A Leibnizian Theory of Miracles[*]

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Abstract. Most accounts of miracles assume that a necessary condition for an event's being miraculous is that it be, as Hume put it, "a violation of the laws of nature," or, at least, that it should not follow from the laws of nature. However, any account of this sort will be ill-suited for defending the major Western religious traditions because, as I will argue, classical theists are under significant pressure to reject such lawless events. In place of the rejected lawlessness accounts, this paper seeks to develop and defend a Leibnizian conception of miracles on which an event is said to be miraculous just in case we can discover its final cause but not its efficient cause.

At the outset of his famous argument against belief in miracles, Hume states that it is a necessary condition for an event's being miraculous that it be "a violation of the laws of nature."[1] While many writers have developed more subtle versions of this claim, and some object to the word 'violation,'[2] the basic assumption that miracles involve some sort of violation, suspension, or circumvention of natural laws is widely shared by both supporters and opponents of miracles.[3] In this paper, I will argue against this view. In particular, I will develop and defend a Leibnizian conception of miracles on which an event will be said to be miraculous just in case we can discover its final cause, but not its efficient cause. The first section will present two arguments from Leibniz designed to show that classical theists are under significant pressure to hold that all events follow from the laws. If these

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1 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 173.
2 So, for instance, J. T. Driscoll, "Miracle" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911) and Robert A. H. Larmer, *Water Into Wine?* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988): chs. 2, 5, *et passim*.
3 Opponents of lawless miracles include Alastair McKinnon, "'Miracle' and 'Paradox'," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967): 308-314 and J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982): ch. 1. Proponents include R. F. Holland, "The Miraculous," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965): 43-51; Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan, 1970); Douglas Odegard, "Miracles and Good Evidence," *Religious Studies* 18 (1982): 37-46; and E. J. Lowe, "Miracles and Laws of Nature," *Religious Studies* 23 (1987): 263-278. One notable exception is Kirk McDermid, "Miracles: Metaphysics, Physics, and Physicalism," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008): 125-147 who argues that miracles need not be in tension with natural laws. However, McDermid does not identify any mark by which miracles can be distinguished from ordinary events.

arguments are compelling, then traditional religious believers – that is, individuals who accept both classical theism and the occurrence of miracles – should reject the view that miracles must be lawless. In section two, the Leibnizian conception of miracles will be described, and in section three its adequacy will be defended. The fourth and final section will sketch an argument to the effect that at least one known event, the origination of the universe, is properly classified as a Leibnizian miracle and may therefore serve as evidence for the existence of God.

I. A Theistic Case Against Lawless Events

A 'traditional religious believer', as I use the term here, is someone who believes in classical theism – the view that God exists necessarily and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, etc. – and also in some set of historical claims about God's miraculous intervention in history, such as those found in the Bible or the Qur'an. In this section I present two arguments from Leibniz designed to show that classical theists have good reason for holding that all events are lawful – that is, that all events follow from laws. If these arguments are compelling, then the assumption that no event can be both lawful and miraculous creates a serious tension in traditional religious belief. The first argument shows that the occurrence of lawless events would conflict with divine rationality; the second argument shows that such occurrences would conflict with divine benevolence.

The Rationality Argument. According to the rationality argument, if there were lawless events, God would be less than perfectly rational. The first phase of the rationality argument proceeds as follows:

(1) God, being perfectly rational, achieves his ends while following rules which are as

general as possible (*T* 337).[4]

(2) There is a single general rule ('the General Order') such that God's following it would

achieve his ends, that is, would bring about the total order of the world he has chosen

(*DM* 6; *T* 242).

(3) It is possible for God to follow the General Order.

Therefore,

(4) God follows the General Order.

The main conclusion of Leibniz's *Theodicy* is that God does not choose the order of the universe

piecemeal, but rather, simultaneously weighing infinitely many considerations, settles on a single total

order (*T* pd23, 84, 360). This simple argument from divine rationality represents one of the central

threads.

Premise (1) is plausibly construed as a correct partial definition of 'rationality.'[5] God's perfect

rationality implies that he never acts erratically. He is consistent in his purposes, adopts plans to

achieve them, and follows those plans.

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4   In-text citations refer to the following works of Leibniz:
   CLC   "The Controversy Between Leibniz and Clarke" in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, tr. Leroy E. Loemker
            (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1956 [henceforth *L*]): 675-721
   DM   "A Discourse on Metaphysics" in *L* 303-330
   M   "The Monadology" in *L* 643-652
   NEHU *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, tr. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge:
            Cambridge University Press, 1996)
   ONI   "On Nature Itself, Or On the Inherent Force and Actions of Created Things" in *L* 498-507
   PNG   "The Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason" in *L* 636-642
   SD   "Specimen Dynamicum" in *L* 435-450
   SDMS "A Specimen of Discoveries About Marvelous Secrets of Nature in General" in *Philosophical Writings*, tr. Mary
            Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson (London: J. M. Dent, 1973): 75-86
   T   *Theodicy*, tr. E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge and Keagen Paul, 1951).

   All works are cited by section number, except *NEHU*, *SD*, and *SDMS* where the page numbers of the translations are
   used. In *T*, numbers marked 'pd' refer to the "Preliminary Dissertation on the Conformity of Faith With Reason."
5   Although, at *T* 337 and elsewhere, Leibniz's word is *sagesse*, usually translated 'wisdom,' 'rationality' comes closer to
   capturing, in contemporary English, the concept Leibniz is getting at.

Premises (2) and (3) seem difficult to deny. According to Leibniz, God has knowledge of all the possible worlds, and can bring about any one he pleases, so the perfectly general rule, *bring about world w* seems to be a candidate for the General Order. However, even if, perhaps due to considerations related to human freedom,[6] one denies that God can bring about just any possible world, it still seems that God ought to be able to settle on a general plan of action which will achieve all of his ends.

This is an unobjectionable argument for a weak conclusion. However, in both the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and the *Theodicy*, Leibniz appears to infer more or less directly from this weak conclusion to the much stronger claim that there are no genuinely lawless events (*DM* 7; *T* 206-207). The reason for this is that in these texts Leibniz is arguing *ad hominem* against Malebranche. According to Malebranche, the laws of nature just are certain divine volitions. Laws are distinguished from other divine volitions by their generality, or universality. God wills the laws once and for all, and thereby brings about all the various phenomena which follow from them. Miracles, on the other hand, according to Malebranche, follow from 'primitive particular volitions.' In bringing about a miracle, instead of willing some general rule for all time, God wills that a particular event should occur on just one occasion.[7]

Leibniz's argument shows that everything God brings about is brought about by the following of just one general rule. Since God follows (rather than merely complies with) this rule, he evidently effectively wills that the resulting regularity should obtain. Therefore, if all God needs to do to make a certain regularity a law is to effectively will that that regularity should obtain, then the General Order is a law. Now, everything God does follows from the General Order, so, if God's willing that a regularity obtain is sufficient to make that regularity a law, then there are no lawless events. However, both the Malebranchean theory of laws and the simple regularity theory of laws entail that God's willing a

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6   See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974): ch. 9.
7   Nicolas Malebranche, *Philosophical Selections*, ed. Steven Nadler (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992): 261-268.

regularity to obtain *is* sufficient to make that regularity a law. These theories cannot, therefore, accommodate lawless events.[8]

The Malebranchean theory of laws has its attractions for the theist. Unlike descriptive theories of laws, it captures the intuition that the laws make things happen the way they do, but it is more parsimonious than typical governing theories of laws. No entities or powers to which the theist is not already independently committed need to be posited. For this reason, the conclusion that the Malebranchean theory entails that there are no lawless events is already a significant result. However, many theists, including Leibniz himself (*ONI* 5, 12),[9] reject the Malebranchean theory. If God has to do something more than merely will that a regularity obtain in order to make that regularity a law, then perhaps the General Order which God wills is not a law. If the General Order is not a law, then perhaps there are some events which, although they follow from the General Order, do not follow from any law.[10]

Leibniz sometimes appears to be trying to rule out this possibility on aesthetic grounds. According to Leibniz, an aesthetically pleasing universe, such as God would create, would be simple in hypotheses and rich in phenomena (*DM* 6; *T* 208); a great variety of things would follow from a few simple laws. One problem with this argument is that the aesthetic premise may be controversial. There is, however, a bigger problem: even if the aesthetic premise is accepted, the argument will only show that *many and varied* phenomena should be expected to follow from a few simple laws, not that *all* phenomena should follow from a few simple laws. The aesthetic considerations raised in the *Discourse* and *Theodicy* are not, therefore, a promising way of generalizing Leibniz's rationality argument to apply to other theories of laws.

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8   On the naïve regularity theory, the mere *existence* of such a rule as the General Order is sufficient to ensure that there are no lawless events, regardless of whether God intentionally follows that order. See McKinnon, "'Miracle' and 'Paradox.'"

9   For a detailed treatment of Leibniz's understanding of laws, see Daniel Garber, "Leibniz: Physics and Philosophy" in Nicholas Jolley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 270-352.

10   This appears to be the view of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*: 3.98-102.

In the Clarke correspondence, Leibniz has a more promising strategy for completing the argument. In his opening foray against the Newtonians, Leibniz writes:

> Sir Isaac Newton and his followers have also a very odd opinion concerning the works of God. According to their doctrine, God Almighty wants to wind up his watch from time to time; otherwise it would cease to move. He had not, it seems, sufficient foresight to make it a perpetual motion. Nay, the machine of God's making is so imperfect according to these gentlemen that he is obliged to clean it now and then by an extraordinary concourse, and even to mend it as a clockmaker mends his work, who must consequently be so much the more unskilful a workman, as he is oftener obliged to mend his work and to set it right. (*CLC* 1.4)

Leibniz's immediate target is Newton's speculation that God periodically intervenes to repair the planetary orbits.[11] However, the principle Leibniz seeks to establish is more general. In the early modern image of the 'clockwork universe,' the causal powers of created things are considered as the "secret springs and principles" which drive the clock.[12] Now, the springs and gears of a clock are designed with an aim in mind, the aim of bringing about a certain specified pattern of overt behavior: the turning of the hands at the desired rates. A clock whose springs do not bring about these results is a defective clock, and its designer is a poor engineer. It is, furthermore, no defense of the engineer's workmanship to point out that the engineer himself comes and resets the clock to the proper time as often as needed, so that the clock always has the correct time. He is a poor engineer precisely because this resetting is needed, regardless of who does it or how.

As we have seen, Leibniz had argued at length in the *Theodicy* for the claim that, in creating the universe, God wished to bring about a particular pattern of overt behavior, analogous to the appropriate movements of the clocks hands. In the Clarke correspondence, Leibniz goes on to claim, quite plausibly, that the laws should be regarded as an *implementation* of this pattern of behavior, in the same way that a clockwork is an implementation of the motion of the hands of the clock.

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11 Isaac Newton, *Opticks* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003): 402. See Gregory Brown, "Miracles in the Best of All Possible Worlds: Leibniz's Dilemma and Leibniz's Razor" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 12 (1995): 25-26.

12 The quoted phrase comes, ironically, from Hume, *Enquiry*, 93, but both the image and the sentiment were widespread well before Hume's time.

Once this picture of the creation is accepted, it appears that accounts which take miracles to be lawless events are committed to the claim that God *intended* to create a world in which, for instance, the Red Sea parted when Moses raised his staff, or the planets stayed in their orbits, but *mistakenly* created a world in which these events did not occur and, like the incompetent clockmaker, had to intervene to fix things. This result is surely unacceptable to the classical theist, who should therefore reject the occurrence of lawless events.

It will be objected at this point that, contrary to Leibniz, the world is not, after all, very much like a clockwork. For the world contains various free beings, who are not mere cogs, and, furthermore, we now know that the actual laws of the universe are indeterministic. Leibniz, of course, adamantly rejects the claim that either human freedom or physics might require indeterminism. However, the rationality argument against lawless events does not depend on this rejection. The universe, we may observe, is a much more complicated sort of machine than a clock, and the desired pattern of behavior is much more complicated than the ticking of clock hands. However, we have everyday experience with machines of this sort. Consider a networked computer application. Here we may have an enormous number of users whose behavior is not in any way controlled or determined by the computer program. Yet we expect, if the programmer is competent, that the program will be designed to behave appropriately regardless of what the users do. The programmer is expected to have anticipated all of the possible behaviors on the part of the users, and told the program how to respond. Of course, the programmer has control over the possible range of inputs the program will accept from users, but the laws of nature limit the courses of action available to created minds, so it seems that God has exercised an analogous sort of control over his system's 'users.'

Leibniz presents a similar line of thought in showing how his view is connected to a central element of religious views of God:

> A true providence of God requires a perfect foresight. But then it requires, moreover, not only that he should have foreseen everything but also that he should have provided for everything beforehand with proper remedies; otherwise he must want either wisdom to foresee things or power to provide against them. (*CLC* 3.9)

This observation ought also to forestall objections from open theists and deniers of middle knowledge. Defenders of such views typically want to claim that their views do not undermine divine providence. However, these views can be used to escape Leibniz's rationality argument only if they *do* undermine divine providence. If God has sufficient knowledge, wisdom, and power to ensure that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from his will,[13] then he is in a position to design laws for the universe which implement the order he has chosen.

What of the second objection to the clockwork universe, the objection from modern physics? To this I reply that there is no in-principle reason why an indeterministic process should not be an implementation of a specific, desired pattern of behavior. Quantum indeterminism, by all accounts, leads to highly regular, predictable behavior at the macro level. Furthermore, although I must admit that I, for one, cannot fathom why God should choose an indeterministic implementation, it should be noted that in the theory of computation there are known cases in which indeterministic algorithms produce provably optimal results.[14] If the indeterministic laws correctly implement the behavior God desired for the universe, then there is no reason why there should be any events which do not follow from them.

The rationality argument proceeds in two stages. In the first stage, it is argued that God has in mind, and intends to bring about, some General Order, a universal pattern from which all events follow. The argument from this lemma to the conclusion that there are no lawless events must take different paths for different theories of laws. On the simple regularity theory and the Malebranchean theory, the

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13 Matthew 10:29.
14 Thomas H. Cormen, Charles E. Leiserson, Ronald L. Rivest, and Clifford Stein, *Introduction to Algorithms*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001): ch. 5.

conclusion that there are no lawless events follows trivially. Given a more metaphysically substantive theory of laws, a second stage of argument is required.[15] In this second stage, it is argued that the laws, or the causal powers from which the laws are generalized, are best construed as an implementation of the General Order. A lawless event should therefore be construed as an intervention to correct an erroneous implementation. God, however, should not be thought to make errors in his implementation. Lawless events therefore do not occur.

The Benevolence Argument. Leibniz offers a second, independent argument for the same conclusion, that if classical theism is true, there are no lawless events. This second argument claims that, given God's benevolence toward finite spirits, it is unlikely that he would create a world containing lawless events.

Leibniz holds that because "God himself [is] the most perfect of all spirits … [he] will have the greatest concern for spirits and will give to them, not only in general but to each one in particular, the greatest degree of perfection which the universal harmony can permit" (*DM* 35-36). Among the distinguishing features of spirits are intelligence and knowledge (*DM* 35). As a result, the perfection of spirits involves the improvement of their knowledge and understanding and of their aesthetic appreciation of God's creation. This is why, according to Leibniz, "in choosing the order of things, the greatest account was taken of [minds], all things being arranged in such a way that they appear the more beautiful the more they are understood" (*SDMS* 83).

God created human beings with the capacity for understanding, and this is among their most valuable traits. It is a great good for human beings to increase in understanding, and the understanding

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15 How the argument applies to sophisticated regularity theories is difficult to say. However, most sophisticated regularity theories agree with the simple regularity theory that laws must be true propositions, so that it is "a contradiction in terms" to say that any proposition is "both a law and broken" (David Lewis, "Are We Free to Break the Laws?" *Theoria* 47 (1981): 114). As a result, proponents of lawless miracles typically do not endorse regularity theories of any kind.

of which they are capable proceeds by the formulation of generalizations that apply to several distinct events. As a result, it is in principle impossible that human beings should ever make any progress in understanding an event which was not an instance of some more general rule. To bring about such an event would be to arbitrarily decrease the happiness and perfection of human beings. In short, lawless events, if there were any, would be among the apparent imperfections in the world which are so notoriously difficult for theists to explain.[16]

An Objection. It may be objected to the rationality and benevolence arguments that there is a certain hubris involved in a finite, imperfect being speculating about what an infinite, perfectly rational, perfectly benevolent being would do. Avoiding this presumption, some traditional religious believers may be inclined to suppose that God sometimes brings about lawless events for reasons beyond our comprehension, to achieve some overriding good unknown to us.

This response bears a superficial resemblance to the 'skeptical theist' response to the evidential argument from evil.[17] According to the evidential argument from evil, the theistic hypothesis predicts that the world should be much better than it is. The evils in the world therefore strongly disconfirm the theistic hypothesis. The skeptical theist responds that, due to our cognitive limitations, we are not in a position to make a prediction about what the world would be like on the hypothesis of theism. Similarly, the objector from hubris wishes to deny that we are in a position to predict that, given classical theism, lawless events do not occur.

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16 On this point I am in agreement with Christine Overall, "Miracles as Evidence Against the Existence of God," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23 (1985): 350-351. For further discussion of Leibniz's benevolence argument, see Brown, "Miracles in the Best of All Possible Worlds," 24-25.

17 The label 'skeptical theist' seems to have been originated by Paul Draper, "The Skeptical Theist" in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996): 175-192. For defenses of skeptical theism, see, e.g., William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition" *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 29-67; Peter Van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 135-165; and Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument From Evil," *Nous* 35 (2001): 278-296.

The resemblance between the skeptical theist and the objector from hubris is, however, only superficial. Some philosophers have argued that skeptical theism threatens to transform into skepticism *about* theism.[18] Insofar as the skeptical theist can respond to this concern, she must do so by pointing out that the claims about which she is skeptical are claims about the value of actual and possible entities or states of affairs, and not claims about theology.[19] That is, the skeptical theist is uncertain about whether God would have made a world better than this one because she is uncertain about how good this world is and/or about how good the other possible worlds are.

Since the benevolence argument works by making lawless events evils, standard responses to the problem of evil, including skeptical theism, can be used against the benevolence argument. We should therefore focus on the rationality argument.

If the objector from hubris endorses the Malebanchean theory of laws, then his situation bears a crucial disanalogy to that of the skeptical theist. The argument from the Malebranchean theory of laws to the denial of lawless events has only important theological claims as premises. As a result, whereas the skeptical theist is committed only to skepticism about the moral value of actual and possible states of affairs, the Malebranchean objector from hubris is committed to skepticism about theology.

If the objector from hubris endorses a metaphysically substantive theory of laws, then the second stage of the rationality argument is required. At this stage, there is a premise to which the objector can safely attach his skepticism: the claim that God's aim in creating the laws was to implement the General Order. Perhaps, the objector may suggest, God has, for reasons of his own, chosen a General Order in which only some events follow from the laws.

There appears, then, to be a way out of the argument: endorse a metaphysically substantive theory of laws, and suppose that God has chosen a General Order which includes lawless events. Of

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18 See, e.g., Draper, "The Skeptical Theist," 188; Mark Piper, "Why Theists Cannot Accept Skeptical Theism," *Sophia* 47 (2008): 129-148, esp. 139-141.
19 See, e.g., Alston, "The Inductive Argument From Evil," 60-61.

course, it is unclear why God, despite his benevolence, would cause us to be confronted with in principle inexplicable events, and it is unclear why God should create laws or give creatures genuine causal powers if not so that these laws or causal powers would bring about his plan for the universe, but we should not expect to understand everything God does.

The traditional religious believer should not adopt this strategy. Adopting it would tend both to undermine the justification of classical theism, and to subvert ordinary religious understandings of miracles.

Although theists do not, in general, derive their belief from an inference to the best explanation,[20] a believer's rational confidence in theism will be closely tied to the ability of theism to make sense of the world and the believer's life in it – that is, its explanatory power. Furthermore, for many believers (including myself) *classical* theism – the view that God exists necessarily and is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, perfectly rational, etc. – is best understood as a metaphysical theory designed to explain more fundamental religious doctrines which are believed on other grounds. Classical theism should be accepted because it is our best metaphysical theory of God. Thus the justification of classical theism depends on its explanatory power even more heavily than the justification of generic theism does. However, the objection from hubris concedes that classical theism seems, as far as our limited understanding allows us to judge, to predict that lawless events do not occur. As a result, we cannot use classical theism to make sense of a lawless event.

In addition to undermining believers' justification for theism, the objection from hubris prevents miracles from playing the role traditional religious believers ordinarily take them to play. Miracles, believers typically suppose, serve as evidence for the existence of God and for particular theological doctrines.[21] However, if miracles are lawless events, then, the objection from hubris concedes, classical

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20 See Alvin Plantinga, "Is Theism Really a Miracle?" *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 132-133; Alvin Plantinga, "On Being Evidentially Challenged" in Howard-Snyder, *Evidential Argument*, 249.
21 For recent examples of this approach, see Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Oxford

theism appears to us to predict that they do not occur. Thus, if such events do occur they are, for us, evidence *against* classical theism.[22]

A Way Forward. The occurrence of miracles is an important part of traditional religious belief, and not easily jettisoned. However, Leibniz argues convincingly that classical theists should not believe in lawless events. Therefore, traditional religious believers should reject lawlessness conceptions of miracles and adopt in their place an account which will render the claim that miracles occur consistent with the claim that all events follow from the laws. It may be that any such account would amount to a conceptual revision, for Hume may be right that it is part of the concept of a miracle that miracles are, *inter alia*, violations of the laws. I am not convinced that this is so, because I am not convinced that ordinary religious believers (those who are not either philosophers or scientists) think much about laws of nature. However, whether or not lawlessness is included in the ordinary religious concept of a miracle, it seems to me that this is not what is central either to the notion of a miracle or to the religious role of miracles. What *is* central is that miracles are extraordinary events by which we are made aware of God's involvement in the course of history.[23] This awareness has both an epistemic component, providing evidence for God's existence and for more specific religious doctrines, and a devotional component, inspiring a religious attitude in the observers. If, therefore, we can discover an account which says that, if certain paradigmatically miraculous events (e.g. Jesus changing water to wine) really occurred, then they were extraordinary awareness-inducing events, without thereby running afoul of Leibniz's strictures on lawlessness, we will have saved what is essential to religious understandings of miracles while resolving the tension lawlessness conceptions create for traditional religious belief. I will now proceed to show that just such an account can be gleaned from Leibniz's writings.

University Press, 1992): ch. 6 and Larmer, *Water Into Wine?*, chs. 7-8.
22 Here I am again in agreement with Overall, "Miracles as Evidence."
23 This is similar to the 'wide' conception of miracles discussed by Swinburne, *Concept of Miracle*, ch. 1.

II. A Leibnizian Theory of Miracles

Leibniz makes a variety of claims about miracles which are not obviously consistent with each other. I shall not attempt to reconcile all of these claims. Rather, the purpose of this section will be to pick up on one particular thread in Leibniz's remarks on miracles which leads to the most plausible and most distinctively Leibnizian account.

Leibniz's doctrine of the "harmony of nature and grace" is well known (*PNG* 15; *M* 87-89). According to this view, there are two distinct comprehensive orders of explanation,[24] the order of efficient causes, and the order of final causes.[25] To give an explanation of an event is to specify one of its causes. Efficient causal explanations must be in terms of the natures of the actors (*NEHU* 66); final causal explanations rest upon the "*principle of fitness*, that is, upon the choice of wisdom" (*PNG* 11).

It is essential to this view that the same event may be fully explained in either efficient causal or final causal terms, and that these two explanations do not render one another redundant. It is further necessary that inference to the best explanation is in both cases justified. This may seem like a lot to swallow, but it is actually implicit in our ordinary thinking, as can be seen by considering the following case.

Suppose Smith is on trial for the murder of Jones. The prosecution and the defense agree that Jones died when, after a collision with Smith, he toppled over a balcony railing. This is the efficient causal explanation of Jones's death. Human bodies are physical objects and, as a result, when a moving human body collides with a stationary human body, the latter is set in motion. Further, it follows from the nature of human beings that their life functions stop when they plummet several stories onto

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24 In the late works *PNG* and *M*, pre-established harmony is not explicitly formulated in terms of explanation. However, it is so formulated at *SD* 442. Garber, "Leibniz: Physics and Philosophy," 327-328 also focuses on explanation in his exposition of pre-established harmony.

25 This is a simplification of the various levels of pre-established harmony Leibniz actually endorses in, e.g., *M* 87. See Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 82-85. The various levels of harmony are a complication that is for present purposes unnecessary.

concrete. Jones's death is thus fully explained. There is no further question to be asked.

But there *is* a further question to be asked, and it is the very question the jury must decide: *why* did Smith collide with Jones? According to the defense, Smith's aim was to get to the refrigerator for a midnight snack. On the dark balcony, he couldn't see Jones and bumped right into him. Jones had balanced himself so precariously on the ledge, that this slight bump sent him tumbling to his death.

The prosecution tells a different story: Smith was a beneficiary on Jones's life insurance policy, and his aim was to collect these funds. When he saw Jones standing at the balcony railing in the dark, he realized that this was his chance and charged at him, knocking him over the edge.

In order to decide whether Smith is guilty of murder, the jury must infer from the known facts to the best final causal explanation. The known facts must be explained in terms of Smith's having some end or aim (getting to the refrigerator, or collecting Jones's life insurance), deciding on some means to that end (walking across the balcony, or giving Jones a shove), and carrying out those means. This project of inferring the best final causal explanation is not rendered redundant by the fact that the jury is already in possession of an agreed-upon efficient causal explanation of the events.

Natural events of course have efficient causes. These are the causes that figure in scientific explanations. If God, as traditionally conceived, exists, then natural events also have final causes. God has reasons for creating the world the way he did. He was bringing about certain particular goods. An enumeration of these goods and an explanation of how the means taken lead to them as ends would be a final causal explanation of a natural event.

Leibniz tells us that "[t]he distinguishing mark of miracles (taken in the strictest sense) is that they cannot be accounted for by the natures of created things" (*T* 207). That is, the only efficient cause of a miracle is God. Since miracles have no finite efficient cause, the only efficient causal explanation is in terms of the infinite nature of God, which is inaccessible to any finite mind. As a result, no finite

mind can comprehend any efficient causal explanation of a miracle. However, the modifier "taken in the strictest sense" is crucial: according to Leibniz, most of the events religious believers describe as miracles do not fit this definition. Rather, the majority of the Biblical miracles (Leibniz specifically mentions the changing of water into wine) are taken to have been performed by "invisible substances, such as the angels … act[ing] according to the ordinary laws of their nature." These events are said to be miracles "by comparison, and in relation to us" because *we* cannot give an efficient causal explanation of them (*T* 249; see also *CLC* 9.117).[26] I shall call miracles "in the strictest sense" *absolute miracles* and miracles in the looser sense *relative miracles*.

In the passages cited, Leibniz makes both metaphysical and epistemological claims about miracles. His main metaphysical claim is that a miracle is an event performed by a higher being. His main epistemological claim is that a miracle is an event for which we cannot give an efficient causal explanation. Since Leibniz regards 'higher beings' as those whose natures we cannot grasp, and he believes that we must be able to grasp the nature of the cause in order to give an efficient causal explanation, he regards these two claims as mutually entailing. It is not obvious that he treats either as more fundamental than the other. It is, however, the epistemological thesis which I wish to defend here.

What makes an event a miracle is the unavailability of an efficient causal explanation of that event – in the case of relative miracles, its unavailability to us, and in the case of absolute miracles, its unavailability to any finite mind. However, even absolute miracles need not be completely inexplicable: the definition of 'miracle' does not preclude *final* causal explanation. Leibniz insists that "when God works miracles, he does not do it in order to supply the wants of nature but those of grace" (*CLC* 1.4). A miracle must have some discernible role in the order of final causes. The Leibnizian theory of miracles which will be advocated in the remainder of this paper can be summed up in the

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26 Here Leibniz is echoing Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.101.1, though Aquinas distinguishes between events that are relatively or absolutely *wondrous* (Latin *mirum*) and calls only the latter miracles (*miracula*).

following two definitions:

- An event E is *absolutely miraculous* iff no part of E's efficient cause is comprehensible to any finite mind, but some part of E's final cause is epistemically accessible to some finite mind.

- An event E is *miraculous relative to* a mind M iff no part of E's efficient cause is epistemically accessible to M, but some part of E's final cause is epistemically accessible to M.

The key concepts in these definitions are *comprehensibility* and *epistemic accessibility*. By saying that a cause is *comprehensible* to a mind, I mean that that mind is so constituted as to be capable of understanding that cause. By saying that a cause is *epistemically accessible* to a mind, I mean that it is possible, in the ordinary course of events, for that mind to come to know of that cause.

III. The Adequacy of the Leibnizian Theory

This theory is extensionally adequate and escapes both of the arguments of section one. The theory is extensionally adequate because the events which the major religious traditions class as miracles are supposed to have been extraordinary events for which no efficient causal explanation was ever discovered, but which are (final causally) explicable in terms of a particular religious view of God and his purposes.

It is easy to see that, on this theory, relative miracles escape the rationality argument. Relative miracles are events whose efficient causal explanations are not discoverable by us. They nevertheless

have efficient causal explanations, in which some entities bring about the event by following "the ordinary laws of their nature." The unavailability of the explanation to us may be due either to the fact that we do not know these laws, or that we do not know the natures of these entities, or that we don't know what states the entities were in prior to the event. Nevertheless, these events are clearly lawful.

That absolute miracles escape the rationality argument is less obvious, and this led Leibniz to minimize the occurrence of absolute miracles, accepting only two: the creation and the incarnation (*T* 249).[27] However, one may wonder how, given the rationality argument, it is possible for the classical theist to accept any absolute miracles at all. There are two possible strategies. One is to adopt a theory of laws on which the absence of a finite efficient cause does not imply lawlessness. Given a regularity theory of laws, whether of the simple or sophisticated variety, there is no reason to suppose that such events must be lawless. For instance, there is no reason why it could not be a (descriptive) law that all genuine prophecies are fulfilled.[28]

Alternatively, it could be held that God does indeed have special reasons for bringing about some lawless events. The creation and the Incarnation are plausible examples. Plausibly, both of these events are great goods and it is logically impossible that either event should have a finite efficient cause. If lacking a finite efficient cause entails lawlessness, then it may be that it is logically impossible for the great goods achieved by the creation and the Incarnation to be achieved without lawlessness. Leibniz seems to have adopted this second strategy.

This approach does not run afoul of my response to the objection from hubris. There, I argued that classical theism, conceived as a metaphysical theory, predicts that lawless events do not occur and, therefore, the occurrence of lawless events would be evidence against classical theism. It follows that including lawlessness in the definition of 'miracle' severely upsets religious conceptions of miracles, by

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27 See Adams, *Leibniz*, 98-99.
28 This strategy, along with the example, was suggested to me by Alexander Pruss.

preventing miracles from making us aware of God's involvement in history. The approach under consideration here does not suggest that miracles are lawless by definition, or that lawlessness somehow contributes to our awareness of God. Rather, it suggests that in some cases the counter-evidence provided by the lawlessness of an event may be outweighed when we recognize the purposes of the event, and see that even God could not achieve these purposes without lawlessness. In other words, the suggestion is that we can admit that the objector from hubris was correct that God might sometimes have good reasons for bringing about lawless events, while continuing to deny that lawless events *in virtue of their lawlessness* could play the evidential and other roles usually attributed to miracles.

Note that these considerations give the classical theist strong reason for endorsing methodological naturalism. The classical theist should suppose that if it was possible for God to achieve his purposes lawfully, then he did so. In nearly all cases, this will be possible. So the theist should go looking for lawful explanations of events, including even miracles. Furthermore, the discovery of an efficient cause for a miracle will not undermine its evidential role. Miracles can play the evidential role they play because of the availability of final causal explanations; the unavailability of efficient causal explanations serves only to direct our attentions toward the final causes.

The Leibnizian theory also escapes the benevolence argument. According to the Leibnizian theory, no event confronts a mind which is in principle completely inexplicable to it. On the Leibnizian theory, *some sort* of true explanation is always in principle available. The distinguishing mark of miracles is not that they are inexplicable, but that they are inexplicable *in terms of efficient causes*. The rationality argument should be taken to show that all events occur for reasons, and that these reasons are, as much as possible, subsumable under laws; the benevolence argument should be taken to show that for every event experienced by us we can, in principle, find at least one of the reasons. In the case

of miracles, only final causal reasons will be available.

It was argued above that lawlessness conceptions of miracles prevent miracles from playing the evidential role believers typically attach to them. The considerations of the preceding paragraph show why Leibnizian miracles are ideal for this purpose. The plausibility of theism generally, and especially classical theism, depends on its explanatory power. A Leibnizian miracle is an event which can be explained only by appeal to final causes, that is, to "the choice of wisdom." Thus if Leibnizian miracles occur then there are at least some events which must remain forever inexplicable to us unless we posit the existence of one who chooses the natural order by wisdom. A Leibnizian miracle is an event which can be explained only by theism or some similar hypothesis.

Furthermore, Leibnizian miracles can attest particular theological doctrines. This is because the project of final causal explanation invites us to frame hypotheses about what God intends, both in a particular case and in general. Thus a miracle may be used to make it abundantly clear that God has a particular plan. For instance, the parting of the Red Sea is very difficult to make sense of except on the supposition that God wished the Israelites to escape. As a result, this event may be taken as a divine endorsement of the Israelites generally or of Moses' leadership.

Finally, Leibnizian miracles can serve a devotional function. They force us to look upward to the 'kingdom of final causes' and "increase our admiration for the most beautiful works of the supreme Author" (*SD* 442). While ordinary events can be explained in terms of the divine wisdom, it is distinctive of miracles that they can *only* be explained in terms of the divine wisdom. Human beings naturally seek ever greater understanding of the world around them. By performing a Leibnizian miracle God would effectively block off the efficient causal route, forcing us to look for final causal explanations, and so to contemplate God and his purposes.

A second objection from hubris may be raised at this point: how should we, being finite, be able

to guess at the purposes of God? If we cannot know God's purposes, then we cannot give final causal explanations of events and so, according to the account here defended, no event could possibly be a miracle. Leibniz is sensitive to this objection:

> I willingly admit that we are liable to deceive ourselves when we try to determine the ends or designs of God, but this is only when we seek to limit them to some particular design … when in fact he at the same time takes into consideration the whole … Therefore when we see any good effect or some perfection which occurs or which ensues from the works of God, we can say with certainty that God has purposed it, for he does nothing by chance (*DM* 19).

Because God sees the whole and chooses the best in all things, small and large, any time we successfully identify a genuine good, we have identified a final cause. However, we erroneously circumscribe God if we suppose that we can ever give a *complete* final cause – no finite mind, so long as it remains finite, can comprehend the complete final cause, because it is infinite (*T* pd23).

In addition, we should note that miracles are typically thought by believers to be done *for the purpose of* revealing God's intentions. Surely God is able to effect such revelation by means of such an event.[29]

Another objection that may be raised is that since this account denies that God intervenes in ways that violate, override, or circumvent the laws of nature, it amounts to a form of deism.[30] The term 'deism' is used to describe a wide variety of views which are at odds with traditional religious belief because they deny particular providence, the view that God has specific purposes for individuals. The Leibnizian view does precisely the opposite for, according to this view, every event, however small, has a divine final cause. Thus God has very specific intentions and purposes for every event in the history of the universe (see *CLC* 3.9).

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29 Cf. Gassendi: "You say that it is rash to investigate the purposes of God. But while this may be true if you are thinking of the purposes which God himself wished to remain hidden or ordered us not to investigate, it surely does not apply to the purposes which he left on public display" (objections to Descartes's Fourth Meditation, in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, trs., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 2:215).

30 Van Inwagen, "Problem of Evil," 148 attributes the general sort of view I am defending to "deists and other thinkers."

IV. Do Leibnizian Miracles Occur?

The miracles of the Bible can be accounted for in Leibnizian fashion: assuming the records are reliable, these were extraordinary events whose efficient causes have never been discovered, and they were done primarily to teach religious faith and practice. Leibniz classes most of these as relative miracles. In fact, he believes that only two absolute miracles have ever occurred: the creation and the Incarnation. This is because these events are great goods, and it is logically impossible that either of them should occur without being an absolute miracle. The incarnation is a complicated issue relying heavily on revealed theology, and so will not be addressed here. The creation is, however, a favorite example of Leibniz's because the origination of the universe is an event which is agreed to have happened and is demonstrably miraculous.

As Leibniz tells Clarke, "creating and annihilating" are among the "miracles which none but God can work" – i.e. the absolute miracles (*CLC* 7.44). The creation or annihilation of a substance can have no finite efficient causal explanation. This is because an efficient causal explanation is an explanation in terms of the natures of the actors, but in the case of creation or annihilation, the finite actor exists on only one side of the event. Its nature is therefore not available as an explanation of the transition from one state to the other. Thus no efficient causal explanation for the origination of the universe can be given by any finite mind: either it is utterly incomprehensible, or it is an absolute miracle.

If this is correct, then a Leibnizian project of final causal explanation is the only method by which human beings can hope to provide a comprehensible explanation of the origination of the world and its laws. If such a system of final causal explanations could be successfully developed and supported by empirical evidence, this would provide strong grounds for supposing that the origination of the world was an absolute miracle, an event clearly showing the choice of a wise mind, and this all

men call 'God.'[31]

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