

A PHILOSOPHICAL ASSESSMENT OF SPINOZA'S CRITIQUE OF MIRACLE

Linus Oluchukwu Akudolu, PhD

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2226-5419>

Department of Philosophy

Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Phone: +2348030782249, Email: oluchukwu1900@gmail.com

Abstract

The concept of miracle has remained a significant subject of philosophical and theological debate, particularly concerning the relationship between divine action and the order of nature. This article examines Baruch Spinoza's critique of miracle with particular attention to his impossibility argument as presented in the Theological-Political Treatise. Spinoza argues that miracles, understood as violations of the laws of nature, are impossible because nature operates according to an eternal and immutable order that expresses the necessity of God's own nature. The study critically assesses the philosophical coherence of this argument by examining its foundations in Spinoza's pantheistic conception of God (Deus sive Natura), his deterministic understanding of causation, and his interpretation of natural laws. Through conceptual analysis and critical evaluation, the article argues that while Spinoza's position provides a rigorous challenge to traditional accounts of miracles, its conclusion depends heavily on contestable assumptions about the relationship between God and nature and the nature of natural laws. The possibility of miracles remains philosophically defensible if natural laws are understood as descriptions of regularities rather than absolute necessities.

Keywords: Spinoza, miracle, natural laws, pantheism, determinism, divine action

Introduction

The question of whether miracles are possible has occupied a significant place in philosophical discussions concerning the relationship between God, nature, and human knowledge. A miracle is commonly understood as an extraordinary event that surpasses the ordinary course of nature and is attributed to divine agency. In classical theological philosophy, miracles are not merely unusual occurrences but events that reveal the activity and power of God. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, describes miracles as effects produced by divine power that exceed the capacity of created nature (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III.101). This understanding presupposes a distinction between God and the natural order: God, as the creator of nature, possesses the ability to act within creation without being limited by the regular processes of nature.

The philosophical difficulty arises when questions are asked concerning the possibility of such divine intervention. If nature operates according to fixed laws, can an event

occur that departs from this order without undermining the rational intelligibility of reality? This question became particularly significant during the seventeenth century, when developments in modern science encouraged philosophers to reconsider the relationship between divine action and natural causation. Among the most radical responses to this problem was that of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), whose naturalistic metaphysics led him to reject the possibility of miracles understood as violations of nature.

Spinoza was one of the most influential philosophers of the early modern period. Born in Amsterdam into a Portuguese Jewish family, he received a traditional religious education before developing philosophical views that departed from established theological doctrines. His intellectual engagement with rationalist philosophy, especially the works of René Descartes and the emerging scientific worldview of the seventeenth century, shaped his distinctive conception of reality. In 1656, Spinoza was expelled from the Amsterdam Jewish community because of his controversial theological positions. He later lived a modest life as a lens grinder while producing philosophical works that would profoundly influence metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of religion (Nadler 3–8).

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, published anonymously in 1670, contains his most extensive discussion of miracles. The work was written within the context of religious conflict in Europe and aimed to defend freedom of philosophical inquiry against the dominance of theological authority. In discussing miracles, Spinoza sought to demonstrate that appeals to supernatural interruptions of nature were inconsistent with a rational understanding of God and reality. For him, the belief that God occasionally suspends natural laws results from a misunderstanding of both divine nature and the order of the universe.

The foundation of Spinoza's critique is his identification of God with Nature (*Deus sive Natura*). Unlike classical theistic accounts that distinguish between a transcendent Creator and the created world, Spinoza argues that there exists only one infinite substance, which is God, and that everything that exists is a mode or expression of this substance (Spinoza, *Ethics* 1p15). Since nature is the necessary expression of God, there can be no independent natural order that stands apart from divine reality. Consequently, an event that violates the order of nature would also imply a contradiction within God Himself.

Closely related to this view is Spinoza's determinism. According to him, everything that occurs follows necessarily from the nature of God. There are no genuinely contingent events because all things arise from the eternal and necessary order of reality (Spinoza, *Ethics* 1p29). A miracle, therefore, understood as an interruption of this order, is not merely improbable but metaphysically impossible. Spinoza maintains that what human beings call miracles are only events whose natural causes are unknown due to the limitations of human understanding (Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* 90).

However, Spinoza's argument raises important philosophical questions. His conclusion depends upon particular assumptions concerning the identity of God and nature, the necessity of natural laws, and the possibility of divine freedom. If these assumptions are questioned, the impossibility of miracles may not necessarily follow. For example, if natural laws are understood as descriptions of regular patterns within nature rather than immutable necessities, extraordinary events need not be considered contradictions of nature. Similarly, if God is understood as transcendent to nature rather than identical with it, divine intervention may remain philosophically coherent.

This article therefore seeks to critically assess Spinoza's impossibility argument against miracles. It does not merely examine whether miracles occur but evaluates whether Spinoza's reasons for denying their possibility are philosophically adequate. The study employs conceptual analysis and critical interpretation of primary and secondary philosophical texts. It argues that Spinoza presents a highly systematic and internally consistent rejection of miracles within his own metaphysical framework; however, the argument does not conclusively establish the impossibility of miracles because it relies upon assumptions about God and natural laws that remain philosophically contestable.

The significance of this study lies in clarifying the philosophical strength and limitations of one of the most influential arguments against miracles. By examining Spinoza's reasoning on its own terms and critically evaluating its underlying assumptions, the article contributes to wider discussions in philosophy of religion concerning divine action, natural order, and the limits of rational explanation.

Literature Review

The philosophical discussion of miracles has developed through competing interpretations of the relationship between divine action and the natural order. While some philosophers have rejected miracles as incompatible with rational explanations of reality, others have argued that miraculous events remain philosophically coherent if properly understood. The present study situates Spinoza's critique within this broader debate while focusing specifically on the philosophical validity of his impossibility argument.

Spinoza's account of miracles has received considerable attention because it represents one of the strongest metaphysical arguments against the possibility of divine intervention. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza argues that nature follows an eternal and immutable order derived from the necessity of God's own nature. Therefore, an event that contradicts the laws of nature would imply that God acts against Himself, which Spinoza regards as impossible (Spinoza 83–90). His interpretation does not deny that extraordinary events occur; rather, it denies that such events provide evidence of supernatural intervention. Events described as miraculous are, according to Spinoza, simply natural events whose causes remain unknown to human beings.

Scholars of Spinoza have emphasized that his critique of miracles is inseparable from his broader metaphysical system. Steven Nadler explains that Spinoza's identification of God with Nature eliminates the traditional distinction between a transcendent divine agent and the created world. Since God is not external to nature but identical with its totality, divine action cannot consist in occasional interruptions of natural processes (Nadler 176–79). This interpretation highlights the internal consistency of Spinoza's position: once his conception of God is accepted, miracles understood as supernatural interventions become difficult to maintain.

Recent scholarship has further developed this interpretation by examining the connection between Spinoza's concept of natural law and his rejection of miracles. Aurora Yu argues that Spinoza's critique cannot be understood merely as a denial of unusual events but must be interpreted through his distinction between the necessary order of nature and human attempts to explain natural phenomena. According to Yu, Spinoza's argument depends on the claim that genuine natural laws express the necessary structure of reality rather than merely describing patterns observed by human beings. Consequently, a miracle, if understood as a violation of this order, would not simply be an unusual occurrence but a contradiction of the rational structure of nature itself (Yu 2024). This recent analysis reinforces the view that Spinoza's rejection of miracles is fundamentally metaphysical rather than empirical.

Clare Carlisle similarly argues that Spinoza's rejection of miracles is connected to his attempt to replace superstition with rational understanding. According to Carlisle, Spinoza does not deny religious experience but challenges interpretations of religion that depend upon ignorance of natural causes. For Spinoza, attributing unexplained events to divine intervention reflects inadequate knowledge rather than genuine understanding of God (Carlisle 202–05). This reading presents Spinoza's critique as part of a wider philosophical project aimed at establishing the authority of reason in matters traditionally controlled by religious interpretation.

However, critics have questioned whether Spinoza's conclusion follows necessarily from his premises. A central issue concerns his understanding of natural laws. Peter Harrison argues that the modern concept of natural laws developed primarily as a description of the regular patterns observed in nature rather than as a set of necessary commands that cannot admit exceptions (Harrison 31–53). If natural laws describe how nature ordinarily operates, then an extraordinary event does not necessarily constitute a contradiction of nature. Harrison's historical analysis is significant because it challenges the assumption that a deviation from ordinary regularity must be understood as a violation of an immutable law.

The distinction between natural laws as descriptions and natural laws as necessities has remained central in contemporary philosophy of science. Stephen Mumford argues that miracles can be philosophically intelligible if they are understood as events produced by supernatural causes rather than as meaningless violations of nature. According to Mumford, the possibility of miracles depends largely on how one understands causation, modality, and the relationship between natural processes and

divine agency (Mumford 44–47). His position directly challenges Spinoza's assumption that divine action and natural order are mutually exclusive.

Richard Swinburne offers a related analysis by defining miracles as extraordinary events brought about by divine action that cannot be adequately explained by ordinary natural causes. Swinburne argues that the occurrence of a miracle does not require abandoning the rationality of science because scientific laws describe regular patterns within nature rather than absolute restrictions upon every possible event (Swinburne 25–30). This perspective challenges Spinoza's claim that miracles undermine the intelligibility of nature.

Robert Larmer also criticizes the identification of miracles with contradictions of natural laws. He argues that a miracle should not be understood as an irrational violation of nature but as an event that requires a cause beyond the powers available within the natural order (Larmer 9–12). For Larmer, the possibility of miracles depends upon whether reality includes forms of causation that exceed purely natural explanations. This approach allows for divine action without requiring a rejection of scientific reasoning.

Recent philosophical discussions have also shifted attention toward the epistemological evaluation of miracle claims. Jacques J. Rozenberg examines the relationship between Spinoza's critique of miracles and broader philosophical debates concerning evidence, testimony, and rational belief. Rozenberg argues that Spinoza's position shares an important concern with later critiques of miracles: extraordinary claims require careful examination rather than immediate acceptance. However, while Spinoza rejects miracles primarily because of his metaphysical commitment to the necessary order of nature, other philosophers evaluate miracles through questions concerning the reliability of human testimony and evidence (Rozenberg 2023). This development shows that contemporary discussions of miracles extend beyond the question of metaphysical possibility to include questions about justification and rational belief.

Yitzhak Y. Melamed's work on Spinoza's metaphysics emphasizes that Spinoza's understanding of divine necessity leaves little room for traditional conceptions of divine choice or intervention. Melamed argues that Spinoza's God is fundamentally different from the personal deity found in classical theistic traditions because God's activity consists in the necessary expression of divine nature rather than voluntary actions directed toward particular ends (Melamed 68–71). This reinforces the view that Spinoza's critique of miracles is a consequence of his unique metaphysical conception of God.

Likewise, contemporary discussions in philosophy of religion continue to question whether miracles should be understood as violations of natural laws or as extraordinary events within a broader causal framework. Philosophers such as Graham Oppy argue that naturalistic explanations and supernatural explanations involve competing interpretations of reality rather than conclusions that can be settled merely

by defining miracles in a particular way (Oppy 115–18). This suggests that Spinoza's argument may successfully challenge one understanding of miracles without demonstrating their absolute impossibility.

The existing literature reveals two major tendencies. The first interprets Spinoza's argument as a consistent consequence of his metaphysics. Scholars in this tradition emphasize that his rejection of miracles follows logically from his identification of God and Nature and his deterministic account of reality. The second tendency challenges Spinoza's assumptions by arguing that his conception of natural laws and divine action is not the only philosophically possible framework.

Recent contributions strengthen this division by showing that the debate has expanded beyond the simple question of whether miracles occur. Contemporary scholars increasingly examine the conceptual relationship between divine agency, causation, natural law, and human knowledge. While Yu's analysis emphasizes the internal coherence of Spinoza's metaphysical system, Rozenberg's discussion highlights the continuing importance of epistemological questions concerning miracle claims. Together, these approaches demonstrate that the philosophical debate over miracles remains unresolved because it depends largely on competing interpretations of reality, causation, and explanation.

Despite extensive discussion of Spinoza's views, a need remains for a focused philosophical assessment of his impossibility argument itself. Many studies explain Spinoza's position or compare it with other theories of miracles, but fewer examine whether his premises adequately support his conclusion that miracles are impossible. This article addresses that issue by evaluating the logical structure of Spinoza's argument and examining whether his assumptions concerning God, nature, and natural laws successfully establish the impossibility of miracles or merely exclude miracles within his own philosophical system.

Spinoza's Metaphysical Foundations of the Critique of Miracle

Spinoza's rejection of miracles is not primarily based on the observation that miraculous claims are rare or difficult to verify. Rather, his argument arises from his broader metaphysical system, particularly his understanding of God, substance, causation, and the necessary order of nature. To assess the strength of his impossibility argument, it is therefore necessary to examine the philosophical foundations upon which it rests.

God or Nature (Deus sive Natura)

The central principle of Spinoza's metaphysics is his identification of God with Nature, expressed in the phrase *Deus sive Natura* ("God or Nature"). This doctrine provides the basis for his rejection of any conception of miracles involving divine intervention in the natural order. Unlike traditional theistic accounts, which distinguish between God as the creator and nature as creation, Spinoza argues that God is the single infinite substance of which all reality consists.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines substance as “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself” (*Ethics* 1d3). He argues that there can be only one absolutely infinite substance because two infinite substances would have to be distinguished by some limitation, which would contradict their infinity (*Ethics* 1p8). This one infinite substance is God, and everything else exists as a mode or modification of this substance (*Ethics* 1p15).

Spinoza’s conception of God differs significantly from the traditional understanding of a personal creator who exists independently of the universe. For him, God is not a being who creates nature from outside and occasionally intervenes within it. Rather, nature itself is the expression of God’s essence. As Nadler explains, Spinoza’s metaphysics removes the distinction between the divine and the natural because “God is not a transcendent cause standing apart from the world but the immanent cause of all things” (Nadler 146).

This view has direct consequences for the possibility of miracles. If God and Nature are identical, then the natural order cannot be understood as something external to God that God may occasionally suspend. A miracle, traditionally conceived as an act whereby God interrupts the normal operation of nature, would imply that God acts against His own expression. Spinoza therefore argues that the belief in miracles involves a misunderstanding of the relationship between God and nature.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza maintains that nature’s universal laws are not independent principles imposed upon God but expressions of divine necessity. Therefore, if something occurred contrary to those laws, it would mean that God acted contrary to His own nature, which Spinoza considers impossible (Spinoza 83). His rejection of miracles is thus a consequence of his understanding of divine identity rather than merely a conclusion based on scientific observation.

However, this foundation also presents a significant philosophical difficulty. Spinoza’s conclusion depends upon accepting his identification of God with Nature. Classical theistic traditions reject this identification and maintain that God transcends nature while sustaining it. From this perspective, divine action does not involve God acting against Himself because nature is not identical with God but is dependent upon God. Therefore, the possibility of miracles becomes closely connected to the prior question of whether Spinoza’s metaphysics provides an adequate account of the divine–natural relationship.

Determinism and the Necessity of Nature

The second major foundation of Spinoza’s critique is his deterministic understanding of reality. According to Spinoza, everything that exists follows necessarily from the nature of God. The universe is not governed by chance, accident, or arbitrary events but by a rational and immutable order.

Spinoza argues in the *Ethics* that “in nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined by the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an

effect in a certain way” (*Ethics* 1p29). Every event, therefore, has a sufficient cause, even if human beings are unable to discover that cause. What appears to be accidental is simply the result of incomplete human knowledge.

This deterministic view is fundamental to Spinoza’s understanding of miracles. A miracle, in the traditional sense, requires that something occur outside or beyond the ordinary causal order of nature. However, if every event necessarily follows from the divine order, there can be no genuine interruption of that order. What appears to be a miraculous exception must instead be an event whose causes remain unknown.

Spinoza’s determinism also influences his understanding of divine freedom. Traditional theology often defines divine freedom as God’s ability to choose among different possible actions. Spinoza rejects this idea. God is free not because God could have acted differently but because God acts according to the necessity of His own nature. Since God’s nature is perfect, there is no reason for God to choose an alternative order of reality.

This interpretation of divine freedom creates a tension with traditional accounts of miracles. If God cannot act otherwise than He necessarily does, then divine intervention in the natural order becomes impossible. A miracle would imply a change in the necessary order of reality, which Spinoza considers incompatible with divine perfection.

Nevertheless, the philosophical adequacy of this argument depends on whether necessity should be understood in Spinoza’s strict sense. Critics argue that divine freedom does not necessarily require unpredictability or arbitrary choice. A transcendent God could establish a regular natural order while also freely determining extraordinary events as part of a broader purpose. Thus, Spinoza’s determinism may exclude miracles only because it begins with a particular interpretation of divine freedom.

Spinoza’s Understanding of Natural Laws

Spinoza’s argument against miracles also depends on his understanding of natural laws. For him, the laws of nature are not merely descriptions formulated by human beings after observing patterns in the world. They represent the necessary structure according to which reality operates.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza states that “nothing happens in nature which is in contravention to her universal laws” because nature preserves a fixed and immutable order (Spinoza 83). Since these laws express the necessity of God’s nature, they cannot be suspended or violated.

This interpretation differs from several modern accounts of natural laws. Peter Harrison argues that the concept of natural law has historically developed in different ways and that scientific laws are often understood as descriptions of regularities rather than as absolute necessities (Harrison 31–53). According to this interpretation, a law

of nature tells us how events normally occur under certain conditions; it does not necessarily mean that every possible deviation would be logically impossible.

The distinction between descriptive and prescriptive laws is especially important for evaluating Spinoza's argument. A prescriptive law, such as a moral command, can be violated because it establishes what ought to happen. However, descriptive scientific laws do not command nature to behave in a particular manner; they describe patterns discovered through observation. Therefore, an extraordinary event would not necessarily constitute a violation of a natural law.

This criticism challenges one of the key premises of Spinoza's impossibility argument. If natural laws are not absolute divine decrees but descriptions of regularities within nature, then the occurrence of a miracle does not necessarily imply a contradiction in God or nature. The question becomes whether Spinoza has demonstrated the impossibility of miracles or whether he has rejected only a particular interpretation of natural law.

Spinoza's metaphysical foundations therefore provide a powerful and coherent explanation for his rejection of miracles. However, they also reveal the dependence of his conclusion upon controversial assumptions concerning the identity of God and nature, the meaning of divine freedom, and the nature of natural laws. The following section examines how these foundations shape Spinoza's specific definition of miracle and the structure of his impossibility argument.

Spinoza's Concept of Miracle

Spinoza's understanding of miracle must be interpreted within the framework of his metaphysical commitments. Unlike traditional theological accounts that define miracles as extraordinary acts of divine intervention, Spinoza rejects the possibility that an event can occur outside the necessary order of nature. His conception of miracle is therefore fundamentally different from the classical understanding because it shifts the meaning of miracle from an objective alteration of nature to a limitation in human knowledge.

In traditional philosophy of religion, a miracle is generally understood as an event produced by divine power that exceeds the ordinary capacities of nature. Thomas Aquinas, for example, defines miracles as events that occur "beyond the order commonly observed in nature" (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III.101). This definition does not suggest that miracles are irrational or contrary to reason; rather, they are events whose cause is a power superior to created nature. For Aquinas, the possibility of miracles follows from the distinction between God, who is the creator of nature, and nature itself.

Spinoza rejects this distinction. Since God and Nature are identical, there can be no external divine agent who interrupts the operation of natural processes. Consequently, he argues that a miracle cannot properly mean a suspension or violation of natural laws. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he maintains that nothing occurs contrary

to the universal laws of nature because these laws express the eternal order of God or Nature (Spinoza 83). Therefore, what appears to human beings as a miracle cannot represent a genuine departure from nature.

For Spinoza, miracles are instead events whose causes are unknown. He argues that events are called miraculous only because people lack adequate knowledge of their natural explanations. In his words, a miracle refers to an occurrence “of which the natural cause cannot be explained by us” (Spinoza 90). Thus, the category of miracle reflects human ignorance rather than a special mode of divine action.

This epistemological understanding of miracle is closely connected to Spinoza’s broader theory of human knowledge. In his philosophy, inadequate ideas arise when human beings perceive reality through limited and confused understanding rather than through a complete knowledge of causes. Because human beings usually encounter only isolated events without knowing the full network of causal relations behind them, they may interpret unusual occurrences as supernatural. However, from the perspective of complete knowledge, every event would be understood as part of the necessary order of nature.

Spinoza applies this interpretation specifically to biblical miracles. He argues that ancient communities frequently attributed unusual natural events to supernatural intervention because they lacked scientific understanding of natural causes. Events such as storms, unusual atmospheric occurrences, or other extraordinary phenomena were interpreted as direct acts of divine will because their natural explanations were unknown (Spinoza 87–90). According to Spinoza, such interpretations confuse ignorance with genuine knowledge of God.

The significance of Spinoza’s account is that it does not simply deny unusual events. Rather, it denies that unusual events provide evidence of a supernatural interruption of nature. An event may be extraordinary in relation to human experience while still remaining completely natural in relation to the total order of reality. In this sense, Spinoza transforms the concept of miracle from a metaphysical claim about divine action into an epistemological claim about human understanding.

However, this interpretation raises a fundamental philosophical objection. By defining miracles as impossible violations of nature from the outset, Spinoza appears to exclude the traditional understanding of miracle by means of his own metaphysical assumptions. If one rejects the identification of God with Nature and understands natural laws differently, then the possibility of miracles may remain open. Therefore, the central question is not merely whether miracles occur, but whether Spinoza has provided sufficient philosophical grounds for concluding that they cannot occur.

The Structure of Spinoza’s Impossibility Argument against Miracle

Spinoza’s argument against miracles represents one of the strongest philosophical attempts to deny their possibility. His position is not simply that miracles are unlikely

or unsupported by evidence; rather, he argues that miracles are conceptually impossible because they contradict the necessary order of reality.

The argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. A miracle is an event that violates the laws of nature.
2. The laws of nature express the eternal and necessary order of God or Nature.
3. An eternal and necessary order cannot be violated.
4. Therefore, miracles are impossible.

The first premise reflects Spinoza's understanding of miracles as events contrary to nature. Since he believes that the laws of nature are expressions of divine necessity, the second premise follows from his metaphysical account of God. The third premise follows from the meaning of necessity itself: if something is genuinely necessary, its opposite cannot occur. From these premises, Spinoza concludes that miracles cannot exist.

The central aspect of the argument is the relationship between God and natural order. Spinoza argues that the laws of nature are not independent rules that God chooses to follow. Rather, they arise necessarily from what God is. Therefore, the claim that God performs a miracle by suspending natural laws would imply that God acts against His own essence. Spinoza considers this conclusion impossible because a perfect and necessary being cannot contradict itself.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza states that if something occurred contrary to the laws of nature, it would also be contrary to the nature of God because the laws of nature are simply expressions of divine necessity (Spinoza 89). The apparent miracle, therefore, would not demonstrate divine power but reveal a misunderstanding of the relationship between God and reality.

A second aspect of Spinoza's argument concerns knowledge of God. According to him, genuine knowledge of God comes through understanding the necessary order of nature, not through events that appear to disrupt that order. If miracles were accepted as violations of nature, they would undermine confidence in rational knowledge because they would suggest that reality does not operate according to a consistent order. For Spinoza, this would weaken rather than strengthen religious understanding.

Furthermore, Spinoza argues that miracles cannot serve as proof of God's existence. If an unusual event occurred, the mere fact that it exceeded ordinary human expectations would not establish that God caused it. A lack of natural explanation does not automatically demonstrate supernatural causation. Therefore, appealing to miracles as evidence for God confuses ignorance of causes with knowledge of divine activity.

The strength of Spinoza's argument lies in its systematic coherence. Given his assumptions that God is identical with Nature and that natural laws express divine necessity, the conclusion that miracles are impossible follows logically. His argument challenges any account of miracle that portrays God as occasionally suspending the

order of nature. Nevertheless, the validity of the argument depends on whether its premises are acceptable. The following section critically assesses Spinoza's impossibility argument by examining whether his assumptions concerning God, nature, and natural laws successfully establish the impossibility of miracles.

A Critical Assessment of Spinoza's Impossibility Argument against Miracle

Spinoza's critique of miracle remains one of the most influential philosophical challenges to traditional accounts of divine intervention. Unlike arguments that reject miracles primarily on empirical or historical grounds, Spinoza's position is fundamentally metaphysical. He does not argue merely that miracle claims are improbable or difficult to verify; rather, he maintains that miracles are conceptually impossible because they conflict with the necessary structure of reality. His argument follows from three central commitments: the identification of God with Nature (*Deus sive Natura*), the deterministic character of causation, and the view that the laws of nature express the eternal necessity of divine essence. If these assumptions are accepted, then a miracle understood as a suspension or violation of natural order would indeed appear incoherent because it would imply that God acts contrary to Himself.

However, the philosophical adequacy of Spinoza's argument depends not only on the logical relationship between his premises and conclusion but also on the justification of the premises themselves. As recent scholarship has emphasized, Spinoza's rejection of miracles cannot be separated from his broader metaphysical framework. Yu argues that Spinoza's account of miracles is rooted in his understanding of natural laws as expressions of the necessary structure of reality rather than merely human descriptions of observed regularities (Yu 2024). Similarly, Nadler explains that once Spinoza's conception of God as the immanent cause of all things is accepted, divine intervention in the traditional sense becomes difficult to maintain because there is no external deity who acts upon nature from outside (Nadler 176–79). Therefore, the critical question is not simply whether Spinoza's conclusion follows from his system, but whether his philosophical assumptions provide the only adequate account of God, nature, and causation.

The Problem of Spinoza's Identification of God and Nature

The first and most fundamental challenge to Spinoza's impossibility argument concerns his identification of God with Nature. According to Spinoza, there exists only one infinite substance, and this substance is God. Everything that exists is a mode or expression of this single substance (Spinoza, *Ethics* 1p15). Consequently, nature is not something created by God and existing independently from Him; rather, nature is the necessary manifestation of the divine essence. Because the laws of nature express God's own necessity, any event that contradicts these laws would also constitute a contradiction within God Himself (Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* 83–90).

This metaphysical foundation provides considerable strength to Spinoza's argument. As Carlisle observes, Spinoza's rejection of miracles is connected to his broader

attempt to replace superstition with rational understanding. For Spinoza, attributing unexplained events to supernatural intervention often reflects human ignorance of natural causes rather than genuine knowledge of divine activity (Carlisle 202–05). From this perspective, belief in miracles represents a failure to recognize the rational order through which God expresses Himself.

Nevertheless, Spinoza's identification of God and Nature remains highly controversial. Classical theistic traditions reject the idea that God is identical with the natural world and instead maintain a distinction between the Creator and creation. According to this view, nature depends upon God but is not identical with God. This distinction allows divine action within nature without implying that God contradicts Himself.

Thomas Aquinas represents this alternative position by arguing that miracles do not involve a violation of nature in a way that undermines divine perfection. Rather, miracles occur because God possesses a power that exceeds the ordinary capacities of created nature (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III.101). On this account, the laws of nature describe the normal operations of created things, but they do not limit the power of the creator who established those laws. From this perspective, Spinoza's conclusion appears to depend upon a controversial definition of the divine–natural relationship. If God is understood as transcendent as well as immanent, then divine action does not require God to act against Himself. A miracle would not represent a contradiction of nature but an extraordinary expression of divine power operating through a reality that ultimately depends upon God.

Furthermore, Spinoza's understanding of divine freedom raises an additional difficulty. Spinoza argues that God is free because God acts according to the necessity of His own nature rather than according to external influences or arbitrary choice. However, many theological and philosophical traditions understand freedom differently, as involving rational self-determination and the ability to act according to purposes or reasons. If divine freedom includes the capacity to determine extraordinary events, then miracles cannot be dismissed simply as incompatible with divine perfection.

The Problem of Spinoza's Understanding of Natural Laws

A second major challenge concerns Spinoza's interpretation of natural laws. His impossibility argument assumes that natural laws are eternal and necessary principles that cannot admit exceptions. Since these laws express the necessity of God's nature, any event contrary to them would be impossible. However, this conception of natural law has been questioned within both the philosophy of science and contemporary philosophy of religion.

Peter Harrison argues that natural laws have historically been understood in different ways and that scientific laws often function as descriptions of regularities within nature rather than as absolute necessities governing every possible event (Harrison 31–53). This distinction between descriptive and necessary accounts of natural law

creates a significant problem for Spinoza's argument. If natural laws describe how nature normally behaves under particular conditions, then an extraordinary event does not necessarily represent a violation of nature.

This issue directly affects Spinoza's first premise: that miracles are violations of natural laws. The concept of violation is appropriate when discussing prescriptive laws, such as moral commands, because such laws establish what ought to happen. However, scientific laws generally describe what happens under certain conditions. Therefore, an unusual event may indicate the presence of another causal factor rather than a contradiction of natural order.

For example, if a physical event occurred through the influence of an additional causal agent, this would not necessarily mean that existing scientific descriptions had been "broken." Rather, it would indicate that the complete explanation of the event involved more than ordinary natural processes. In the same way, defenders of miracles argue that divine action need not abolish natural order but may involve a cause operating beyond the ordinary mechanisms studied by science.

Recent discussions support this criticism by emphasizing that Spinoza's understanding of natural law represents one philosophical interpretation rather than an uncontested conclusion. Yu's analysis shows that Spinoza's argument is strongest when natural laws are understood as necessary expressions of divine essence, but weaker when laws are interpreted as explanatory models developed through human observation (Yu 2024).

Miracle as Divine Action Rather Than Violation of Nature

A further difficulty with Spinoza's argument concerns his assumption that miracles must necessarily involve violations of nature. Many contemporary philosophers of religion reject this interpretation and argue that miracles should instead be understood as extraordinary events resulting from a cause beyond ordinary natural processes.

Richard Swinburne argues that miracles are not irrational disruptions of nature but unusual events caused by divine agency that cannot be adequately explained through established natural regularities (Swinburne 25–30). According to this view, scientific explanation remains valid because natural laws describe regular patterns within the world; they do not necessarily exhaust every possible form of causation.

Similarly, Stephen Mumford argues that the possibility of miracles depends on whether supernatural causation is philosophically coherent. He maintains that an event may have a natural description while also having a supernatural explanation because different levels of causation are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Mumford 44–47). Therefore, accepting miracles does not require rejecting scientific reasoning but requires recognizing that reality may contain causal dimensions beyond those accessible through natural science.

Robert Larmer develops a similar position by arguing that miracles should not be interpreted as violations of nature but as events requiring a cause that exceeds the powers of ordinary natural processes (Larmer 9–12). From this perspective, Spinoza's argument becomes too restrictive because it assumes that all possible causes must belong entirely within the natural order.

However, Spinoza's critique remains important because it exposes a genuine philosophical challenge. If miracle claims are understood as arbitrary interruptions of a complete and self-sufficient natural system, then they create difficulties concerning the rational intelligibility of reality. Spinoza therefore successfully challenges simplistic conceptions of miracles even if he does not eliminate all possible accounts of divine action.

The Epistemological Dimension of Miracle Claims

Although Spinoza's metaphysical argument faces significant objections, his epistemological concerns about miracles remain influential. Spinoza argues that human beings often interpret unusual events as miraculous because they lack knowledge of their natural causes. This criticism remains relevant because the existence of an unexplained event does not automatically establish supernatural causation.

Contemporary discussions have expanded this epistemological dimension of miracle debates. Rozenberg argues that philosophical evaluation of miracles involves not only questions of metaphysical possibility but also questions concerning evidence, testimony, and rational justification (Rozenberg 2023). While Spinoza focuses on the necessary order of nature, later discussions examine whether human testimony and available evidence are sufficient to justify belief in extraordinary events.

This distinction is important because Spinoza's epistemological caution is stronger than his metaphysical conclusion. He successfully demonstrates that ignorance of natural causes cannot by itself prove divine intervention. However, the inability to provide a natural explanation does not logically establish that supernatural explanation is impossible. Likewise, the discovery of a possible natural explanation does not necessarily disprove the possibility of divine action.

Therefore, Spinoza's epistemological argument should be accepted in a limited sense. It provides a valuable warning against premature appeals to miracles, but it does not demonstrate that all miracle claims are false.

Overall Evaluation of Spinoza's Argument

Spinoza's impossibility argument remains one of the most rigorous philosophical critiques of miracle because of its systematic relationship between metaphysics, causation, and natural order. Its strength lies in its internal coherence: within a pantheistic and deterministic worldview, miracles understood as violations of nature are indeed difficult to defend.

Nevertheless, the argument does not establish the absolute impossibility of miracles because its conclusion depends upon assumptions that remain philosophically contested. The identification of God with Nature, the deterministic interpretation of causation, and the understanding of natural laws as necessary expressions of divine essence represent one possible philosophical framework rather than universally accepted truths.

Contemporary scholarship therefore suggests a more balanced assessment of Spinoza's contribution. Melamed's analysis confirms that Spinoza's conception of divine necessity leaves little room for traditional ideas of divine intervention (Melamed 68–71), while Oppy argues that debates between naturalistic and supernatural explanations often involve competing interpretations of reality rather than conclusions that can be settled by definition alone (Oppy 115–18).

The most defensible conclusion is that Spinoza successfully demonstrates the incompatibility of miracles with his own metaphysical system, but he does not prove that miracles are impossible in every philosophical framework. His critique remains valuable because it forces careful examination of the relationship between God, nature, causation, and human knowledge. Rather than eliminating the possibility of miracles, Spinoza's argument continues to serve as a profound challenge that any philosophical defence of divine action must address.

Conclusion

This study has examined Spinoza's critique of miracles by analysing the metaphysical foundations and logical structure of his impossibility argument. Spinoza's rejection of miracles follows from his identification of God with Nature (*Deus sive Natura*), his deterministic account of causation, and his understanding of natural laws as expressions of divine necessity. Within this framework, miracles understood as violations of nature are impossible because they would imply a contradiction within the rational and immutable order of reality.

The analysis has shown that Spinoza's argument is philosophically coherent when considered within his own metaphysical system. His critique also provides an important epistemological caution by demonstrating that unexplained events should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of supernatural intervention. However, the study has also revealed that Spinoza's conclusion depends upon assumptions that remain contested, especially concerning the relationship between God and nature and the nature of natural laws.

If God is understood as transcending nature and natural laws are interpreted as descriptions of regularities rather than absolute necessities, miracles can remain philosophically possible. Therefore, Spinoza does not prove the absolute impossibility of miracles; rather, he demonstrates their incompatibility with a specific pantheistic and deterministic worldview. His contribution remains valuable as a rigorous challenge that continues to shape philosophical debates about divine action, causation, and human knowledge.

Works Cited

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Trans. Joseph Rickaby. London: Burns and Oates, 1905. Print.
- Carlisle, Clare. *Spinoza's Religion: A New Reading of the Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Print.
- Harrison, Peter. "Newtonian Science, Miracles, and Laws of Nature." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56.1 (1995): 31–53. Print.
- Larmer, Robert A. *The Legitimacy of Miracle*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014. Print.
- Melamed, Yitzhak Y. *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.
- Mumford, Stephen. *Miracles: Metaphysics and Modality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001. Print.
- Nadler, Steven. *Spinoza: A Life*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Print.
- Oppy, Graham. *Naturalism and Religion: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation*. London: Routledge, 2018. Print.
- Rozenberg, Jacques J. "Spinoza, Hume, and the Epistemology of Miracles." *Philotheos* 23.2 (2023): 161–173. Web. 1st August 2026.
- Spinoza, Baruch. *Ethics*. Trans. Edwin Curley. London: Penguin Classics, 1996. Print.
- Spinoza, Baruch. *Theological-Political Treatise*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001. Print.
- Swinburne, Richard. *The Concept of a Miracle*. London: Macmillan, 1970. Print.
- Yu, Aurora. "Spinoza on Miracles and Natural Laws." *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 37.2 (2024): 157–179. Web. 1st August 2026.