

# WITH GOD THERE ARE NO MIRACLES

*Shari Tresky*

Note: I use the pronoun ‘It’ when referring to God, both because of my own sensibilities, and because I believe it more accurately portrays Spinoza’s view that God should not be anthropomorphized.

Spinoza was a controversial philosopher who introduced a radical view of God; Spinoza’s God was not a paternalistic father figure, but the Divine energy present in all of Nature. For him Nature/God was one unified Divinity. Spinoza disputed the biblical claims about God’s glory as displayed in stories about the miracles God supposedly performed. He claimed that the idea of miracles was antithetical to the very existence of God, and opposed the more popular notion that miracles were evidence of God’s amazing power and overwhelming influence on the world. Spinoza pointed out that miracles implied an opposition to Nature, rather than a union, and this contradicted the idea that God was an infinite and perfect Being.

In order to understand Spinoza’s view on miracles, and his position that they cast doubt on the existence of God, it helps to first understand how he arrives at his conclusion that God does exist, and become familiar with his perspective on God’s nature. Spinoza tells us that God’s existence is not self-evident, so we must deduce it from other primary ideas that we know to be true. These primary ideas must agree with the laws of Nature or they would not make sense – if our primary ideas violated the laws of Nature they would be absurd. Any ideas which cast doubt on the immutability of nature’s laws cast doubt on our primary ideas, which in turn, casts doubt on the existence of God, Itself.

The concept of infinity and the concept of perfection are two primary ideas. Spinoza sees God’s nature as infinite and perfect by definition, or It would not be the highest being we could imagine. So the existence of God can be deduced because we can imagine a being that is perfect and infinite, and a perfect and infinite being would, by nature, have to exist. God’s essence includes Its existence, and so must be the ultimate cause of everything that exists. Since God is infinite, Its existence must be all – encompassing; everything that is a part of Nature must be a part of God. And since God is also perfect, all of Nature’s laws are also perfect. Nothing exists outside of God; therefore, nothing exists outside of Nature and natural laws.

Spinoza believes that being the first cause of everything in existence does not necessarily mean that God’s nature is like our own – just because God “causes” everything else, it does not mean that God sets out to make us in order to fulfill some kind of need. God is not a master builder with a purpose or an end in mind. On the contrary, Spinoza claimed that if God had a purpose for creation then it would imply that God had some lack – something that was missing which It needed to fulfill through our existence. And how could something that was infinite

and perfect have any lack or need? If something is missing from God’s world, then God is not an infinite being in a state of perfection.

Following from this reasoning, Spinoza concludes that God’s understanding and God’s will are one and the same. God knows everything in existence and God wills everything in existence, or it would not exist in the first place. God is not trying to get anywhere, God just is, and God’s existence is proof enough that whatever happens in reality is within the realm of God. What this means is that anything that happens in Nature is by definition, Divine law; it is understood as it is, and meant to be as it is. Nature expresses an impregnable and absolute Divine order. Nature is God’s true providence and illustrates God’s perfect and infinite essence.

Miracles, on the other hand, are occurrences that are believed to transpire outside of, or beyond the scope of Nature; they are supernatural and challenge natural laws. But if natural law is Divine law then how could anything oppose it? If Nature is the providence of God then it necessarily follows that any force that exists outside of natural laws cannot challenge it – in fact no force can even exist outside of Nature because that would imply that God somehow exists as a force outside of Nature. If God existed as a force outside of Nature, then God would no longer be perfect and infinite, but limited by the forces It was opposing. The contradiction here is that God cannot be infinite and perfect and contradict the laws of nature, which necessarily must be an expression of what God wills. Therefore, miracles do not exist – the occurrences that are often called miracles are nothing other than natural phenomena that human beings do not understand.

So why do so many people point to miracles as proof of God’s existence? As human beings with a purposive nature, we want to find a reason for things we don’t understand. If something happens that is an exception to the normal expectations we have created as a result of our limited understanding, we may – out of fear and avoidance – retreat into ignorance instead of pursuing greater knowledge. We use the excuse of “God’s will” to explain what we do not understand. Along with that, we also tend to be egoistic. We anthropomorphize God and then assume that everything that happens has to have a reason that pertains to ourselves. It is as if human beings, with our goal-oriented perspective and our ego-centric universe, cannot conceive of a being that is not like ourselves, especially a being that is intelligent but not teleological. We project that God has the same goal-oriented nature that we do, and then we narcissistically assume that everything that pleases us was intentionally created by God for our benefit. If a phenomenon occurs which is harmful and mysterious, we interpret it as punishment from God, but if it is positive

and mysterious, we see it as a miracle bestowed on us by God as some kind of reward for good behavior.

Since God is the greatest being we can conceive of, we assume that God must generate these mysteries that we cannot explain. But if God is everything, then nothing is outside God, and it follows that everything that happens – even those things that human beings may find mysterious – happens inside of Nature and follows natural laws. If God is infinite, then God cannot oppose a part of Itself, so special interventions – miracles – cannot occur. The concept of miracles implies a God/Nature dualism in which God is required to oppose Nature for the benefit of human beings. A miracle is a limited phenomena; it is a fixed event in which God supposedly has an exceptional success in overcoming Nature in a particular instance where Nature usually prevails. But if Nature needs to be opposed, then God is not all-powerful in the first place. A limited event can never prove the existence of an infinite and perfect God. Only Nature, with its eternal laws that extend over infinity, can point to God's existence. Thus, Spinoza tells us that the belief in miracles does not support the idea of God. On the contrary, if miracles – phenomena outside of the laws of Nature – existed, this would be evidence of the absence of God, because a perfect and infinite being would not need to intervene in a reality that was already a manifestation of It's perfection.

This concept of God/Nature dualism, to which Spinoza was responding, is reminiscent of Descartes Mind/Body dualism, only on a larger scale. Spinoza's view of God unifies God and Nature, and it also implies the unification of mind and body, which Spinoza explains as two attributes of one universal substance, and this substance is God. Although there have been critics who say that the problem of communication still exists between the body as a material thing, and the mind, as an immaterial thing, Spinoza might reply that there is no such problem if we can see that the infinite and perfect nature of God implies that God cannot be divided from Nature itself. It follows from this that human minds are a part of God, and thus cannot be divided from Nature or from our own bodies. Our minds and our bodies are each attributes of the same universal "God" substance. We certainly cannot understand many of the infinite attributes of God, or some of the Divine laws of Nature, but this does not mean that it would take some kind of miracle to explain the communication between the body and the mind. It just may be one of those things that are beyond human understanding. And who knows, maybe we will understand it one day.

Spinoza believes that the highest purpose of human existence is to come to know God as best we can. We do this by studying Nature, not by trying to subjugate it. Miracles tell us nothing about God; what we call miracles only reveal that there are phenomena that we do not understand. There may be a phenomenon that is beyond human understanding or one that we have yet to understand, but either way, the mystery inherent in the idea of miracles teaches us nothing about the existence or nature of God. We can gain no knowledge from something that surpasses our understanding. On the other hand, if we let go of the idea of miracles, and realize that all phenomena must necessarily arise inside of Nature, then it follows that the more we can know about Nature, the more we can know about God. In that context science becomes a spiritual path for getting closer to the Divine.

In Spinoza's world, it would be the scientists who would have the truest spiritual path – those who sought to understand Nature would be seeking to understand God. Yet scientists don't necessarily have a spiritual view of Nature either. A purely rational mindset can lead to a reductionist perspective in which everything in reality is viewed as a machine, devoid of soul, without any Divine essence. Spinoza's idea of union between Spirit and Matter is a unique and important contribution to Western philosophy. Spinoza's description of the highest level

of personal consciousness goes beyond the strictly rational mind into a trans-rational level of awareness that he describes as intuitive in nature – a grasping of the Whole, that comes to us when we move beyond the study of the mere parts. When one reaches this state of mind, there is a joy - a kind of "intellectual" love of God that we will experience that enables us to more deeply appreciate our connectedness to all living things. This concept seems similar to the Eastern philosophical concept of higher consciousness, although Eastern spiritual systems have a more specific process than Spinoza had for reaching this level of awareness, and do not necessarily have an idea of God; they might just call It Nature and leave it at that.

A perspective that reconciles science and religion may serve us well today, as we struggle to meet the challenge of escalating environmental destruction and the human, as well as the non-human suffering caused by our technological development. Perhaps if more people truly understood the deepest implications of Spinoza's philosophy, we would be living in a kinder, more compassionate world. But many of us prefer to believe that God can intervene on our behalf, even though we know that bad things happen to good people every day. Most of us want to feel that we have recourse - that there is a power higher than ourselves to whom we can appeal for favors; we want to see God as a parental figure in the heavens. The idea that we can ask God for favors gives us a little more of a sense of control over our lives. Inadvertently, this desire for control may lead to a lack of compassion in how we treat others because the implication of believing in the possibility of receiving special treatment from God is that those who do not get that special treatment must not deserve it. This relieves us of any responsibility for helping others improve their lives.

I thought about this a lot during the 9-11 crisis when so many people were describing their survival, or the survival of their loved ones, as some kind of miracle from God. This did not make me feel good, like it seemed to make many others feel, because all I could think of when they played story after story about these "miracles" was, "How would you feel if you heard someone saying this and your loved one was on of the people killed?" In a way, the idea of miracles implies a sort of "blame the victim" perspective for those who aren't lucky enough, (or good enough) to receive one. If we stopped believing in miracles then our economic and political philosophies might reflect a stronger desire to provide for those who need our help, because we would not be able to hide behind the idea of everything being "God's will." We might understand more clearly that we are all part of God, so that we love God by loving one another.

Also, this desire for preferential treatment from God can be very divisive between different cultures. Again, during the 9-11 crisis, it was common to hear the sentiment, "God bless America." Many patriotic people put out the message that God was "on our side." That same mindset, taken to an extreme, was exactly what the terrorists themselves believed, although I have to admit, their faith was a lot stronger than most Americans because they were willing to actually kill themselves over it. What may appear to be an innocent belief in the "rightness" of one's belief's can easily slip into a divisive and dangerous dogmatism once the authority of God is introduced into the equation.

Of course this psychological need for God's "help" keeps the religious institutions in business – after all, if there were not the possibility of using religious rites administered by religious representatives to appeal to God for favors, then the authority of religious institutions would be seriously undermined. Of what practical use would they be? Would people go to church just to hang around with each other appreciating the magnificence of God? I'm not sure if that would be enough to get most people up early on Sunday (or Saturday) morning!

Even those who are not looking to God for selfish benefits sometimes dispute Spinoza's concept of "God consciousness." Social activists might fear that a more spiritual awareness of our connection to all living things will breed indifference or passivity concerning injustice; if we love everyone then we will not be motivated to fight against what we see as unjust in the world. But on the contrary, loving the world and everything and everyone in it does not necessarily mean that we just sit around and contemplate our navels. We have only to look at Gandhi and his life to see that this is not true. Spinoza's ideas about the unity of God and Nature give me some hope for Western civilization as we continue to face the choices that will lead us closer toward suffering and destruction or compassion and survival. Hopefully, we will choose to give up our antagonism toward Nature, and stop asking God to fight what is a part of God, Itself. Otherwise, the whole human race may not survive...unless there is some kind of miracle of course!

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a position paper that was written for Philosophy 201, History of Modern Philosophy.*