidence might prove overwhelming: indeed, the hypothesis that Jones committed suicide might well explain all the other, indirect evidence much better than any alternative hypothesis (murder in a bungled robbery attempt, say).

Now think about the case of a purported (i.e., supposed) miracle. Here too, quite apart from the direct testimony of a witness, there may well be many other such bits of indirect evidence that are best explained by the hypothesis that an anomalous event did indeed occur, and which might well be far stronger than the direct evidence. Thus, in addition to direct testimony for the claim that Christ arose ("I saw him in the garden and he spoke to me!") would be the empty tomb itself and the burial clothes, the despondency of the Christ's followers suddenly giving way to great cheer and a deep faith, and so on. Surely these things need explaining; and it may emerge that such bits of indirect evidence are much better explained by Christ's actual resurrection than by any competing hypothesis, and that such evidence is even stronger than the testimony of our witness. Hume's objection is one about the weight of evidence, and he has said nothing whatsoever about adding the weight of indirect evidence for a genuinely anomalous event.

Second, Hume's Objection appears on reflection to be much too strong. The evidence of past experience for some regularity of nature (all Fs are Gs) will, on his account, always be weightier than new contrary evidence for a violation. But if that were true as a general principle, it would seem to show that it is *never* rational to believe — on the basis of direct testimony or any other evidence — that an event which never occurred before has in fact occurred. But this, surely, is not at all plausible as a general principle. Indeed, were Hume's Objection against miracles taken seriously, its partner objection — the Wrong Laws Objection — could never

even arise: one could *never* have good reasons for saying (as scientists clearly sometimes must) that supposed scientific laws need to be revised on the basis of new, contrary evidence. Hume seems to think that the invariable experience of past occurrences must always win out, and that one could never have good grounds to revise laws in the way scientists actually do. And that, clearly, is much too strong. Hume has vastly overestimated the weight of past experience.

B. A More Potent Humean Objection

Recall from our introduction to this chapter a concern of many thinking Christians to understand the most severe form of skepticism about miracles, namely that they are impossible. One might understand Hume's stance on miracles to express exactly this form of severe skepticism. While this is perhaps not the most charitable way of reading Hume's own claims, an extreme skepticism is at least *beneath the surface* of what he says about miracles and their relation to laws of nature. For on reflection, it looks as if Hume has understood miracles and laws in a way that would render miracles impossible. Miracles, on the standard conception, are violations of at least one law of nature. But laws of nature are simply true statements of the uniform and regular behavior of natural objects and events. Were there no such uniform and regular behavior of the natural objects and events, we should have no grounds for calling those statements *laws* at all. Hence, our grounds for calling them laws are precisely our grounds for denying any event as miraculous.

Here then arises the more severe (we might still reckon it Humean) challenge to miracles: given the standard definition that miracles violate a law of nature, there are no miracles, *because they are impossible*. Let's state this argument more explicitly, as follows:

We discover genuine laws of nature by discovering the orderly, regular behavior of natural objects, like dead bodies irreversibly decaying, and heavy bodies falling, and so on. It is a law of nature that (say) all metals are conductors of electricity, that all bodies on which no net forces are acting remain at rest or move at uniform velocity in a straight line, and so on. In short, a law of nature is what is called a *true universal generalization*, of the form "All Fs are Gs" or "All so-and-sos do such-and-such." This is the standard account of a law of nature. Hence, anything that is a genuine law of nature has *no exceptions*, no

counterinstances: if it really *is* a law of nature that all Fs are Gs, then there cannot be an F that is not a G. But a miracle is by definition a violation of a law of nature. Thus: if (i) nothing could be a law of nature unless it is unviolated, and (ii) no event could be a miracle unless it violates a law of nature, then no event could be a miracle. Miracles are impossible.¹¹

That's a pretty scary argument. What should the thinking Christian make of it?

C. Miracles as Non-Violations of Law

Given the believer's commitment to miracles, it may be quite natural to respond as follows: "I smell a trick. It's all just a matter of definition, of how miracles are defined in relation to laws. If this really shows that miracles aren't possible, well, alright, so there are no 'miracles.' But it doesn't show that Christ didn't raise Lazarus from the dead, or that he didn't walk on the water, or that he didn't multiply the loaves and fishes. Call them what you want: no abstract philosophical argument like this can show that he couldn't raise Lazarus or walk on water, and that's all I need."

But hold on now: that's *not* all the believer needs. Not, at least, if the believer aims to deploy such remarkable events as these to any apologetic advantage — strong or otherwise — as *evidence* for the existence of God or the divinity of Christ. Whatever *apologetic* role we might want miracles to play, this response threatens to cut it off, by conceding that such events have no special status in relation to natural laws. If the believer simply gives up on insisting that miracles have some genuinely *anomalous status* in relation to laws of nature, then it becomes altogether unclear what there is about such events that points to something *outside* the natural order.¹² (Mere *rarity* won't do it.) And if miracles point to

11. Representatives of this line of argument can be found in Nicholas Everitt, "The Impossibility of Miracles," *Religious Studies* 23 (1987): 347-49 and in Alastair McKinnon, "'Miracle' and 'Paradox,'" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967): 308-14.

12. The point being made here was encountered earlier in Section II, with the words "traditionally, it is precisely (AE) — the existence of what we are calling an anomalous event — that is offered as evidence for (DC) — the existence of a divine cause."

nothing outside the natural order, one can scarcely hope to use them to apologetic advantage. No: the believer needs to recognize in such events something distinctive in their relation to the natural course of law-governed events, something more than the quick response just offered acknowledges.

Let's take the severe skeptical argument seriously, as Christian philosophers universally have. If miracles are actual, as believers claim, then they *are* possible. Given the above argument for their impossibility, then, the available options are pretty clear, aren't they? There are two options, corresponding to the two main premises of the argument above — that (i) nothing could be a law of nature unless it is unviolated, and that (ii) no event could be a miracle unless it violates a law of nature. Since it is an unnegotiable part of the Christian faith that miracles are possible (since actual), the believer must deny one of these two premises. That is, the believer must either claim that laws of nature can be violated, or else claim that miracles are not violations of the laws of nature but are in some other way anomalous.

D. Salvaging the Possibility of Miracles

There is plenty to be learned from thinking about the second of these options — lots of fun metaphysics, if you want to think of it that way (or even if you don't), but more importantly, plenty to help us advance our thinking about the apologetic role of miracles. Let's see what can be said in reply to this severe skeptical argument against the possibility of miracles by taking the second route. Our task is to determine whether we can arrive at a coherent story about miracles that is different from the standard conception of them as violations of laws. Let's do it in two steps.

(i) An Assessment of the Problem

We can best start by asking how we got into this mess. (Let's hear nothing of it being the author's fault. The mess is an old and important one, and we are going to get out of it.) We got into the mess by adopting the standard picture of miracles, as violations of laws of nature. And where did that come from? Well, it came from two fundamental beliefs, shared by many theists and nontheists alike, which motivate the picture we've been working with up till now:

- (a) Miracles, if any there be, are fundamentally divine interventions into the causal order of nature; and
- (b) The concept of causality is fundamentally a concept of *lawlike regularity* among events.

Those might have seemed innocuous enough. Especially the first: the believer, surely, will be happy enough with (a) — with the idea that miracles are brought about by God in a supernatural way, from outside of nature. The challenge (the mess) confronting believers who also accept (b) is to explain the idea that something could be a law of nature despite having a miraculous violation: and as the above argument suggests, it's far from clear how a law could be a true statement of the form "All Fs are Gs" if there are cases of an F that *isn't* a G. We're trying to avoid that bugaboo. And it is important to see that we can. It is important to see that accepting (a) doesn't in any way *require* one to accept (b).

(ii) Accounting for Miracles Without (b)

On the Humean conception, we are led to think of causality in terms of lawlike regularity, and to think of miracles as *violations* of such laws. Is there some other way of thinking about causality, laws, and miracles that would avoid the challenge confronting us? There is. Consider first the idea of miraculous intervention itself. When we speak of God's miraculous activity in the natural order, we can, surely, understand such divine intervention not simply in terms of laws themselves as descriptions of the (otherwise) regular course of nature, but rather in terms of God's having the power *to bring about occurrences that cannot be caused by the natural forces operative in the created objects* left to themselves. That is to say — now following two Christian philosophers of a bygone age, St. Thomas Aquinas and G. W. Leibniz — that miracles are occurrences which are *beyond the natural power of any created thing to cause or bring about*: the natural forces operative in a human body dead for four days cannot cause that body to rise anew in living health. What God can cause is something the powers operative in the body itself *cannot cause*. And that is a somewhat different picture of causality and laws — a *non-Humean* picture. How so, exactly? Well, according to the Humean idea (b), causality is fundamentally a concept of lawfulness, and laws are simply descriptions of the regular behavior of objects and events. But on this alternative picture, causality is *fundamentally* a concept about the causal powers in things; and laws, accordingly, are not mere descriptions of regularities, but instead

expressions of what the objects in nature are capable of producing in virtue of the powers they possess.

And so notice, then, how miracles are related to laws on this new, alternative picture. Miracles are not "violations" of the laws of nature at all. The laws of nature, recall, describe what objects in nature are capable of producing in light of the powers that they have. And miracles, recall, are occurrences that are beyond the natural power of any created thing to cause or bring about. Thus, miraculous events — those events not caused by the operation of natural powers in created objects — do nothing to threaten the truth of natural laws about natural causes. The idea of some event rendering a claim of the form "All Fs are Gs" false while that claim remains a law was the difficulty with accepting (b) above, the bugaboo we aimed to avoid. We can now see that believing in events having supernatural causes needn't saddle one with believing that there are *false laws of nature*, laws having exceptions. Miracles are so to speak "gaps" in nature, occurrences having causes about which laws of nature are simply silent. The laws are true, but simply don't speak to events caused by divine intervention. (Laws of nature are, after all, laws *of nature*, not *supernature*. As our Church Fathers might have expressed it, miracles can be *supra natura* without being *contra natura*.) In short, then, miracles are anomalous — non-nomological, non-lawlike — not because they violate laws of nature, but rather because the laws of nature don't speak to their causes at all.

So much for our rescue of the possibility of miracles. We've secured here a new picture of miracles, a better picture: we've secured it by getting a better picture of laws of nature and the relation of miracles to them. Our new picture, of miracles as anomalous events not violating laws of nature, pulls the teeth from any severe skeptical argument against the very possibility of miracles.

Thus we can, at last, judge the first of our three objections to miracles — the broadly Humean misgiving(s) — to be safely behind us. But what about the Wrong Laws Objection to miracles, and the Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection? These are still on board. Let's consider them now, in the context of facing head-on our main question yet outstanding: What evidential role can believers fairly expect miracles to play in a Christian apologetic?

VI. The Epistemological Question: Miracles and Evidence

One shouldn't, I think — and now grant me, as you just have, the luxury of speaking in the first person — expect too much.¹³ Recall again (from the introduction) that many Christians will confess to being perplexed when confronting someone who is utterly skeptical about miracles. Don't miracles point to God in the way any effect points to its cause? True enough, if miracles are impossible, then there is no hope of engaging such an argumentative strategy. But that severe skepticism is well behind us. Isn't there a positive "argument from miracles" to the existence of God, what we've called a strong apologetic strategy for showing someone that God exists? Thus we ended our introduction with this: "Our ultimate goals are to determine to what extent some strong apologetic strategy — some argument from miracles to the existence of God — is workable, and to defend the rationality of believing in miracles." What I should like to emphasize in these final sections is that those are indeed *two* goals, and that the success of defending a rational belief in miracles is *in no way* dependent upon the success of giving "an argument from miracles to the existence of God." The remaining objections to miracles — the Wrong Laws Objection and the Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection — provide a good context in which to clarify these points. I shall recommend that while these objections may *have some force* against a strong apologetic of miracles, they have *little or no force* against a more moderate apologetic strategy, and that they *count not at all* against the rationality of believing in miracles. Let's gird up our loins one last time, and confront these objections.

A. Miracles: Possibility vs. Actuality

Miracles are not impossible. There is nothing incoherent about them, as the severe Humean skeptic might have it. But a *coherent* story about the world needn't be a *true* story: wide is the gate to coherence, and narrow the way to truth. Now according to the Wrong Laws Objection, any candidate

13. Most chapters in this volume are written in the first person. I adopt the first person here, in part to indicate that many believers are (I gather) inclined to be rather more optimistic than I about the role of miracles in a Christian apologetic. They won't reckon anything in the remainder of this chapter to be outright false; they'll just read it as being too pessimistic. At least the record is straight: from here on out I'm speaking for myself, as most authors have spoken through their entire chapters.

e for an anomalous event — one which the laws of nature together with prior natural events cannot in any way explain — is at best evidence that we've gotten the laws of nature wrong. And according to the Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection, even if that remarkable event *is* anomalous and falls outside the scope of the true laws of nature, it points to God only if every anomaly must have a divine cause (or, put another way, only if *non-miraculous* anomalies are impossible). Both of these objections, then, are directed squarely against the truth of the miracle claims of theism generally and Christianity in particular. How strong are these objections?

If the Humean Objection emerges as weak overall, the same cannot quite be said of these remaining objections. Recall again our working "definition" of a miracle: *e* is a miracle only if

(AE) *e* is an anomalous event, and

(DC) *e* is caused by God either directly or through some divine agency.

And recall again our two central questions: given some remarkable event *e*,

- (I) Are there (theistically neutral) grounds on which to justify the belief that (AE) is true?
- (II) Does the truth of (AE) serve as (theistically neutral) evidence for believing that (DC) is true?

The strong apologetic, aiming to argue from miracles to the existence of God, requires that each of these central questions receive the answer "yes." Confronting this apologetic is the skeptic who claims that, while miracles are possible, they are not actual — that belief in miracles is coherent but not true. Such a skeptic will think about miracles, perhaps, in much the way you and I are likely to think about (for example) UFOs and extraterrestrials. (The analogy isn't perfect, but few analogies are: maybe it'll help.) If someone aimed to offer a sort of "argument" for extraterrestrials — an argument from the reality of UFOs, say — then you and I, as fair-minded skeptics, can grant that such creatures are *possible* while nevertheless persisting in the rational belief that extraterrestrial creatures are *not actual*. Far from shrinking in the face of "evidence from UFOs," we have in place a much larger, overarching view of the world according to which such "evidence" from UFOs is really no evidence at all: however remarkable and curious those lights in the sky may be, we will persist in

the belief that there is available some alternative, if perhaps complex, hypothesis that can more plausibly explain that phenomena. Of course if one were already disposed to believe in the existence of extraterrestrials, then one would more quickly judge the remarkable and curious events to involve some object from another planet. But that's scarcely a neutral stance, and the believer in extraterrestrials cannot expect you and I to share beliefs of that sort. Moreover, even if (for whatever reasons) we came to believe that such curious events *did* involve some object from outside our atmosphere, this alone does not show that there are sentient and intelligent creatures visiting us on earth aboard them. It's not at all easy to *show* that there are extraterrestrials.

Now our skeptic about miracles, while granting the *possibility* of genuinely anomalous events, may fairly persist in a view of the physical world according to which they are *not actual*. Among nonbelieving skeptics about miracles, it is very common to have in place a larger, overarching view of the world according to which each event that occurs is caused by prior events, in accordance with the laws of nature. Let's call this prevalent worldview *Naturalism*. And consider then some remarkable and unexpected event *e*. The naturalist, far from shrinking in the face of "evidence from remarkable and unexpected events," will presumably recommend what many see as the hallmark of a proper scientific methodology — expanding and revising our account of nature and the laws governing occurrences within it, in the face of new and contrary observations. Should some remarkable event *e* appear to have no explanation in terms of prior events and causal laws, the naturalist will encourage us to remember that it is in precisely this way that currently formulated *laws of science* are shown not yet properly to capture the genuine *laws of nature*. Putative evidence is always evaluated relative to some prior beliefs or worldview. So whatever "evidence from remarkable events" we might offer for *e* being an event having no cause in prior natural events, the naturalist skeptic will surely regard it as evidence that we have misunderstood the laws of nature. When regarded in this way, such an event *counts not at all* as evidence for the existence of genuine anomalies. Of course, if one were already disposed to believe in divine interventions into the natural causal order, one would more quickly judge *e* to be genuinely anomalous. But that's scarcely a neutral stance, and the believer in miracles can hardly expect the skeptic to share those beliefs. No remarkable event *all by itself* counts as unbiased, theistically neutral evidence for being genuinely anomalous. Thus the Wrong Laws Objection is always available to the skeptic. Given the demand for neutral evidence, the answer to our central question (I) looks to be "no."

Moreover, even if the skeptic were, for whatever reasons, to become convinced that some remarkable event was not caused by prior *natural* events, he might still insist that whatever *is* caused to occur is caused by *prior natural events*. That is, such a skeptic will be prepared to admit two options: either an event is caused or uncaused. If it is caused, its cause is *natural*. If it is uncaused, well then, of course, nothing caused it: the event is a radically spontaneous and inexplicable event. And here again, no such inexplicable event all by itself counts as unbiased, theistically neutral evidence for its having a divine cause. Thus our skeptic can fairly and rationally claim that the anomalous event is not miraculous: the Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection is always available to the skeptic. So the answer to our central question (II) looks to be "no."

In short, there is no *forcing* one to accept the occurrence of miracles.

But of course, there is no *forcing* anyone to believe *anything*. The real question is what it is most reasonable to believe. While the Wrong Laws and the Non-Miraculous Anomaly objections are always at least *available* as options one might take, they may not always be the most *reasonable*, the most rational options to take. Let's pause briefly to reflect on what might be said against these options being the most reasonable options to take. Doing so will lead us to some final thoughts, in the direction of a more moderate apologetic strategy and the rationality of believing in miracles.

B. The Wrong Laws Objection

How reasonable the Wrong Laws Objection proves to be, in particular cases, will depend upon lots of details. Different cases of supposed anomalies will bring with them different details. Avoiding too many details, let's suppose that we grant the familiar demand for theistically neutral evidence (although soon, I shall urge that we needn't grant it). Even granting this demand, there may be cases of supposed anomalies where our remarkable event *e* turns out — after the most serious and persistent efforts to reformulate our scientific laws — stubbornly to resist any naturalistic causal explanation whatever. In such a case, we might think that the unity of science is better preserved by admitting that *e* is truly an anomaly than by working toward a radical revamping of scientific laws.

Suppose that a small group of unbelieving biologists and forensic scientists, all committed to Naturalism, were confronted with what, by any examination of the relevant facts, seems to be the raising of a man

from the dead after four days in the grave. The accepted and successful laws of natural science cannot explain such an occurrence, and no diligent efforts to uncover new laws, or ingenious efforts to revamp existing ones, succeed in explaining the occurrence. Our scientists might persist in their commitment to Naturalism. If so, they can only judge their larger belief-system to be in pretty serious disarray. The truth about biology, whatever it is, must be reckoned quite different from what existing biological science tells us — a strained admission in light of the ability of existing science to explain all relevant biological phenomena *except* the man's rising. Moreover they are yet without any explanation whatsoever about the apparent anomaly. Now remaining in this state of "cognitive vertigo" is, surely, an option. And yet, in light of the evidence, one cannot help but think that our scientists' degree of (well-earned) confidence in the laws of science ought to be *higher* than their confidence in Naturalism.¹⁴ They do of course *believe* that every event must be causally explainable in terms of prior natural events and the laws of nature; but — here is the *key* question — is it reasonable to continue believing this, in the face of an event that seems resistant to explanation by biological laws, given the otherwise great success of these laws?

That question is not easily answered. For our thoroughgoing naturalists, the anomaly has shaken their confidence in the established laws of science, but not their belief that every event has natural cause. (More than once, they will remind us, the history of science has witnessed such upheavals: in all such cases, the community of scientists, far from giving up their Naturalism, retrenched their efforts to work out a more adequate account of the world consistent with it.) Yet to many, it would — all things considered — seem far more reasonable to retain the existing canons of biology, and grant the following inference to the best explanation: the phenomenon is genuinely anomalous, and Naturalism is false.

One can't help but wish for some clearer way of deciding, on purely neutral grounds, when one stance is more reasonable than another. Which of the two stances, prior to any other considerations or details, is *in its own right* objectively more reasonable, or is more likely to be true — the idea of Naturalism, or the idea of events having no natural causes? I

14. Indeed, it is presumably because the general run of natural scientists abhor such cognitive vertigo that, given their commitment to Naturalism, they are keen to deny the historical basis of the biblical testimony to miracles in the first place. The historical reliability of the biblical record is, alas, another question we haven't pursued here: see footnote 15.

confess to thinking that there is no good answer to this question, no "right" answer that anyone who is rational would be obliged to accept.

C. The Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection

Something similar arises in connection with the Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection. Here, as with the Wrong Laws Objection, the believer might at least make progress without arriving at anything like a proof; and then, despite the progress, one may still confront residual worries about what is most reasonable to believe. Let's see why.

Suppose it were granted that some remarkable event *e* is genuinely anomalous. Such an anomalous event points to God (i.e., is genuinely miraculous) only if it has a divine cause. But as the Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection is keen to remind us, we can prove that our anomalous event *e* has a divine cause only if we can give some proof against its having some other cause or indeed *no cause at all*. And this simply cannot be proven. The event could be anomalous precisely because it is a spontaneous, uncaused event. In other words, there is no direct, deductive proof of the divine cause condition (DC) from the anomalous event premise (AE). That's the challenge against being able to answer "yes" to our central question (II).

But perhaps all is not immediately lost here. The objection seems to require that the only available argumentative route to a conclusion — the only way of supporting some claim as reasonable to believe — is a deductive one, in the form of a genuine proof. Surely this is too strong. Even if there is *no deductive route* from (DC) to (AE), it hardly follows that there is *no route whatever* from (DC) to (AE) — no way at all in which an anomaly can serve as rational grounds or good evidence for believing that it has a divine cause. Indeed, much of legal and scientific reasoning takes the form of a (nondeductive) "inference to the best explanation." Long ago, astronomers came to realize that the orbit of Uranus exhibited unexpected deviations from their best calculations of what it should be. The best explanation — the only reasonable explanation, given everything else that was known about the solar system — was that there must exist a gravitational force exerted by some theretofore unknown (and as yet undiscovered) heavenly body, affecting the orbit of Uranus. That reasonable belief led astronomers to search for, and eventually discover, the planet we call Neptune. Or consider a miniature "legal" case — of two hopelessly failing students whose final exam papers are remarkably high-score

'A's. If, on inspection, both exams are exactly alike (even down to the few mistakes), then we can reasonably believe that our students have cheated: given the evidence, that is far and away the best explanation, the best inference to make. Now in both of these cases, as in a vast range of others like them, while we lack anything like a deductive proof, we nevertheless have very strong evidence grounding our inference to what best explains it. It is of course *possible* that (unlike all other planets) there is no gravitational explanation for the orbit of Uranus, or that the failing students suddenly knew the course material remarkably well and by chance inexplicably wrote the same things on their papers. But surely it is far and away more reasonable, given the evidence, to believe here that some other gravitational body exists, and that the students have cheated.

In the same way, while a positive "argument from miracles" may not be available to *prove* the existence of God, it may nevertheless be *more reasonable* to claim that *e* has a divine cause than to claim that *e* is spontaneous, inexplicable, uncaused. The occurrence of some remarkable event that is inexplicable in terms of past events and the laws of nature is perhaps good evidence that it was caused by something outside nature: perhaps the best explanation is that *e* is caused by God. Indeed many people would claim that the idea of an event being altogether *uncaused* (having no causal explanation whatsoever) is simply unreasonable.

That's fair enough. But is it right? How would one show, or plausibly defend, this view that the idea of an uncaused event is unreasonable? Indeed, how would one go about showing or defending even the weaker claim — that uncaused events are less reasonable than divinely caused events? While many of us do in fact find ourselves quite naturally believing this weaker claim, the skeptic might find himself quite naturally believing otherwise: to the skeptic, it seems more reasonable to accept the existence of an uncaused event than to accept the existence of an invisible divine cause. Which view, *in its own right*, all on its own, is objectively more rational, more likely to be true? Once again, I confess to thinking that there is no good answer to this question, no "right" answer that anyone who is rational would be obliged to accept.

Yet perhaps the challenge from Non-Miraculous Anomalies isn't so dim as all that. As before, different cases bring with them different details. Mightn't there be cases presenting us with *evidence*, quite beyond the anomalous event itself, for their having a divine cause? You can have evidence for my causing some occurrence if you see me bring it about. That sort of evidence won't be available in the case of an invisible God. But suppose that you know me and my inner character well — well enough to

know that if you call me on the phone and ask that I send you \$50, then you will receive the money from me. Should you ask me for money, receiving it is evidence that I sent it. Had you not asked, you almost certainly wouldn't have found an envelope with money taped to your front door: surely the best explanation for the money's appearing on your door is that I put it there. Elijah knew the inner character of the God of Abraham and Isaac well enough: he asked God to consume the bullock and stones and wood and water on Mt. Carmel, and fire came down from a cloudless sky to consume the altar. That, surely, is evidence of God's causing the fire. In this case at least, isn't it more reasonable to suppose that fire from a cloudless sky was caused by God, and less reasonable to suppose it was uncaused?

It sure seems so. The skeptic might, alas, wonder if the Elijah story is even true, and add that he himself has no evidence that any miracle like the one described in the case of Elijah has actually occurred. For better or worse, we have rather fewer examples of candidate miracles, nowadays, earning a spot in the broadcasts of reputable evening newscasts, to present to our skeptic. It is worth remembering that a strong apologetic of miracles, aiming to provide the skeptic with an "argument from miracles" to the existence of God, needs an event to offer up for discussion that the skeptic will accept as a candidate.¹⁵ As we've said, there is no forcing one

15. A tall order, perhaps, if we aim to enlist the help of Elijah. I've studiously avoided the question of how one should go about establishing the inspiration and authority of the biblical record and its reliability as a true statement of past events. The second of these won't follow straight from the first: we'd need other premises (on which fair-minded believers have disagreed) about literal reading and inerrancy and more. I have no expertise on such matters, and shan't pronounce on it. I have no expertise on the first issue (of inspiration and authority) either, but will pronounce on it this far: the divine authority of Scripture seems to me not something that one could really establish at all. Some of us came to believe it at our parents' knee. (But then, how'd *they* come to know it?) To accept the authority of Scripture on the authority of my parents will work all right as an explanation of why I *do* believe it, but hardly works as a justification of the belief itself (why I *should* believe it). My own view is that no amount of historical scholarship can establish the inspiration and authority of scripture. We've got historical evidence about the life of President Washington sufficient to underwrite the belief that he owned slaves; but what sort of evidence could there be about God inspiring the Gospel writers (say) or the selection of the Canon that would underwrite belief in those? (Here I commend to the reader the later chapters of Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), and his discussions there of the Principle of Dwindling Probabilities. My suspicion is that Plantinga is right: our warrant in believing the Bible to be the authoritative Word of God owes to the work of the Holy Spirit. Full stop, pretty much.)

to believe in miracles. But our latest effort has been in the direction of cutting a path that could in principle be followed in arguing from the occurrence of a genuine anomaly to the existence of a divine cause. Whether our skeptic is well enough on board to grant the occurrence of a genuine anomaly will depend on the particular case at issue, and how well the Wrong Laws Objection can be met in that particular case. If, in light of our previous reflections, it can in that case be met, then our latest effort has shown that such a case might also point to a divine cause, even if the route to this conclusion is something weaker than a deductive proof — something rather more like an inference to the best explanation.

VII. Belief in Miracles and a Moderate Apologetic Strategy

So far as I can see, apologetics is about defending the rationality of the Christian faith, not *proving* it. There is probably no convincing proof for Naturalism, but it is not thereby irrational to believe that Naturalism is true. There is probably no argument for theism that every rational person must accept, but theism isn't thereby irrational to believe. Suppose the challenges from Wrong Laws and Non-Miraculous Anomalies cast some doubt on our confidence that questions (I) and (II) can readily be answered affirmatively. This result counts at most against what we have been calling the strong apologetic undertaking, of proving the existence of God by appeal to miracles: it tells not at all against the rationality of believing in miracles, nor against their deployment in a more moderate apologetic strategy. Let me close with some brief reflections on those issues. My purpose is to address the two residual worries most recently nipping our heels — about the difficulty of judging one view to be objectively more reasonable or likely than another, and about the demand for theistically neutral evidence. Neither of these, on reflection, are genuine worries at all.

A. The Rationality of Believing in Miracles

The believer oughtn't shoulder the mistaken idea that the rationality of the Christian faith stands or falls with the success or failure of positive arguments proving the existence of God. Likewise, the Christian would be equally mistaken to suppose that the rationality of believing in miracles

stands or falls with the success or failure of an argument showing that some event is indeed anomalous and has a divine cause. Let's think about the first of these, first. If the central apologetic task is one of defending the rationality of the Christian faith, then the thinking Christian is concerned with answering the charge that believing in God is somehow illegitimate — that in light of the evidence, accepting theism is in one way or another irrational, or less than fully rational. But what evidence *is* that, and what exactly makes believing theism in light of it irrational or unreasonable? The skeptic will say that theistic belief is unreasonable because it simply isn't very credible, isn't very likely to be true, given other accepted beliefs. But surely a lot rides on (i) what those other beliefs *are*, and (ii) how likely or reasonable *they* are said to be. Concerning (ii), I've already spilled the beans: few if any "deep" beliefs wear an obvious and objective degree of likelihood or reasonableness marked plainly on their sleeves. (Which is objectively more likely to be true — that time had a beginning, or that there is no beginning to time? Which, all on its own, is objectively more likely to be true — that in our heavenly abode we are souls or spirits, or that we have physical (if incorruptible) bodies? None of these wears an obvious and objective likelihood on its sleeve. None of these, *all on its own*, is objectively more reasonable, more likely.) This brings us straight to (i): What *are* these other beliefs, on the basis of which theism is judged to be not very likely true, not very credible? No doubt theism is not very likely, when judged from the basis of Naturalism. But the believer is scarcely obliged to judge the credibility of theism against the "evidence" of Naturalism. (No doubt the claim "Time had a beginning" is not very likely, when judged from the view that every event must be caused by a temporally earlier event. But one needn't believe that latter causal hypothesis: it isn't all on its own more objectively likely, something that anyone who is rational is obliged to accept.)

Is the believer rational in accepting theism? Well, the reasonableness or likelihood one associates with that belief will depend on the reasonableness or likelihood associated with other of his or her beliefs. Among these beliefs may be — *why not?* — the deliverances of religious experience, and/or the fine-tuning version of the teleological argument (say), and/or an acquired faith via general revelation, and/or the work of the Holy Spirit. If the believer is in possession of no good reason for doubting the deliverances of one or another of these sources of belief, then their likelihood for that person will be sufficiently high to count for them as evidence for believing in theism.

Now return to miracles. The skeptic may insist that belief in mira-

cles is unreasonable simply because it isn't very credible, isn't very likely to be true, given other beliefs about the world. As before, a lot rides on (i) what those "other beliefs about the world" *are*, and (ii) how likely or reasonable *they* are said to be. Concerning (ii), there is no obvious and objective degree of likelihood or reasonableness marked plainly on the sleeves of the naturalist claim that laws of nature have no "gaps," or that nature encounters no outside intervention. The likelihood that there are sometimes genuinely anomalous events, events having no cause in some prior natural event, will for the believer be judged on the basis of other beliefs she has, and the likelihood she attaches to them. Among these other beliefs may be — why not? — the deliverances of religious experience, and/or arguments for the existence of God, and/or an acquired faith via general revelation, and/or the work of the Holy Spirit. If the believer is in possession of good reasons for accepting (no outweighing reasons for rejecting) the deliverances of one or another of these sources of belief, then the likelihood of those beliefs, for that person, may be sufficiently high to count as good grounds for reckoning the belief in genuine anomalies to be very reasonable. Indeed, the contents of these other beliefs may be such as to invite the *expectation* of divine intervention. True enough: if what is counted as good grounds for believing some claim is to be judged on the basis of the likelihood or reasonableness of other, prior beliefs, then an unbeliever — sharing no such beliefs as those deliverances of religious experience and natural theology and faith might provide — may well lack sufficient grounds for believing in miracles. But the believer needn't be in that position. And the believer who isn't in that position, who aims to defend the rationality of believing in miracles, needn't presume the posture of "adopting" it by obliging the familiar demand for "theistically neutral evidence."

B. The Moderate Apologetic

These latest reflections suggest how in broad outlines one might conceive the relevance of miracles to a more attenuated, moderate Christian apologetic. The evidential contribution of miracles, rather than figuring at the front end (the beginning) of an effort to demonstrate the existence of a divine being, will instead figure in the middle of an effort to establish the warrant for other central religious beliefs — the Christian plan of salvation generally, say, or the divinity of Christ in particular. At the front end will be located those of one's beliefs already enjoying sufficiently high

likelihood, thanks to the arguments of natural theology or to religious experience or general revelation or the work of the Holy Spirit. Here the believer may have sufficient (and let's call it what it is — *theistic*) evidential grounds not simply for judging miracles to be possible, but to be expected from a Creator having those attributes such beliefs give reason to believe he has. And since Hume's argument against testimony is no longer in place, the believer may safely enlist the evidence of historical testimony as well. The route taken by this moderate apologetic is thus from theistic belief (supplemented by historical testimony or not), to rational belief in miracles, to belief in the authority and truth of claims to which miracles are a confirming witness. The raising of Lazarus, the walking on water, the multiplication of loaves and fishes — all alike serve as confirming evidence that Jesus of Nazareth is who he said he is, namely the divine Son of God.¹⁶

Many further questions remain, about the stronger positive argument from miracles and the moderate apologetic strategy lately suggested. The purpose of this chapter has been to point the thinking believer in the direction of these questions, to illustrate how philosophical reflection is fruitfully brought to bear in approaching them and their forerunners, and to recommend that, in light of its inherent difficulty, thinking Christians approach an "apologetic from miracles" with a refined mixture of intellectual humility and tenacity. There is no forcing one to believe in miracles. But neither is there any reason to shrink from seeing in events like the resurrection evidence of God's reaching down to make himself known to creatures.

16. And here it is perhaps worth asking why Jesus performed the miracles recorded in the New Testament scriptures. We can pretty safely say that it was in part because he had compassion for people. But did he intend them to play some (let's go ahead and call it) apologetic role? If so, the theistic beliefs of his Jewish audience were already well in place, and the point would be to confirm his status as the divine Son of God. That's the moderate role proposed here. But notice that even in this case, many theists refused to believe, and called him a magician; moreover, recall Christ's impatience with this "evil generation demanding a sign." We oughtn't expect too much from any apologetic of miracles: there's no *forcing* a theist to be a Christian.