SCHLEIERMACHER'S METAPHYSICAL CRITIQUE OF MIRACLES

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Introduction

In *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher offers three critiques of miracles—a pragmatic, an epistemological, and a metaphysical critique.[1] Of these three critiques, by far the most important is Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique. In his own day, it was this critique that decisively distinguished Schleiermacher's account of miracles from the traditional orthodox account. In contemporary theological debates over contingency and divine action, it is this critique that underlies much of the continued skepticism towards miracles.[2] Now as then, Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles continues to be a live issue

In this essay I shall analyze Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles. Though Schleiermacher objects to miracles for undermining the feeling of absolute dependence that within his dogmatics grounds religious faith, Schleiermacher's case against miracles is not ultimately theological. And though Schleiermacher understands the system of nature as leaving no room for miracles, neither does Schleiermacher's case against miracles issue from the science of his day. In the end Schleiermacher's case against miracles is philosophical, issuing from his assimilation of Spinoza. Thus when my analysis of Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique against miracles turns to a rebuttal of that critique, I shall not trace how his critique breaks with traditional orthodoxy or Newtonian science, but rather show how his critique fails on its own—philosophical—terms.

[1]Schleiermacher's pragmatic and epistemological critiques are found in Schleiermacher (1830, §14.3, pp. 71-73), whereas his metaphysical critique is found in Schleiermacher (1830, §47, pp. 178-84).

[2]Cf. Wiles (1986).

Having mentioned in passing Schleiermacher's pragmatic and epistemological critiques of miracles, I want to say something about these critiques as they relate to his metaphysical critique. In the preface to the second edition of *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher denied being the creator of 'a new theological school', modestly claiming that he had 'invented nothing'.[3] Schleiermacher's theological project in *The Christian Faith* was to reconstruct Christian dogmatics around the believer's consciousness of feeling absolutely dependent.[4] Despite Schleiermacher's many contemporaries who regarded him as having decisively broken with the Christian tradition, Schleiermacher always regarded himself as a thoroughly Christian theologian, who in so reconstructing Christian dogmatics was faithfully preserving the essence of Christianity.

In writing the second edition of *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher was therefore at some pains to demonstrate his fidelity to the Christian tradition (especially the Reformed tradition). It is in this light that Schleiermacher's pragmatic and epistemological critiques of miracles must be viewed. When in §14 of *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher presents his pragmatic and epistemological critiques, it is not for the purpose of once and for all disqualifying miracles as an invalid concept (this task Schleiermacher leaves to the upcoming metaphysical critique in §47). Instead of disqualifying miracles outright, the pragmatic and epistemological critiques serve rather to show that miracles are dispensable.

Dispensable in what sense? Dispensable in the sense that (1) miracles are redundant appendages to faith, and that (2) the occurrence of a miracle can never be adequately verified. The first of these constitutes Schleiermacher's pragmatic critique of miracles, the second his epistemological critique. Defining miracles as 'phenomena in the realm of physical nature which are supposed not to have been caused in a natural manner',[5] Schleiermacher first takes a pragmatic line and argues that whether or not miracles exist, they are ill-equipped to produce faith. To this end he cites those instances

[3]Schleiermacher (1830, p. viii).
[4]Schleiermacher (1830, §4).
[5]Schleiermacher (1830, §14.3, p. 71).

in Scripture where people witnessed miracles but did not respond in faith, and conversely instances where people witnessed no miracles but did respond in faith. Schleiermacher then explicitly refers to 'Christ's oft-repeated command not to make [his] miracles more widely known'.[6] Thus in terms of furthering the believer's God consciousness, miracles have for Schleiermacher a negligible role.

Schleiermacher's epistemological critique of miracles corresponds to what nowadays is called the god-of-the-gaps objection to miracles. Even if there were such a thing as a miracle (i.e., a phenomenon in the realm of physical nature which has not been caused in a natural manner), how could we ever recognize it? Alternatively, how could we definitively exclude the possibility that a phenomenon was after all caused in a natural manner? As Schleiermacher saw it,

> In any other context than that of ... faith and its realm, we may encounter any number of facts which we cannot explain naturally, and yet we never think of miracle, but simply regard the explanation as deferred until we have a more exact knowledge both of the fact in question and the laws of Nature.[7]

For Schleiermacher, to know that a miracle has occurred is to know the truth of a universal negation. Thus for a subject S to know that an event E is a miracle, S would have to know that for all natural laws L, it is not the case that L explains E. And this seems to require that S explicitly identify every conceivable natural law that might explain E on a gigantic list, and then eliminate each of these laws from the list as inadequate for explaining E. Formulated in this way, the task of demonstrating that E is a miracle becomes impossible for any finite rational agent.

Although these critiques by Schleiermacher carry some weight, they hardly destroy the concept of miracle. Against Schleiermacher's pragmatic critique, one can argue that even though miracles never guarantee faith, they might nonetheless furnish one means by which God on occasion chooses to

[6]Schleiermacher (1830, §14.3, p. 71).
[7]Schleiermacher (1830, §14.3, pp. 71-72).

elicit faith. Schleiermacher makes much of those places in Scripture where miracles fail to elicit faith and where faith is elicited apart from miracles. But he uniformly ignores or dismisses those occasions in Scripture where miracles do seem to elicit faith. Jesus' statement in John 14:11 where he urges the disciples to believe on account of his works (i.e., miracles) is a case in point. In *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher cites this verse twice,[8] but never to acknowledge that miracles might be a vehicle by which God can at least in principle elicit faith.

On the other hand, against Schleiermacher's epistemological critique, one can argue that knowledge of a universal negation does not demand an explicit identification and rejection of each thing being quantified over. Yes, for an event E to be a miracle, it must be the case that for all natural laws L, L does not explain E. It does not follow, however, that for a subject S to know that E is a miracle, S has to explicitly identify each possible natural law L and then verify that L does not explain E. Scientists claim to know plenty of universal negations without ever having explicitly identified and rejected everything to which those negations might apply.

For example, physicists are convinced there are no perpetual motion machines. They maintain this conviction without examining all the mechanical devices in the universe, much less determining for each of these devices whether its motion eventually halts. Physicists have theoretical reasons for rejecting perpetual motion machines, most notably the second law of thermodynamics. So too, there can be theoretical reasons for thinking that natural laws are incapable of explaining an event—and thus for designating an event a miracle—apart from a complete and explicit examination of every single natural law which might explain that event.[9]

Schleiermacher's pragmatic and epistemological critiques do not overthrow the concept of miracle. They are easily enough challenged. And even if left unchallenged, they do not demonstrate that belief in miracles is irrational. It is consistent with these two critiques that miracle remains a coherent

[8]Schleiermacher (1830, §99, p. 422 and §122, p. 566).

[9]See for instance my article 'On the Very Possibility of Intelligent Design' in Moreland (1994, pp. 113-38).

concept. Perhaps miracles do not serve to elicit faith, and perhaps they cannot be known in a strict scientific sense. But Schleiermacher has done nothing to show that 'phenomena in the realm of physical nature' which have not 'been caused in a natural manner' are impossible. For a putative miracle like the bodily resurrection of Jesus, an explanation of how this event could have occurred in a 'natural manner' has yet to be given. Since there is no way to guarantee that such an explanation will never be given, Schleiermacher's epistemological critique shows that designating Jesus' bodily resurrection a miracle is potentially falsifiable. What this critique does not show, however, is that this designation is incoherent. For that we need Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique, which does contend that the very notion of miracle is incoherent.

Relativized and Absolute Miracles

What then is Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles, and how does it render the concept of miracle incoherent? Before answering these questions, we need to be clear precisely which notion of miracle Schleiermacher is seeking to overthrow with his metaphysical critique. Schleiermacher works with two notions of miracle, one a relativized notion, the other an absolute notion. Failure to distinguish these two notions has led to confusions in making sense of Schleiermacher's view of miracles.

For instance, in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* Albert Schweitzer takes Schleiermacher to task for not having clarified his view of miracles, remarking with a pun, 'Freilich hat auch keiner so geschickt zu verschleiern gewusst, was er [i.e., Schleiermacher] zuletzt von Wundern festhält und was nicht.'[10] Schweitzer's criticism of Schleiermacher is not in the end justified. Schleiermacher was a more careful thinker than Schweitzer gives him credit. Indeed, a close reading of

[10]Quoted in Loos (1966, p. 19, n. 1). The quote may be translated, 'Of course no one was as skilled at veiling what in the end he really did and did not hold of miracles.' The pun centers on the word translated 'veiling'—Schleiermacher literally means 'veil maker'.

Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* leaves no doubt where Schleiermacher finally stood in his view of miracles. Nevertheless, it is instructive to see how Schweitzer might have been misled into thinking that Schleiermacher was less than forthcoming in the view of miracles he disseminated for public consumption.

Certainly as Schleiermacher describes it, the invasion of the God consciousness into human history through Jesus Christ smacks of the miraculous.[11] Nor does Schleiermacher help his case when directly after presenting his epistemological critique of miracles, he appears to give back with one hand what he has just taken away with the other:

> Once Christ is recognized as Redeemer, and consequently as the beginning of the supreme development of human nature in the realm of the self-consciousness, it is a natural assumption that ... He who exercises such a peculiar influence upon human nature around Him will be able, in virtue of the universal connexion of things, to manifest also a peculiar power of working upon the physical side of human nature and upon external Nature. That is to say, it is natural to expect miracles from Him who is the supreme divine revelation....[12]

Is this an about face? Not quite. As Schleiermacher immediately continues,

> And yet, they can be called miracles only in a *relative sense,* since our ideas of the susceptibility of physical Nature to the influence of the spirit and of the causality of the will acting upon physical Nature are as *far from being finally settled* and as *capable of being perpetually widened* by new experiences as are our ideas of the forces of physical Nature themselves.... Similar phenomena might occur even apart from all connexion with the realm of religion, whether as accompanying other kinds of development or as *signalizing deeper movements in physical Nature* itself.[13]

[11]See especially Schleiermacher (1830, §§11 and 100).

[12]Schleiermacher (1830, §14.3, p. 72).

[13]Schleiermacher (1830, §14.3, pp. 72-3), italics added. Though Schleiermacher seems in this passage to be granting more room to miracles than Spinoza, in point of fact Schleiermacher is agreeing with Spinoza that designating something a miracle

What we are left with, then, are *relativized miracles*, that is, miracles relative to our current knowledge and experience. So long as something cannot be accounted for on the basis of current knowledge or experience, it can be said to constitute a relativized miracle. But since our knowledge and experience are always changing, it ever remains a possibility that what we regard as a miracle today can lose this status tomorrow, finding an explanation in the 'deeper movements in physical Nature.'

Schleiermacher's dogmatics accommodates relativized miracles. What Schleiermacher's dogmatics cannot accommodate, however, is *absolute miracles*.[14] In §47 of *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher defines absolute miracles as events that entail 'an absolute suspension of the interrelatedness of nature'.[15] In §14 of *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher had defined miracles as events 'in the realm of physical nature which are supposed not to have been caused in a natural manner'.[16] In setting the stage for his metaphysical critique of miracles in §47, Schleiermacher therefore needs to tighten up his earlier definition of miracles. At issue is what it means for an event not to have been caused in a natural manner.

Schleiermacher sets up the problem as follows: Nature (or the system of nature) is an interrelated (or interdependent) nexus of causes and effects. Ordinarily, when an event happens, there is a natural cause that explains it. Thus ordinarily, when an event E happens, there is a natural cause C that explains E. Let us denote this relation of natural causation between C and E by $C \Rightarrow E$. Consider now what it must mean for an event M to be a miracle in the sense of suspending the causal interrelatedness of nature (i.e., for M to be an absolute miracle). Certainly M must satisfy a universal negation of the sort Schleiermacher considered in §14 of *The Christian Faith*, to wit, that there is no natural cause C such that $C \Rightarrow M$. This can be expressed more formally by

constitutes an expression of ignorance. The *locus classicus* for Spinoza's view of miracles is found in chapter 6 of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*—see Spinoza (1670, ch. 6).

[14]Schleiermacher (1830, §47, p. 181).

[15]Schleiermacher (1830, §47, p. 180).

[16]Schleiermacher (1830, §14.3, p. 71).

(α) For all natural causes X, it is not the case that X ⇒ M

This cannot be the whole story, however. For Schleiermacher, nature forms a causal nexus. It is therefore insufficient to characterize a putative miracle M as simply an isolated event lacking a natural cause. The problem is that in suspending the interrelatedness of nature, the occurrence of a miracle M precludes the occurrence of some other event W that *would have* occurred if the deity had not intervened and replaced M for W within the causal nexus of nature. A miracle always involves a *substitution.* Something that would ordinarily have happened must not happen if a miracle is going to occur.[17] A cause C was all set to operate to produce W. But instead the deity intervened and produced an event M that is incompatible with W. Formally, this relation between C, M, and W can represent this as follows:

(β) C has happened; C ⇒ W; M is incompatible with W; but M happened instead of W

Schleiermacher's conception of an absolute miracle can now be characterized as follows: an absolute miracle is any event M that satisfies (α) and (β). Conditions (α) and (β) taken together unpack what Schleiermacher means by 'an absolute suspension of the interrelatedness of nature'. Absolute miracles are not simply events that are inexplicable in terms of natural causes or (equivalently) natural laws. In addition, they are events that usurp the place of the ordinary events that would otherwise have occurred. Unlike relativized miracles, absolute miracles have no place in Schleiermacher's dogmatics. The upshot of Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles in §47 of *The Christian Faith* is that absolute miracles constitute an incoherent category of thought, and as such need to be rigorously excised from Christian dogmatics.

[17]Schleiermacher (1830, §47, pp. 181-2). Actually, Schleiermacher introduces an unnecessary subtlety here, distinguishing miracles in which something that was supposed to happen fails to happen (negative miracles) from miracles in which something that was not supposed to happen does happen (positive miracles). The logic is the same for both cases, however, since in either case something still happens (even the failure of some event happening constitutes an event).

We now turn to Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles. (Note that in the sequel I shall use 'miracle' and 'absolute miracle' interchangeably, letting Schleiermacher's notion of a 'relativized miracle' take second seat.)

The Metaphysical Critique

Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles in §47 of *The Christian Faith* can now be readily summarized. Schleiermacher makes the standard rationalist move of subsuming causality under logical entailment. Once this move is made, (β) is no longer simply a metaphysical claim about the world, but a logical claim whose internal coherence is subject to the ordinary rules of logic. Let the arrow → denote logical entailment, and as before, let the arrow ⇒ denote the cause-effect relation. Since causality is subsumed under logical entailment, replacing the causal arrow ⇒ with the arrow of logical entailment → does not change the truth of (β).

Corresponding to the original condition (β) one therefore obtains the following logically equivalent reformulation of this condition:

(β′) C; C → W; not both M and W; but M

Unlike the original causal version (β), the logical version (β′) is directly subject to the ordinary rules of logic. By manipulating this logic, one very quickly derives a contradiction from (β′):

> Since M, but not both M and W, therefore not-W. Since C → W and not-W, therefore by modus tollens not-C. But C. Contradiction.

It follows that (β′) is self-contradictory, that (β) is in turn self-contradictory, and therefore that the concept of miracle is incoherent.

Let us now flesh out this bare-bones summary of Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique. First, let us consider the influence of science upon his critique. Schleiermacher wrote *The Christian Faith* in the earlier portion of the 1800's,

well after the rise of modern science with Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton. In identifying causality with a relation of logical necessity (i.e., with the entailment relation symbolized by the arrow →), was Schleiermacher therefore making a move mandated by the prevailing science of his day? The correct answer to this question is No. Though in Schleiermacher's day Newton remained the premier scientist, Schleiermacher attributed only limited importance to his contributions. Thus in his *History of Philosophy* Schleiermacher remarks,

> [The Newtonian philosophy] is full of true discoveries, but still always only from the observation of single functions of nature, and thus a mere aggregate, without any tendency to bring forth a whole.[18]

The science of Schleiermacher's day was too miserly in its philosophical commitments to yield the comprehensive world picture that Schleiermacher and his fellow Romantics desired. Newton and the British empiricists generally, whether devout Christians like Robert Boyle or skeptical libertines like David Hume, would thus have been unwilling to follow Schleiermacher in his move of assimilating natural causes to logical necessity. Their attitude towards natural causes would have been captured, rather, in Newton's 'General Scholium' to the second edition of his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*: '*Hypotheses no fingo*' (i.e., 'I feign no hypotheses').[19] As Pearcey and Thaxton remark,

> [Newton] insisted that the concept of force he had introduced was not an ultimate explanation at all—either occult *or* mechanistic. It was merely a postulate used to explain observations. Ultimate explanations, Newton said, should be left out of science. This is the context in which he uttered his famous expression *hypotheses non fingo*.[20]

Given this minimalist view of science, Newton and his disciples had no difficulty retaining a full-fledged notion of miracles

[18]Quoted from Brandt (1941, p. 214).
[19]Newton (1958, p. 302).
[20]Pearcey and Thaxton (1994, p. 90).

wherein a transcendent deity intervened within nature.[21] Even the great John Locke, Newton's contemporary and the premier philosopher in his day, regarded miracles as having evidential value—perfectly capable, as he put it, of 'procuring belief'.[22]

Hume was the only notable exception among the British empiricists, arguing on the basis of a crude inductivism that empirical evidence could never establish a miracle.[23] Hume's critique, like Schleiermacher's epistemological critique, focused on our incapacity to know miracles. Now for all the attention that philosophers have heaped on Hume's critique, it, like all epistemological critiques of miracles, must always remain inconclusive. Humans are ever devising new ways of knowing things. Even within the hard sciences Hume's crude inductivism has long since been discarded. The models of rationality that philosophers of science are currently using to describe the nature and development of scientific knowledge do not close the door to miracles.[24] Epistemological critiques must invariably confront G. K Chesterton's insight that 'we do not know enough about the unknown to know that it is unknowable.'

Even if an epistemological critique succeeds in weakening our conception of miracle (say by convincing us that miracles are much harder to validate than previously suspected), an epistemological critique can never succeed in overthrowing the concept of miracle. The problem with epistemological critiques in general is that our capacity or incapacity to know something is never determinative of a thing's status in reality. Mathematicians are quick to appreciate this point. Consider, for instance, Goldbach's conjecture, a famous open problem in arithmetic that has been on the books for over two centuries now. As philosophers Bradley and Swartz describe this problem,

[21]More than half of Newton's writings were concerned solely with religion and alchemy—see Gregory's introduction to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in Spinoza (1670, p. 9).

[22]Locke (1690, p. 382). See also the paragraphs on miracles in Locke (1695).

[23]Hume (1748, ch. 10).

[24]Peter Lipton's model of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) might even make 'divine intervention' the best explanation for a given phenomenon—see Lipton (1991).

> Goldbach's Conjecture [asserts that] every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes... . Goldbach's Conjecture is easily understood. In fact we understand it well enough to be able to test it on the first few of an infinite number of cases... . [But] for all we know, it may turn out to be unprovable by any being having the capacities for knowledge-acquisition which we human beings have. Of course, we do not *now* know whether or not it will eventually succumb to our attempts to prove it. Maybe it will. In this case it will be known ratiocinatively. But then, again, maybe it will not. In that case it may well be one of those propositions whose truth is not known because its truth in *unknowable*. At present we simply do not know which.[25]

The point to appreciate about Bradley and Swartz's remarks is that regardless whether mathematicians ever prove or disprove Goldbach's conjecture, there is a right and a wrong answer to the question *Is Goldbach's conjecture true?*—the right answer being either Yes or No.

Reality and our ability to know reality are always two separate questions. In the case of Goldbach's conjecture, a definite fact of the matter is at stake. Either mathematical reality is so constituted that every even number greater than 2 is decomposable into a sum of two primes, or there is some even number N that is greater than 2 for which no primes p and q can be found such that p + q = N. So too, in the case of any putative miracle M, one can take the view that a definite fact of the matter is at stake—Is M a miracle or is it not? One's capacity to know whether a given event M constitutes a miracle will then always become a separate question. Perhaps faith needs to be presupposed before we can know that an event M constitutes a miracle.[26] But the question itself whether M is a miracle will continue to have a definite answer—the right answer being either Yes or No.

Now it is precisely at this point that Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique seeks to overthrow the concept of mira-

[25]Bradley and Swartz (1979, pp. 147-149).

[26]Alan Richardson (1942, p. 127) takes this position in his discussion of Jesus' miracles: 'Only those who came in faith understood the meaning of the acts of power. That is why any discussion of the Gospel miracles must begin, as we began, with a consideration of the biblical theology, with the faith which illuminates their character and purpose.'

cle. Yes, mathematical reality is so constituted that Goldbach's conjecture is either true or false. But no, physical reality is not so constituted that miracles can meaningfully be affirmed or denied. To use another mathematical analogy, miracles are like dividing by zero and asking what number one gets. Mathematical reality excludes division by zero. One simply cannot divide by zero. The question—What number does one get when one divides 2 by zero?—admits no answer. The question is ill-formed. It is semantically illegitimate. So too, to ask whether a given event M is a miracle is illegitimate according to Schleiermacher. The very concept of miracle is incoherent. It cannot avoid self-contradiction. This is the upshot of Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles.

Since Schleiermacher obviously did not obtain this critique from the science of his day, whence then did he obtain it? The gray eminence in this story is Spinoza. After Plato, Schleiermacher could not sing Spinoza's praises highly enough. In his early days (1793-1796) Schleiermacher had regarded Spinoza as 'in every respect superior'[27] to Leibniz—no mean feat. In his subsequent *Speeches* (1799) Schleiermacher would write,

> Offer with me reverently a tribute to the manes of the holy ... Spinoza. The high World-Spirit pervaded him; the Infinite was his beginning and his end; the Universe was his only and his everlasting love. In holy innocence and in deep humility he beheld himself mirrored in the eternal world and perceived how he also was its most worthy mirror. He was full of religion, full of the Holy Spirit. Wherefore, he stands there alone and unequalled.[28]

In his still later *History of Philosophy* (1812) Schleiermacher would refer to Spinoza as the flower and crown of the movement that began with Descartes.[29] In *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher defines 'freedom' in terms identical with

[27]Quoted in Brandt (1941, p. 36).
[28]Schleiermacher (1799, p. 40).
[29]Brandt (1941, p. 146, n. *).

Spinoza (i.e., a being is free if its actions are determined by itself alone).[30]

In both his epistemological and his metaphysical critiques of miracles Schleiermacher faithfully follows Spinoza's sixth chapter in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. There Spinoza offers both an epistemological and a metaphysical critique of miracles that parallels Schleiermacher's critiques in *The Christian Faith*. Spinoza's epistemological critique in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* reads as follows:

> Just as men are accustomed to call divine the kind of knowledge that surpasses human understanding, so they call divine, or the work of God, any work whose cause is generally unknown.... Therefore unusual works of Nature are termed miracles, or works of God by the common people; and partly from piety, partly for the sake of opposing those who cultivate the natural sciences, they prefer to remain in ignorance of natural causes, and are eager to hear only what is least comprehensible to them.[31]

A few paragraphs later Spinoza presents his metaphysical critique:

> Since nothing is necessarily true save by the divine decree, it quite clearly follows that the universal laws of Nature are merely God's decrees, following from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature. 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. Or if anyone were to maintain that God performs some act contrary to the laws of Nature, he would at the same time have to maintain that God acts contrary to his own nature—than which nothing could be more absurd.[32]

In the latter metaphysical critique, Spinoza presents a proof by contradiction that the very concept of miracle is incoherent. In *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher presents an entirely parallel proof by laying out condition (β), i.e.,

[30]Compare Spinoza (1677, bk. 1, def. 7) with Schleiermacher (1830, §81.2, p. 334).
[31]Spinoza (1670, p. 124).
[32]Spinoza (1670, p. 126).

(β) C has happened; C $\Rightarrow$ W; M is incompatible with W; but M happened instead of W

and then collapsing the causality relation (symbolized by the double-arrow $\Rightarrow$) into a relation of logical necessity (symbolized by the single-arrow $\rightarrow$, and usually called entailment). And this, as we saw earlier, warrants the reformulation of (β) as (β'), i.e.,

(β') C; C $\rightarrow$ W; not both M and W; but M

which in turn entails an immediate contradiction.

If in formulating his metaphysical critique of miracles Schleiermacher is directly appropriating Spinoza, the question arises: Why examine Schleiermacher's critique at all, and not focus instead strictly on Spinoza? The logic of their critiques is after all the same. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Christian theology Schleiermacher's critique is far more useful than Spinoza's. Having placed himself squarely within the Christian tradition, Schleiermacher must try to make sense of that tradition in the light of a metaphysical critique of miracles. Unlike Spinoza, who never hides his contempt for miracles, Schleiermacher must try his best to make room for miracles within the system of nature.

Granted, Schleiermacher never succeeds in making room for miracles. But his valiant attempts are far more instructive than Spinoza's continual invective against the superstitions of 'the common people'. Having dashed miracles against the altar of nature, Schleiermacher attempts every means possible to resurrect the notion. If there is anything Spinoza has missed, Schleiermacher will be sure to find it. More significantly, by analyzing what it would mean for God to substitute a miracle for an event that otherwise would have occurred by natural causes, Schleiermacher clarifies what is at stake in preserving the traditional understanding of miracle as God intervening in nature.[33]

[33]For a helpful historical discussion of the traditional understanding of miracles, see Loos (1965, pp. 37-42).

THE FLY IN SCHLEIERMACHER'S NATURALISTIC OINTMENT

Spinoza's and Schleiermacher's metaphysical critiques of miracles have not gone unchallenged. When their critiques are challenged, invariably the fault is located in their choice of metaphysical first principles.[34] The key philosophical difficulty in Spinoza's and Schleiermacher's critiques remains their identification of causality with logical necessity. Thus Tennant will write,

> [Spinoza] naively assumed the order and connexion of pure ideas to be identical with the order and connexion of things, and *causa* to be identical with *ratio*. Hence it was natural for representatives of the rationalistic school to assert that laws concerning actuality were characterised by logical necessity.[35]

Unfortunately, simply noting that Spinoza and Schleiermacher collapsed causality into logical necessity does not take us very far in rebutting their view of miracles. Tennant is right in saying that Spinoza identified causality with logical necessity. He is not right, however, in saying that Spinoza did this naively. Spinoza and Schleiermacher knew exactly what was at stake in this identification, both philosophically and theologically.

The fundamental thing at stake for them in this identification was whether everything that happens in the world is ordained by God. What happens in the world belongs to the realm of causality. What God ordains belongs to the realm of logical necessity (the idea being that whatever God ordains necessarily happens). Yet unless what happens in the world can be subsumed under what God ordains, the world becomes a place beyond God's control; worse yet, God becomes a truncated deity who can no longer claim such attributes as omniscience and omnipotence without mincing words. Spinoza and Schleiermacher were not atheists, nor were they process theologians. They were hard-core theological determinists whose theology demanded that everything in nature be ordained by God.

[34]See Loos (1965, p. 43).
[35]Tennant (1925, p. 10).

The problem of adequately rebutting Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles therefore consists not simply in recognizing that causality and logical necessity have been collapsed, but rather in showing how they can avoid being collapsed if an omnipotent God who ordains everything down to the minutest detail is to be kept in the picture. This is the rub. Without an omnipotent God who ordains everything, it is easy enough to avoid collapsing causality and logical necessity.[36] The problem is to retain a God who ordains everything, and at the same time to avoid collapsing causality into logical necessity. Equivalently, the problem is to find a theological determinism that avoids a strict causal determinism.

To see what is at stake in such a theological determinism, consider once again Schleiermacher's definition of (absolute) miracle. As he defined it, M is an (absolute) miracle just in case M satisfies the following two conditions:

(α) For all natural causes X, it is not the case that $X \Rightarrow M$
(β) There is some natural cause C such that C has happened; $C \Rightarrow W$; M is incompatible with W; but M happened instead of W

Suppose now we ascribe to God omnipotence in the sense that anything God ordains comes to pass necessarily. Omnipotence in this sense can be expressed formally by the following condition:

(γ) For all Y (Y totally unrestricted), it is necessarily the case that if God ordains Y, then Y comes to pass.

Whether Schleiermacher's notion of omnipotence is richer than (γ) can for now be bracketed. The point is that in ascribing omnipotence to God, Schleiermacher (and Spinoza) demanded no less than (γ).[37]

[36]Process theologians, for instance, do this all the time—see Case-Winters (1990, pt. 3).

[37]Schleiermacher and Spinoza employ the language of 'ordination', 'will', and 'decrees' throughout their work, and use these terms synonymously. When applied to God this language signifies the necessity of what is determined coming to pass. See Schleiermacher (1830, §54, p. 211 ff.) and Spinoza (1670, ch. 6) for examples of how they use these terms.

Given (β) and (γ), Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles may now be characterized as follows: God ordains the system of nature taken as a whole, and thus by implication ordains every instance of the causal relation ⇒ as it connects a given cause to a given effect; hence for any natural cause C, (γ) underwrites the identification of C ⇒ W with C → W in (β); but once this identification is made, (β) enters a self-contradiction, and the notion of miracle becomes incoherent. The logic in this chain of reasoning is impeccable—the chain itself constitutes a valid argument. If therefore the conclusion of this argument is problematic, one of its premises has to be problematic also. But which one?

The problematic premise is that God should have ordained a 'system of nature', or as Schleiermacher calls it, a *Naturzusammenhang*. I submit that there is no *Naturzusammenhang*. Schleiermacher's *Naturzusammenhang* is not properly speaking the world—i.e., the place where humans live, move, and have their being. The very conception of a *Naturzusammenhang* already presupposes that the world is a self-contained system of natural causes. In other words, the *Naturzusammenhang* presupposes a thoroughgoing metaphysical commitment to naturalism from the start. Accordingly, Schleiermacher's *Naturzusammenhang* is not the world, but a metaphysical fiction that Schleiermacher has substituted for the world.

The preceding paragraph asserts more than I am prepared to justify in the few remaining pages of this essay. Ultimately the status of Schleiermacher's *Naturzusammenhang* will have to be decided on theological grounds, not with the philosophical propaedeutic I am presenting here. Indeed, as a strictly logical matter, there is no inherent contradiction in God ordaining physical reality to operate strictly in accord with universal laws of natural causation. Pace Schleiermacher, it is possible that God has ordained the world to be a *Naturzusammenhang*, i.e., a closed system in which everything operates according to universal laws of natural causation.

The crucial point to realize, however, is that this is not the only possibility. It is also possible that God has ordained the world to be other than a *Naturzusammenhang*. If God has ordained the world to be a *Naturzusammenhang*, then of neces-

sity everything that happens in the world must obey universal laws of natural causation. Nevertheless, it is another question entirely whether it is necessary for God to have so ordained the world in the first place. The idea that it is necessary for God to have ordained the world as a *Naturzusammenhang* is, as we shall now see, philosophically insupportable.

The problem with requiring God to ordain the world as a *Naturzusammenhang* is that it artificially constricts the range of things God may ordain. This artificial constriction of metaphysical options becomes especially evident in Schleiermacher's treatment of prayer. In arguing against the possibility of miracles as 'an absolute suspension of the interrelatedness of nature', Schleiermacher notes that one reason Christians are unwilling to give up miracles is because they understand answered prayer in miraculous terms. As Schleiermacher puts it,

> Prayer seems really to be heard only when because of it an event happens which would not otherwise have happened: thus there seems to be the suspension of an effect which, according to the interrelatedness of nature should have followed.[38]

Again we have a case of condition (β) being fulfilled, this time with an answer to prayer substituting for the event that would have happened if the prayer had not been offered. And of course, this understanding of prayer is unacceptable to Schleiermacher:

> Prayer and its fulfilment or refusal are only part of the original divine plan, and consequently the idea that otherwise something else might have happened is wholly meaningless.[39]

Though this refutation of efficacious prayer[40] follows as a corollary of Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of mira-

[38]Schleiermacher (1830, §47, p. 180).

[39]Schleiermacher (1830, §47, p. 180).

[40]By efficacious prayer I mean prayer which makes a difference in the sense that without the prayer being offered, things would have turned out differently. In the subsequent discussion of efficacious prayer I have been helped enormously by Nancey Murphy's article 'Does Prayer Make a Difference?'—see Murphy (1989).

cles, there is a difficulty here which becomes much more apparent in the concrete context of efficacious prayer than it does in the more general context of Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles. The difficulty centers on the question of fatalism. Though Schleiermacher was a determinist, he was clearly not a fatalist.[41] The rejection of fatalism by philosophically sophisticated determinists goes back at least to the Stoics of old. As Roy Weatherford remarks in his monograph on determinism,

> While the Stoics were determinists, they rejected fatalism. Against the 'Idle Argument' (When I am ill it is idle to consider calling the physician, for if I am fated to die, the physician cannot prevent it and if I am fated to get well, I have no need of the physician), Chrysippus responded with the notion of 'condestinate' events: events that are [destined] to occur only together. Thus, I am [destined] to get well *as a result of* my calling the physician. The universal causal determinism of the Stoics makes *nothing* idle or pointless—every little thing or event has its role to play in the grand scheme of the Universe [cf. Schleiermacher's *Naturzusammenhang*], without which the world would be different and contrary to God's plan.[42]

Schleiermacher's refutation of prayer constitutes an Idle Argument. Schleiermacher explicitly repudiates conditionals of the form 'If I had not prayed, things would be different.' Yet as a non-fatalist, Schleiermacher must surely embrace conditionals of the form 'If I had not gone to the physician, things would be different,' especially if he is ill and the physician holds the key to his cure. Chrysippus's refutation of the Idle Argument through condestinate events requires that counterfactual conditionals like 'If I had not gone to the physician, things would be different' be taken seriously. How, then, does Schleiermacher justify dismissing counterfactual conditionals like 'If I had not prayed, things would be different'? Whence the double standard?

The answer clearly depends on Schleiermacher having limited the range of God's ordaining activity. For

[41]Cf. Schleiermacher's discussion of human responsibility for sin in Schleiermacher (1830, §81.2, p. 334).

[42]Weatherford (1991, p. 28).

Schleiermacher God ordains precisely one thing, to wit, a *Naturzusammenhang* whose operation is from start to finish conditioned by universal laws of natural causation. 'If I had not gone to the physician, things would be different' is not an idle conditional for Schleiermacher because the physician operates in accord with those universal laws of natural causation that govern the cure of illness. On the other hand, 'If I had not prayed, things would be different' is an idle conditional for Schleiermacher because there is no chain of natural causes from, say, Isaac praying that Rebecca bear a child to Rebecca actually conceiving and bearing a child.

We must now confront the obvious question: Why should God be limited to ordaining a *Naturzusammenhang*? It seems that there are all sorts of things God could, at least in principle, ordain. God could ordain that prayers offered in faith get answered and make a difference. God could ordain that nature exhibit a certain regularity for a time and thereafter cease to exhibit it. God could ordain a certain event unconditionally (cf. God's promise to Abraham to make him a great nation). God could ordain another event conditionally (cf. God's promise to bless Israel if Israel keeps the law). In line with Schleiermacher, God could ordain that all things operate according to universal laws of natural causation within a *Naturzusammenhang*. Alternatively, God could ordain that only some things, and not others, operate according to such natural laws.

Or God could ordain that nothing operates by unbreakable natural laws, but instead ordain only individual events (whether conditionally or unconditionally). My own metaphysical preference is this last option: God only ordains individual events, and any patterns we discover from examining these events represent flexible regularities, not inviolable laws. On this account miracles constitute sharp deviations from these flexible regularities. Yet regardless what happens, whether an event stays within expected statistical variations or explodes off the charts, the event is as much ordained by God in one case as in the other.

Conclusion

Schleiermacher's metaphysical critique of miracles is in the end an exercise in question begging. Essentially Schleiermacher

has God lock the door and throw away the key, and then asks whether God can get back into the room. Since God makes the best locks in the business, even God is not capable of getting back into the room without a key. By ordaining a *Naturzusammenhang*, God builds a closed system of natural causes which has no way of accommodating miracles. Does the world constitute a *Naturzusammenhang* as Schleiermacher asserts? As a strictly logical possibility, Schleiermacher may be right in asserting that the world constitutes a *Naturzusammenhang*—God could conceivably ordain everything to work according to universal laws of natural causation. This assertion, however, must always remain one of several distinct and live metaphysical options. It is not a necessary truth. It is not the only game in town.

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