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### Miracles as a Motive of Credibility for Faith

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THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Miracles as a Motive of Credibility for Faith

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Divinity

Of the University of St. Thomas

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

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Connor McGinnis

St. Paul, MN

2022

## **Dedications**

To Mom, Dad, and Ryan, for their love, support, and goodness they have shown me and which I will never be able to fully repay

**\*\*\***

To Joey, Ryan, and Bill, for helping awaken me to the beauty of the intellectual life

**\*\*\***

To Mary Seat of Wisdom, who inspired this project and brought it to completion

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# Introduction

It is a striking, perhaps even amusing, phenomenon in life that so many things which are called “obvious” are also in complete conflict with one another. Sometimes this conflict arises from newly acquired knowledge, as with the case a person seemingly innocent of a crime is caught on camera committing said crime. On other occasions, the conflict between seemingly obvious truths is largely a matter of cognitive wiring. The viral sensation “The Dress” exemplifies this, where a photo of a dress is seen by some to be undoubtedly gold and white and other to be undoubtedly blue and black.<sup>1</sup> Yet other instances of this conflict arise from the background assumptions and worldviews of those involved in the dispute. If you ask some people whether God is active in the world and in their own lives, they will emphatically affirm that He is, perhaps saying something like “It just obvious God was directing things in that situation,” or “It is clear that He healed me from my ailment.” Those who take the contrary position might likewise make the point that it is just obvious that things are undirected and purposeless or that, for example, dead people have an extremely good track record of staying dead, and any worldview in which there are exceptions is obviously wrong, perhaps even delusional.

So which is it? Is there a God Who works signs and wonders in the natural world which are (or can be) apparent to those who pay attention, or is everything ultimately explicable in terms of nature, without requiring recourse to the supernatural? Put in other terms, are at least some miracle claims true, and if so, with what confidence can we assert this? That various sophisticated arguments can be advanced both for and against miracles seems to make it doubtful

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Corum, “Is That Dress White and Gold or Blue and Black?” at The New York Times (27 February 2015), at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/02/28/science/white-or-blue-dress.html>.

that the resolution of the question on miracles is an obvious one. Yet the question still lingers, and the implications of whether or not there are credible miracle reports have a certain gravity to them. If miracles do happen, then some supernatural agent, God or otherwise, is real. Moreover, such a being seems to care about us or is trying to communicate with us, which may well have profound implications for what we are to believe and how we are to live. Hence it is natural to ask “Do accounts of the miraculous provide good reasons to believe in God and some particular religion?” Since this is a work of Catholic theology, it might be put in more specific and formal theological language as, “Do these miracle accounts provide good *motives of credibility*<sup>2</sup> for faith in the God revealed in Catholic theology? If so, how do these motives of credibility contribute to a person’s act of faith?” These are the questions this thesis will seek to answer.

### **The Significance of Miracles**

As a preliminary, it is worth addressing what the significance of miracles is in the first place as it relates to faith in the revelation of God. For a Christian, is belief in miracles necessary? After all, one could simply make a commitment to follow the commands of Christ in care for the poor, love of enemy, and the like, whereby one could be called a follower of Christ.

Fashionable as this might be in some circles, this is to effectively strip away the substance of Christian thought and teaching. Indeed, the early Church put rather strong emphasis on the miraculous as the basis for everything, and it is summed up well in the teaching of St.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

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<sup>2</sup> What motives of credibility are and the role they play will be explained later in the work. For present purposes, they can be understood as reasons for someone to believe a particular message or event is the work of God.

<sup>12</sup> Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; <sup>14</sup> if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup> We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. <sup>17</sup> If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.<sup>3</sup>

*If Christ has not been raised from the dead, your faith is futile.* Yet, Christ being raised from the dead would be a miracle, and if miracles are to be rejected, then so is the Christian faith. The intelligibility of Scripture is absolutely dependent on the miraculous, for without it, it is hard to see in what sense the Jews were chosen and guided by God or how to make sense of the Law. For example, when speaking about how to discern who is a true prophet, the book of Deuteronomy says,

<sup>21</sup> And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’— <sup>22</sup> when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him (Deut. 18: 21-22).

Here, genuine prophecy requires the Lord to reveal something to a prophet and speak through Him, which is likewise impossible if miracles cannot occur. Given the prominence of prophets within the life of the Jewish people, an entire portion of their theological heritage would have to be written off on account of even their own Law.

The fact that belief in the miraculous is integral to the Christian faith might seem so obvious as to not be worth mentioning. Yet, it is not something that is universally accepted.<sup>4</sup> However, to deny miracles is to fail to take the Christian message on its own

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 15: 12-19 (RSV); the RSV translation will be used throughout unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the work of the Anglican bishop John Shelby Spong or some forms of Quakerism.

terms, and if Christ is to be reduced to simply a profound moral teacher, without giving us supernatural aid by means of grace, then absurdity follows. To pick one point, the command to love our enemies is a really nice high-sounding ideal, which is also impossible to do on a human level when those enemies are persecuting, perhaps even killing your loved ones, heaping scorn upon you, and tearing down everything you deem as good. It is only a message backed up with divine authority, with grace to move us, which can dream of such a high ideal. However, as soon as divine power is given a foot in the door, it is hard to keep the miracles which follow out. Hence, miracles are significant and indeed central to Christian theology and belief.

### **Fundamental Theology and Miracles**

One might wonder, in the midst of all this discussion of miracles, what branch of theology the following discussion might fall into. Talk of miracles as such does not have a clear home in much of dogmatic theology, say in discussion of the Trinity, of Ecclesiology, or of Grace. Even less do miracles seem to fit into discussions of Moral & Spiritual Theology, Church History, Patristics, or Pastoral Theology. Recall this work is about miracles as they relate to motives of credibility for the Faith. If one were to look in textbooks and references works, one will find that discussion of motives of credibility, the act of faith, and how miracles relate to them is taken up in Fundamental Theology. How the discipline is precisely defined can vary. Lawrence Feingold defines Fundamental Theology as “theology’s reflection on itself as a



discipline, its method, and its foundation in God’s revelation transmitted to us through Scripture and Tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Fr. John Hardon S.J., meanwhile, defines it as,

That branch of theology which establishes the fact that God has made a supernatural revelation and established the Church, founded by Christ, as its divinely authorized custodian and interpreter. It is called theology because it is a science dealing with God; and it is fundamental because its role is to set forth the rational foundations of the Catholic faith. In some circles the term "fundamental theology" has taken on a derived and secondary meaning, namely the science of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

While both definitions are correct, Hardon’s has the most relevance here, especially with respect to the phrases “establishes the fact that God has made a supernatural revelation” and “its role is to set forth the rational foundations of the Catholic faith.”

Since miracles traditionally function as a means of determining whether or not God has in fact made a supernatural revelation and since miracle claims are often used to bolster the case for there being rational foundations of the Catholic faith, it follows that discussion of miracles in those contexts falls under the domain of fundamental theology.<sup>7</sup> Still, the question of how much theology is actually going on deserves answering. If one is using reason to determine whether a miracle in fact took place and what its nature was, then that seems to be simply within the domain of philosophy. While much is going to depend on the context, at least in this work the focus is on miracles *as they motivate faith*.

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Feingold, *Faith Comes From What is Heard: An Introduction to Fundamental Theology* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2016), xix.

<sup>6</sup> John Hardon, S.J., *Modern Catholic Dictionary* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1980), 224.

<sup>7</sup> It should be made clear that not all discussions of miracles will pertain to fundamental theology. Much will have to do with the *formal object*, that is, the lens and method through which they are being examined. Putting forward miracles as an argument against agnostics or atheists in order to motivate faith would be in the vein of apologetics, which falls under (or at least near to) fundamental theology. Analyzing miracles in terms of how they come forth from God might fall under Theology of God proper. A study of miracles in Scripture as accounts of Scripture might be relegated to Biblical Theology, and so on.

Thus, it is not merely some detached scientific study of “Did some actual supernatural phenomenon take place here?” The entire project has an eye toward faith and is also done in faith that God does reveal and has revealed. As such, this will be a work of theology, albeit with significant employment of philosophical tools.

### **The Plan of This Work**

In the course of this thesis, miracles as a motive of credibility for faith will be the focus. As a preliminary to discussing faith specifically, Chapter 1 will deal with basic epistemological issues relevant to the project. It will discuss the logical structures of various kinds of arguments as well as if we can come to know things at all, miracles included. Additionally, I will take up the philosophical positions of scientism and radical empiricism, showing first how these philosophical positions conflict with miracle claims. I will then proceed to refute these philosophical theses in order to clear the way for the possibility of miracles. Finally, the *Preambula Fidei*, or preambles of faith will be taken up, talking about what intellectual work comes prior to faith and offering an argument against materialistic naturalism and an argument for theism.

Chapter 2 is the theological core of the thesis. In it, I will first take up what miracles are and in what senses the term might rightly be used. The motives of credibility and how they are to be understood will be more fully fleshed out. Then I will make a brief sketch of faith in Scripture and in Church teaching. Finally, the work of two great Saints of the Church, Thomas Aquinas and John Henry Newman, will be analyzed with respect to faith and how faith bears on miracles.

I will draw these accounts together in a synthesis in the hopes of providing a modestly robust account of faith and our coming to assent to revelation.

Chapter 3 takes on the critics. The main antagonist will be Benedict de Spinoza, a philosopher of the modern period who wrote a critique of miracles largely motivated by his natural theology and natural philosophy. I will also briefly discuss objections offered by the philosopher David Hume.

The work will conclude (appropriately) with a conclusion and a tying together of all the threads discussed thereto.

# Chapter 1: Basic Epistemological Considerations

Any account of whether miracles occur and how they can be known will have to take into consideration the context and background in which miracle reports are made. This background includes both the way people come to various kinds of knowledge and also the perspective from which they reach that knowledge. As such, if miracles are offered as a sort of motive or argument, what is the strength of their conclusion? What kind of arguments, structurally speaking, would one give for miracles? Whatever the answers to these questions, it will also be necessary to see what epistemological conditions are necessary for miracles to even be feasible and what background worldviews they might work with.

## Demonstration, Induction, and Skepticism

If one is to philosophize and theologize well, in the sense that one takes philosophy and theology to be bodies of knowledge elaborated upon via arguments, the knowledge of logic becomes paramount. How to structure arguments, how to relate evidence to certain conclusions, and knowing the strength of these conclusions will go a long way toward helping make what is being studied intelligible. Importantly, the *kind* of argument being used will, in part, set the terms of the entire discussion. While there could be many different distinctions and subcategories of argument types, three will be relevant here: (1) Demonstration, (2) Deduction, and (3) Induction.

*Demonstration:* Demonstration is the gold standard for argumentation because it yields the most certain conclusion among the options listed. For an argument to be a demonstration, the premises must be true, first and immediate, more known than, prior to, and causes of the

conclusion.<sup>8</sup> What it means to have true premises is clear enough, but for them to be first and immediate means that those premises are not ones which are themselves demonstrated, but rather they are self-evident. With respect to being more known than, prior to, and the causes of the conclusions, the most important of these three is that the premises are causes of the conclusions. That the premises are more known than and prior to the conclusion follows from the fact that they are causes. This is the case because every cause is ontologically prior to (that is, more fundamental than) its effect and also that a cause is better-known in itself than its effect.<sup>9</sup>

All of this produces what Aristotle and Aquinas call scientific knowledge, which is knowledge of things through their causes. That being said, it should be apparent that demonstration is not a particularly good tool when applied to using miracles as motives of credibility. It is difficult to see how an argument could be constructed with self-evident (or at least previously demonstrated) premises which results in “God performed this miracle” or something to that effect. Moreover, to have premises which are more known than, prior to, and the cause of the conclusion would require that God acting as the cause of the miracle be placed among the premises. Since, however, the very question of motives of credibility is *whether* God is, in fact, acting on the occasion at hand, such a thing could not also be a premise in the argument without begging the question. Therefore, in putting forward miracles as a motive of credibility, demonstration is not the way it can be done.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics*, trans. Richard Berquist (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary*, 19-20; Specifically regarding the notion that the cause is more known than the effect, there can be some confusion. In some cases, the effect might be more known to us than the cause as with knowing the effects of God vs. knowing God Himself as the cause. However, even if we ourselves do not know the cause as well as the effect, the cause is in itself more knowable because any intelligibility and understandability found in the effect will have to already be present in the cause. Thus whatever intelligibility the effect might have is had in a derived way, whereas it is had in a primary way by the cause. In this sense is the cause better known than the effect.

*Deduction:* What, then, of deduction? A deductive argument is one where “it’s logically necessary that if the premises are all true, then so is the conclusion.”<sup>10</sup> This is to say, deductive arguments are logically structured such that there is no actual or even possible scenario in which the premises of the argument are true, and the conclusion is false. Argument forms such as *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* would be basic types of deductive arguments because their logical structure requires the conclusion to be true if the premises are.

Still, deductive arguments generally speaking are not as strong a demonstrations. Demonstrations are actually a type of deductive argument, but they have the additional conditions mentioned above such as having premises which are immediate and prior, which cause their conclusions to be true, and so on. A mere deductive argument doesn’t have such constraints. As such, deductive arguments are in a certain sense weaker than demonstrations, since there are certain additional conditions the premises of a demonstration must meet. Both types of arguments have the conclusion follow necessarily from the premises, but in non-demonstrative deductive arguments, the premises themselves aren’t required to be as well-founded.

As to whether or not deductive arguments can be used to advance miracles, the short answer is yes. The longer answer requires a little bit of qualification. Take the following example:

1. If the leg was healed without a doctor fixing it, then a miracle occurred.
2. The leg was healed without a doctor fixing it.
3. Therefore, a miracle occurred.

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<sup>10</sup> Harry Gensler, *Introduction to Logic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2010), p. 81.

This is a deductively valid argument, and perhaps there are certain contexts in which it would be a good and useful argument. There is a catch, however. Given that these are not demonstrations, the premises can be contested fairly easily, especially premise 1. Were someone to mount a defense of that premise, one would, in all likelihood, eventually have to give a non-deductive argument as support, such that an act of God would make the most sense of an otherwise inexplicable healing. Yet, making sense of a phenomenon and trying to figure out what is most likely actually appeals to a different type of argument, and so any deductive argument would be structurally deductive but rely on at least one non-deductive premise. To support said premise, one would need a third type of argument: induction.

*Induction:* Inductive arguments, in contrast with deductive arguments, claim that the conclusion only follows probably from the premises rather than necessarily.<sup>11</sup> Hence, all the premises could be true and the conclusion still false, but for it to be false would be surprising. With this relative looseness of connection between the premises and the conclusion also comes a certain variety of inductive arguments. Probabilities, for example, are inductive. If one has 100 black and white balls in a bag, with 70 of those balls being black, then one can argue that a randomly chosen ball has a probability of 70% of being chosen. Another inductive argument is sample generalization, an example of which could be “Gene has gone out to get the paper at 7:15 A.M. every morning this week. Thus, it is likely that Gene will go out to get the paper at 7:15 A.M. today as well.” As the sample size increases with the results remaining the same, the likelihood of the conclusion increases. A third type of inductive argument is what is known as inference to the best explanation, or abduction.<sup>12</sup> Clear examples of this are criminal trials where

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<sup>11</sup> Gensler, *Introduction to Logic*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> Not to be confused with the other meaning of the same word where somebody is kidnapped.

the prosecutor is attempting to argue that a certain suspect is guilty of a given crime. They try to fit a person with the available evidence, arguing that the best explanation for the evidence is the actions of the defendant. Or to give another example, a couple comes home from dinner to find their couch torn up and stuffing spread around the room. Upon finding their dog, they see bits of stuffing around his mouth. Now, perhaps someone snuck in, ripped up the couch and placed the stuffing around the dog's mouth, but the better explanation is that Fido himself is the culprit. This is inference to the best explanation.

As pertains to miracles, inductive arguments, especially of the inference to the best explanation kind, seem to fit most cleanly with establishing miracles. Some phenomenon is witnessed, and a cause must be established. Naturalistic explanations are ruled out in favor of the miraculous, which is seen as being probable. Thus, one concludes that a miracle has likely occurred. Of course, context will matter. The healing of a bone *here and now* right after someone prays over the injured area will be more obviously a miracle than someone getting healed from cancer where the only people praying were not present at the time of healing. At that point, it becomes a matter of weighing the evidence and options in that given context, which can be messy. Yet, that is how abductive arguments go. It seems that most any miracle account is going to have to fall under this type of argument and explanation; an act of God fits the facts better than everything else. This would be to provide a motive of credibility on the basis of miracles. Demonstration, deduction, and induction – these three are all forms of argumentation. Yet, it is the third, induction, which will play the most prominent role in appraisal of what evidence there is for miracles and the claims they purport to back up.

*The Skeptical Challenge:* All of these kinds of arguments depend upon moving from known or established premises to (up to that point) unknown conclusions. Hence they are great



tools for one who has strong, well-established premises. For all that work, however, a philosophical skeptic would remain unimpressed. A philosophical skeptic is one who holds that one should suspend judgement on some certain set of propositions.<sup>13</sup> Some might be skeptical about sense-knowledge, and hence think we should suspend judgment on anything which relies on sense knowledge. Others are universal skeptics, thinking that for any proposition about the world, one ought to suspend judgment. Examples can be multiplied, but the point is clear. So are the implications. For a skeptic of any sufficiently strong persuasion, no cogent arguments could be given for miracles because none of the premises would be assented to.

In tackling this, any number of things might be said. At least as far as universal skepticism goes, as a philosophical position it is certainly self-refuting. That one ought to suspend judgement on all propositions would require one to suspend judgement on the skeptical thesis itself. Now, one could deny they hold to skepticism as a thesis but just put forward that they have a skeptical habit of mind, thus avoiding charge of self-contradiction. The problem then becomes they cannot give an account for *why* they are skeptical or what epistemic virtue their position might have. Thus they trade incoherence for committed irrationality. Moreover, it bears pointing out the obvious fact that such skepticism is often put forward “when the lights are on,” but when the skeptic lives their daily life, they have to commit to making decisions all the time. There is a performative self-contradiction to such an extent as to make genuine skepticism seem incredibly dubious. As for those who still hold fast and continue to reject any claim another might put forward, there is a certain practical necessity in not continuing the conversation. As G.E.M. Anscombe effectively said in another context, “Why try to reason with corrupt minds?”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Juan Comensaña, “Skepticism,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019): at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/#KnowJustSkep>.

<sup>14</sup> Paraphrase from G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 17.

For all of that, few people are committed philosophical skeptics. Rather, their skepticism is more targeted and topical and is often grounded in their background metaphysics and epistemology. Two near-cousins which often generate a significant amount of skepticism, especially surrounding miracles and the supernatural, are empiricism and scientism. Refuting these positions will be necessary in order for claims of the miraculous to be workable.

### **Empiricism and Scientism**

Empiricism can be a fairly broad school, encompassing many thinkers, many of whom would not agree with each other. Peter Markie, in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, defines empiricism as follows: “We have no source of knowledge in S or for the concepts we use in S other than sense experience,” where S is just the subject matter under consideration.<sup>15</sup> We can make a distinction here between strong empiricism and weak empiricism. Strong empiricism would hold that all knowledge is derived from sense experience and the immediate logical entailments of that sense experience. Weak empiricism would hold that while concepts require sense experience, we can, from those concepts, arrive at genuine knowledge which is not derived from sense experience and its immediate entailments.

Many in the Aristotelian school would be identified as weak empiricists, following the Latin phrase “Nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu,” *Nothing in the intellect unless first in the sense*. We need sense experience in order to form concepts, as the claim goes. However, Aristotle also famously had his own natural theology, and the prime mover is not something seen. Hence his empiricism only went so far. In the twentieth century, however, the English-

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Markie, “Rationalism vs. Empiricism,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2021): at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/#Empi>.

speaking world saw the rise of a far more radical form of empiricism: The Logical Positivists. Aside from mathematical and logical truths, which they held not to be factual in themselves but rather expressive of relationships between facts, they held that the only meaningful statements were those which could be empirically verified.<sup>16</sup> This resulted in a widespread eschewal of metaphysics (and ethics), precisely because metaphysics went beyond the empirical to more fundamental principles. Similarly, any theology, natural or otherwise, was also written off. As pertains to miracles, while there might be some mysterious phenomena, an appeal to God or to unseen powers was seen as nonsense. Science was the new metaphysics, and philosophy's job ended up being relegated to finding ways to analyze or express scientific claims.

The modern heir of logical positivism, often (though not exclusively) seen on a more popular level, is the thesis that the natural sciences produce the only true or legitimate knowledge. This intellectual movement is called scientism. The seemingly extensive success of the modern scientific project can be taken as good reason to believe that everything else plays second fiddle to the sciences. Yet, while scientism and logical positivism have a certain intuitive appeal, they face insuperable problems. Indeed, there is good reason logical positivism is now about as dead a philosophical position as one can find. I will limit myself to three critiques:

1. Scientism and positivism are self-refuting (or trivial)
2. Scientism and positivism cannot answer basic epistemological challenges to their position.
3. Science itself uses forms of reasoning which metaphysics would be criticized for.

Turning to the first, as Edward Feser points out, depending upon how one defines "science," the position of scientism either fails its own standard or it makes no interesting

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Uebel, "Vienna Circle," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020): at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vienna-circle/#OveDoc>.

claim.<sup>17</sup> If science is, as the positivists would have it, strictly of an empirical and experimental nature, then the thesis “The only (true) knowledge is scientific knowledge,” fails its own standard. It is not one you can subject to empirical testing in order to figure out. As an epistemology, it is self-referentially incoherent, which is about as bad as it gets. Now, if “science” includes answers to questions such as “What is a cause?” or “Can our conception of matter be exhausted by quantitative analysis?” then scientism and positivism avoid the charge of incoherence on the penalty that they effectively give the game away. Such questions are often associated with metaphysics and philosophy of nature, which is what the initial followers of positivism and scientism had been trying to avoid.

Second, science itself has no answers to epistemologies which have a certain skepticism about sense-knowledge. One will not have the ability to show a skeptic an experiment in the hopes of proving something if he takes the entire enterprise to be dubious. Certainly, science will not be able to address full-blown skepticism as was outlined previously. Thus, science has certain presuppositions which are pre-empirical but which must be in place for the entire enterprise to get off the ground. Yet if non-empirical or analytic statements are seen as untrue or meaningless, science itself will be left without these tools and will flounder completely.

Finally, much of what is called science today uses reasoning similar to at least some metaphysical claims. Aristotle and Aquinas held, for example, that one could reason from natural effects to God, even though one cannot see or test God. Yet, when planets were still being discovered, the very same line of reasoning was used to conclude the existence of what would come to be known as Neptune. This is because astronomers, when observing Uranus, noticed its

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics* (Neunkirchen-Seelschied: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 10-12.

orbit was somewhat irregular. They posited another planet pulling on it and eventually came to discover it was Neptune.<sup>18</sup> While, admittedly, Neptune is empirically discoverable while God is not, since they both lie at the conclusion of the same type of reasoning (moving from known effect to unknown cause), it would be special pleading to say that God is not permitted at the end of an argument while an argument of the same form allows for Neptune. One cannot just deny the conclusions of arguments but must find an issue with the argument itself, so one must find an issue with arguments for God which an argument for Neptune would not share. Thus, if a certain type of reasoning is used in science, it seems fair game to use it in metaphysics or natural theology as well. Also, as an aside, if various theories about multiverses or interpretations of quantum theory, some of which are perhaps in-principle impossible to verify, are considered scientific, all the worse for the scientific position.

In conclusion, then, logical positivism and scientism really have nothing going for them. They are either incoherent or trivial, they cannot answer fundamental questions in epistemology, and they critique philosophical disciplines for using the same broad kinds of reasoning that science itself uses. As such, these positions should not be seen as a threat to theology & philosophy broadly and to miracles in particular. If miracles are to be ruled out, it must be done on their own (alleged lack of) merits. Ruling them out simply because they cannot be empirically verified will not do.

### ***The Preambula Fidei***

To draw together what has been said up to this point, when putting forward apparent miracles as an argument, as a motive of credibility that someone else might accept, the way this

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<sup>18</sup> “When was Neptune Discovered?” at <https://coolcosmos.ipac.caltech.edu/ask/146--When-was-Neptune-discovered->.

is typically going to be put forward is by an inductive inference, in particular an inference to the best explanation. Roadblocks such as universal skepticism, logical positivism, and scientism all fail as workable epistemologies and so are not able to rule out miracles simply in virtue of the fact that they are miracles. What remains as a means of setting the stage is building a positive worldview in the context of which miracles might be seen. It does not have to be full-blown Catholicism, but at least making plausible that a supernatural reality might exist will raise the background probability of miracles and provide a means to see them as validations of a particular message as being from God.

*Miracles and Preambles:* One question which may arise in the process of setting up this context and worldview is where miracles actually enter the picture. For example, do miracles themselves provide a good reason to believe God exists, or must one already establish or presume that God exists in order for miracles to even be on the table? The answer is that miracles function as part of a cumulative case for God's existence and can act as a preamble of faith, but once God's existence has been demonstrated or at least granted as plausible, the context in which those miracles occurred might validate a particular message attached to them.

In terms of how to think of what the preambles of faith (or *preambula fidei*) are, Feingold and Fr. Hardon can again shed some light here. The former's brief definition of the preambles of faith is "those truths about God which reason can discover without the aid of Revelation and which help dispose a person to recognize Revelation."<sup>19</sup> Fr. John Hardon, meanwhile defines the preambles of faith in this way:

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<sup>19</sup> Feingold, *Faith Comes From What is Heard*, 101. He also identifies the preambles with the apologetic enterprise of showing the reasonableness of belief in God, Christ, and the Church on p. 31.

The main premises of reason on which the act of divine faith depends as on its rational foundation. They are mainly three: 1. the existence of God; 2. his authority, or right to be believed because he knows all things and is perfectly truthful; and 3. the fact that he actually made a revelation, which is proved especially by miracles or fulfilled prophecies performed in testimony of a prophet's (or Christ's) claim to speaking in the name of God.<sup>20</sup>

Taking Feingold's definition first, someone who is a committed atheist may see or hear an account of something miraculous (or at least apparently so) such that it would dispose him both to belief in God and also to following Him. However, one who is agnostic or even friendly toward theism might see a miracle as perhaps further evidence God exists, but the miracle itself need not bear the full weight of convicting the person. They may already put some credibility in other arguments and experiences, and an apparent miracle is just one more piece of evidence among an already existing body of evidence. Thus, to be disposed to believe in God would likewise more easily dispose such a person to accept revelation. In the context of an already believing Jew, for example, a miracle by Christ or one of His followers is not going to need to do much to shore up their belief in God, but it will be important in helping said Jew to be disposed to believing Christ's (and thus God's) particular message. Therefore, miracles can indeed dispose someone to accept revelation, but it might do different work depending on the particular person.

Fr. Hardon's definition first emphasizes the preambles of faith as premises of reason on which divine faith depends *as on its rational foundation*. While faith itself is dependent upon God's action in us and our cooperation with His grace at the most

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<sup>20</sup> Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 432.

fundamental level (and a level which is by itself sufficient for divine faith without rational analysis), one can still provide a rational foundation for that faith in addition, and this is what the preambles of faith do. He also emphasizes miracles and prophecies especially with respect to the fact that God has revealed something (more so than establishing that God exists), and it does seem the primary role of the preambles within theology itself is indeed to provide a reason to believe that some particular message or event is the work of God. This is not to say that miracles can *only* be applied to his third premise of reason, but they do perhaps pertain *especially* to that one.

It is safe to say, then, the miracles can act as preambles of faith, although the work they do for any given person is going to vary depending upon where that person is coming from and how much weight that miracle needs to carry by itself relative to other considerations about the existence, nature, and revelation of God. To reiterate, then, miracles can serve both as evidence for God and also as evidence for a particular message being from God. As such, miracles do act as preambles of faith, although playing a number of different roles.

One final question before moving on to evidence for a theistic or at least broadly supernatural worldview is what the difference is between miracles as a preamble of faith and miracles as motives of credibility. The short answer is that they are effectively the same. Fr. Hardon identifies them as such in his definition of motives of credibility.<sup>21</sup> That being said, one could make the case that a Catholic with weak but genuine divine faith

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<sup>21</sup> Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 364: *The rational grounds for accepting divine revelation in general, or of the divine establishment of the Catholic Church in particular. **These grounds are also called the preambles of faith.** They included the evidence from reason that God exists; that what he reveals is believable because he is all-wise and true; and that he did actually make a revelation because he performed and continues to perform verifiable miracles testifying to his having spoken.*



would not need miracles as a *preamble* to faith so much as a support, which is to say, as a motive of credibility. Thus, while miracles as preambles of faith and miracles as motives of credibility are effectively equivalent, there might be cases where it is more appropriate to use one term rather than the other.

*Contra Naturalism:* Miracles are only part of the case the preambles of faith put forward. Other considerations surround the existence of God and the nature of the world. It is to these considerations we now turn. Specifically, is there any reason to think the sort of materialistic naturalism which pervades Western thought is actually true? Further, are there actually good reasons to believe in God, or at least some powerful, transcendent reality? The contention here is that the answer to the first question is “No,” and the answer to the second is “Yes.”

Taking up the first issue, a materialist would hold that matter is all that exists and any facts about the world, and explanations of those facts, are going to be grounded in matter as such. This is one of the foundational planks of much of contemporary naturalism, and so if it is false, naturalism is rendered significantly less plausible. Yet, there are certain features of how matter is presently understood which, when carried out to their logical conclusions, render materialism highly problematic. What follows is an account of how and why.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Much of this is inspired by various blog posts written by Edward Feser, including but not limited to: Edward Feser, “Materialism Subverts Itself,” (11 January 2019), at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2019/01/materialism-subverts-itself.html>; Edward Feser, “Concretizing the Abstract,” (2 August 2012), at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2012/08/concretizing-abstract.html>; and this series: Edward Feser, “Mind and Cosmos Roundup,” (21 June 2013), at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2013/06/mind-and-cosmos-roundup.html>.

Imagine you are looking at an apple sitting in front of you. It is red and has a slightly waxy finish. It weighs 4 ounces and is about four inches in diameter at its widest point. If one were to analyze this apple scientifically, say by breaking it down to the molecular level, certain other features would become apparent, such as sugar content and the like. Much of the information this would yield would be of a quantitative nature, as with the weight or dimensional measures. However, there are some things which would not yield quantitative measures, such as the redness or the taste. Indeed, if one were to ask if the *apple itself* is really red, one would receive an answer to the effect of “Well, no. The apple itself isn’t red, but rather red light bounces off of it, and so *we see* red.” The matter might have the feature of what light it reflects, but what it does not possess is the actual redness *as we experience it*. So where does that redness exist? In our own minds, it seems. Science itself says so (as the story goes)!<sup>23</sup>

This distinction yields two different kinds of qualities we ascribe to matter: primary qualities and secondary qualities. The primary qualities are those which are analyzable in terms of quantitative measurement (e.g. mass, dimension, acceleration, etc.). Secondary qualities are those which are not part of the matter themselves but which exist in the matter as perceived (e.g. color, sound, taste, etc.). Thus, secondary qualities are what our mind perceives of material objects.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Stephen Pordes, “Physics Questions People Ask Fermilab,” (28 April 2014), at [https://www.fnal.gov/pub/science/inquiring/questions/colorofatoms.html#:~:text=atoms%20\(as%20opposed%20to%20molecules,clear%20except%20under%20special%20conditions..&text=you%20could%20not%20see%20the,atom%20would%20be%20too%20faint](https://www.fnal.gov/pub/science/inquiring/questions/colorofatoms.html#:~:text=atoms%20(as%20opposed%20to%20molecules,clear%20except%20under%20special%20conditions..&text=you%20could%20not%20see%20the,atom%20would%20be%20too%20faint).

While the writer does say matter is colored, he means it in the exact sense described here: matter absorbs and reflects light of various wavelengths.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting, though, that such thinkers as Descartes, whose mechanical world picture this is founded upon, himself denied even primary qualities as real features of the world, as can be found in his work *Le Monde*.

Such a distinction, while perhaps interesting when first learned, is not particularly controversial or exciting in the normal course of things. That being said, it poses an extremely serious problem for materialism, which can be illustrated in the following logical aporia:

1. Secondary qualities do not exist in matter as such.
2. Secondary qualities do exist in the mind.
3. The mind is, ultimately, matter.

These three propositions cannot be held together without contradiction. 1 and 2 combined together yields the conclusion that the mind *is not*, ultimately, matter, thus contradicting 3. This is because if secondary qualities exist, they have to exist somewhere. Yet the very definition of secondary qualities precludes them from being in matter itself, leading to the conclusion that secondary qualities such as color (specifically, color as we perceive and experience it) exist in the mind. If these qualities cannot exist in matter but do exist in the mind, then the mind cannot be material, because we would be attributing contradictory properties to the mind (that secondary qualities both can and can't exist in it).

Propositions 1 and 3 entail that secondary qualities do not exist in the mind, thus contradicting 2. The reason here is that if secondary qualities do not exist in matter, and yet the mind really is just matter, then secondary qualities cannot exist there.

Finally, 2 and 3 together entail that secondary qualities *do*, in fact, exist in matter. If the mind is material and secondary qualities exist there, it follows that secondary qualities exist in matter.

Therefore, one of those propositions must be false. 2 could be denied by the materialist without cost. 1 could be denied by the materialist, but it would require an entire rewriting of what matter is, leading to something like Aristotelianism, panpsychism

(that consciousness is actually a fundamental attribute of matter itself), or neutral monism (that matter is neutral between the mental and what we typically call material). Thus, while not refuting materialism outright, to deny 1 would take all the teeth out of the position and make supernatural features of reality seem much more plausible. To deny 3, meanwhile, is an outright falsification of materialism and results in dualism instead.

The problem for the materialist is that it is impossible to deny 2. That secondary qualities exist in the mind is obvious to anyone who has experiences of them. If you experience red, or sound, or the taste of something, that quality is in your mind. Even if you are hallucinating, such that there really is no red object in front of you, or soundwaves moving through the air, or whatever, that hallucination is still an experience your mind is having. Even if it is “all in your head,” then that is enough to settle the case. To deny 2 is to effectively deny any experience of qualities at all, which is impossible.

This leaves denial of 1 and 3. Neither are good news for materialistic naturalism. As was mentioned previously, even to deny 3 and maintain 1 opens the door for other metaphysical worldviews and undercuts all the supposed obviousness of naturalism. The very concept of matter itself precludes it from being the only thing that exists, so one must either open the door to non-materialistic worldviews, or they must embrace dualism outright. Either way, materialistic naturalism is false.

For all this, there is still a plethora of options available which do not include God in the picture. Even if naturalism is false, there may still be no God. What argument can be given for theism, then? Timothy Hsiao and Gil Sanders have developed a version of the argument from contingency which may work well here:

1. There are dependent beings.
2. If there are dependent beings, then their existence must be continually sustained by something else.
3. If dependent beings are continually sustained by something else, then either the chain of continually sustained dependent beings regresses infinitely or terminates in an independent being that is not itself sustained.
4. The chain of sustained dependent beings cannot regress infinitely.
5. Therefore, the chain of continually sustained dependent beings must terminate in an independent being that is not itself sustained.<sup>25</sup>

The rationale here is as follows. As Hsiao and Sanders understand it, to be dependent is to be dependent here and now. This is to say, there are beings which have something sustaining them in existence. One can be pretty flexible in what exactly it is that is sustaining such beings. Take a human person and grant for the sake of argument that God is not presently sustaining said person. They are still being sustained by their constituent parts and the integrity in which those parts are held. So humans are dependent beings, and they are continually being sustained by something, even if it is just their constituents. Hence premises 1 and 2 are true.

Premise 3 seems the most obviously true. If one is to explain dependent beings in terms of sustaining causes, then either those sustaining causes are independent and unsustained or they are not. If they are, that fulfills the premise. If they are not, then it is bumped down to the next level and keeps going either to infinity or until one hits an independent and unsustained being. Premise 4, meanwhile is true for the following reason: If the sustaining went on infinitely, then every member of the series is dependent, but there is no source or foundation on which that dependence rests. It would be, as Aquinas says, an essentially ordered series of causes, and these of necessity require a first element. One common illustration is the idea of an infinitely long series of train cars without a locomotive on the front. If none of the cars has the power to move

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy Hsiao and Gil Sanders, "The Contingency Argument in Plain Language," *The Heythrop Journal* 63, no. 2, (2021): 1-2.

themselves, then an infinitely long chain won't help. The case here is similar. If there is an infinitely long chain of dependent beings, their existence is never actually explained, and the chain itself stands without an explanation. It would be an act of sheer existential bootstrapping and thus impossible.

Hence, the arguments concludes there is a first independent being which is not itself sustained. The obvious objection here is that this first being could just as well be the most fundamental state of matter rather than God. At this point one can start arguing for the divine attributes. This being (or set of beings) has as part of its nature independent existence. It depends on nothing else to exist, and so is of its very nature self-existent. It is necessary in the metaphysical sense of the term. Already, matter seems like a bad candidate because if there are even theoretically possible models where matter began to exist (regardless of what the actually true model might be), then it follows it is not the nature of matter at its most fundamental constituent to exist. Moreover, if this first thing has really distinct attributes and features, then those features in some sense comprise that first thing. The problem is if this first thing is dependent on such a composition of those features to exist, then it is not first. Therefore, it must be simple. It must also be immutable, because if it is simple, any change it undergoes would be a change of its nature, which just is to exist. A change would thus make it not self-existent and thus would fail to be a first, independent, unsustained being. Also, if it cannot change, and time is the measure of change, then it is not subject to time and hence is eternal.

Thus we have some first unsustained being which is necessary, simple, immutable, and eternal. It would also seem to be immaterial because, for starters, matter is subject to change. Further, it seems like matter follows the laws of physics, whatever those might be at the most foundational level. Yet to change is to not be immutable and to be subject to laws is to not be

independent and first. Hence, this first being would be immaterial. Being immaterial, it would be either an abstract immaterial entity or a concrete one. Abstract entities, however, are not possessive of causal efficacy, so the first sustainer must be concrete and causally active. This leaves three options. The concrete immaterial cause: (1) Causes according to some deeper law, (2) Causes chaotically and randomly, or (3) Causes according to its own intention/volition as a mind (of sorts). As was mentioned earlier, however, if there is some deeper law, it is dependent and non-foundational. Hence (1) is not an option. If (2) was an option, there would be no rhyme or reason to what exists, how it exists, and for how long, because the foundational level is chaotic. This is not what we see. Therefore, (2) also fails. This leaves option (3) where the first sustaining cause is acting as its own agent according to some *ratio*, which is indicative of this being having both an intellect and a will. It has the power to sustain everything else, making it, if not omnipotent, at least “mostly-potent,” and so on.

More could be said, but to establish a first, independent and sustaining cause which is necessary, simple, immutable, eternal, immaterial, concrete, acting with intellect & volition, and possessive of great power starts to make it look like God does indeed exist. If God exists, not only does naturalism fail, but miracles look considerably more plausible. Thus, with materialistic naturalism found to be self-undermining and with a fair case for the existence of God on the table, the preambles of faith which are not miracles make the preambles which are miracles considerably more likely.

## **Summary**

This chapter has taken up preliminary epistemological issues such that the case for miracles can be made more easily and with greater clarity. First was discussed the various types

of arguments and logical apparatuses available in putting miracles forward as a motive of credibility for faith. The main takeaway was that miracles will typically be presented as an inference to the best explanation, though perhaps it could be presented in deductive argument form as well. Universal skepticism was shown to be untenable (or at least not worth engaging) as well.

Next, the question of positivist and scientific epistemologies was taken up. Both were shown to be incoherent, incapable of answering basic epistemological difficulties, and out of touch with the practice of science besides. Therefore, miracles cannot be ruled out simply because they are not amenable to empirical or scientific analysis.

The final section was on how miracles fit into the wider nexus of belief. Specifically, it discussed what the preambles of faith are, where miracles fit into the question of belief in God and the differences (or relative lack thereof) between the preambles of faith and motives of credibility. Finally, materialistic naturalism was shown to be problematic, and an argument for the existence of God was given. These provide reasons to think miracles are in-principle likely or at least possible given the world we live in. The project now turns to establishing more clearly what miracles are and exactly how they can move us to faith, looking particularly closely at the act of faith as discussed by some of the Church's greatest thinkers.



## Chapter 2: The Theological Core: Miracles, Faith and the Connection Between

Miracles as a motive of credibility for faith – this is the topic taken up in this work. Yet, with the partial exception of motives of credibility, very little has been done by way of explaining what these terms mean and what their import is. What actually is a miracle? What is faith? How might one move from the first to the second? These are the questions this chapter will set out to answer.

### The Nature of Miracles

For all the talk of miracles so far, little has been done to nail down what is meant by the word. Most people have some pretty inchoate, general concept of what miracles are, but there is going to be enough variety that having a more specific notion of miracles is helpful. C.S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, gives a first stab at a definition as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power.”<sup>26</sup> He eventually goes on to refine that definition into a new account: A miracle is when God chooses to “introduce into [the universe] events of which it would not be true to say, ‘This is simply the working out of the general character which He gave to Nature as a whole in creating here.’”<sup>27</sup> An event in the universe which is caused by God and which supersedes nature’s created ability to carry out on her own (apart from standard divine conservation) would seem to qualify as a miracle.

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<sup>26</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, Revised ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 69.

St. Thomas Aquinas, for his part, defines miracles as “those things which God does outside those causes which we know.”<sup>28</sup> It is clear that Aquinas is not making some appeal to ignorance here, for he says “a miracle is so called as being full of wonder, as having a cause absolutely hidden from all: and this cause is God.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, when he speaks of “causes which we know,” it is not merely that any cause we might be ignorant of might be miraculous, but rather causes which are in-principle unknown and unknowable to us in the order of things will be miraculous. Yet, this definition is still fairly general. A contemporary Thomistic account is given by Fr. Anselm Ramelow O.P.:

What defines a miracle is not merely that it is an exception to what is natural (which would be true for defects as well), but that it elevates the nature of a thing to a power that cannot account for by this nature. Unlike said defects, miracles are exceptions that are *super*-natural rather than *sub*-natural. As such, then, miracles are not violations of the laws of nature. Even though that would have to be called “physically impossible” yet that are not *contrary* to nature; rather, that are *beyond* nature ... in the sense of elevating it to a higher power.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, a miracle is an elevating of the nature of a thing (or things) by granting it a higher power which it does not possess according to its own nature. Edward Feser also adds the qualification that it can be the suspension of a certain power as well, giving the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being thrown in the fire without being burned.<sup>31</sup> The fire’s ability to burn is not actualized by God even if the existence of the fire is. This too can be a miracle. So, we can define a miracle as the suspension of the laws of nature by the addition or subtraction of the power of a substance (or group of substances) by God.

There still remain some difficulties, however. While the above definition is fine so far as it goes, it has its limitations. For example, one of the motives of credibility is pointing to the

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 105, a. 7, at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

<sup>29</sup> *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 105, a. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Anselm Ramelow, “God of Miracles,” in *God, Reason, and Reality*, ed. Anselm Ramelow (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2014), 314-15.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 244.

persistence of the Church through the course of history despite persecutions, attacks, and poor leadership at times. This is taken to be something of a miracle in itself, yet it would not qualify based upon the above definition. Or take the following story of Fr. Thomas Weinandy: He was discerning whether to write a difficult and potentially controversial letter, and so he asked for a sign from God, saying,

If you want me to write something, you have to give me a clear sign. This is what the sign must be. Tomorrow morning I am going to Saint Mary Major's to pray and then I am going to Saint John Lateran. After that I am coming back to Saint Peter's to have lunch with a seminary friend of mine. During that interval, I must meet someone that I know but have not seen in a very long time and would never expect to see in Rome at this time. That person cannot be from the United States, Canada or Great Britain. Moreover, that person has to say to me in the course of our conversation, 'Keep up the good writing'.<sup>32</sup>

In the course of the day, he reports, that very thing happened. Yet, none of these events themselves seemed outside the order of nature. All the same, presuming the veracity of the report, there was a clearly and specifically answered prayer the specifications of which would have been fairly unlikely to occur without God providentially ordering them.

This highlights a certain difficulty in determining what is and is not a miracle. It seems one could make a strong case that the answer to Fr. Weinandy's prayer was miraculous. Yet, it is not the case that all antecedently improbable things which occur must be miraculous. Is it context-dependent then? If there is some sufficiently religious context to the improbable event, is that enough to make it a miracle? There are no easy answers to these questions.

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<sup>32</sup> Carl Olsen, "Fr. Thomas G. Weinandy explains his critical letter to Pope Francis," at The Catholic World Report (1 November, 2017), at <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/11/01/fr-thomas-g-weinandy-explains-his-critical-letter-to-pope-francis/>.

Another separate difficulty is what to make of supposed angelic or demonic influences in the world. A demon possessing somebody, for example, certainly is not an act of God, and demons themselves would be in the created order even if not the physical order. Various ways the demon can manifest might well be *unnatural*, but many might hesitate in calling those manifestations miraculous. Certain preternatural realities would not fit cleanly into the properly supernatural and miraculous, yet these preternatural realities may well *point to* God and His ability to bring about miracles.

Where do these difficulties leave us? While defining miracles as the addition or subtraction of some power of a substance by God is not wrong, it might be worth taking inventory of multiple analogical uses of the term miracle which may be correct to a certain degree but which cannot thus be smashed together to form one cohesive definition of the word “miracle.” Providential happenings might indeed be miraculous, but not in the same way that the Resurrection would be miraculous. Even preternatural events could have a hint of the miraculous to them, but depending on the actors and what exactly is happening, the events might be miraculous in only the loosest sense of the term. Yet all of these could motivate faith in a person, depending on their own disposition. In spite of these variances, some workable definition of miracles, even if still somewhat circumscribed, should be available. Therefore, when speaking of miracles throughout the course of this work, the following fairly broad (but still limited) definition will be used:

*Miracle: An event or occurrence which is either impossible in the physical order or which is at least highly improbable and which occurs in a setting such that one can recognize it as the work of a God who reveals Himself.*

It must be emphasized that this is not the only correct definition of the word “miracle” such that it excludes all others like those above. However, this definition is broad enough to include both physically impossible miracles and improbable happenings of providence together. It also speaks of the physical order rather than the natural order so as to preclude questions as to whether or not angels and demons might be “natural” due to their being creatures. Lastly, the event must in a certain way point to God so as to provide the event credibility as coming from Him; if the event cannot be easily connected to Him, such grounds for credibility are undermined. This will be how miracles are understood going forward.

### **Motives of Credibility**

The discussion of the preambles of faith in the last chapter, in conjunction with the equating of those preambles with the motives of credibility, has fleshed out in some detail what motives of credibility are and do for a person. Here we will briefly tie that content in with the accounts of miracles given above. Recall Fr. Hardon’s definition of the motives of credibility alluded to above:

The rational grounds for accepting divine revelation in general, or of the divine establishment of the Catholic Church in particular. These grounds are also called the preambles of faith. They included the evidence from reason that God exists; that what he reveals is believable because he is all-wise and true; and that he did actually make a revelation because he performed and continues to perform verifiable miracles testifying to his having spoken.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, 364.

The key phrase here is “verifiable miracles.” For miracles to be a motive of credibility, they need to be verifiable. This is not to say that they need to be verifiable *to everybody*. However, these miracles do need to be verifiable to at least some person in order to act as a motive of credibility. Indeed, given the definition of “miracle” at work here, the miracle must be verifiable in such a way that it points to God or at least some supernatural reality. For example, a person who has early-stage cancer yet who does not know about it can be miraculously healed by God without anyone praying for that person or that person otherwise being healed through some obvious religious act. This would be an exception to the definition of “miracle” provided above. However, since we are looking at miracles from the vantage of how they motivate belief, any miracles which nobody knows about fail to be relevant to the discussion. Hence the (deliberately) restricted definition of miracles at play here, which rules out unknown and unrecognizable miracles.

As the previous chapter stated, those miracles which are known and recognized as such can be used both as evidence for the existence of God as well as evidence for some particular revelation or message being from God. Fr. Hardon emphasizes the latter especially, so it is all the more important that if some miracle takes place, the connection between the miracle and the message is established. Once this occurs, one can have credible reason to hold the message is indeed from God.

### **Faith Biblically and Dogmatically**

Miracles as a motive of credibility for faith – having explained what miracles are and having given a brief refresher on the motives of credibility and how they tie in with

miracles, now it is time to turn to the matter of faith. Before looking at the two particular accounts of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John Henry Newman, however, it will be worthwhile to do a brief survey of the foundations of these accounts as found in Sacred Scripture and in the dogmatic teachings of the Church, even if such a survey can only scratch the surface of what there is to say.

*Faith in the Old Testament:* While the Old Testament provides a number of personal models and expositions on faith, it does not have quite the developed sense which the term carries in the New Testament. For example, the Hebrew word *emunah* has connotations of firmness, security, faithfulness, or even truth. Avery Cardinal Dulles notes that this is often predicated of God, especially with respect to His covenant with Israel.<sup>34</sup> In that sense, it means more of a *fidelity toward* rather than a *faith in*. However, this is the foundation for the faith and fidelity of individuals as well. If God is faithful, then one can have faith in Him to carry out His promises. This is brought home in cases such as Psalm 89, where the state of the monarchy is being lamented even while the author holds to some continuation of the Davidic dynasty. This is because of his trust in God's *emunah*, which is referred to several times throughout the Psalm.<sup>35</sup> Naturally, the paradigmatic Old Testament figure for faith is Abraham. He, at the command of God, leaves Ur of the Chaldees and takes his family and possessions to the Promised Land. In that sense, there is a fidelity to God, for Abraham carried out God's command. Still, it is more multifaceted than this. When God made the promise of giving Abraham descendants, it did not require a following of instructions on Abraham's part. It required

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<sup>34</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7-8.

<sup>35</sup> Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 150.

belief in God and His fidelity, His *emunah*. Both of these aspects of faith – the carrying out of a command and trust in what the Lord says – are unified and reach their climax in Abraham’s preparedness to sacrifice his son Isaac. In this, Abraham serves as the model, especially given allusions to him among New Testament writers, such as Paul in his Letter to the Romans, the author of the Epistle of James, and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Still, much of the Old Testament’s account of faith has to be filtered through the prominence of the Pentateuch and specifically the Law. Since these set the practical standard for Hebrew life, faithfulness to the Lord often was associated with faithfulness to the covenant for both God and man. As such, there was a strongly practical component to faith which only later became largely intellectually-based.<sup>36</sup>

*Faith in the New Testament:* Once the New Testament comes to the fore, things develop significantly. For example, faith often becomes associated with particular concrete acts of God in response to need. People are healed due to their faith (e.g. the hemorrhaging woman and the centurion whose servant was ill). The question arises, though: faith in what or Whom? Fundamentally, it had to do with faith in Jesus, as sent by God and as enabled to carry out His work in the world. The Gospel of John really delved into the importance of believing, especially based upon the word and testimony of Christ.<sup>37</sup> If the testimony is not enough, then at the very least, His works and the works of

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<sup>36</sup> Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, John 10: 24-25 - <sup>24</sup> So the Jews gathered round him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness to me.

See also the episode with the Apostle Thomas in John 20: 28-29 - <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”



His followers (i.e. miracles) should provide sufficient testimony. However, those who prefer darkness and wickedness and self-reliance will be blinded to this and will thus not believe in Christ and His salvific message.

The development of the Old Testament view of faith is not relegated only to the Gospels. The Epistles spend significant amounts of time discussing matters of faith and belief. In the case of the Pauline corpus, much of Paul's discussion of faith centers around combatting Judaizing tendencies in the communities he is writing to, which ultimately leads to a deepening of what faith means, especially as it relates to the Old Testament notion of faith. In the Old Testament, fidelity to the Law and belief in God's own fidelity played an incredibly important role. With the coming of Christ, the Law of Moses was fulfilled, and so fidelity to the covenant actually necessitated, not following the Law of Moses, but believing in Him Who fulfilled it: Jesus Christ. This is why faith is of a more personal nature in the New Testament. No longer is it merely fidelity to the Law. Rather, it is faith in and faithfulness to God in the Person of Jesus Christ. This faith comes through hearing (Romans 10:17), but this is meant to point to something more total, which is the "obedience of faith."<sup>38</sup> In this obedience of faith, what is at first an assent to Christ and His teaching becomes that by which one orients his life.

One particular passage worth exploring in the New Testament is the discussion of faith in the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. The first three verses say *<sup>1</sup>Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup>For by it the men of old received divine approval. <sup>3</sup>By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.* The first verse could also

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible Commentary, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 137.

be rendered as the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1 is often taken as the preeminent Scriptural definition of faith. If faith is an assurance, then it is God, the highest of authorities, Who is doing the assuring. If we opt for the translation of “substance” rather than “assurance,” this becomes even stronger, because they not only possess God’s assurance, but they possess Him Himself in the knowledge God gives them. Yet, God and the final end of His providential order, for which we hope, is unseen, and so while this faith provides a conviction, even a sort of evidence, of God and the rightness of the Gospel, there remains a certain obscurity. The Word by which God made the visible world is invisible to us, and so faith is how we come to believe in this creative Word.

It should be apparent that there is no singular Biblical concept of faith. Rather, what had been seen as something which predominantly surrounded the covenant (though which had predecessors in men like Abraham) eventually came to be superseded by belief in and adherence to the teachings and the Person of Jesus, the fulfillment of that covenant. This faith is salvific and is supposed to result in a total turning of oneself to the Lord, but it can be undermined through our own wickedness. For those who do have it, it is a certain possession of and witness to God and the message He gives through His word, Jesus.

*Faith Dogmatically Considered:* There is much that can be said about faith from a dogmatic point of view. The discussion here will be limited to what is relevant to this work as a whole, and thus will largely skirt around the technicalities of the debate between Protestants and Catholics pertaining to justification.

The first note of importance is that, according to Severino Gonzalez Rivas, S.J. and Joseph A. Aldama, S.J., the act of faith being an act of the intellect is defined divine and Catholic

faith.<sup>39</sup> They point to, for example, John 17:8, where Jesus says that the Apostles “know in truth”<sup>40</sup> that He came from the Father. Since knowing is intellective and truth is the proper object of the intellect, faith itself must be intellectual.

The First Vatican Council, in speaking of Faith, affirms that it: (1) is the beginning of man’s salvation, (2) is a supernatural virtue, (3) is inspired and assisted by the grace of God, (4) is belief that what God has revealed is true, (5) and is motivated by the authority of God Himself, who cannot err nor deceive.<sup>41</sup> Given the errors of rationalism and agnosticism which the Council was seeking to combat, these aspects of faith show both the divine origin and divine end to which faith directs us, for faith comes from God by supernatural infusion and on His authority, given what He has revealed in order that we might believe and thus begin to attain salvation. Faith is thus not merely some religious sense or something which finds its origin in the human person. It is, rather, a gift from God to direct man toward Himself.

Still, this faith is obscure. It is looking through the glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12). For though faith sheds light in a certain way, there is a certain imperfection inherent in faith, because faith implies a lack of vision of its object. Rivas and Aldama deem this thesis as being at least theologically certain,<sup>42</sup> though the fact that Hebrews 11:1 speaks of “things not seen,” it could plausibly be said to be something directly revealed to us through Scripture. In spite of this, it is still divine and Catholic faith that the act of faith is certain.<sup>43</sup> The reason for this is that the motive of faith, God, is the surest possible. Even for the subject of faith, that is, the person who

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<sup>39</sup> Severino González Rivas, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa IIIB: One Grace; On the Infused Virtues*, trans. Kenneth Baker (Saddle River: Keep the Faith, Inc., 2014), 267-268.

<sup>40</sup> Or “Know truly...”

<sup>41</sup> Peter Hünemann, Helmut Hoping, Robert L. Fastiggi, Anne Englund Nash, and Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 3008.

<sup>42</sup> Rivas, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa IIIB*, 280.

<sup>43</sup> Rivas, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa IIIB*, 285.

has faith, there is a certain certitude as well inasmuch as it requires a full assent without doubt. This does not mean there is full comprehension of the mystery or no nagging questions, but rather that the assent is such that there is no simultaneous non-assent (doubt). In this sense, faith is certain.

Hence, it can be said that faith is an operation of the intellect which is certain in itself even if obscure to us. It finds its origin in God and, when infused into us, directs us back to Him that we might come to know and love Him. This dovetails well with faith as found in the Scriptures, for it is our faith in Christ, as the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, that is truly necessary. Having given a brief synopsis of Biblical and Dogmatic accounts of what faith is, the more detailed accounts of Aquinas and Newman can be analyzed with this background established.

### **Aquinas and the Movement of Faith**

Scripture shows and doctrine affirms faith to be important in the life of one who is to be in right relationship with God. It is not only virtuous but salvific, and this adherence of faith is directed toward God and what He sets out for us to believe. Yet, while the fact *that* one has faith is important, *how* one comes to faith plays a key role in the discussion of miracles aiding people in belief. In the process of coming to faith and weighing potentially miraculous evidence as a component of that process, how do all the parts fit together? What constitutes the act of faith in an individual such that testimony of miracles can play a role? In the *Secunda Secundae* of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, the first series of questions is devoted to the virtue of faith, and it is to these we now turn.

*The Object of Faith:* The very first articles St. Thomas writes on faith pertain to its object, which is to say, that which it is directed toward. Question 1, article 1 specifically asks whether the object of faith is First Truth, or “the simple and everlasting truth,” as Pseudo-Dionysius says. Each object can be distinguished into the material object and formal object, the former being those things which are known and the latter being the means by which they are known. Hence formally, First Truth is the object of faith precisely because it is in virtue of the God Who reveals – First Truth Himself – that one comes to faith. But even materially, one has faith in certain teachings or propositions either about God or about things as they relate to God. Since all of these propositions then are either about God or are defined in relation to Him, First Truth is likewise the material object for faith.

Why is the object important? It is important because the object of belief and one’s relationship to it will in large part determine *how* one comes to hold that belief. Specifically, the object and one’s relationship to it will determine the quality of the assent by which one holds to some particular belief. For example, one can see some particular truth (either with the external senses or by an immediate apprehension by the intellect) in a way that practically determines assent to said truth. Hence, in the very act of seeing my friend buy an ice cream cone, I have come to know that he bought an ice cream cone. On the intellectual side of things, simply in virtue of knowing what a bachelor is, I will know that bachelors are unmarried. We see these truths and the intellect is naturally (though perhaps defeasibly) moved to assent. One can also think of *scientia* as Aquinas uses the term. *Scientia* is, after all, a type of seeing, for Aquinas says “All science is derived from self-evident and therefore *seen* principles; wherefore all objects of science must needs be,

in a fashion, seen.”<sup>44</sup> *Scientia* requires a reasoned body of knowledge which moves from first principles. It is like seeing inasmuch as the assent is naturally impelled, but it is unlike sight inasmuch as there is a mediation in reasoning, as with, for example, use of a middle term in a demonstrative syllogism.

Unlike seeing or *scientia*, however, there is also opinion (*opinio*), and the degree of assent can be different here. Fr. James Brent O.P., distinguishes three uses of opinion as used by Aquinas.<sup>45</sup> First, opinion can simply mean assent to something that is contingently true. In this sense, then, one can have the opinion “It is raining outside.” This sense of “opinion” does not have much bearing on level of assent; it has more to do with the modality of the thing being assented to.

The second sense in which “opinion” is used builds on the first inasmuch as it is *a weak or unconvinced* assent to some contingent truth. Applied to the previous example about rain, perhaps one had heard earlier in the day that there was a 76% chance of rain at 1 PM, and that at 1 PM, this person was inside and away from any windows, doors, or other means of knowing what was going on outside. They may be of the opinion that it is raining given the forecast, but there would be very real room for doubt. This would be the second sense of “opinion” used by St. Thomas.

The final sense of the term “opinion” is described as an assent without fear of error, or *opinio vehemens*. An example Fr. Brent uses is the proposition “Great Britain is an island.”<sup>46</sup> While this cannot be demonstrated from first principles, and we do not see it

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<sup>44</sup> *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a.5.

<sup>45</sup> James Brent, “The Epistemic Status of Christian Beliefs in Thomas Aquinas” (Ph.D. diss., St. Louis University, 2008), 54-55.

<sup>46</sup> Brent, “The Epistemic Status of Christian Beliefs,” 55.

in an unmediated way, it is not something most of us are particularly inclined to doubt. Because it is strongly corroborated by credible testimony, we ascribe to an *opinio vehemens* a high level of credibility.

Thus, one can hold something as a matter of sensible sight, intellectual sight, or scientia, and assent follows from all of these naturally. When it comes to opinion, the object of faith can be held in the first sense, where the material object itself is a contingent feature of reality. When it comes to the second and third senses, there is a way faith can be said to be held either tentatively or as a strong opinion arising from human reason. However, the way in which *those* senses of opinion can be conjoined with faith requires some disambiguation.

Any discussion of faith which is constrained by brevity will have to contend with the fact that there are many different and important distinctions when talking about faith, and not all of them can be covered adequately. Still, one of the most important distinctions is that of the difference between what Brent calls *acquired* faith on the one hand and *infused* faith on the other. Acquired faith is that faith whereby human testimony produces some belief in a person which we can hold to, and hold to specifically as an *opinio vehemens*.<sup>47</sup> Infused faith, on the other hand is a particular act of God's grace working within a person to move them to assent to revelation. In this sense, then, infused faith cannot be an *opinio vehemens* at all because it is not actually based upon human testimony or reasons as such (though of course humans can testify to divinely revealed

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<sup>47</sup> Acquired faith here is effectively a natural faith inasmuch as one does not come to believe by the operation of grace or some otherwise supernatural power. Acquired faith is likewise a belief inasmuch as it is not arrived at by demonstration, but acquired faith has a surety to it that many other kinds of belief do not in virtue of the credibility and thorough consistency of the testimony propping up such faith.

truths). Further, at least some divinely revealed truths are not contingently true and so would not even qualify under the first type of opinion. If infused faith is not an opinion, then, it would seemingly have to be some kind of knowledge. Again, however, *scientia* does not apply because the faith is not demonstrated syllogistically. Also, faith is not of something seen, as Aquinas states in Question 1, Article 4 of the *Secunda Secundae*, citing Hebrews 11:1 as proof of this.

It follows from all of this that infused faith is its own kind of act. On the one hand, it does not and cannot come about by vision, from which it follows that the object does not determine belief. Assent requires internal movement from the will. On the other hand, infused faith is not brought about by discursive weighing of evidence nor is it always about some contingent matter. Hence, infused faith does not qualify as a type of opinion. Given this seeming muddle, it is helpful to outline the psychological process by which faith comes about, at least in its initial act. It is to this question we now turn.

*The Steps of Faith:* In his volume titled *On Faith* in his commentary on St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*, Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange lays out the psychological process whereby an adult makes their initial act of faith. It consists of twelve factors and captures some of the interplay between the intellect and the will in this initial act of faith<sup>48</sup>:

**Stage I Concerning the End:**

Acts bearing on man's last end. Analysis of the mental intention. A first judgment begets desire. A second judgment leads to resolution. There are, accordingly, four progressive factors.

[Intellect] First: A judgment is formed to the effect that the last end of man, now known implicitly at least to be a good thing, is definitely desirable.

[Will] Second: A desire takes shape for one's salvation, a happiness identified with the last end.

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<sup>48</sup> The following format is taken from Brent, "The Epistemic Status of Christian Beliefs," 137-138, who adds the designation of whether each step belongs to the intellect or will and formats the text into three boxes.



[Intellect] Third: Conviction follows. Salvation is possible and may be earned.<sup>49</sup> This second judgment prescribes: My duty is to know God, to love him above all, to serve him by doing his will [obeying].

[Will] Fourth: An intention develops. A resolution is formed. Insofar as it depends on myself, I sincerely determine to work for my last end, which means: My mind is made up to seek my salvation through obedience to God.

Once faith is in possession, the third and fourth factors result from the enlightenment and spurring produced by an interior grace. Without grace the fourth factor is not possible for anybody.

### **Stage II Concerning the Means**

The Employment of Means. A) The order of Election. Four factors, here numbered five to eight.

[Intellect] Fifth factor: Counsel. Consideration leads to a speculative judgment, and then to a mixed speculative and practical one. Reflecting on revelation, proposed and listened to in salutary preaching - to say nothing of the divine signs confirming it, I am gripped with the conclusion: It is credible. More than that, men ought to believe it.

[Will] Sixth Factor: Consent. I myself will no longer doubt its credibility. Thus far the consent lacks efficacy.

[Intellect] Seventh Factor: A practico-practical judgment. From now on there is no way out. I should give credence from this moment.

[Will] Eighth Factor: Supernatural election, called by the Council of Orange, an affection rooted in one's credulousness. I am ready to believe.

### **Stage III Execution of the Act**

B) Order of Execution. Four factors, numbered nine to twelve.

[Intellect] Ninth Factor: Intellectual Command, an imperative. Believe!

[Will] Tenth Factor: Stirring of the will by a pious inclination. My attraction is growing on me.

[Intellect] Eleventh Factor: I now believe.

[Will] Twelfth Factor: Fruition. Enjoyment of the security in believing.

Taking Stage I first, factors one and two pertain to the intellect apprehending some good and having a certain volition toward it. The intellect sees the offer of salvation and judges it as something good.<sup>50</sup> Interminable life, without pain or sadness, in a supernaturally perfected state are all goods which are part of the package. Yet on top of that all, He Who is Goodness Himself is possessed when one is saved. Thus, the intellect

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<sup>49</sup> Neither Brent nor Garrigou-Lagrange dwell on the notion that salvation may be earned. At risk of Pelagianism, it can probably be understood in the sense given in Hebrews 11:6, that God rewards those who seek Him. This is not to say we are the first mover in salvation, only that in virtue of our cooperation with God, we can come to attain that salvation.

<sup>50</sup> This is presuming one has heard the Gospel and news of salvation, for as St. Paul says, faith comes from what is heard.

judges this to be good and desirable. The will follows, with a simple volition toward that salvation.<sup>51</sup> The third factor is among the more complicated and important. As Garrigou-Lagrangé says, there is a conviction of both the possibility of attaining salvation and of the fact that it must be earned or otherwise sought after. The book of Hebrews can shed a little bit of light here, for when speaking of faith, it says: “For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). The conviction of the possibility of salvation here is contingent upon belief in the existence of God and further that God can be approached such that He will reward those who seek Him.<sup>52</sup> Salvation is possible because God can grant it. However, it requires a seeking such that there is an implied obedience to God. Finally, with the conviction that salvation is possible through obedience to God, an intention is formed to seek out salvation through obedience. Hence, the process moves from simple volition to a concrete intention to act for that end through the relevant means.<sup>53</sup>

Stage II pertains to the means of the act of faith. The first factor of section two, fifth overall, is again a fairly complex one. Upon the hearing of the content of revelation from preaching, witness, and various signs, there is a judgement formed of the credibility of that revelation. Further, in being credible, it is something that people ought to believe. Note, however, the general nature of both of these statements: “This revelation is credible.” “Men ought to believe it.” It is with the sixth factor that it is applied to the individual: “I will no longer doubt its credibility.” Any barriers or willfully entertained

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<sup>51</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 8 a. 1.

<sup>52</sup> This appears to be a pre-sectarian judgement, independent of any particular religion. The near-universal human experience of seeking after the divine and trying to follow certain precepts in addition to offering some kind of sacrifice seems to suggest this.

<sup>53</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.12, esp. a. 2 & 6.

doubts are chosen against. Arriving at the seventh factor, one performs what Garrigou-Lagrange calls a practico-practical judgment. The person entertaining faith affirms “I should give credence from this moment.” As Fr. James Brent explains, the reason it is called a practico-practical judgment is that this type of judgment is the beginning of some act or practice. This is contrasted with a speculative-practical judgment, which arrives at the same conclusion but which does not move to some definitive act.<sup>54</sup> When distinguishing between factors five and seven, Garrigou-Lagrange uses the example of the Pharisees, who see Christ’s signs and understand better than most His fulfillment of Scripture. Yet, while they can see the credibility of Jesus’ message (factor five), they cannot bring themselves to acceptance of it as found in factor seven. They perform, at most, only a speculative-practical judgment. They do not actually see the message of Christ as conducive to achieving their final end, and presumably this is because the final end they truly seek is not salvation as laid out in the first couple factors, but rather some other, lesser good.<sup>55</sup> Finally, factor eight is a movement of the will in response to factor seven: “I am ready to believe.” This disposition is a grace from the Holy Spirit whereby one is made able to accept what has been offered by revelation. It moves the individual from “I ought to believe” to “I am prepared to believe,” thereby deciding that one will indeed act upon that obligation.

The final section, Stage III, breaks down the particular way in which the act of faith occurs. In factor nine, with the credibility of revelation in hand and the person disposed to believe it, the intellect forms the command: “Believe!” This might seem a

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<sup>54</sup> Brent, “The Epistemic Status of Christians Beliefs,” 150.

<sup>55</sup> Brent, “The Epistemic Status of Christian Beliefs,” 147.

little strange given Aquinas' definition of that act of faith specifies that it is an act of the intellect under the command of the will. However, in question seventeen, article one, Aquinas actually affirms that command is an act of reason rather than the will.<sup>56</sup> That being said, imperative commands of the intellect themselves *presuppose* an act of the will, and so since the will is the first mover of doing an act, it too can be said to command the intellect. Hence, there is no contradiction; there are just different senses in which the intellect commands and the will commands. It follows from this, as seen in factor ten, that the will is stirred by a pious inclination. The will seeks to grasp its object and possess it. Thus in factor eleven, one comes to possess true and genuine faith. One has come to believe in the revelation of God with supernatural faith. Factor twelve follows with enjoyment of security in believing.

Thus, one can see the factors of coming to faith from unbelief according to a prominent interpreter of Aquinas.<sup>57</sup> It need not necessarily happen in the order listed though (e.g. perhaps one first feels convicted about the truth of Christianity and only then goes on to reflect on salvation and man's last end). However, to repeat what has been said previously in this work, individual persons are going to vary. For some, such as the atheist, factor three is going to be too much to overcome. After all, if salvation is possible, then there must be a God such that He can give salvation. Yet, if there is nothing to reality that is at all divine, then such salvation, while seemingly desirable, simply lies beyond the realm of possibility. This contrasts with the example of the Pharisees mentioned above, who cannot bring themselves to assent to the teachings of

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<sup>56</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 17. a. 1.

<sup>57</sup> Eleonore Stump presents a similar one as well in Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas: Arguments of the Philosophers*, (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2003), 287-294.

Jesus despite the manifest credibility of what He was saying. Still others might be in principle open to such revelation, but they have not heard the preaching of the Gospel or seen signs such that said Gospel message is confirmed. In short, where someone might fail to make an act of faith will depend on the individual and where they are coming from. That being said, it seems that factors three and five will be where miracles might come into play the most.

This whole schema might also raise the question of whether or not the act of faith actually has an evidentialist bend to it. After all, factor five especially seems to indicate just that: Revelation is credible based upon not just salutary preaching but upon various signs confirming that preaching and that witness. If the act of faith is dependent upon such rational consideration, though, it would directly contradict what was said above about the unique nature of faith, that it is neither vision nor opinion (where opinions are understood as evidentialist). To clear this up, we must look at factors five, seven, and eleven. Fr. Brent has specific labels for these factors, namely: the Judgment of Credibility, the Judgment of Credendity, and the Judgment of Faith, respectively.<sup>58</sup> Recall that the Judgment of Credibility is a speculative judgment to the effect that the truths of revelation are credible. The Judgment of Credendity is a practico-practical judgment whereby one appropriates to themselves the obligation to believe and begins to set about acting on that judgment. What is important to note about the Judgment of Faith is that it is properly part of the act of faith while the other two judgments are, strictly speaking, not part of it. Rather, they are factors which lead to the execution of the act of faith. It is worth emphasizing further that they are just that: factors. They are not premises

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<sup>58</sup> Brent, "The Epistemic Status of Christian Beliefs," 140.

of some argument whereby one propositionally concludes the content of revealed faith.<sup>59</sup> They are, to put it in more metaphysical terms, causes of the act of faith, but only causes in the looser, indeterministic sense. Specifically with the Judgment of Credibility, we have seen examples (e.g. the Pharisees) of how one can make a Judgment of Credibility without thereby going all the way to accepting the faith. It is only at the point where the will is elevated by God's grace that the execution of the act of faith can even take place, and so while credibility might have gone into disposing a person to receive that grace of election, it is the will, elevated by God's grace, that is actually doing the work to move the individual to the Judgment of Faith. Therefore, it follows that the act of faith remains neither vision nor opinion. Yet it truly is an intellectual judgment, enabled by the grace of God working in a person.

### **Newman's Account of Faith**

St. John Henry Newman was an English convert to Catholicism from Anglicanism who wrote during the mid/late nineteenth century. Among other things, he was concerned to combat the theological liberalism of his time, which denied binding ecclesial authority and whose skepticism was undermining genuine faith. In seeking to elucidate how the faith could be held firmly yet in an intellectually responsible way, Newman wrote a number of works, with perhaps his most prominent being *An Essay in*

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<sup>59</sup> Brent, "The Epistemic Status of Christian Beliefs," 153.

*Aid of a Grammar of Assent.*<sup>60</sup> Given the more systematic nature of the work, it will provide the framework for the ensuing discussion.

*Propositions and Assent:* In setting his account up, Newman begins by distinguishing three different types of propositions. There are interrogatives, which imply a question which can be affirmed or denied (“Is it the case that  $x$  is  $y$ ?”). This is contrasted with conditionals, which are expressed as conclusion (“It is therefore the case that  $x$  is  $y$ ”). It is conditional inasmuch as there are implicit premises which it is based upon. The final proposition is the categorical, which makes an assertion (“ $X$  is  $y$ ”). To these propositions correspond three intellectual acts: doubt, inference, and assent, respectively. For any given proposition, then, one can deny it, which is just a negative assent. One can doubt it, which is to abstain from holding (or denying) it due to uncertainty. One can infer it from antecedent premises. Finally, one can simply assent to it, not as a conclusion to an argument, but simply as a standalone proposition. Regardless, however, since these types of propositions are mutually exclusive, so too are the mental acts which correspond to them mutually exclusive. If one doubts, one cannot simultaneously assent, for example. Likewise, one cannot simultaneously assent to a proposition and conclude it as an inference.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> I found some helpful summary material in reading Martin Cyril D’Arcy, *The Nature of Belief*, (Providence: Cluny Media, 2017) and in the six lectures on Newman from Fr. John Bayer, as found at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPxnbhTbRLwp-rcJ0N-4QTA/videos>.

<sup>61</sup> This is a point which Newman is at pains to emphasize in order to set up the discussion of his famed “Illative sense” below. There is an interesting truth captured here though when one thinks about a simple person’s faith vs. an intellectually developed faith. One with simple faith might unreservedly assent to a dogma without having thought about it, but as soon as they are presented with an argument for *why* that dogma is true, this might paradoxically cause them to begin doubting the teaching, even if the argument is a good one! When matters of faith become matters of argument, all of a sudden, they are open to being rejected or qualified in a way that is not possible with the unconditional nature of simple assent.

As the title of the work indicates, of all of these mental acts, Newman is primarily concerned with assent.<sup>62</sup> Within assent, there are two primary distinctions: first is notional assent, which pertains to general terms (e.g. “Snow is cold.”). Contrasted with this is real assent, which pertains to specific, concrete terms (e.g. “Queen Elizabeth is the grandmother of Prince William.”). Of the two, real assent is stronger and carries with it a greater power of conviction and motivation towards action. Regardless of which type of assent one might have, though, assent consists of apprehending the terms of a proposition plus some mental assertion of that sufficiently understood proposition. Specifically, one must know the predicate, for it is by the predicate that one’s knowledge of the subject grows. Newman does qualify this, however, by saying there are certain ways in which one might be able to indirectly assent to a proposition, even if one does not completely know the terms. Take the statement “Photons lack mass.” Perhaps one is unacquainted with physics, not knowing what photons are nor how “mass” is being used. One might still be able to assent to it if, for example, some respected authority declared it. In that way, one might indirectly assent to the proposition in three ways: (1) Assenting to the proposition itself (“Photons lack mass.”). (2) Assenting to the proposition’s truth (“Photons lack mass” is true.). (3) Assenting to the propositions truth and to the ground of its being true (My teacher’s word that “Photons lack mass” is true.). Given this, then, assent cannot only be distinguished between notional and real. It can also be distinguished as direct or indirect.

*Faith and Assent:* The implications this logical apparatus has for faith can begin to be seen by what Newman says at the beginning of chapter five: “To give real assent to

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<sup>62</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895), 7.



[a dogma] is an act of religion; to give a notional, is a theological act.”<sup>63</sup> To clarify this, he adds “It is discerned, rested in, and appropriated as a reality, by the religious imagination; it is held as a truth, by the theological intellect.”<sup>64</sup> What might be somewhat counter-intuitive to a reader unfamiliar with Newman is that the type of assent which corresponds to faith proper is the type that he is rather less interested in. Notional assent is the holding as true some particular theological proposition, which is faith at its most basic level. It is true that this faith might be indirect as well, inasmuch as one might believe a theological proposition on the grounds that it is revealed by God, even if that person does not understand the meaning of the terms of said proposition. Newman’s interest is different: What can we do to make this notional faith we hold more real, more convicting, and more prone to move us to action? It is to take this notional assent of faith and draw from it a real assent. As mentioned above, there is a component of real assent which is concrete, perhaps even experiential, which simply does not occur with a merely notional assent. On the surface, however, there is a problem in the fact that God and many of the Mysteries of the Catholic faith, are not subject to observation or sensory experience. The question, then, is how it is even possible to move from a notional assent to a real assent in matters pertaining to, for example, the teaching that God is One or that God is also Triune. While one might have faith in these teachings, is it possible at all to assent to the objects of faith in not only a notional but also a real way?

It is at this point which Newman gives one of his most famous expositions: conscience as a means of attaining to God. Further, this faculty of conscience has a

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<sup>63</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 98.

<sup>64</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 98.

twofold aspect. He says “The feeling of conscience...it is a moral sense, and a sense of duty; a judgment of the reason and a magisterial dictate.”<sup>65</sup> His point here is that one both evaluates oneself according to conscience (a sense of right and wrong, we’ll say) and also evaluates whether such-and-such an action is allowed (a sense of permissibility). It is the latter sense, of permissibility, which the Saint turns his attention to, for this sense can induce a certain fear, dullness, or dismay at the future (for the wrongdoer). Indeed, we can feel a certain shame or dismay even if nobody else was involved in the action, or, conversely, we can feel peace, contentment, or pride in the performance of good acts. The point of these emotions is that we do not feel such things toward lifeless, inanimate objects. We feel shame or pride with respect to other persons. Thus, when we feel we are acting in accord with or contrary to some precept, we feel and act if there is some Person Who is evaluating them, One Who is able to stand in judgment over all our actions, not as some mere law or standard, but as Another we can commune with. What might start off as a notional assent to God’s existence or care of the world (or His Oneness, as Newman is taking up) moves to a real assent, an assent to the object of the proposition rather than merely to the proposition itself. The religious imagination, then, becomes a way to “give color” to what is assented to in the Creed, not as a substitute for that creedal and notional assent, but rather as a supplement and enhancement. Faith in God moves from a notional assent to a real one, just as a student can move from believing that two objects of different mass fall at the same rate based upon calculation to seeing, experimentally, that this is so.

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<sup>65</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 105.

For all this, it might still seem unclear as to how one is assenting to God's presence as a moral lawgiver and judge as opposed to reasoning his way toward God in this way. After all, Newman seems to be giving an argument for *how* we come to a real assent of God, with this assent lying at the end of a chain of reasoning. This would turn the assent into an inference, which is what was categorically denied earlier. Yet, if one does not reason his way to God and His moral lordship over us (among other things), in what way can we be justified in giving unconditional assent? The strength of adherence would not, then, be proportionate to the evidence or reason given. This problem is stated by his quoting of Locke, who says of knowledge that it necessitates "the not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built on will warrant."<sup>66</sup> Newman finds this to be wrongheaded and simply not in accord with the reality of how human beings actually reason, accusing Locke of speaking of idealized humans he might have created rather than humans as they actually exist and act.<sup>67</sup> That being said, in rejecting Locke, he must avoid falling into the pit of rationalism, where the truths of the faith can and should be proven. He seeks to head this off when he says, "We do not deny our own faith because we become controversialists; and in like manner we may employ ourselves in proving what we already believe to be true, simply in order to ascertain the producible evidence in its favour, and in order to fulfil what is due to ourselves and to the claims and responsibilities of our education and social position."<sup>68</sup> In setting out to rationally analyze both the faith and how we come to know it, it is already coming from a

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<sup>66</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 162.

<sup>67</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 164.

<sup>68</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 190-191.

place of belief, of faith. It embodies the Anselmian dictum of faith seeking understanding.

This still leaves the problem, though, of accounting for how one can believe matters of faith when they are not subject to rational or straightforwardly empirical demonstration. Some assent to these things simply, which is to say, in a way that is barely recognized and reflected on, even though it might be fundamental to the direction they take in life. Conversely, some have complex assent, where the given proposition is explicitly reflected upon and consciously adopted. All of them, however, would seem to require some substantial reasoning as a foundation. This is especially so given that, while assents might in-principle change, the assent of faith requires certitude and the indefectibility that certitude provides.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Newman concludes his discussion of certitude by giving it three conditions: (1) that it follows on investigation and proof, (2) that it results in intellectual satisfaction and repose, and (3) that it is irreversible.<sup>70</sup> For any one of these conditions to be fulfilled would seem to require fairly watertight argumentation. To have all three of them, the evidence and proofs would need to be *airtight*. How, then, might one come to believe matters of faith responsibly?

Newman goes on to elaborate about different types of inferential reasoning. There is formal inference, which relies on the more formalized logic one would find with Aristotle or with modern propositional calculus. Elsewhere, he describes reasoning in this

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<sup>69</sup> Newman is careful to contrast certitude with infallibility. Certitude, as a general rule, holds true, and it consists in holding to some proposition regarding a particular case. Thus, what can be certain about what one did this morning, even while knowing the memory is not infallible. Infallibility, on the other hand, is a gift or faculty belonging to a person enabling them to be correct not just about some particular truth but about any truth in some relevant area of discussion. See Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 224.

<sup>70</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 258.

way as “the faculty of gaining knowledge without direct perception, or of ascertaining one thing by means of another.”<sup>71</sup> Newman’s complaint here is that such logic tends toward a certain reductivity and flattening of what is actually being reasoned about, with a much greater emphasis on the relation between propositions than on the content. There is, however, a more informal means of reasoning that allows individuals to see in the concrete the truth of certain propositions by a certain convergence of evidence and probabilities. Newman famously references the lemma which opens Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*.<sup>72</sup> If you inscribe a polygon in a circle, as the number of sides of the polygon increases, the more and more closely the polygon approximates the circle it is inscribed in. Yet, you can never simply add a sufficient number of sides to reach that perfect circularity. Likewise, informal reasoning draws together a number of threads, many of which would be useless as standalone arguments, and shows how they converge to the truth of some particular concrete state of affairs. Thus, while one might never deductively reach such a conclusion, one can nonetheless think of the conclusion as something of a limit case, the logically distinct truth to which all these other truths point without ever definitively reaching it. This illustrates well informal inference, a close relative of which is what Newman calls natural inference. While difficult to put clean parameters to, one who has natural inference is often said to have an “eye” for his particular subject matter or a certain intuitive grasp of it. It is judging from one concrete particular to another. He gives the example of Napoleon being able to look at an opposing force and very quickly determine its size, its formations, what would happen for various

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<sup>71</sup> John Henry Newman, “Implicit and Explicit Reason,” in *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford, Between A.D. 1826 and 1843* (New York: Wentworth Publishing, 2019), 256.

<sup>72</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 320.

movements of those formations, and the like. There was not some algorithm or strict calculation he used. He simply saw deeply into the reality of what was going on. One consequence of this, however, is that there is a certain subjectivity to natural reasoning. Napoleon, while a brilliant general, probably would not have had the same natural insight into the sciences or music as he did in conducting war. Similarly, the brilliant mathematician may have no ability to run a business or understand the geological history of some location simply by looking at it. In that sense, this light of natural inference is largely person- and topic-specific.

Thus St. John Henry Newman arrives at his famed Illative Sense, which is the power of reasoning and judging when in its perfection.<sup>73</sup> Since the Illative Sense is the perfection of the reasoning faculty, there is no higher arbiter in the realm of human reasoning by which things are measured. This might be unappealing or difficult, but we must contend with the fact that inference and assent comprise the means by which humans come to acquire knowledge and thus must contend with inference's inherent obscurity and assent's inherent distinctness and definitiveness. To sidestep these would be to do violence to the way humans think and would thus be both practically unhelpful and perhaps even theoretically incoherent. To take an example from Newman, that England is an island is something practically all are certain of, yet if they tried to give a proof for it, such a proof would be inherently obscure and poor. Yet the conviction of England's being an island remains clear and definite. It would be difficult to pull apart all the threads of why one would consider England to be an island, but it is not as if there is no rational foundation for it. Yet, it seems that the belief is not simply conditioned upon

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<sup>73</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 353.

specific formal premises and conclusions, and so the conviction that England is an island is an assent, and even a rational assent, but it is not conditioned upon specific premises.

There are different ways this Illative Sense can be described, or at least there are intellectual near-neighbors to it. G.K. Chesterton once quipped that “a man may well be less convinced of a philosophy from four books, than from one book, one battle, one landscape, and one old friend.”<sup>74</sup> It is a whole confluence of different experiences, some of which are far from explicitly intellectual, which can move a man to believe one thing or another. To give a more contemporary comparison, Newman’s account of the Illative Sense seems to be a strong, even if not necessarily perfect, resemblance to the concept in Reformed Epistemology of a properly basic belief. Properly basic beliefs are not grounded in any prior belief but are those beliefs upon which the rest of a worldview is built. Alvin Plantinga is probably its most famous defender. What distinguishes such properly basic beliefs from mere fideism is that it is not contrary to reason and can even have a certain accord with reason (e.g. believing other minds exist). Indeed, properly basic beliefs can be held outside of reason and inference, which seems to be a characteristic shared with Newman’s idea of assent.<sup>75</sup> All this is to say that while Newman presented his own idea of the rationality of belief in matters of faith, there are others who have come after who seem to have come to substantial agreement with him.

*Summary:* In conclusion, Newman sets up an account of belief which centers around certain mental acts, most importantly the act of assertion. One can assert something notionally, or they can have real assent, which is of a stronger, more concrete

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<sup>74</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 150.

<sup>75</sup> Anthony Bolos and Kyle Scott, “Reformed Epistemology,” in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, at [iep.utm.edu/ref-epis/](http://iep.utm.edu/ref-epis/).

nature. This assent, meanwhile, can be both direct or indirect. Newman's main concern in all of this is to account for how one can come to a real assent about the truths of the faith as opposed to merely notional. One illustrative (though not exhaustive) way this is done is through the workings of our conscience, which seems to answer in some real, convicting way to some Person outside of us, to Whom we owe our obedience. The difficulty arising from this is that for any real assent we might have, there would need to be some corresponding reason or evidence for our holding it. Yet, assent is explicitly not an inference, at least not a formal inference, and thus it seems detached from any potential evidence or arguments which could make the assent intellectually respectable. Newman's response to this is that while assent is necessarily incompatible with formal inference, there is an informal type of inference which is reached through what he calls our Illative Sense. This sense stands above all the rest of our judgments and reasonings and is founded upon the drawing together of many different strands of thought and circumstances. One might not even be able to list these reasons in any way so as to produce an argument. Yet, they are there and stand as the basis for our beliefs in the Christian faith in a way that safeguards from outright irrationality. Thus, the certain assent of faith is founded on reason, but that does not mean it always is or has to be founded on an explicit line of reasoning.

### **A Synthesis of Aquinas and Newman**

If one were to try to systematize a synthesis of Aquinas and Newman, it would probably look less like fitting pieces of a puzzle together and more like examining a set of concentric circles, where one account mostly provides a big-picture view while the



other fills in details pertaining to that picture. More specifically, the Thomistic twelve-factor account of faith can be given greater detail, especially on a phenomenological level, by Newman's work. Both thinkers are in agreement that infused faith does not lay at the conclusion of some kind of argument. Aquinas would say that infused faith is called such precisely to contrast it with acquired faith, which is founded on argument and human testimony. Likewise for Newman, faith consists principally in an assent, which is itself incompatible with faith being an inference grounded in premises or some logically prior reasoning. These two tracks (that infused faith is contrary to acquired faith and that assent is contrary to inference) can be seen as running parallel to each other, even if they are not capturing exactly the same thing. As to how the account from Newman fits with the Thomistic schema, I would like to focus on what the former can add to the latter. One prior note, however, is that bringing Newman to bear on the twelve-factor model can bring forth quite clearly the fact that the factors are not always (and often are not) temporally consecutive steps.

Now taking the first four factors,<sup>76</sup> it should be clear that in many cases, especially among children, there is not some initial stage of reflection on one's last end and eternal destiny before taking up the faith. They may later reflect on what implications their faith has for their happiness or eternal destiny, but that will end up being a reflection through the eyes of faith already. Still, there are some who have some kind of sense that

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<sup>76</sup> [Intellect] First: A judgment is formed to the effect that the last end of man, now known implicitly at least to be a good thing, is definitely desirable.

[Will] Second: A desire takes shape for one's salvation, a happiness identified with the last end.

[Intellect] Third: Conviction follows. Salvation is possible and may be earned. This second judgment prescribes: My duty is to know God, to love him above all, to serve him by doing his will [obeying]. .

[Will] Fourth: An intention develops. A resolution is formed. Insofar as it depends on myself, I sincerely determine to work for my last end, which means: My mind is made up to seek my salvation through obedience to God.

they are made for something, that they exist for a reason and they ought to fulfill that reason. This can come apart from any particularly eschatological considerations as regards life after death, at least at first. This sense that we exist for something, that our life has meaning beyond the meaning we try to make for ourselves, *can* be an element of that Illative Sense Newman speaks of, where the person cannot really articulate how or why they believe their life has some meaning, some destiny, but they believe it to be so anyway. This is identifying that they have some ultimate *end* and that it ought to be pursued.

The third factor is where things begin to get more complicated. While someone may have some informal sense of having an end, that it not by itself sufficient to identify that end with God. A naturally religious man might easily ascribe divinity to his ultimate end, but there are many others who would not. Perhaps they think natural happiness is their ultimate goal. Conversely, perhaps there are others who think their end cannot really be attained after all. This is where it is necessary to have some kind of assent to God's existence and providence (at least with respect to our ultimate happiness and destiny). This can come from strict argumentation. Perhaps it comes from identifying that inner voice of conscience with God (or at least seeing conscience as an instrument of God). There might be numerous informal reasons that one cannot really tease apart for why one thinks that God is their final end. These factors can vary greatly from individual to individual, but there are also numerous ways a person can arrive at factor three. They could believe it as someone already having faith and simply seeing God's existence as our final end as part of the package of belief. There are others, meanwhile, who do not have supernatural faith but could, in fact, infer this about God from reason or simply as a

matter of informal inference. Especially as pertains to factor four, Newman's connection of God and our conscience comes to the fore, because it is through obedience to Him (through our conscience) that we arrive at our final end. Regardless, a faithless person could still arrive at the conviction of the attainability of salvation by obedience to God and thereby seek out that salvation through inferring formally or informally. This is sufficient for the time-being.

Arriving at factor five,<sup>77</sup> this is probably where the Thomistic account and Newman's account diverge most clearly. However, even this divergence can be diminished by not being overly restrictive on what comes into consideration and how deliberated that consideration is. While factor five does mention divine signs confirming the revelation, it also mentions how the revelation itself speaks to its own credibility. This seems to indicate that the conclusion of credibility is not necessarily some strictly syllogistic or formal reasoning alone, because the "ring of truth" found in revelation is going to be a more informal inference. Additionally, if this informal inference can be extended to more general things, then the considerations as found in factor five could dovetail quite well with Newman's account. Now, the Thomistic schema will often emphasize more strongly the miraculous and the more "objective" reasons for attributing credibility to revelation, but this makes sense since, as Newman points out, it is hard to systematize and easily articulate matters of informal inference in a clear way. Factors six

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<sup>77</sup> [Intellect] Fifth factor: Counsel. Consideration leads to a speculative judgment, and then to a mixed speculative and practical one. Reflecting on revelation, proposed and listened to in salutary preaching - to say nothing of the divine signs confirming it, I am gripped with the conclusion: It is credible. More than that, men ought to believe it. [Will] Sixth Factor: Consent. I myself will no longer doubt its credibility. Thus far the consent lacks efficacy. [Intellect] Seventh Factor: A practico-practical judgment. From now on there is no way out. I should give credence from this moment.

[Will] Eighth Factor: Supernatural election, called by the Council of Orange, an affection rooted in one's credulousness. I am ready to believe.

through eight simply set the stage for moving to assent to revelation. There is a certain respect, perhaps, in which moving from a notional assent to a real assent might enable one to perform the practico-practical judgment of appropriating to oneself the need to believe, whereas mere notional assent might be insufficient to move from “This is credible and should be believed” to “I will believe it.”

Now come the final four factors.<sup>78</sup> Here, the Illative Sense does not come so strongly to bear. However, this might be where the greatest payoff of having a real assent to matters of the faith rather than a notional one is seen. Specifically, a real assent will likely evoke a stronger stirring of the will. The attraction of the faith is more magnified and filled-in precisely because there is a certain concreteness and realness to it which mere notional assent cannot give (important as that notional assent is in the life of the soul). Likewise, with factor twelve, there will similarly be greater enjoyment and greater security in a matter of real assent simply in virtue of the fact that such assent is more strongly adhered to. While all assents of faith have a kind of certainty and indefectibility, this is most especially pronounced with real assent, and so the security of belief will be at its strongest with a real assent of faith.

It is apparent that with plausible interpretation of the Thomistic account and Newman’s account, there is a large amount of compatibility in the way each position understands how individuals might come to believe. In a way, they can be quite complementary, with the Thomistic account providing a logical structure and more

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<sup>78</sup> [Intellect] Ninth Factor: Intellectual Command, an imperative. Believe!  
[Will] Tenth Factor: Stirring of the will by a pious inclination. My attraction is growing on me.  
[Intellect] Eleventh Factor: I now believe.  
[Will] Twelfth Factor: Fruition. Enjoyment of the security in believing.

objective means of analyzing the act of faith, while Newman's account tries to do greater justice to the phenomenological aspect of reasoning a person might go through in considering assent to religious doctrine. How this all works with miracles can thus be seen more clearly. Miracles are clear and oft-cited evidences for the Thomistic view of faith and can be incorporated into a person's judgements most especially in factor three for atheists and agnostics and factors five and seven for those who are already theists. What makes Newman's contribution so helpful here is twofold: First, the large number of miracle accounts in different times and places can contribute to one's Illative Sense about the work of God in the world. One need not analyze any specific miracle claims in rigorous logical fashion in order to justify belief. It is the mass accumulation of testimony and interrelated lines of evidence which contributes to belief. Second, Newman's emphasis on real assent comes very much into play here. It is one thing to walk through a metaphysical proof of God or engage in philosophical investigation of His existence, nature, and revelation's concordance with what we see in the world. It is another thing entirely to witness something, seemingly concrete and immediate, which signifies God's work, presence, and interest in human affairs. Simply put, miracles often strike people more strongly, even if they have supreme confidence in the clear logicity of various philosophical arguments. Your average person might be quite bored with an argument for God, yet that same person would be very interested to hear in someone being healed from cancer after being prayed over or perhaps even being raised from the dead, seemingly by God's hand. Miracles are ripe for creating real assent in a way many other evidences are not, and Newman's account of belief helps us to better understand why.

## Summary

Miracles as a motive of credibility for faith – this chapter has analyzed or revisited each of these major components so that we might be know how to understand them and how they fit into the broader picture of Christian belief. Taking up the nature of miracles first, we discussed how God might relate to the natural (or physical) world and to various occurrences in it, ultimately concluding that the word “miracle” can have a certain flexibility of meaning. Still, a fair definition was given, which states that a miracle is “an event or occurrence which is either impossible in the physical order or which is at least highly improbable and which occurs in a setting such that one can recognize it as the work of a God who reveals Himself.”

Next, motives of credibility were revisited, noting that they are rational grounds for believing in revelation and the establishment of the Catholic Church. These can cover areas ranging from God’s existence, His trustworthiness & character, and His communicating a particular message to the world, confirmed in certain ongoing signs. In particular, we noted that while miracles can happen even without a person noticing, for a miracle to act as a motive of credibility it must be verifiable by at least somebody in order to count. Thus, only those miracles which have some means of being detected and discerned were considered to be relevant.

Finally came a long discussion on faith, tracing out the Biblical and dogmatic roots. The evolving meaning of the word “faith” was taken up, ultimately resting on the idea that there is no one meaning or use of the word, but much can be related to faithfulness to God’s covenant with us, and in particular to the fulfillment of that covenant in Jesus Christ. Our faith is belief in and fidelity to Him and His teachings as

found in the deposit of faith and as transmitted by the Church. The Church, for Her part, teaches that faith is an act of the intellect which is both sure, yet which also has obscurity for us. It is given to us as a gift from God in order that we might know and love Him and, consequently, find salvation in Him.

In that discussion of faith, an account inspired by St. Thomas Aquinas and one given by St. John Henry Newman were laid out and brought into conversation with each other. St. Thomas speaks of different levels of knowledge & belief and how infused faith is *sui generis* among them. Further, the object of faith, being unseen but grounded in God, does not determine belief but requires a movement of the will as enabled by grace. Finally, a twelve-factor schema was laid out regarding a person's first coming to the faith. As for Newman, we discussed the logical apparatus of his theory, especially around assent and inference. The importance of real assent was established as was the fact that belief can be justifiably grounded in more informal inference along the lines of the Illative Sense. The Thomistic account and Newman's were put into dialogue with each other, coming to the conclusion that while superficial tensions exist among them, there is a basic and even illuminating compatibility between the two. Especially applying this synthesis to miracles can yield helpful insights into the role they play in belief.

In matters of faith and the miraculous, there appears to be some way of looking at them that can do justice to man's rationality while also not dismissing the phenomena outright. There are, however, some who think that as a matter of principle, miracles are either impossible or at least unknowable. If this is the case, then the entire project laid out above will be a non-starter. In order to further justify using miracles as a motive of credibility for faith, these critics ought to be answered, thus removing the last major

obstacles to analyzing apparent miracles to see what support they can lend in favor of Christian doctrine.



## Chapter 3: Critics

Since the advent of modern philosophy, there has been a much more consistent and sustained criticism of the idea of miracles than there had been in prior ages. One can clearly see such tendencies in disciplines such as Biblical studies, where a paradigm of rejecting accounts of the miraculous simply because they were miraculous rose to prominence. Among those who came to reject miracles, two figures stand out with particular prominence: Benedict de Spinoza and David Hume. Due to the more positivist tendencies one tends to find in Western philosophical thought, Hume has come to be something of the poster child for arguing against miracles. Yet, it is precisely in virtue of this that responses to Hume here will be fairly minimal; he has been talked about and addressed by so many thinkers on so many fronts that a mere summary of the faults of his position will have to suffice. Conversely, the arguments Spinoza puts forward have tended to receive less coverage and so will, consequently, be the primary focus of this chapter.

### **The Critiques of the *Theological-Political Treatise***

Spinoza devotes the entirety of the sixth chapter of his book to a critique of miracles. In that chapter, he sets up four lines of inquiry, where he says he will show:

- (1) that nothing happens contrary to nature, but nature maintains an eternal, fixed, and immutable order, and at the same time demonstrate what should be understood by the term ‘miracle.’
- (2) that from miracles we cannot know about either the essence or the existence or the providence of God, but rather that all three are much better grasped from the fixed and unchangeable order of nature.

- (3) from some examples in the Bible that by the decrees, volitions, and providence of God, Scripture itself means nothing other than the order of nature which necessarily follows from his eternal law.
- (4) the method required for [correctly] interpreting the miracles narrated in the Bible and what we should particularly notice in such miracle narratives.<sup>79</sup>

In the course of the following argument, I will take up the first three of these theses of Spinoza's, exempting the fourth since it seeks to elaborate upon the consequences of there being no miracles rather than being an argument against miracles as such.

*Objection 1: Nothing can happen contrary to nature.*<sup>80</sup>

Spinoza's first objection to miracles is based upon his notion of the laws of nature as being in-principle inviolable. He begins by noting something any orthodox Christian would agree with (given proper qualifications)<sup>81</sup>: What God wills follows unfailingly and from necessity. This is to say, if God wills something, it would be impossible for that thing not to follow. He then goes on to say that God's understanding is not distinct from His will, which entails that we are asserting the same thing when we say God wills something and when we say He understands it. The upshot of this is that just as God's understanding of something is necessary, so too is His willing of that thing. The universal laws of nature, then, being known by God, are also thus willed by God. Since they are willed by God, they follow necessarily and are thus impossible to violate. Nothing can happen contrary to nature since nature is infallibly decreed by God's will, and this will is of the same necessity as the divine nature itself.

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<sup>79</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 82.

<sup>80</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 82-84.

<sup>81</sup> Some might distinguish between God's antecedent and consequent will; the following comments would, in this case, only apply then to God's consequent will.

It is worth noting here that Spinoza has included an important footnote to go along with this, which says “note here that I mean not only matter and its properties, but other infinite things besides matter.”<sup>82</sup> The importance lies in the fact that this footnote clarifies how for Spinoza, “nature” is broader in scope than what we typically think of as “nature.” In particular, most discussions of miracles (especially post-Hume) conceive of the laws of nature as pertaining in a quite exclusive way to matter and its governance. For Spinoza, however, this discussion goes beyond matter to, it seems, everything. Indeed, he goes on to say “No sound reasoning convinces us that we should attribute only a limited power and limited virtue to nature or believe its laws are suited to certain things only and not to all.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, if we were to grant the existence of creatures such as angels, they would also be included. Likewise for things such as, for example, the nature of the triangle. Spinoza supports this line of thinking by stating that the power and virtue of nature is the very virtue and power of God, and likewise the rules of nature are the very decrees of God. As such, the range and domain of these laws, and the power given to them, is infinite, being “so broad as to extend to everything that is also conceived by the divine understanding.” The only alternative to this is to say that God created nature which is impotent and unable to regulate itself without His constantly interfering and maintaining it, which would be an absurdity in Spinoza’s eyes.

What can be said about this objection? I am hesitant to say it of a figure of such stature as Spinoza, but it seems that his mistake is basically an equivocation; that being said, it is an interesting mistake and worth elaborating upon. For the sake of thoroughness, however, there is a corollary problem which also ought to be addressed: the distinction between God and nature.

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<sup>82</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 83.

<sup>83</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 83.

Turning to the first point, it should be clear from the foregoing discussion that when Spinoza is speaking of the “laws of nature,” he does not actually mean the same thing which many others mean by that same term. Most of the latter typically regard the laws of nature as being the (typically mathematically formalizable) laws which govern the movement of bodies and the nature of the space which these bodies find themselves in. Spinoza is quite explicit that he means more than this, going on to include other “infinite things” besides matter. Why does this lead to equivocation? There is equivocation because any proponent of miracles who says that these miracles would be violations (or suspensions) of the laws of nature is saying something quite different in meaning from what Spinoza is saying when miracles violate the laws of nature. To help elucidate this point, it would be worth bringing in a distinction Aquinas makes about law.

Questions 93 and 94 of the *Prima Secundae* take up the eternal law and natural law, respectively. Aquinas identifies the eternal law with God’s Wisdom itself, which directs all actions and movements. Natural law, meanwhile, pertains properly to human actions as a means of properly directing said actions under the guidance of reason. While this does not seem to really encompass “the laws of nature” an analogy can be drawn. Natural law is grounded in human nature and ranges over the natural end of man and the means to get there. A certain analogous sense of natural law, then, can be applied to any natural (or, to keep with my usage in chapter 2, physical) object. These physical objects have their own natures which govern what they are capable and incapable of doing, and so there can be a certain understanding of laws of nature which might be better understood as laws of *natures*. The importance of considering laws of nature as being grounded in the natures of various physical substances is that this captures something in the vicinity of what most people mean when they say miracles violate the laws of

nature: the natural operations of such-and-such physical substances as grounded in their respective natures provides a normative rule for how they act.<sup>84</sup> Yet, miracles show physical reality acting in ways contrary to that normative rule, resulting in the laws of nature being violated.

Recall, however, the eternal law Aquinas appeals to. If God wills, in His providential and wise governing of the world, that the laws of nature be suspended or otherwise contravened, *this still does not violate the higher, eternal law*. If God were to providentially ordain that the laws of nature governing the Red Sea never be violated and also ordain that the Red Sea part in such a way as to violate the laws of nature, this would introduce a contradiction into the eternal law and would thus render such a miracle impossible. This is not, so far as we can tell, what happens with instances of the miraculous. Rather, the laws of nature, that is, the natural law as applied to physical reality, are subordinated to the eternal law. Hence, the laws of nature are capable of being superseded by a higher law on an orthodox Christian account while the eternal law is not. Yet, given Spinoza's description of the laws of nature, his conception seems to fit much better with the eternal law. He says "the universal laws of nature are simply God's decrees."<sup>85</sup> Aquinas says of the eternal law that it "is nothing else than the type of Divine Wisdom, as directing all actions and movements." One could be forgiven for thinking that Spinoza and Aquinas are asserting, if not exactly the same thing, at least things which are very near to each other in meaning. Thus, if we are to identify Spinoza's "laws of nature" with Aquinas's "eternal law," then the two would likely be in substantial agreement. Given that Aquinas is an authoritative

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<sup>84</sup> I grant that discussion of natures and a robust essentialism would not be welcomed in many corners of philosophy of science and metaphysics. Yet, this account still captures the basic sense of "This thing is not acting the way it is supposed to be acting." For those who want to parse it out in terms of essenceless tropes and the like, they are free to do so without affecting the main point here.

<sup>85</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 83.

representative of orthodox Christian thought, Christians in general could likewise agree with Spinoza here. The laws of nature *qua* eternal law cannot be violated. Since, however, Christians mean something else when speaking of the laws of nature and how miracles supposedly violate<sup>86</sup> them, Spinoza's criticism thus misses the mark and fails to undercut the Christian account of miracles. His argument rests, as I have said, on an equivocation concerning the "laws of nature."

That being said, there is an important thread running through Spinoza's objection which requires attention. It is best captured in this passage:

For, since the virtue and power of nature is the very virtue and power of God and the laws and rules of nature are the very decrees of God, we must certainly believe that the power of nature is infinite, and its laws so broad as to extend to everything that is also conceived by the divine understanding. For otherwise what are we saying but that God has created a nature so impotent and with laws and rules so feeble that He must continually give it a helping hand, to maintain it and keep things going as He wills; this I certainly consider to be completely unreasonable.<sup>87</sup>

It is no secret that Spinoza is somewhat (in)famous for his pantheism, and while he does not sketch it out more fully until his *Ethics*, which is published several years after the *Theological-Political Treatise*, one can see elements of that pantheism here. Unlike the Christian worldview, which maintains a strict distinction between God and creation, Spinoza collapses that distinction, where he ascribes attributes associated with divinity (e.g. infinity) to nature itself. He further identifies the virtue and power of nature with the virtue and power of God, which is considerably stronger than the claim that the virtue and power of God are manifest or visible in nature.

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<sup>86</sup> Which is to say that they do not "violate" the laws of nature at all so much as supersede them.

<sup>87</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 83.

Now, if we are considering Spinoza's argument simply in the realm of dialectic, where he is seeking to convince his opponents, then this pantheistic spin would be manifestly question-begging. Christians are not pantheists, so why should they be troubled by his argument here? Still, for those seeking the actual truth of the matter, this accusation of question-begging stops too short. It is one thing to say Spinoza is begging the question; it is another thing to say his position is incorrect.

The primary point one could put pressure on is the claim that the virtue and power of nature is the very virtue and power of God. This can be understood in several ways. The first is that "nature" is just this infinitely malleable instrument which God can project His power and virtue through. As such, nature is potentially infinite inasmuch as it can conform to whatever level of power God wishes to project. This interpretation would effectively undercut the *identification* of God and nature. To put an image to it, nature would be this spandex suit which conforms to God's infinity but which is emphatically not the same thing as God; nature and its power and virtue would be entirely derivative, even if it is infinite. We will call this the "conformist interpretation."

A second understanding one could have of Spinoza's claim of the power and virtue of nature being the very virtue and power of God is that God, by His own decree, creates a separate infinite thing called "nature," which He has endowed with the ability to exist and act entirely separately from Himself. God, as it were, takes His infinite power and virtue and transplants it into nature. This would again preclude us identifying God and nature; rather we find that God multiplies Himself (or at least His power and virtue) in a separate reality. We will call this the "multiplication interpretation."

A third understanding strongly emphasizes the identity between God and nature, and this can take two forms, namely a naturalizing form and a theologizing form. The naturalizing form simply collapses God into nature as we perceive it, where there really is no God, but we use the name “God” to simply denote the natural order. This is, in other words, rank atheism. The theologizing form collapses nature into God, where literally everything is divine and somehow united in God despite the appearance of distinction, multiplicity, and creatureliness. It is a sort of theological monism, which could perhaps be taken in an idealist route, where all of nature is nothing more than the thoughts of God. It would be like the natural world being a computer simulation, except everything is in God, not a computer, and we are not a program but rather divine thoughts.

Taking these interpretations in order, the “conformist interpretation” seems to be ruled out by his later remarks against “a nature so impotent and with laws and rules so feeble that He must continually give it a helping hand.” Indeed, on this view, nature is infinitely feeble and impotent, only taking its form and power from God’s continuous use of it. There is a certain sense in which this might correspond to the Thomistic account of prime matter, where it constantly requires some form to sustain it (the main difference being God would be directly sustaining and informing nature whereas substantial forms would serve that function with prime matter). To that extent, there might be a certain (partial) truth to this account, but it would be ruled out by Spinoza anyway. The “multiplication interpretation” would avoid the charge of an impotent nature only at the charge of incoherence. If God’s power includes necessary self-existence, He obviously cannot communicate that to something which is created and “implanted” with that necessary self-existence. As such, nature’s power would not be identical to God’s in at



least one important area. Finally, the naturalizing form of the third interpretation makes nonsense out of Spinoza's theological criticism of miracles, and the theologizing form raises such severe epistemological problems that it would hardly be worth the price of refuting miracles. For indeed, if we are all divine and do not know it, we would be the "ignorant parts" of God. Moreover, our multiplicity and creatureliness would be mere illusions, which would call into question almost everything we observe. We would simultaneously be identified with an omniscient being whilst also being utterly incapable of escaping a very deep skepticism. Thus, Spinoza's pantheistic intimations cannot serve as a strike against miracles anyway.

A final note is on Spinoza's complaint about God creating too feeble and impotent a nature if we attribute limited power and virtue to nature. There does not seem to be anything absurd about this, despite his protests. We have already seen how some various renditions of pantheism either fail or are inconsistent with other things he says. Moreover, the orthodox Christian instinct would be that nature is *necessarily* feeble and impotent without God sustaining it. Indeed, it would not exist at all without God's constant supervision. This is not a strike against God's omnipotence because we do not think that God's omnipotence would include the ability to create another divinity like Himself. Rather, the feebleness of nature just highlights the stark contrast between divinity and creation and thus, by comparison, magnifies God's majesty and power.

*Objection 2: Miracles cannot give us knowledge of God.*<sup>88</sup>

Spinoza's second objection argues that miracles are unable to provide knowledge of God's existence, essence, or providence, and that, in fact, miracles might be said to actually undermine any such knowledge. Mentioning in passing that God's existence is not known in itself (presumably as self-evident or from a priori demonstration), His existence must therefore be shown from unchanging and firm principles. Yet, if miracles are taken to be violations of nature's universal laws, upon which said principles stand, then these unchanging and firm principles of demonstration used in proofs for God become uncertain and open to counter-example. It follows, says Spinoza, that the very means of we use to come to know God by reason are thereby undermined.

If one were to take the weaker claim that miracles are simply marvels we cannot explain in terms of natural causes, one still runs into problems. For, either these miracles do have natural causes which are mysterious to us, or they proceed directly from God's will. Both of these result in a situation where we cannot explain what is going on. If we cannot understand mysterious natural causes, it is clear that we are proceeding in ignorance. Likewise, we do not understand God's will apart from the order He has set for the natural world, and so appealing to God's will is likewise mysterious and effectively empty of explanatory value. Taking the Cartesian notion of clear and distinct ideas, if the phenomenon before us (i.e. the miracle) is not clear and distinct, then it cannot serve as a means of giving us clear and distinct knowledge about God, which would have to be derived from the miraculous phenomenon. To put it pithily, if we simply see miracles as

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<sup>88</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 84-89.

wonderous, mysterious phenomena, we would be using a mysterious phenomenon in order to attain knowledge of God, which is completely irrational. Much better, Spinoza says, to use the natural order which is the manifestation of God will and knowledge.

He goes on to say that even if we could draw conclusions from miracles, such conclusions would never arrive at God Himself. This is because miracles are limited, finite phenomena, and we could never infer an infinite power behind the miracles, as opposed to merely some very large one. This is to say, we could only at best ever infer some preternatural power behind miracles rather than one which is strictly supernatural and divine. Thus, even granting everything to one who believes in miracles, they cannot thereby use that knowledge to come to knowledge of God Himself.

Boiled down, then, there are three arguments here. The first says that miracles undermine the principles used for natural theology, thus destroying our ability to know God through reason. The second is that miracles as mysterious phenomena cannot give knowledge of God because a mysterious effect cannot thereby render non-mysterious knowledge of the cause. Finally, Spinoza argues that miracles, being finite effects, cannot lead us to God anyway.

Turning to the first argument, one wonders what principles Spinoza must have in mind which miracles would thereby violate. Looking at most of the a posteriori arguments for God, the primary principles these use do not seem to be undermined by miracles. Consider some examples: “Whatever is changed is changed by something else,” “Everything which exists can be explained in virtue of some cause or else the necessity of its own nature,” or “Every agent acts for an end.” When one examines these principles, it is clear that miracles would not violate any of them. Things would not change without

something changing them, exist without explanation, or somehow fail to act for an end. It is only if the discussion is kept in very general terms that Spinoza's objection has any plausibility. Once one starts asking for how miracles would violate the principles of specific arguments, his case falls apart. As such, the first argument fails.

Spinoza's second argument is that we cannot derive secure knowledge of the cause from mysterious effects. The real force behind his argument lies in his emphasis on knowledge coming through what is "clear and distinct." Since the phenomenon is not clear and distinct in virtue of our lack of knowledge about its origin, it follows that we cannot come to clear and distinct knowledge of the cause from the phenomenon. It "surpasses human understanding," as he says. Now, if the standard for knowledge here is being held to the level of what is "clear and distinct," such that it is obvious and cannot be doubted, then the proper retort is something to the effect of "You are completely correct. Also, who cares?" As mentioned in the first chapter, much of the intellectual legwork miracles do is in the context of abductive arguments for the best explanation. These hardly constitute "clear and distinct" instances of knowledge, yet most Christians would be content with such imperfect knowledge anyway.

Moreover, the claim that miracles surpass human understanding is somewhat overwrought. They can be wonderous and amazing, no doubt, but the type of knowledge they give is derived from the context of "What can explain this phenomenon?" If no natural (as in physical) explanation is available, this leaves the supernatural (and, perhaps, preternatural). Now, if someone is actually performing works which would be miraculous, this seems to act as an implicit approbation by God of whatever message comes with the works. Otherwise, it would be strange why God would act through a

person or occurrence when He, in fact, rejected what they were preaching. This especially since He knows that these miracles will be taken by people as confirmation of the message of some miracle worker and prophet. Now, is this a line of reasoning utterly without fault or potential missteps? No, but we use such reasoning (of inferring motive from action) all the time well enough, so we would need further argumentation on the part of the skeptic here if we are to reject such reasoning.

Regarding the final argument about finite effects being unable to demonstrate a God who is infinite in power it would be worth revisiting our working definition of the word “miracle,” which says: *An event or occurrence which is either impossible in the physical order or which is at least highly improbable which occurs in a setting such that one can recognize it as the work of a God who reveals Himself.* It is worth acknowledging here that based upon this definition, miracles are not said to be demonstrations of God in the strict sense. Rather, miracles “point to a God who reveals Himself.” *Point to.* This is an inference which only rises to the level of inference to the best explanation. Thus, if Spinoza’s charge is simply that demonstration does not follow from miracles, then, like earlier, Spinoza could be correct and the advocate for miracles could still move forward with a non-demonstrative case. Moreover, there is a case to be made that even demons can act in a way which can seem miraculous.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, Spinoza cites Deuteronomy 13 where Moses mentions prophets who perform amazing

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<sup>89</sup> St. Athanasius’ *Life of St. Anthony* recounts just this, and there are many other cases throughout the history of the Church of people claiming the demonic do seemingly wonderful things to draw people toward themselves and away from God.

works yet lead people into idolatry.<sup>90</sup> Thus, it is true that one cannot immediately or certainly infer God's existence and attributes from miracles.

That being said, one can still pull knowledge from miracles. For starters, miraculous events provide good evidence that there is more than mere physical law at play. Even the conjunction of a number of physical causes and factors is not going to be enough to bring about a number of miracles, simply on account of the fact that physical causes are not the kinds of things which would give rise to certain phenomena (e.g. preternatural knowledge, raising from the dead, etc.). At the very least, then, one can get to, as mentioned before, at least preternatural phenomena, and possibly supernatural. Combine this with the fact that miracles can be interpreted in light of already existing matrices of theological knowledge (such as natural theology), then one might be able to distinguish between various causes of the miraculous phenomena.

Finally, as at several other points already mentioned, Spinoza is thinking of miracles too much in the abstract and not enough in concrete instances. Take alleged Eucharistic miracles for instance. Since it is the doctrine of the Church that the consecrated species transforms substantially into the body and blood of Christ, a wondrous occurrence where a host made of bread turns into verifiable human flesh would provide, not just information about God, but also information about such-and-such a doctrine (in this case, the real, substantial presence of Jesus in the Eucharist). If particular doctrines of a religion are attested to by miracles, then the other doctrinal

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<sup>90</sup> This is not an insignificant challenge since using miracles as a motive of credibility seems to be undermined by this very example from Deuteronomy 13. A short response, however, is that Deuteronomy 13 is given in the context where the people have already seen and pass along in an institutionalized memory the wondrous works of God in, e.g., the Exodus. Thus, some lesser work by a false prophet still does not hold a candle to what God has actually done and thus is not sufficient to contradict what has been given by God through Moses and the Law.

elements of said religion (including its claims about God), also grow in credibility.

Therefore, once one actually looks at particular miracle claims, the idea that we cannot infer anything about God from them begins to look absurd. This is not to say that discernment is not necessary (it very much is!), but the claim that miracles are insufficient to get us to God in at least some measure fails to match the reality of the situation.

*Objection 3: God's edicts and commands are nothing other than the order of nature.*<sup>91</sup>

The final objection from Spinoza I will discuss here is a theological argument from Scripture that the relevant Biblical texts themselves depict supposedly miraculous events as acts of nature. He cites several examples in Scripture where a supposed act of God is described in natural terms. He cites a number of examples: (1) God tells Samuel that He will send Saul to be anointed as king, but it is a servant who advises Saul to see the prophet. God appears nowhere in the story to communicate or direct Saul to Samuel. (2) God says He will put a rainbow in the sky, which we now know to be simple refraction and reflection of sunlight. (3) In Psalms 104 and 147, natural actions and processes are described as being the word of God or the envoys and ministers of God. Even miraculous events which lack immediate and obvious natural explanations often involve some natural cause. Thus, to afflict the Egyptians with boils, Moses had to throw ashes into the air. Likewise, Christ in healing a blind man in John 9 made use of mud rather than simply decreeing the man's eyes be healed. Thus, the occasions for some miracles seem to be set off by natural events.

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<sup>91</sup> Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 89-91.

The point of all of this, Spinoza tells us, is that everything narrated in Scripture happened naturally but is ascribed to God so as to inspire devotion among the common people. Miracles become, effectively, literary devices to excite the imagination of readers rather than provide an account grounded in history. This is how he seeks to explain other miracle narratives which do not seem to have a clear natural explanation. The question is, how does this all hold up?

The first thing to note is that there is a tension (though probably not an outright contradiction) between the case that many miracles are ascribable to natural causes even in the Scriptures and the case that miracles are literary devices meant to inspire devotion and excite the imagination. If the authors really did want to inspire such devotion, it would be strange that they basically attribute to God what they clearly depict as natural. Conversely, if they intend to describe nature as really being the source of these miracles, then it is difficult to understand why they would attribute these things to God also. The two rationales provided by Spinoza undermine each other.

The second issue is that Spinoza places in opposition God's work and the work of nature such that the one excludes the other. So, when Saul's attendant advises that he go to Samuel, and this is taken to mean God did not send Saul to the prophet, we see here a clear example where the action of the human participants is taken at the expense of God's action and participation. Apparently, God could not, in His providence, have ordained that Saul's servant tell him to go to Samuel. The issue is even more apparent with examples like passing through the Red Sea. Even granting that the wind caused the sea to split, how often do we find such a strong and consistent wind splitting seas? Additionally, it seems to have happened at an exceedingly convenient time, when the Israelites needed



to escape the Egyptians, ending only when the Israelites had made it through but before the Egyptians were also able to reach them. These are the kind of interpretations which strain credulity, where a merely natural account leaves out some of the most important details. Recall that the definition of miracles used for this paper includes the notion of extremely improbable occurrences which take place and which occurs in a setting such that one can recognize it as the work of a God who reveals Himself. Even were we to grant that the passing through the Red Sea were possible on merely natural grounds, the high improbability of such an event occurring in such a way as to save the Israelites and destroy the Egyptians should be enough to convince that a miraculous event or an act of special providence took place.

Lastly, and mostly as an aside, it seems that Spinoza simply does not devote enough space to proving his point. If he wants to make the case that each and every miracle report in Scripture is really just a natural event or literary device, he is going to have to make a more thorough case than the one he has provided.

*Concluding Spinoza:*

In the course of this chapter so far, we have looked at three primary arguments Spinoza gives against miracles. The first was that miracles are violations of the laws of nature, and since nature is simply the manifestation of God's will, miracles are thus contrary to the will of God. This is impossible, and hence, miracles are impossible. This objection was based upon an equivocation regarding what is meant by "the laws of nature" when a Christian is using the phrase to describe miracles and when Spinoza is using the phrase. Spinoza's use fits much more nicely with Aquinas's account of the eternal law to which natural (or physical) law is subordinated. Miracles do not violate the

eternal law but may supersede or suspend the physical law (though even then, not always). Therefore, when Spinoza says miracles cannot violate the natural law, if what he means is the eternal law, then Christians would agree. However, in that case, there are subordinated laws which can, consequently, be suspended. Also, Spinoza's pantheism will not be able to save him here because each potential interpretation of the accounts he gives of the relationship between God and nature is either inconsistent with other things he says or is contrary to reason of its own accord.

The second objection he raised was that miracles cannot give us knowledge of God, and this for three reasons: (1) to say miracles go against the laws of nature is to cut off the branch natural theology sits on; (2) a mysterious effect (which is what a miracle supposedly is) cannot render secure knowledge of the cause; (3) a finite effect cannot demonstrate an infinite cause. However, miracles do not undermine the central principles used in natural theology (e.g. the principle of sufficient reason or final causality), so the first reason fails. The second reason fails because we do not need to attain clear and distinct ideas of God in order to attain at least *some* knowledge of Him. Indeed, the beginning of this work indicated that abduction, that is, inference to the best explanation, was probably going to be the most employed method of reasoning here. So even then, a miraculous occurrence could yield some useful knowledge. Finally, the complaint that a finite effect cannot demonstrate an infinite cause, while true in some sense, still is not a crippling problem, especially when one looks again at concrete miracles rather than vaguely and abstractly considering them.

The third and final objection raised was that the Bible itself supports a naturalistic understanding of miracles. It was pointed out that the reasons Spinoza provides for this

are in tension with each other, that he pits divine and natural action against each other in an unnecessary way, and that he really does not provide sufficient evidence to make as strong a statement as he wants to. Thus, Spinoza's three main objections to miracles all fail.

### **A Note on Hume**

For all the importance of Spinoza in the history of philosophy, if one were to ask today what the primary argument against miracles is, it would not be the Spinozistic arguments that most people would cite. It would rather be the arguments of Hume, or at least modern soundbites which are simplifications of Hume's arguments, such as "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." The effective claim is that miracles would never be able to meet the evidential burden required such that one could responsibly believe them. In Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he provides an oft-cited formulation of this argument against the rationality of belief in miracles.<sup>92</sup> Therein, Hume grants for the sake of argument that testimony upon which a miracle is based constitutes a full-blooded proof (proof being understood in a weaker sense than some deductive demonstration). Even then, it still would not matter. Any miracle which takes place must be a violation of a law of nature, for if it were not a violation of such a law, we would not consider it particularly strange, miraculous, or otherwise in need of such spectacular explanation. The problem with this is that a law of nature is such that there is (effective or actual) uniform experience in favor of it. It follows from this that the proof

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<sup>92</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 79-80, accessed September 1, 2022, ProQuest Ebook Central.

There is, of course, scholarly debate as to what exact argument Hume is trying to make here and how all the parts of his broader argument hang together. Setting aside that debate, I will merely present on how the argument in pp. 79-80 can be, and often is, construed as a stand-alone and in-principle argument against belief in miracles.

in favor of the laws of nature is precisely the proof against miracles. Further, since miracles are based on testimony, that testimony would have to be of such a kind that it would be even more miraculous for it to be false than for whatever miracle said testimony is trying to establish. The implicit premise here is that there is no such testimony, for he says “When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened.”<sup>93</sup> For anyone who can read between the lines, the proper takeaway is that it is necessarily more likely for the testifier to either deceive or be deceived than that a law of nature was violated. Hence, we are never able to responsibly believe in miracles.

There are different places Hume takes up miracles, but this can be taken as somewhat representative, if for no other reason than this follows the general argument that is often presented. Given the influence of this and similar arguments on the discourse surrounding miracles, those who advocate for the miraculous will need to have some answer. So far as that goes, it seems the fundamental issue here lies in the supposed necessity of these laws of nature. There are at least two problems. First, Hume’s critique is inconsistent with his previous arguments about (the lack of) necessary connections between causes and effects. Second, and more seriously, Hume’s account of how miracles relate to the laws of nature and how testimony establishes such laws, is subtly question-begging.

Dealing briefly with the first point, Hume, just earlier in his treatise, argues that the supposedly necessary connection between causes and effects is artificial, effectively being a habit of mind by which we associate an event A and an event B. It is, as he calls it, “a customary

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<sup>93</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry*, 80.

connexion in the thought or imagination between one object and its usual attendant.”<sup>94</sup> Here one finds Hume’s famous doctrine of constant conjunction, where what we see as the laws of nature are simply events of a type A constantly being followed by events of a type B. However, we are not privy to the intrinsic nature of these relationships; we do not observe, to use Hume’s examples, force, power, or energy as such. We simply observe one event following another. Since, as Hume says, we need sense impressions to form concepts, and there are no impressions of force, power, energy, cause, etc., it follows that anything we might consider a concept of these things is, at best, empty.

The reason this poses a problem for Hume’s argument against miracles is that the necessary connection between events is, on his account, merely a product of our mind, something *we* impose on the world. If there is some genuine reason why effects necessarily follow from certain causes, we do not have access to that reason; for practical purposes, the regular following of one event from another is simply a brute fact. This will come back to haunt the Humean argument against miracles because the universal testimony of event A preceding event B gives no actual reason to suppose that will always hold in every case (or, indeed, in *any* future case). Since we cannot actually appeal to intrinsic natural necessity or causes (since we cannot observe and thus comprehend such things), the most one can say is “Well, that is what has always happened up until now.” Yet, if someone were to ask “Even so, why should we expect these relations to hold in the future,” the Humean will be able to provide no further answer. Thus, to adopt Hume’s views on causation, natural necessity, and the laws of nature is to simultaneously defang his argument against miracles.

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<sup>94</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry*, 55.

The second, deeper problem with Hume's argument lies in the fact that it is, at bottom, question-begging. Consider the following statements:

1. "Event A is always followed by event B, full stop."
2. "Event A is always followed by event B, unless God acts in some miraculous way."<sup>95</sup>

Now, the problem facing Hume is that pretty much any evidence in favor of 1 is also going to be evidence in favor of 2. After all, by and large, we see nature acting in regular ways, which even those who believe in miracles will grant. As such, the testimony in favor of 1 cannot be counted as testimony which cuts against 2. So while Hume speaks of weighing hypotheses against each other, that is not, strictly speaking, what is happening here. Now, all that being said, testimony in favor of 2 *is* evidence against 1, but this is not a significant problem. The part of 1 which 2 cuts against is the "full stop," not the "Event A is always followed by event B...". Therefore, the "universal testimony" Hume appeals to is not actually undermined. Indeed, 2 is more helpful precisely because it can actually contend with whatever testimony and evidence there is for miracles without having to rule them out *a priori*. Since statement 2 allows us to be most open to the full breadth of evidence, even if it turns out that there are not miracles and God does not intervene, it enables us to at least investigate each case as it arises. Furthermore, since 2 still upholds all the testimony in favor of statement 1, it seems that statement 2 is, if not superior to 1, at least on par with it. Yet, if statement 2 is what we are working with, it obviously cannot stand as an argument against miracles.

Now, the tempting reply of the Humean is going to be that statement 2 begs the question and assumes precisely what is at issue. This is not going to work. For starters, as I briefly

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<sup>95</sup> These are both assuming that otherwise normal conditions obtain; if there is some obstacle in place such that B does not obtain but would if that obstacle were not present, that would factor in. For simplicity's sake, we are assuming a lack of such barriers or inhibitors.

mentioned, it might turn out that there are no actual miracles and that God either does not exist or does not intervene when He does exist. This would still be entirely compatible with statement 2 since 2 does not actually assume there are miracles. Consider a similarly structured statement: “We go to the park every July 4<sup>th</sup>, unless it rains.” Now, it might never actually rain on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July (perhaps they live in a very arid region), and the statement does not assume that it will or does rain. It merely provides a condition under which the initial statement (“We go to the park every July 4<sup>th</sup>”) does not obtain, even if that condition never ends up occurring. Something similar is happening with statement 2. That B always follows A unless God acts miraculously would hold true *even if God never acts miraculously*. The condition might never end up occurring, but it would not thereby render the statement false.<sup>96</sup> In short, no questions are being begged because no miracles or actions of God are being assumed.

Even if one were to say that “We see the laws of nature holding, but we can never observe God acting,” the simple, if flippant, response is that we are simply sliding back into Hume’s excessive empiricism. After all, we do not observe causes as such (at least as Hume envisions them). Thus, if the objector is going to hold the line that we need to be able to observe God and His action in order to be allowed to appeal to Him as statement 2 does, we are right back to the first problem with Hume’s argument: this empiricism is actually *incompatible* with the Humean argument against miracles. The complaint that we cannot observe God and His providential action is the same type of complaint about not being able to observe forces, energy, power, causes, etc. Yet, as was argued above, if we draw this line of reasoning out to its logical conclusion, we end up in a scenario where we also cannot provide a grounding for the laws of

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<sup>96</sup> This is, indeed, simply a standard outcome of using a material conditional. A statement “If P, then Q,” might well be true even if  $\sim P$ . So if we reformulate 2 by saying “If God acts miraculously (P), then the laws of nature hold only sometimes (Q)” it would still be correct even if it turned out that  $\sim P$ .

nature and thereby cannot use those laws of nature as an argument against miracles. To put it pithily, if we need to be able to observe God to even appeal to Him as a hypothetical possibility, then the same must hold true for causes themselves. Yet, since we cannot observe causes *qua* causes, the laws of nature have no actual force, and thereby, cannot rule out miracles. In other words, if we demand such a strict empiricism where even hypothetical divine action is ruled out as inadmissible, then (if we are consistent) Hume's entire argument falls apart. If we are more liberal with what we allow as even merely possible explanations, then statement 2 is in play and is, as we have seen, at least a match for statement 1. Yet, statement 1 is what Hume needs to make his argument work. Either way, the Humean argument against miracles fails.

### **Summary**

So much, then, for Spinoza's and Hume's arguments. Despite entirely different lines of attack against miracles as a metaphysical or epistemological possibility, at the end of the day, the in-principle possibility of miracles is still in play. Spinoza's argument that the laws of nature are identical with God's will relies on an equivocation if it is intended to rule out miracles. The second claim that miracles do not give us any knowledge of God anyway is also false so long as we maintain a reasonable standard of what knowledge we can derive. Finally, the case from Scripture that miracles are merely natural events also fails, both due to lack of sufficient support and also because the two rationales used to support it are in tension with each other. Lastly, when it comes to the Humean in-principle argument against miracles, we find there that it also fails, both because it is inconsistent with what Hume writes elsewhere but also because any proof for the consistency of the laws of nature is in concord with a position with consistent laws of nature except when God acts miraculously. Therefore, these two thinkers are unable, at least in the works discussed here, to undermine the credibility of miracles. As it stands, each miracle claim



or cluster of miracle claims has to be investigated on its own merits rather than ruled out from the start.

## Conclusion

It will be worth, at this point, revisiting the main points of each chapter to draw everything together. The first chapter dealt with preliminary epistemological considerations. After tracing out various types of arguments, including demonstration, deduction, and induction, I concluded that a particular form of induction, namely, abduction (or inference to the best explanation) is going to be the most common and useful means by which one argues for God's action in some apparent miracle. General skepticism was also ruled out as a live option, and more targeted forms of skepticism like strong empiricism and scientism were shown to be incoherent and at odds with the facts. Following this was a discussion of the preambles of faith, which are the rational underpinnings of faith such as the existence of God, His truthfulness, and whether or not He has revealed some particular message in some particular context. Miracles apply most strongly to the last of these preambles, though they can play a role in the first one as well, depending on where a person might be coming from. I also argued that materialistic naturalism has an ultimately impossible task of accounting for what matter even is without letting non-naturalistic explanations in the door. Finally, I presented an argument for God's existence which would render much more plausible the idea that miracles can happen. If we have independent reason to believe that God exists and that He is capable of causing miracles, then miracles might very well be on the table.

Chapter 2 took up the broad themes of this thesis: miracles, motives of credibility, faith, and the interplay among them. In the ensuing discussion of miracles, the seemingly inescapable conclusion is that there is no single definition of miracles which works so as to exclude all others; multiple analogical uses of the term could be employed. That said, the working definition

was as follows: “An event or occurrence which is either impossible in the physical order or which is at least highly improbable and which occurs in a setting such that one can recognize it as the work of a God who reveals Himself.” As for motives of credibility, these can largely be identified with the preambles of faith, although I emphasized the fact that these miracles need to be verifiable and visible to at least somebody in order to count as a motive of credibility.

Miracles that nobody knows about can hardly serve to strengthen one’s faith or increase their disposition to faith. Regarding that faith itself, one can find from Scripture and Tradition that it is an act of the intellect, but one which requires the will to complete the journey. There is a certain obscurity to faith which prevents it from being mere intellectual apprehension. Then, the accounts of Aquinas and Newman come into play and can be integrated in such a way that one can see both the objective factors which go into the act of faith as well as the phenomenology of the act and its eventual payoff for a person’s adherence to and delight in God and His revelation. Miracles specifically can help us on a phenomenological level to more easily reach a real assent in faith whilst still recognizing that miracles are not the proper *cause* of divine faith.

Finally, chapter 3 turned to two thinkers who would argue that any evidence for miracles we might have needs to be discounted. Spinoza gave several arguments, concluding that miracles are theologically impossible, that they do not provide knowledge of God, and that they are actually in conflict with Scripture. All of these concerns were eventually dealt with. Hume, meanwhile, argued that any testimony for a miracle would be overwritten by the testimony for the law of nature that miracle would have supposedly violated, thus giving us an in-principle argument against such divine action. Based upon the inconsistency of this argument with other things Hume said, and the conceptual muddle it commits besides, the Humean objection too fails.

Now comes the hard work. We have a framework from which to view miracles, where they might bring a person to faith or strengthen the faith of those who already possess that gift. The various skeptical or rationalist challenges which claim anything pertaining to the miraculous is dead-on-arrival are not credible. The project now is asking and then answering the following question: Have there been any such miracles, and what can they contribute to the project of aiding individuals in their approach to and growth in faith? In asking this question, we find we have the happy problem of having an incredible mass of testimonies for the miraculous and possibly-miraculous. The Evangelical scholar Craig Keener, for example, has catalogued an extensive number of reported miracles, filling two large volumes.<sup>97</sup> The Congregation for the Causes of Saints investigates claims of miracles for the men and women who are in the canonization process. There has been extensive research on artifacts such as the Shroud of Turin, the Tilma of our Lady of Guadalupe, and various apparent Eucharistic miracles. The data is out there. The stories are out there. The question now is whether or not they hold up, whether or not they can give us a glimpse into questions about God and His plan for the world. For the Christian in particular, most of the weight hangs on one question: Did Jesus rise bodily from the dead? If so, there is a certain (qualified) sense in which everything else is just details.

If the Gospel message is to be proclaimed today, especially in the West, there will be no shortage of people who stand in some need of being convinced. Likewise, there will be Christians themselves who feel their faith is being assailed and who also stand in need of greater conviction. The message will need to be made credible. In being attentive to that credibility, miracles are a promising route by which the Christian faith can be given substance, wonder, and

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<sup>97</sup> Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011).

support. If the miraculous can be effectively used in motivating the credibility of the saving message of Christ, then that true and divine faith can be kindled, that faith which is the beginning of eternal life. *And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.*<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> John 17:3

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