

Three Tensions Concerning Miracles: A Response to Edward Feser

Fr. Anselm Ramelow, O.P.

I would like to thank Prof. Feser for his perceptive comments on my article on the God of miracles. Some of the questions he raises will not have an easy answer. This is, I believe, not due to flaws in argumentation, but due to certain tensions in the subject matter itself.

I will address three such points of tension in the subject matter that I found indicated in the talk:

- 1) the notion of *metaphysical necessity*
- 2) *improvisations* and *director's cuts* as models for God's plan of *salvation history*
- 3) what can or should be *proved* by miracles

1) The Notion of *Metaphysical Necessity*

Let me begin with an observation on Prof. Feser's comment¹ that the laws of nature are *metaphysically necessary*, because they reflect the natures or essences of things. I stumbled over this phrase, because I understood this phrase to mean that such laws are *absolutely* necessary in the sense of Spinoza, who for that reason rejects the possibility of miracles. For if something is *absolutely* necessary, then not even God can interfere with it. If one were to formulate this metaphysical necessity in a semantics of possible worlds (which Spinoza would not), one would have to say that such natures and their laws would hold in all possible worlds.

Of course, it might be that such natures do not exist in all possible worlds, as Prof. Feser himself suggests. Yet even if we take "metaphysically necessary" in a minimal sense, meaning only "necessary within this one actual world that we are living in", even then the claim would be too strong for our purposes. If miracles, *ex hypothesi*, do happen in this one actual world, then they cannot be taken to change something that is metaphysically necessary. The "temporal revocation of a law" that Prof. Feser himself later considers would appear to be a contradiction, if the law is metaphysically necessary.

But not only miracles would be impossible, if we take the "laws of natures" to be metaphysically necessary. Even defects might then be impossible. This why I argued that laws of nature(s) describe what *normally* takes place, but not *universally* or with *absolute certainty*. It is part of the nature of things that they are open for variations – and variations that happen in two directions: "up" and "down."

- 1) **Variations Down:** namely by failure and defect. Horses have eye sight by nature; that is part of the law of their nature. Yet the nature of a horse is not "metaphysically necessary" in the sense that it would exclude the possibility of *blind* horses. – Then there are:
- 2) **Variations Up:** the same natures do have a (specific) obediencial potency to be elevated by grace and to do things miraculously that they could not do by their natural capacities alone (such as bilocating or levitating).

¹ "Since laws of nature reflect the natures or essences of things, they are *metaphysically necessary*."

Such up and down openness of natures should not be taken as flatly contradicting nature, but as a certain addition to and subtraction from the nature of things. Such variations are possible only in a metaphysics of act and potency. Defect and *Privation*, variation downward, is, in this understanding, a lack of actualization, while *grace* – variation upwards – can be considered an over-actualization.

Miracles will typically be variations *upward*, an elevation or over-actualizing of natures. This will normally be true. Yet, Prof. Feser points us to difficult cases that, to the contrary, seem outrightly *destructive* of nature. Jesus' drowning of a herd of swine comes to mind. Given such examples it seems harder to reject the notion of miracles as a *violation* of nature, or at least as a variation downwards.

Here I admit, I have no easy answer (and I don't think anyone has). Prof. Feser suggests the example of the three young men not being burned in the oven of Nebuchadnezzar. Here, fire's nature is destructively prevented from doing its thing. Prof. Feser rightly proposes that here God is not destroying something, but he is just *stopping to do* something, i.e., *not cooperating* with the usual actualization of the nature of fire. God is simply *leaving something out*.² In addition, I would suggest that this might actually be something positive, namely a positive power of resistance from the side of these three young man, resistance *against* the destructiveness of fire.

Still, there are harder cases to reckon with. Sometimes God seems to do something more directly violent, for example when Jesus curses the fig tree and it withers as a consequence. Perhaps this could still be understood in analogy to God's "hardening the heart of Pharaoh;" Aquinas understood this "hardening" to mean that God merely *refrains from giving* Pharaoh the grace of conversion, the hardening of the heart being a mere consequence.³ So it would still be a matter of leaving something out – in this case suspending the power of vegetative growth in the fig tree.

Such "leaving out" is often not even outside the normal course of nature. As C.S. Lewis points out when commenting on the withering of the fig tree: *all* plants eventually wither and die. That is itself part of their nature: many plants necessarily wither periodically as part of their natural life cycles.⁴ Here God merely accelerates the process, perhaps by stopping to cooperate with the normal life functions of the tree. Hence we do not have to conclude that God straightforwardly contradicts himself or violates his own creation.

Aquinas also uses the parallel of the ebb and tide of bodies of water on earth. Ebb and tide happen under the influence of the moon against the natural gravitational pull of water. Even though natural gravitation is contradicted by such a movement, Aquinas would not want to characterize this motion as "violent." Water is part of a larger system of nature, within which such motions are perfectly normal.

² In musical terms: leaving out some notes from the normal piece.

³ Aquinas makes an important qualification in *De Pot.* VI, 1 ad 8: God could not be the author of a defect that is directed against the first cause, himself. This would be both the definition of *sinful* evil and a self-contradiction.

⁴ Cf. C.S. Lewis, "Miracles," in: *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: Harper, 2002), 297-462, at 426f.

Still, in cases of chastisements and witherings, such events are – as *super*-natural occurrences – harder to distinguish from the mere *sub*-natural failure of the potential of a thing. The miraculousness of the effect might then just lie in the rapidity and totality of its occurrence. As the most extreme case we could consider the total disappearance of a thing, a failure not just of its *second* act, but of its *first* act. If the eschatological end of the world would be of that sort, then it would need to be considered a supernatural intervention; total annihilation would refer to the first cause just as much as the Big Bang.⁵

Still, how are we to make sense of destructive miracles? Generally, destruction would be considered sub-natural, a variation downward. But on a larger scale it could be in harmony with the super-natural order that constitutes a variation upward. Accordingly, Prof. Feser suggests that there could still be a positive “final cause.” Such final causes, I would suggest, are articulated not by descriptions of natural causalities, but by narratives – narratives that make intelligible the intentions and actions of rational agents. These intentions and their narratives constitute a larger story in which even something like a chastisement (such as the story of *Lot’s wife* or the *death of Ananias and Sapphira* (Acts 5: 1-11)) can be part of a greater good. Or, as C.S. Lewis suggests for the withered fig tree, it could be part of an enacted parable, which is its own form of narrative. In some cases, the destructive chastisement can also involve more than one agent: thus Aquinas suggests that the drowning of the swine is the work of the demons, not of Jesus, who merely *permits* the destruction of the swine in view of the larger story.⁶

Now the largest story to be told would be *salvation history*. And this leads us to the next section.

2) Improvisations and Director’s Cuts as Models for God’s Plan of Salvation History.

Considering this largest story, salvation history, Prof. Feser raises the question of how this story is best articulated. And here the difficulties might be more *theological* in nature, rather than philosophical.

Prof. Feser suggests two analogies:

- a) an analogy with **improvisation**, where God in working miracles improvises additions to the story.
- b) the “**director’s cut**” - analogy, where the larger story includes **new material**, perhaps even subplots and other scenes that dramatically alter the film, just as miracles dramatically alter the natural order of things.

Intuitively I prefer the second analogy, perhaps because improvisation seems to be a bit too loose when it comes to divine providence.

I myself suggested the idea of a “lost chapter” that is rediscovered and that finally makes the plot of the novel intelligible. I took this idea from C.S. Lewis’ very suggestive book. (C.S. Lewis

⁵ Leibniz would consider the periodic destruction of planetary systems as a form of judgment, yet as brought about by natural processes, as a “pre-established harmony between grace and nature;” *Monadology*, n. 88.

⁶ Cf. François Pouliot, *La doctrine du miracle chez Thomas d’Aquin; Deus in omnibus intime operator* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 67 and 130.

was an author himself, and had a marvelous eye for such features.) Prof. Feser does not particularly like Lewis' idea, because it would imply that nature on its own is deficient and unintelligible without the lost chapter of miracles. And indeed, on the largest scale, this analogy seems to imply that creation would have been deficient and unintelligible without the miracle of the incarnation – the incarnation constituting the lost chapter in the story.

Here we need to walk a fine line. There is no simple answer.

On the one hand we might side with Aquinas against Duns Scotus and deny an “absolute predestination” of Christ. That is, we would deny that Christ would have come, had Adam not sinned. Thus, without the fall, nature would have been complete and intelligible on its own; there would be no lost chapter.

Still, in postlapsarian terms, after the fall has actually happened, nature *has* become less intelligible and deficient; it has varied downwards. Thus, if we were to read the story without the chapter of the incarnation, it would be the story of a fall without redemption. It would be a story with a God who does not care or does not have a backup plan. I am not sure that this story would be intelligible. The *Exultet* of the Easter Vigil gives us some clues (*lex orandi, lex credendi*): the *Exultet* suggests that without the chapter of the incarnation our nature would not only be deficient, but our whole existence would be in vain. *Nihil enim nobis nasci prófuit, nisi rédimi profuísset*: “in vain would we have been born without the redemption.” So, yes, the analogy of the lost chapter does imply that in the actual order of things nature is deficient and unintelligible on its own. Moreover, since God was not surprised by the fall, even in a pre-lapsarian state this chapter was not outside of God's plan, i.e. it was not outside of the author's story. That is why the *Exultet* can sing of the *Happy Fault that gained for us such a redeemer*. The chapter was always part of the plan, even if, in the logical order, its planning *followed* the fall of Adam.

On the other hand, whiel nature in this sense incomplete, this should not lead us to think that nature anticipates the supernatural in its own terms. The story of salvation history is not just part of an *unfolding of nature*, as Hegelian forms of thought might suggest. Otherwise the incarnation, grace and miracles would be something *owed* to us. It would happen automatically, rather than being a story with choices and actions, with re-actions and Happy Faults that lead to our redemption. In this story, the supernatural variation of nature is not “always already” anticipated in a “supernatural existential” or in a *desiderium naturale videndi deum*. This would indeed, as Prof. Feser quotes *Humani Generis* 26, “destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order.” So we need to maintain that it is a true variation upwards.

And we do not thereby need to imply that our nature by its variation or elevation is *violated or interfered* with. I think it is philosophically reasonable to say that the human mind, being infinitely open to all reality, is capable of various degrees of actualization, from philosophical contemplation to the beatific vision, without the implication of a defect in the absence of the supernatural order. Again, I doubt that one can make sense of this tension apart from the analogy of being and a metaphysics of act and potency. If we are boxed in by univocal categories (Scotist fashion), then grace can only either destroy nature, making it into a different thing, or else add nothing new, such that there can be nothing new under sun.

In short, walking the fine line, I think we need to say two things: a) that nature has a certain completeness and intelligibility of its own, but also b) that, especially given the fall, the “lost”

chapter of the incarnation was always part of the story. It is not a mere arbitrarily added improvisation that might as well not have been there. The incarnation and resurrection remains the key to the whole that allows everything to fall into place.⁷

Thus a Jewish understanding of the biblical narrative will have some intelligibility, but it will lack a key to its deepest level of meaning. If we take Prof. Feser's analogy of God as the director of a film, then, at the point of the incarnation God becomes like Alfred Hitchcock, who famously liked to insert an episode, in which he himself walked across the scene. And so does God: the one through whom the heavens and the earth were created himself enters his story. This is a truly dizzying thought, and I think such dizziness is an ingredient to any experience of a miracle, which is by its nature *mirabile*, "wondrous."⁸

3) What Can or Should Be *Proved* by Miracles

Prof. Feser makes some comments about the evidence for miracles and the best use thereof. He would be hesitant to try and make a proof for the very existence of God from the fact of miracles, and I share that hesitation. I would not attempt to do that myself. Yet I do also appreciate daring attempts like that of William Lane Craig who tries to do just that, proving the existence of God from the evidence for the resurrection. Unless such arguments are so bad that they open Christians up to ridicule, I do appreciate anything that shows the reasonableness of faith. Still, I do agree with Prof. Feser that it is much more promising to begin with a philosophical proof for the existence of God. Having established the existence of God, the likelihood or prior probability of the occurrence of miracles will be much greater. Given God's existence the odds will significantly shift in the direction of evidence for a miracle. In addition, if it can be shown that God is *good* and that He *cares*, then it is not so unlikely that miracles actually happen.⁹

Here it is important to see that presupposing the existence of God is not a presupposition of faith. Beginning with a proof for the existence of God does not mean beginning with faith. We do not take the existence of God on faith, but on reason, beginning with a rational, philosophical argument for God. Thus, such an argument does become itself part of the rational evidence that we have for miracles, without begging the question.

But not only the existence of God, even the recognition of miracles does not presuppose faith. We do *not* accept miracles on faith. Rather, we accept our faith based on the evidence of miracles. "If you do not believe me, believe at least the works I am doing," says Jesus. Jesus here implies that "works"¹⁰ are visible to people that *do not yet have the faith*. As such, the acceptance

⁷ It is, as I had tried to argue in my article in the book, itself part of the evidence for the resurrection that it sheds light on the whole and constitutes the best explanatory hypothesis for what we know even without it.

⁸ Miracles continue the philosophical wonder of being, namely that something is rather than not: they highlight that there is something truly new under the sun, similar to creation or Big Bang.

⁹ If D. Hume weighs the evidence for miracles against the evidence for the laws of nature, then we might as well throw our philosophical knowledge of God into the balance of "prior probability."

¹⁰ These works reflect the work of creation in Genesis; now there is the work for the new heavens and new earth: "My Father and I are still at work."

of miracles has to be based on reasonable evidence and cannot already depend on faith. The existence of miracles cannot be taken on faith, since they are to prove the credibility of our faith in the first place.

Given such evidence, what, then, do miracles add to our knowledge of God? It seems that we do already have perfectly fine philosophical knowledge of God and his nature, even before we consider miracles. Are miracles then merely be a gratuitous illustration of what we know already? Or do they add something?

Prof. Feser suggests that the one thing miracles add is evidence for the truth of Christianity. As such, miracles would then allow for a rational transition from philosophy to faith.

Now this is certainly true. But I think that this is not the *only* thing miracles add to our philosophical knowledge of God. I would claim that miracles can provide empirical evidence for further philosophical insight about God. They do not so much add another proof for the existence of God, but they do further our knowledge of his nature; and this in the following way: However we are going to articulate the variations that miracles perform upon natures, these special acts of God show that he is the master of nature and its laws. Miracles show that natures and their laws are subject to Him, who is nature's author. And this, in retrospect, throws light on these natures themselves, namely that they come from the same source as the miracles, and that this source is not just a "first mover," but indeed a person, someone who is omnipotent, possesses foresight and purpose, is benevolent and free. Some of these properties might be deducible in other ways as well; but for the most part, miracles might be our best available evidence for these attributes of God. And I would not rule out that such evidence could be available *outside of* Christianity as well – such as God listening to the prayers of a pious Muslim woman, who is asking for the miraculous healing of her child. Evidence for miracles would then also tell us about God that He is a Being worthwhile praying to, and a Being to whom we can reasonable express gratitude. This is not trivial. Not all philosophies of God – and not even all religions – are compatible with that evidence.

And one does not yet have to be a Christian to come to see this evidence as such. One does not yet even have to be a theist. While proofs for the existence of God strengthen the evidence for miracles, this evidence is visible even to an atheist scientist. This is not merely an arbitrary claim from my side. It is precisely the method that the Church employs when she asks atheist doctors to look at the miracles of Lourdes. Such doctors will not necessarily be converted, but they can and will state that there is something naturally inexplicable.

So, why then is the atheist not converted? Is it, because we did not precede the evidence with a proof for the existence of God? I don't think so. For some, the insight comes *uno actu*: witnessing a miracle and coming to believe in the existence of God. Still, not all do so. Why not? Perhaps the evidence is not strong enough? I am not sure we can say that either. Otherwise our belief in and through miracles would not be rational and justifiable.

Here again we have a fine line to walk: Prof. Feser says, on the one hand, that St. Thomas the Apostle could not help being convinced by the encounter with the risen Christ. On the other hand, he seems to suggest that there is not enough evidence for miracles, because they do not happen frequently enough; after all, as miracles they cannot occur as frequently as the normal workings of nature.

I think that this seeming contradiction illustrates yet another tension that is worth keeping. But I suspect that the deeper reason for the tension might be found elsewhere. For I probably would have to disagree with Prof. Feser that miracles merely lack frequency and the necessary regular and repeatable patterns. Some miracles do, after all, happen in predictable patterns such as the annual liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius. Certainly, miracles do not have the same frequency as normal occurrences; but that does not make the miracles insufficient in evidence or certainty, as David Hume claimed. In fact, we can test many of them as we can test any well-confirmed theory. Some of the evidence can be subjected to repeated testing by the methods of forensic criminology, as has been done with the Shroud of Turin, the Tilma of St. Juan Diego and many Eucharistic miracles. Other confirmation is provided by medical testing as in the cases of the miracles of Lourdes.

So the evidence is not too weak, and here is where the Vat. I applies: *If anyone says...that miracles can never be known with certainty, nor can the divine origin of the Christian religion be proved from them: let him be anathema.*

On the other hand, I do not think that this should make us say that St. Thomas the Apostle was *necessarily* or *automatically* convinced by putting his fingers in Jesus' side. The point is that something can be objectively rational and certain, yet it can be subjectively unrecognized.

Cardinal **Newman** has a sermon for the feast day of St. Thomas the Apostle that addresses precisely this question. After quoting a number of scripture passages where people are praised for their faith, he warns his listeners that, on the one hand, what is praised here is not a form of fideism, not a belief without or against reason. On the other hand, he suggests that there are indeed necessary dispositions that lead to the *subjective acceptance* of the rational evidence:

Now these passages cannot mean that faith is against reason, or that reason does not ordinarily precede faith, for this is a doctrine quite contrary to Revelation, but I think I shall not be wrong in understanding them thus,—that with good dispositions faith *is* easy; and that without good dispositions, faith is *not* easy; and that those who were praised for their faith, were such as had already the good dispositions, and that those who were blamed for their unbelief, were such as were wanting in this respect, and would have believed, or believed sooner, had they possessed the necessary dispositions for believing, or a greater share of them.

In other words, there are two extremes to be avoided: 1) saying that the evidence is not rationally or quantitatively sufficient, and 2) that our belief is unavoidable or automatic. The evidence is enough for a miracle to be visible even to an atheist. But the act of faith still involves an assent that depends on both the cooperation of our will and the cooperation of God giving us the gift of faith.

What is required in terms of our cooperation – or, as Newman would say, our “good dispositions” – can be further illustrated with Blaise **Pascal**. Pascal famously insists that God gives enough evidence to those who seek him, but not enough to those who are indifferent or even defiant. God can only be found by those who seek him. In Pascal’s own words:

It was not, then, right that He should appear in a manner manifestly divine, and completely capable of convincing all men; but it was also not right that He should come in so hidden a manner that He could not be known by those who should sincerely seek Him. He has willed to make himself quite recognizable by those; and thus, willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart, He so regulates the knowledge of Himself that He has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek Him not. There is enough light for those who ... desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.

Does that mean that our belief depends on our desire or our will, rather than on evidence? By no means; the evidence is objectively there. It is not the fault of the evidence, if we are blind by our own fault and will. It is the *blindness* that is willful, not the belief.

Cardinal **Newman** makes the same point by contrasting the two attitudes as “active” and “passive” respectively:

The one goes to meet the truth; the other thinks that the Truth ought to come to him. The one examines into the proof that God has spoken; the other waits till this is proved to him.

He feels no personal interest in it; he thinks it not his own concern, but (if I may so say) God Almighty's concern. He does not care to make the most of his knowledge; he does not put things together; he does not add up his facts and cumulate his arguments; he leaves all this to be done for him by Him who speaks to him; and if he is to have any trouble in the matter, then he is willing to dismiss it altogether.

And next, supposing proof is actually offered him, he feels no sort of gratitude or delicacy towards Him who offers it: he says without compunction, "I do not see this"; and "that does not follow"; for he is a critic and a judge, not an inquirer, and he negotiates and bargains, when he ought to be praying for light.

Newman thought that it was the initial fault of the apostle Thomas that he wanted to prescribe to our Lord the way in which he was going to believe him. In the Gospel people are frequently portrayed as asking for signs and wonders, and when they are produced they are never the right ones.

What, then, is it that leads us to the right attitude, the attitude of true seekers? To Newman it was not a mere act of the will or arbitrary belief. Rather it was the voice of God speaking in our conscience. Knowledge of the existence of God does not come by preceding proofs, but from an encounter with God, the perception of a voice that speaks with authority. We might not understand correctly what the voice is saying. But precisely for that reason we are called to become seekers in order to attune our ears to hear the voice ever more clearly. To Newman it is the voice of conscience that “throws us out of ourselves,” that indeed makes us seekers in the

sense of Pascal. It requires us to look actively beyond ourselves, and to find God's communications beyond our own preconceptions.

And it is in this way that we will then also encounter the evidence for miracles. Sometimes it can happen all at once: encountering the evidence for a miracle and encountering God. But often it happens in a process of seeking and growth, which begins with recognizing God's voice. This voice speaks already, and most clearly, in children. Thus the encounter happens always already at the root of our being, because it is *in* our own nature that we find God *authorizing* this very nature. The authoritative voice of the author of nature asks us to trust this, our nature and its faculties – for without the faculties of our mind we could indeed neither question nor prove, nor disprove anything,¹¹ including the evidence for miracles.

And so I do not have simple answers to Prof. Feser's comments and suggestions. I do think that my answers are logically coherent, yet they do have to straddle certain tensions that are due to the very complexity of the subject matter.

¹¹ Cf. Anselm Ramelow, "Knowledge and Normality; Bl. John Henry Newman's 'Grammar of Assent' and Contemporary Skepticism." *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2013): 1081-114.