

Pannenberg on Spinoza's Theory of Miracles: A Misunderstood Parallel?

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Introduction

The contemporary theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg and the early modern philosopher Baruch Spinoza could be considered worlds apart religiously and intellectually. While Pannenberg clearly considers himself a theologian first and foremost,¹ Spinoza considered himself a rationalistic philosopher who rejected the religious dogmatism of his native Netherlands and only engaging in theology to support his philosophical claims. Formatively shaped by the experiences of war and religion, however, these two thinkers share a common commitment to reason and to the belief that God (however conceived) is both manifested and found operating through history and natural events. With this, the following essay examines Pannenberg's presentation regarding Spinoza's theory of miracles, arguing that despite a perceived difference based on a traditional misinterpretation, Pannenberg shares much with Spinoza regarding the nature of the miraculous.

On Spinoza's Theory of Miracles: Pannenberg and the Traditional Interpretation

Pannenberg on Spinoza's Theory of Miracles

Pannenberg rarely refers to Spinoza. This is odd, not only considering Spinoza's prominence in western thought, but also considering the amount attention Pannenberg gives to Hegel and Bultmann; two thinkers highly

1. Pannenberg seeks to engage various fields of human knowledge through the lens of an intellectualized faith; rejecting the fideism of Karl Barth, the subjective pietism of Frederick Schleiermacher and the complete surrender to philosophy by Rudolph Bultmann.

influenced by the philosopher.² While in most works Spinoza simply appears in a single footnote,³ the philosopher of The Hague does receive significant attention in three places: textual criticism, metaphorical language within God-talk, and miracles.

Regarding miracles, Pannenberg credits Spinoza's philosophy with being the "precondition" to the "revival" of philosophical monism in modern thought and a challenge to Christian theism.⁴ While the modern conception of essence, which sparked Spinoza's metaphysics, does require theologians to revise their conception of God as a divine essence related to the world, Pannenberg contends that Spinoza's pantheism goes too far.⁵ Nevertheless, he argues, the 'pantheistic revision' of modern theology wrongly influenced its view of miracles. Pannenberg states that: "Spinoza criticized the possibility of miracles on the ground that the immutability of the natural order is a necessary expression of the immutability of God

2. In two key works, *Revelation as History* and *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, Pannenberg makes no mention of Spinoza despite his impact on these doctrines. Moreover, in his more encyclopedic writings, like *Basic Questions in Theology*, one also finds no reference to Spinoza despite the plethora of doctrines and authors discussed. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, Rolf Rendtorff, Trutz Rendtorff and Ulrich Wilkens, *Revelation as History* (London: MacMillan, 1968); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); and see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Volume One (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) and Volume Two (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).

3. For instance, in *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, Pannenberg's only reference to Spinoza comes in a footnote in a discussion on the *imago dei* and the eighteenth century idea of human improvement in Leibniz. Here Pannenberg notes that Leibniz's equation of the 'city of God' as the moral world was based in Spinoza's rejection of Hobbes' distinction between natural kingdom of God and a prophetic kingdom of God. Pannenberg states: "Spinoza, however, had disputed the distinction on grounds that the content of the reign of God—whether this was made known naturally or supernaturally—can in any case consist only in justice and love." This parallels Leibniz's contention in *Principles of Nature and Grace* that "nature leads to grace, and grace perfects nature by using it." As such, for Pannenberg, Spinoza is one of the forerunners of modern human idealism. In *Jesus: God and Man*, Spinoza appears for a single time again in Pannenberg's footnotes. This single reference simply notes that Hegel's "untiring emphasis that God as Spirit" is a defence of the personality of God against Spinoza. See Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 51–52.

4. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, 18–19. This challenge, Pannenberg notes, became most "nuanced" in Hegel's philosophy.

5. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, 367.

himself. In his view it would show imperfection in the Creator if the Creator had to intervene in its course to adjust its direction to his will.”⁶

According to Pannenberg, the conception of immutable natural order arose during the late medieval period where natural law became “conceived objectively, [and] not in relation to limits of human understanding.” With this, theologians like Aquinas were able to theorize that miracles were “*praetor naturam*” (different from nature) in *Summa Theologica* and “*contra naturam*” (contrary to nature) in *Questiones de potentia*.⁷ Pannenberg adds: “Later, the view of miracles as occurring *contra naturam* became more generally accepted, as did the conception of the essence and order of nature discovered from human experience. This development finally led to the idea that a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.”⁸ Descartes and Spinoza, Pannenberg continues, connected the immutability of natural law with Divine immutability, and with this Spinoza rejected the possibility of miracles because God’s perfection in nature would need no correction or improvement.⁹ Such believe easily evolves into a conception natural order that allows no exceptions and therefore excludes any idea of miracles (i.e. Hume).

Pannenberg, then, sees a direct connection between late medieval metaphysics and Spinoza’s later denial of the possibility of miracles. His theory of historical connection becomes important to note, as it repeats the traditional interpretation of Spinoza’s theory of miracles, and in doing so misses the connection to his own theory. It is important, then, to examine the traditional views on Spinoza at this point, which establishes the ability to reevaluate Spinoza’s theory.

6. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, 45. Pannenberg, here, cites Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise chapter six, but more importantly he refers to Strauss’ *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft* (106ff).

7. Pannenberg, “The Concept of Miracle,” 760. One wonders, however, if this problem is simply inherited from Aristotle and Plato; where it could be argued that Aristotle likewise argued for the immutability of God and nature, while Plato argued for the immutability of God and the radical contingency of nature. W. Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 61 (1961): 87–108.

8. Pannenberg, “The Concept of Miracle,” 760.

9. Ibid., “That the order of nature, once created, is unchangeable had been affirmed already by René Descartes as a consequence of God’s immutability, and [as such] Baruch Spinoza concluded that miracles therefore cannot occur... perfection of the Creator requires us to affirm that the order of creation is never in need of repair or of later improvement.”

Traditional Interpretations on Spinoza's Theory of Miracles

Traditional scholarship on Spinoza, even from the earliest philosophers succeeding him, seemed to have unanimously agreed that Spinoza rejected the possibility of miracles. Most introductions to Spinoza simply state, without any elaboration, that Spinoza denied the existence of miracles.¹⁰ More problematic, however, is when interpreters paraphrase Spinoza's propositions regarding miracles, they often reveal a presumptive interpretation. Seymour Feldman, for instance, in his article on Spinoza in the *History of Jewish Philosophy* merely states "Miracles are not only impossible, but to believe in them is to deny God, since a miracle is a violation of nature."¹¹ William Lane Craig, a former doctoral student of Pannenberg, states: "As early as 1670 Benedict de Spinoza in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* had argued against the possibility of miracles and their evidential value."¹² This traditional interpretation has led philosophers to diagram Spinoza's argument this way:

1. Natural laws are immutable;
2. Miracles are violations of natural law;
3. It is impossible for immutable laws to be violated;
4. Therefore miracles are impossible.

10. Though many could be cited, a recent and popular example is Roger Scruton, *Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2002). Scruton's only reference to Spinoza's theory on miracles is in reference to his legacy on Kant, where he states "Spinoza is right in believing that God's majesty is diminished by the idea that things might have been otherwise. The belief in miracles does no credit to God. For what need has God to intervene in events which he originates? The laws of the universe must be universally binding if we are to understand them: and it could not have been God's will to leave us forever ignorant of our situation" (112). Even odder is the absence of any mention of miracles in the standard classic history of philosophy by Fredrick Copleston and his discussion on Spinoza. See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume IV: Modern Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 205–263.

11. Seymour Feldman, "Spinoza," in Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman, *History of Jewish Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 624.

12. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 249.

These scholars, however, do not allow for the possibility of Spinoza defining miracles in another way than violations of natural law. The problem lies in a mistaken interpretation of Spinoza that arose in the early interpreters of the philosopher. In surveying the references to Spinoza's miracles theory, one immediately notices numerous references to either David Hume or Leo Strauss. This is significant, as the interpretation of Spinoza's theory on miracles by these two thinkers has become standard in Western thought.

In his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume writes: "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature."¹³ Considering that this statement plays little importance in Hume's discussion on miracles, which refers more to the improbability of human testimony regarding miracles than the impossibility of them according to natural law, it would seem that Hume was making an implicit reference to Spinoza here.¹⁴ If this were the case, it would appear that Hume had some knowledge of the great philosopher. Hume scholar, Richard Popkin has argued that while Hume never directly cites Spinoza, and even criticizes him in places, Hume was simply reflecting the mainstream attitude towards Spinoza in English philosophy at the time.¹⁵ Spinoza, rather, had influenced Hume significantly, as seen by the many early critics who identified him as a Spinozist.¹⁶ Popkin posits that Hume was introduced to Spinoza by English deists, particularly his patron Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay,¹⁷ who grabbed onto Spinoza in support of their own theologies, notably their own rejection of miracles. This connection is important. For if Hume was familiar with Spinoza's philosophy, and that awareness came through those who used Spinoza for their own denial of

13. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *Classics of Western Philosophy* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1995, 4th edition), 888.

14. Michael Levine, "Miracles," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/miracles> (2002).

15. Richard Popkin, "Hume and Spinoza," *Hume Studies*, Volume V, Number 2 (November 1979), 66. Both Richard Popkin and Paul Russell argue that Hume's criticisms of Spinoza were sarcastic and ironic, in light of his views on atheism. This is not surprising since Ramsay considered Spinoza a terrible atheist.

16. Russell, "Atheism and the Title Pages of Hume's Treatise," 414. Russell speaks of Samuel Clarke's statement at the Boyle Lectures.

17. Popkin, "Hume and Spinoza," 66. See also Paul Russell, "Atheism and the Title Page of Hume's Treatise," *Hume Studies* Volume XIV, Number 2 (November, 1988), 416. Russell connects Hume with Ramsay through Spinoza's childhood friend Michael Ramsay and argues that Hume would have known Spinoza's Treatise while writing.

miracles, it makes sense why Hume's disciples, interpreters,¹⁸ and critics would feel that Spinoza himself denied the possibility of miracles.¹⁹

More influential for contemporary philosophy, perhaps, has been Leo Strauss' *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. This is especially the case with Pannenberg, who specifically refers to Strauss in his comment that Spinoza's theory of miracles as impossible.²⁰ Strauss asserts that Spinoza's aim is to deny the possibility of miracles by precluding their metaphysical possibility beforehand.²¹ Spinoza sets up other theories as being products of opposing philosophical worldviews, in that they have particular views of nature, and consequently they are subject to being judged by reason. Revelation must be rationally justifiable, or else you are either trying to rationally prove that revelation is contra-reason or that the ground of revelation is independent of reason. Since Spinoza could not conceive of revelation as supra-rational, Strauss contends, he ultimately denies revelation. This denial, the undermining of scripture's authority on the basis of reason, was compelled by his desire to liberate philosophy. He felt that reason could not bow to revelation, Strauss maintains, for it is only the rational examination that frees all from prejudicial presuppositions.²²

Spinoza rejects the view of nature that exists by virtue of God's will alone. Where all acts of nature are acts of divine power, and miracles are evidence of God's freedom and omnipotence over the natural order with persuasive power. In particular the traditional and biblical views on miracles assert two ideas: 1) that God operates like a king over nature, intervening in anyway he wills; and 2) that miracles carry the power to prove a theological notion.²³ In opposition to this, Strauss states, Spinoza argues that miracles

18. James Fieser, "David Hume: Writings on Religion," <http://www.iep.utm.edu/h/humereli.htm#H1#H1> (2005).

19. Popkin fails to see any connection between the two philosophers on miracles, understanding Hume to think miracles as "implausible" and Spinoza to think them as "impossible," he does clearly connect the two in their notions about the foolishness of popular religion and divine providence. Popkin, "Hume and Spinoza," 88.

20. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, 106.

21. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (University of Chicago: Chicago, 1997), 132.

22. *Ibid.*, 130.

23. *Ibid.*, 131. Strauss states that the traditional and biblical views see miracles as a way to "convince the heathens that the visible gods to whom they paid worship (sun, moon, elements) are powerless and insubstantial, and that they are subject to the rule of an invisible God."

prove nothing about God, for only the fixed laws of an immutable universe reveal any content about an immutable God. Strauss states: "If anything is to be proven from miracles, then the miracle as a miracle must be knowable to reason unguided by faith. Reason must be able to establish that a particular occurrence could not have come to pass as a result of natural causes. In other words, the limits of the power of nature must be fully known."²⁴ And since we do not know the entire laws of nature, no conclusion can yet be drawn from miracles, no reason to assume a cause from a greater or infinite power and even no reason to believe a miracle had taken place.²⁵ So if any event occurred where the natural causes are not known, judgment is to be suspended. Since miracles do not happen today, we rely only on the reports of Scripture, and since we do know something about the nature of reporting by humans (e.g. preconceived notions, emotion, personal interests) that cloud any pure facts of events, the absence of any content that allows us to consider the natural causes or the presumptions of the witnesses compels one to admit that we can know very little about these events.²⁶

Strauss interpretation of Spinoza reveals a characterization of a philosopher who considers miracles as a product of a vulgar and barbaric mind, one beneath the rational and scientific mind that is immune to seeing the miraculous. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this traditional interpretation of Spinoza, but first it is helpful to recount what exactly Spinoza himself said regarding miracles.

Spinoza on Miracles

What did Spinoza actually say regarding miracles? In *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza dedicates his sixth chapter to the question of miracles. And like his discussion on God-talk, the notion of analogy and metaphor becomes important in a theory of miracles. Spinoza begins his chapter: "Just as men are accustomed to call divine the kind of knowledge that surpasses human understanding, so they call divine, or the work of

24. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critiques of Religion*, 132.

25. Strauss adds that while Spinoza felt confident enough to assert this denial, about the knowledge of natural law, he had no qualms about judging what operates contrary to natural law.

26. *Ibid.*, 133.

God, any work whose cause is generally unknown.”²⁷ Spinoza continues, “For the common people suppose that God’s power and providence are most clearly displayed when some unusual event occurs in Nature contrary to their habitual beliefs concerning Nature.”²⁸ Such events, especially if favorable to the believer, are considered to be evidence of God existence. Spinoza, then, states something interesting: “Therefore, they believe that all those who explain phenomena and miracles through natural causes, or who strive to understand them so, are doing away with God, or at least God’s providence.”²⁹

Interestingly, Spinoza does not dispute that unusual events occur, but argues that common believers have falsely separated the power of God from the power of ‘Nature’; being ignorant of the correct relationship between God and the world, where they conceive of the former as some regal power and the latter as some “kind of force or energy”. This would mean that, Spinoza contends, “unusual works of Nature are termed miracles,” partly due to piety and partly due to ignorance about natural law. In effort to refute this “folly” Spinoza offers to defend four propositions:

1. “That no event can contravene Nature, which preserves an eternal and fixed immutable order;”
2. “That neither God’s essence nor God’s existence—nor, consequently, God’s providence—can be known from miracles. All these can be far better apprehended from Nature’s fixed and immutable order;”
3. In Scripture itself, the decrees of God and diviner providence are nothing more than “Nature’s order, which necessarily follows from her eternal laws;”
4. Therefore, there is a better way to interpret the miracles of Scripture.³⁰

Regarding the first proposition, Spinoza argues that, like his discussion in the fourth chapter on Divine Law, “that all that God wills or determines involves eternal necessity and truth,” means that there is an equation of

27. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, MN: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 71.

28. *Ibid.*, 71.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 72.

divine intellect and will (i.e. to divinely will something means that God understands that thing and vice versa). Universal laws of nature, therefore, "are merely God's decrees, following from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature." Spinoza reasons, "So if anything were to happen in Nature contrary to her universal laws, it would also be necessarily contrary to the decree, intellect and nature of God."³¹

"Nothing, then, can happen in Nature to contravene her own universal laws, nor yet anything that is not in agreement with these laws or that does not follow from them. For whatever occurs does so through God's will and eternal decree."³² Nature follows fixed and observable laws, for by their very nature these laws are divine decrees. Miracles, therefore, cannot violate these natural laws. It may be said, then, that a miracle defines an event that cannot be understood by human reason, and since common people are ignorant of science unusual events appeared miraculous; but, Spinoza argues, "there are undoubtedly many alleged miracles in Scripture whose causes can be easily explained from known scientific principles."³³

Regarding the second proposition, that miracles cannot provide understanding about God's existence and providence, Spinoza argues that since miracles are events that are beyond human reason, from them "we can understand nothing" about God. One can know God, however, by knowing that "all things are determined and ordained by God and that the workings of Nature follow from God's essence."³⁴ Since natural laws are equated with God eternal decrees, one can only know God better through the study of nature.³⁵

Regarding the third proposition, that Scripture teaches that God's decrees and providence are equated with natural order, Spinoza claims that one should not expect Scripture to communicate events in a way one would expect from a scientist, philosopher or historian, because the purpose of Scripture is to entice piety and devotion. As such, Scripture does not often

31. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 72.

32. *Ibid.*, 73.

33. *Ibid.*, 74.

34. *Ibid.*, 75

35. This is evident in Scripture, Spinoza claims, where the miracle performances by false prophets and the many miracles they observed elsewhere did not enable the Israelites to "form any sounds conception of God."

speaking about the natural causes surrounding miraculous events; nevertheless, there are few indications of these natural causes.³⁶ He, then, concludes:

Therefore, there can be no doubt that all events narrated in Scripture occurred naturally; yet they are referred to as God because, as we have already shown, it is not the part of Scripture to explain events through natural causes... So if we find, in Scripture, some things for which we can assign no cause and which seems to have happened beyond—indeed contrary to—Nature's order, this should not perplex us. We need to have no hesitation in believing that what truly happened had happened naturally.³⁷

So, even in miracle narratives where one does not find natural circumstances within the narrative itself, it is to be assumed that they are there nonetheless. This is because description of natural causation does not inspire devotion. Spinoza articulates, "If Scripture were to describe the downfall of an empire in the style adopted by political historians, the common people would not be stirred."³⁸

What of miracles that appear to be without natural causes at all, like a curse do to sin or a blind man healed by faith. Spinoza argues that one should read these as one would read any anthropomorphic statement about God—e.g. God is angry, or grieved, or is repentant, or remembers a promise. These are statements based on the author's preconceived ideas about God and the universe.

This statement leads into Spinoza's fourth proposition, the need for a unique hermeneutic of Scripture. With the purpose that "no one, by misinterpreting Scripture, should heedlessly come to think that he has found something in Scripture contrary to the light of Nature."³⁹ Ahead of his time, anticipating Gadamer, Spinoza notes that it is difficult for any person to recount any event without some preconceived notions being involved. (Additionally, it is unlikely that two people will recount an event in the same manner.) "In consequence, chronicles and histories reflect the writer's own

36. Examples of such hidden hints include: the plagues of Egypt being products of the eastern winds and the rainbow after the flood being a by-product of refracted light.

37. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 79.

38. *Ibid.*, 80.

39. *Ibid.*, 81.

beliefs rather than actual facts.”⁴⁰ Spinoza, therefore, contends that a proper interpretation of Scripture, especially miracle accounts, should involve knowledge about the cosmology, culture and religious beliefs of the original writers; “Otherwise we shall confuse their beliefs and judgments with the miracle as it really happened.”⁴¹ As such, Spinoza argues, “nowhere [in Scripture] does it say that something can happen in Nature that contravenes her laws or that cannot follow from her laws; so neither should we impute such a doctrine to Scripture.”⁴² Miracles therefore are natural occurrences and should be explained in that way.

So is the Traditional Interpretation of Spinoza Correct?

It is evident that Spinoza's miracles theory, that is nothing can depart from the ordinary course of nature, is a consequence of his metaphysical doctrines. Miracles as traditionally conceived require a distinction between God and nature, something that Spinoza's philosophy rules out in principle. Moreover, nature's order is inviolable in so far as the sequence of events in nature is a necessary consequence of God's attributes. There certainly are “miracles”, however, in the sense of events whose natural causes are unknown to us and to which we attribute to the powers of a supernatural God. This is, however, once again a retreat to superstition, “the bitter enemy of all true knowledge and true morality.”⁴³ Such strong equation of miracle with nature can allow one to understand how critical interpreters, especially those with strong anti-religious or pro-religious tendencies, would understand Spinoza as simply rejecting miracles altogether. Contemporary commentators, however, have challenged the traditional interpretation of Spinoza in regards to miracles.

40. In example, Spinoza refers to the solar miracle in Joshua that reflects the cosmological understanding of ancient Hebrews and was used apologetically as proof that God controlled the very sun they worshipped as divine. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 81.

41. *Ibid.*, 81.

42. *Ibid.*, 84.

43. Steven Nadler, “Baruch Spinoza,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. 29 June 2001, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/#3.1>.

Definition of Miracle

One challenge has come from James Collins, who argues that Spinoza has three meanings to the notion of miracle: “factual ignorance, opposition and transcendence in principle.”⁴⁴ Miracles of factual ignorance are simply ones where simple wonderment and lazy logic leads one to misunderstand a simple event as miraculous (e.g. winning the lottery). Miracles of opposition are those that seem to contravene natural order, which most interpreters refer to when they speak of Spinoza’s rejection of miracles, because such miracles are simply products of ignorance about the true nature of God essence.⁴⁵ Miracles of transcendence are those that seem to surpass all human understanding, and can be classified as oppositional miracles for they surpass nature, but they differ in the sense that they are “not opposed to nature.” These distinctions in Spinoza’s view of miracles are important, because with the third meaning Spinoza admits the possibility of unexplainable miracles.

Miracles and Prophecy

A second challenge emphasizes the distinction between miracle and prophecy in Spinoza’s thought. Alan Donagan argues, in the *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, that unlike David Hume, Spinoza could not reject the extraordinary event altogether. Though this is not discussed in chapter six of the *Treatise*, but chapter one, critics note that Spinoza admits the reality of prophecy (i.e. revelation).⁴⁶

Unlike his psychological consideration of prophecy, Arthur Fox points out that Spinoza treats miracles in a purely philosophical manner.⁴⁷ If he classified prophecy philosophically along with other miracles, Nancy Levine

44. James Daniel Collins, *Spinoza on Nature* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 217. This is where Spinoza invokes the equation of God and Nature; that is where divine decrees are the same as natural law. Those who understand miracles to be against natural order are ignorant to the true nature of Nature.

45. *Ibid.*, 218.

46. Alan Donagan, “Spinoza’s Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 360.

47. A. C. Fox, *Faith and Philosophy: Spinoza on Religion* (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1990), 133. Fox makes the point, which I make elsewhere in this paper, that prophecy for Spinoza is linked to psychology; the psychological

adds, he would have placed prophecy as an inferior subspecies of natural reason.⁴⁸ "This is not, however, the route Spinoza takes with prophecy," she contends, rather he understands prophecy as something transcending reason, not divorced from it.⁴⁹ Donagan notes that Spinoza had two primary philosophical assumptions regarding scripture: one is that though we may not fully understand revelation, it does not mean that it falls outside of the order of natural causes (*Ethics* 1p29); second, that all our cognition is comprised of adequate and inadequate ideas.⁵⁰ So while Spinoza assumes that prophecy is subjected to natural law and is "intelligible in principle", Herman De Dijn affirms, it still cannot be fully grasped by human reason.⁵¹ De Dijn concludes: "A rationalist too can and must recognize that there are things in Nature that human reason cannot explain, without this meaning that they escape all rational or intuitive reasoning."⁵²

If, for Spinoza all so-called miracles are really extraordinary events subject to the laws of nature, how does he explain particular events; particularly those he accepts as true, as the audible voice heard by prophets / apostles and the event of revelation?⁵³ How does he explain, furthermore, events like creation and resurrection? For, according to his theory, Spinoza would affirm that an extraordinary event (i.e. a miracle) can either be explained through natural causes (unknown to the witnesses)⁵⁴ or it did not occur and there is another naturalistic explanation for the event.⁵⁵ This

faculty of imagination. If imagination is a natural faculty of the mind, working by its own laws, then it is possible to consider prophecy as a naturally occurring event in Spinoza's metaphysics.

48. Nancy Levine, *Spinoza's Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 109.

49. *Ibid.*, 110.

50. Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology," 360.

51. Herman De Dijn, "Spinoza and Revealed Religion," in *Studia Spinoza* ed. H. De Dijn, F. Mignini and P van Rooden (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), 39.

52. *Ibid.*, 40.

53. Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology," 361–362. (A reference to Spinoza's TTP 1.9)

54. In one example, the account of the solar miracle in Joshua 10:12–14, Spinoza argues for that some event extraordinary occurred but the witnesses misunderstood it based on their ignorance of natural physical law. Spinoza offers naturalistic explanations for this solar event, such as "an unusually great refraction of light" because of excessive coldness (See Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 27)

55. Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology," 362. (A reference to Spinoza's TTP 6.13)

would imply that prophecy and resurrection would have natural causes.⁵⁶ When it comes to prophecy, Donagan notes that Spinoza was able to accept physical manifestations during revelation because of his psychology.⁵⁷ That is in medieval psychology, inherited from Maimonides and Islamic philosophy, the faculty of imagination was the conduit through which the prophets cognate their revelations into imaginary words and visible forms. As for resurrection, in the *Treatise* Spinoza refers only to one, the resurrection of the dead boy under Elisha (2 Kings 4:31–37), which really was a revivification and not a resurrection.⁵⁸ With the resurrection of Jesus, however, in the single reference Spinoza makes to it ever, within a personal letter, he denies the event taking place and claimed that Apostles imagined the event.⁵⁹ Even in denying the possibility of true resurrection, Spinoza still finds natural causes to explain away the event itself (e.g. that Jesus either was resuscitated or the apostles hallucinated the experience). So unlike Hume, Spinoza does maintain the fact that some extraordinary event occurred, and that the witnesses or writers understood the even in the particular way recorded in Scripture, but that their true cause was different than what they believed.

The question is, Donagan asks, is why Spinoza accepted the stalwart of Judaism (Moses' experience of God) as perfectly reasonable but reject the central tenant of Christianity as not?⁶⁰ This contradiction might give credit to Strauss' interpretation of Spinoza, that while his methodology allows for miracles his presumptions do not. The evidence indicates, however, that Spinoza did accept the existence of miracles, only that they were extraordinary events within the natural order. While Donagan does not hypothesize on why Spinoza would consider Jesus' resurrection to be impossible within the natural order, the answer may lie with the correlating

56. These are important questions, especially for Christian readers of Spinoza. For to deny the miraculous as a violation of natural law, or submit all miracles as extraordinary events of natural causation, does one have to deny creatio *ex nihilo* and resurrection? Christian theologians, especially the Church Fathers, often connected the power of the resurrection with the power of God to created out of nothing.

57. Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology," 365.

58. The revivification was caused by Elisha's own body warmth, as he laid across the body. *Ibid.*, 363. (A reference to Spinoza's TTP 6.47)

59. *Ibid.*, 363. (A reference to Spinoza's Epistle 75.)

60. *Ibid.*, 364.

Christian doctrine of divine incarnation. Spinoza could simply not accept the notion of God becoming human, and as such he dismisses Jesus' resurrection out of hand, where methodologically he likely could have supported it.⁶¹

Transcendent Miracles?

Third, University of Ottawa philosopher Graeme Hunter gives a more thorough interpretation of Spinoza and corrects the traditional interpretation of miracles. In his article, "Spinoza on Miracles" and his recently published book *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought*,⁶² Hunter argues that: "It is not Spinoza who rejects [miracles] out of hand. It is his readers—a long succession of them stretching back to the Enlightenment."⁶³ Hunter contends: "what Spinoza rejects are biblical texts that depict miracles as defying the natural order."⁶⁴ The key, Hunter argues, is that Spinoza maintains that the Bible is self-interpreting; and thus, biblical texts depicting supernatural miracles must be interpreted in light of texts that suggest that miracles are a product of natural causes. As such, "Spinoza's mind is not hardened against miracles, as such, though his readers' minds often are."⁶⁵

In outlining Spinoza's four propositions, as noted above, Hunter contends that only the first proposition—that nature is immutable and cannot be violated—could be construed as rejecting the possibility of miracles. Behind this proposition, however, is a more general axiom, which Hunter labels "the Miracle Axiom" (MA):

MA: Nothing happens in nature that (a) contravenes (*repugnet*) nature's universal laws, (b) that does not agree (*convenit*) with those laws or (c) follow (*sequitur*) from them.⁶⁶

61. My appreciation is give to Graeme Hunter (University of Ottawa) for suggesting this point, "Re: Spinoza on Miracles," personal email (30 June 2005).

62. Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005) 93–107.

63. Graeme Hunter, "Spinoza on Miracles," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 56, (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004): 42.

64. *Ibid.*, 42.

65. *Ibid.*, 43.

66. *Ibid.*, 44. (a reference to Spinoza's TTP 6.)

When one considers, Hunter adds, that for Spinoza “nature” means “infinitely more than merely matter and its affection,” the Miracle Axiom “does not say that we must explain miracles exclusively in terms of extended things, but rather in terms of extension plus thought, plus all other unnamed (and to us incomprehensible) attributes of the divine being.”⁶⁷ Miracles are a product of God, and even though God is equated with Nature, one must realize that Nature is something exalted as God; “And so understood, MA contains nothing that religiously orthodox philosophers would want to repudiate.”⁶⁸

Hunter, then, contends that Spinoza has two definitions of “miracles,” one weak and one strong. A weak miracle “is a deed (*opus*) whose natural cause we (or the narrator) cannot explain by appealing to the example of some everyday thing.” A strong miracle “is that whose cause can never be explained in reference to natural principles known to us by the natural light.”⁶⁹ Hunter argues that weak miracles abound, for they are simply events a person, ignorant of natural law, cannot explain and that it could be considered un-miraculous by someone with such knowledge. Essentially, we simply are ignorant of the natural laws by which the miracle operates. The strong miracle in Spinoza, “envisages the possibility of events that are beyond any human intellect to explain.”⁷⁰ Such miracles include: the giving of the Promised Land to Israel and the miracles of the Christian Apostles. Such events do not mean, however, that they are unnatural or supernatural events; merely events that one presupposes operate by natural law. Such laws are relatively impossible for the human mind to conceive, however, because there is infinite number of attributes in Nature/God. Spinoza reminds his readers, Hunter notes, that the human being is merely a small part of the cosmos—the eternal order. If these two definitions are correct, Hunter concludes, then Spinoza does not deny the existence of miracles; he merely seeks to explain what they are.⁷¹

If Spinoza does not reject miracles, then why do we have centuries of interpreters who say that he did? Hunter contends that this arose in later

67. Hunter, “Spinoza on Miracles,” 44.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*, 45.

71. *Ibid.*

readers because of three factors: one, the conflict between Spinoza and scholastic theologians on nature; two, the charge that Spinoza was the new atheistic threat in Europe; and, three, the bad reading of Spinoza's theory on miracles as been taken for granted.⁷² This bad interpretation has found its way into Pannenberg's own reading of Spinoza, which, is rather superficial. What will be shown is that Pannenberg own orthodox theory on miracles shares much in common with Spinoza.

Are Pannenberg's and Spinoza's Theories on Miracles Parallel?

Even though Pannenberg contends that Spinoza denied the existence of miracles based on his notions of divine perfection and immutable natural laws, I would argue that Pannenberg misses Spinoza's openness to miracles and ultimately has more in common with Spinoza than he realizes.

Miracles within Patterns of Nature

Pannenberg argues that the notion of a miracle being a violation of natural law is a self-defeating notion; for if an exception to a law is possible, then it was not a law in the first place. So the notion of miracle as violation of natural law subverts the very notion of law.⁷³ This theory in late medieval thought, Pannenberg notes, runs contrary to the notion of miracles as "signs and wonders" found in early Christian theology. Pannenberg cites that Augustine "saw no invasion of the divine world order in miracles but related them simply to our limited knowledge of this order."⁷⁴ As Augustine stated: "Whatever is unusual is a miracle."⁷⁵ As such, "unusual events do not breach natural laws, but manifest the working of hitherto concealed parameters. Nor are we to see only deviations from the usual course of

72. Hunter, "Spinoza on Miracles," 48–49.

73. Pannenberg, "The Concept of Miracle," *Zygon*, vol. 37, no. 3 (September 2002): 759. See also, Pannenberg, "History and Reality of the Resurrection," in Gavin D'Costa, *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 65.

74. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, 46.

75. Pannenberg, "The Concept of Miracle," 760. (A reference to Augustine's *City of God* 21, 8, 3)

events as miracles.”⁷⁶ Augustine said that such events may appear contrary to human understanding of nature, but that is only because there are limits to human knowledge; for in God’s understanding, as Creator, such events are not necessarily contradictions.⁷⁷

Instead, Pannenberg adds, for Augustine

The existence of the world and humanity is a much greater miracle than all the spectacular events that astonish us because they are unusual. The only problem is that our minds are too dulled to perceive the miracle of creation in what place every day. The contingency of creation as a whole expresses itself in each detailed event. Since every moment and every event contingent, it is ultimately nonderivable. Its occurrence is thus a miracle.⁷⁸

Pannenberg agrees, then, with Schleiermacher who said that a “‘miracle is simply the religious name for event. Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle.’ Once it is related to the Infinite, the *Universum*.”⁷⁹

So, Pannenberg affirms, that miracles are simply “unusual events” within the “concealed parameters” of the natural order that are perceived as events of divine providence by the religious mind.⁸⁰ Contrary to medieval and modern thought, Pannenberg argues (contrary to Spinoza), that nature cannot be objectively understood by human experience. Rather, we need to return to an Augustinian theological view of natural science, which bases one’s understanding of nature on human subjective relationship to nature; that the natural order is merely something humans are accustomed to experiencing. The ultimate truth, then, is that everything and all events are contingent upon God.⁸¹

This mean, of course, miracles are ambivalent and are not always divine activity; sometimes an unusual event is simply that, an event with an unknown natural cause.⁸²

76. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, 46.

77. Pannenberg, “The Concept of Miracle,” 760. (A reference to Augustine’s *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* 6, 12, 24.)

78. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, 46.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, 45.

81. Pannenberg, “The Concept of Miracle,” 761.

82. This explains Pannenberg notes, the apparent miracles by Egyptian sorcerers or false prophets and the ‘beast’ of Revelation 13. Pannenberg, “The Concept of Miracle,” 761.

So to interpret something as a 'miracle' is to make a faith statement. While the religious mind sees nothing as a matter of fact, humans still take the natural order for granted. Miracles become an event, according to Pannenberg, for the radical awareness of contingency between God and man; a "basic contingency that permeates all reality." Pannenberg continues, "Such an unusual occurrence may be experienced as a 'miracle,' and the religious person will take it as an act of God, a 'sign' of the continuing activity of the Creator in creation and perhaps of new things to come."⁸³

When viewed in light of the contingency of all events, miracles are not violations of the order of nature but the order of nature is a miracle in itself. Natural laws merely "describe repetitive patterns in the sequence of events," and their miraculous character is how such patterns provide for complex creatures in this universe. Humans have failed to recognize the contingency of all things because of such patterns, and the unusual breaks our accustomed awareness. This does not mean, of course, unusual events are violations of these accustomed patterns but are rather "unusual occurrences may in fact follow other patterns of law that we do not know about."⁸⁴ This means that, while something may not be explainable today, it does not mean it will remain so always. Even the resurrection of Christ or the resurrection of the dead, Pannenberg contends, "need not defy such explanations in principle."⁸⁵

The Augustinian concept of miracles, then, does not reject the existence of a natural order; it only requires us to plead ignorance to exhaustive knowledge about natural patterns. Unusual events, therefore, even extremely unusual ones that had occurred in the past, may not be cause to deny their

83. Pannenberg, "The Concept of Miracle," 761.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid., 762. See also, Pannenberg, "Modern Cosmoslogy: God and the Resurrection of the Dead," <http://www.math.tulane.edu/~tipler/tipler/tipler3.html> (1997). Resurrection is an important point for Pannenberg, both the historic resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of Judaeo-Christian eschatology. One supports the other, in his mind, and neither are out of range of possibility for physical laws that are yet undiscovered. Pannenberg feels that the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, in one factors God into the equation of history, and the later resurrection of the righteous means that there are physical laws at work that humans are simply ignorant about today. See Pannenberg, "History and Reality of the Resurrection," in Gavin D'Costa, *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 65. See also, Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 343–363. See also, Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 66–106.

existence; that judgment is based on limited contemporary knowledge. So Hume's argument that miracles are not-possible because they run contrary to custom is no longer a sufficient reason to deny their possibility; and doing so would only be a dogmatic commitment not consistent with natural science.⁸⁶

Conclusion

This paper aimed at comparing the philosophical theological concepts of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Baruch Spinoza regarding the possibility and existence of miracles. Beginning with a challenge to the traditional interpretation of Spinoza on miracles, as maintained by Pannenberg, this paper presented recently advocated alternative interpretations that reveal Spinoza's openness to the miraculous. It then presented Pannenberg's own theory on miracles, highlighting their shared conceptions. With this, one can see that Pannenberg and Spinoza are not radically different in their theories on miracles. They both essentially argue for the radical contingency of the world upon God and the notion that miracles are simply unusual events that the religious person interprets as caused by God. The difference between Pannenberg and Spinoza comes, then, with the conception of God (the Infinite, the Universum) and conception of nature as fixed laws.

Pannenberg posits the classical Christian view of a transcendent but personal God, whereas Spinoza advocates a pantheistic monism. Regardless of their differing conceptions on God, both maintain the essential contingency of the world upon God, both as cause and sustainer. Nevertheless, while space does not allow the freedom to explore this further, I believe that Pannenberg's pneumatology augments his classical theology to incorporate the elements of pantheism necessary for his theory on miracles, and would constitute another parallel with Spinoza.⁸⁷ Regarding

86. Pannenberg, "The Concept of Miracle," 762.

87. Theologian Stanley Grenz noted that Pannenberg's pneumatology conceived the Holy Spirit as an "all-pervasive, creative presence in creation and human life, climaxing in the new life of the believer." Grenz continues:

Pannenberg relates the Christian affirmation of the Spirit as the source of life in creation to the biological discovery that life is essentially ecstatic. Every organism lives in an environment that nurtures it. And every organism is oriented by its own drives to move beyond its immediate environment toward the future of itself and its species. This is how creatures participate, in God through the Spirit, he asserts. The Spirit may be understood as the environmental network or,

the conception of nature as fixed laws, Pannenberg does reject Newtonian (and Einsteinian) physics, but in positing the fact that nature operates within parameters implies that there are some limitations to what can be done within the natural order.⁸⁸ Moreover, the notion of observable patterns within nature appears to suggest that Spinoza and Pannenberg merely disagree on metaphysical causality, as Spinoza understands also natural law to be merely regular patterns within nature.⁸⁹ Spinoza states: "The term 'law,' taken absolutely, signifies that according to which each individual, or all some members of the same species, act in one and the same fixed and definite manner."⁹⁰

"field" in which and from which creatures live. The Spirit is also the "force" that lifts them above their environment and orients them toward the future.

Another theologian, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen agrees with Grenz's interpretation here and adds that Pannenberg's 'force field' theory conceives of a cosmos where the Spirit is the "environmental network" in which all creatures live. "By virtue of the fact that they are alive, creatures participate in God through the Spirit" that has given them life. Kärkkäinen concludes, "So the Spirit as force field is the most comprehensive and powerful field in which creatures move." If one's conception of the Spirit involves a field of force that permeates the entire cosmos and its creatures, develops and evolves that cosmos and is central to a creature's connections with God, could this be considered a pantheistic notion? See Stanley Grenz, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Quest for Ultimate Truth, *The Christian Century* (September 14–21, 1988) 797; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 122.

88. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, 45.

89. E. M. Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 47.

90. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 36.