

## What is a Law of Nature?

What is a law of nature? We all assume nature works in a regular way. When you say it is the natural law that a brick cannot grow on a tree you are not saying it is a rule that can be obeyed or disobeyed. You are merely describing how a brick never grows on a tree. That is what we mean by laws of nature.

The fact that nature is not made of real laws, but merely describes how events happen and what to expect, does not imply that nature is loose. A brick will never grow on a tree but it does not need a law to make it so. This point is critically important. It tells us that even if nature is not real laws, it still does not help in showing that miracles might be possible.

Belief in miracles claims that natural law can be suspended by a supernatural entity and thus we have miracles. Religion says nature doesn't always work in a regular way for God suspended the law that dead men stay dead in the case of Jesus who rose from the dead. But it follows then that we are only guessing what the law of nature is. Maybe the law is, "Dead men stay dead except Jesus." It follows then that our idea that the law is, "Dead men stay dead" is wrong. Maybe it is not true that dead men stay dead after all. Maybe the law should be stated thus, "The dead men we know of stay dead but we cannot speak for the dead men we know nothing about"? That is no law at all.

The religious accuse sceptics about miracles of guessing they don't happen when they guess too. They guess that they happen. They make the same guess about natural law as the sceptics do. But they won't admit the guess forbids them to hold that the law can be magically suspended.

Scepticism about miracles does no harm. Belief in miracles can do harm. Make up your mind.

Every law is really a heap of countless laws. For example, the law that when you don't breath any more and the law your heart stops beating and the law your brain no longer works means you are dead. That is only a few of them. The chemistry laws come into it too. For simplicity, we tend to condense as many laws as possible into one.

If natural law is suspended, then we do not presuppose that we know what natural law is for one or more natural laws that compose the law could be suspended by miracle all the time. For example, maybe the natural law is that egg cells can grow into babies by themselves but this law has been suspended so the only law we have experience of is that sperm is needed.

If we believe in miracles we have reason to believe that this suspension is happening or could be. The result is that we can believe in nothing. We will be just as unsure about natural law as we are sure – neither believing in it or denying it. We cannot even prove that miracles are infrequent. Proving that might help us to say that natural law is probably intact most of the time because we can't know about every miracle that takes place.

Miracles are accused of saying natural law is not always the same and so that it is not really law. If the accusation is true then their suggestion is criminal. Believers and unbelievers both say that nature has to have laws before natural law can be changed to allow a miracle to take place. In theory then natural law is supported to a huge degree. But theory aside, natural law is being dismissed in effect. The effect, which is what counts, is really no better than a rejection of the stability of natural law. Suppose a man rises from the dead. You might as well say that it is no longer law that dead people stay dead. It is bad and dangerous to oppose belief in the stability of natural law so it is bad to accept miracles as true. The miracles only pay lip service to the notion of natural law. The philosophy of the miracle fans gives the green light to those who endorse a reckless belief in miracles - drive out in front of a truck for the truck will miraculously pass through your car.

Some say that there are no laws of nature. Brian Davies says that natural laws depend on God so it is nonsense to say God intervenes in or interrupts natural law. For him what we call natural law is as supernatural as a miracle so everything is a miracle. For him the world is a miracle and God doing individual miracles would be contradictory. Davies is saying Jesus didn't rise from the dead - only that it is no more miraculous than if Jesus stayed dead. See page 173 (Philosophy of Religion for A Level, OCR Edition, Anne Jordan, Neil Lockyer and Edwin Tate, Nelson Thornes Ltd, 1999). Davies should know that if the laws of nature are miraculous and come from God it does not follow that God ever suspends them.

Some say the laws of nature are only in our heads for we see patterns (page 121, The Future of Atheism, Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett, SPCK, London, 2008). For example, babies grow in mothers not on trees. They say there being no laws means we cannot be confident that miracles are nonsense. So miracles do not break real laws by happening. They break non-existent laws. But the laws of mathematics are in our heads too. We have never seen the number 1 and never seen 2. But that does not make them non-laws. It does not mean they are to be discarded. The whole point of agreeing that

there are laws of nature and laws of maths is so that we have a model for looking at the world. Miracles try to distort that model and so are bad news.

It does not matter if a miracle is a violation of our nature or not if it is a violation of our perception of natural order. A miracle would be a violation of our perception of nature's regularity or natural order. A miracle contradicts our perception of order. It contradicts the assumption of order that we need to make to work and live in the world. A miracle then is always a violation of our rights. We have the need and therefore right to presume natural order. Once you deny it, anything goes. Us being compelled by miracles to deny that nature is regularity is as bad as nature not being a regularity. It would be strange to be against nature being changeable while being accepting of us perceiving it as changeable. As far as we are concerned, it might as well be changeable.

God setting up nature to work like it was regular and reliable and then temporarily changing it to do a miracle is silly. One reason it is silly is that it is not respectful to God to say he makes fixed laws and then un-fixes them. An all-powerful and all-knowing being should know what he is doing.

Hume said that it is more likely a person reporting nature to be behaving miraculously, that is in a way we do not expect, is lying or mistaken than that they are right. Is Hume saying the evidence for the regular and ordinary is better than the evidence for the rare and unusual? Yes. The laws of nature are not forces. The laws are just ways of describing what to expect. Though they are not laws they are as good as laws.

SO?

A law of nature means not a real law but the way things will be done. It is about describing not prescribing. If cats never have pups that is not a real law though you can call it one but it does not have to be a law to be true. Exceptions would not prove the rule in a case like that. We need to be able to describe what to expect. It is one thing if laws come up against each other and something unexpected or odd happens. That oddness is a law of nature so it is fine. But it is another if cats have pups. It is not an exception. It is a break of the law. The law is dead.

The argument that God will not do miracles for that is breaking the law of nature is not saying God cannot change nature. It is only saying he has set up nature to exclude any supernatural changes. God has the right to set up an unchanging universe.

Having established that natural law describes not prescribes we are saying that we must reject the notion of a God who prescribes. There could be no God or it could be that God simply sets up things to work a certain way but is not making it a law. Something always doing the same thing does not mean it is controlled by a law.

That refutes the religious argument: "Both the laws of nature and the miracles which are exceptions to the laws show there is a lawmaker." Belief in miracles requires that both be signs of God. In practice believers see the sign of law and the sign of miracle as unequal. They see miracles as the biggest or real signs!! They prove it is more important to them to justify their own notions than to justify belief in the truth. The sign of law would matter most for we see the laws but hardly ever the miracles!! Thus it would be better to believe in God because of the sign of law than because of a miracle. You can believe in miracles without needing them as signs.

**Finally**

The term "laws of nature" does not mean prescriptive laws. We are not saying something has decreed that a stone cannot eat meat. The laws of nature refer to descriptive "laws". We are just describing how things work. We are not saying they ought to behave that way or anything but that is just how they behave.