

On Behalf of Resurrection: A Second Reply to Cavin and Colombetti

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Abstract: This essay is a reply to “The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis—With a Rejoinder to Stephen T. Davis” by Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos Colombetti. In it, I establish what natural laws are, what a miracle is, and how “naturalism” and “supernaturalism” differ as worldviews. Cavin and Colombetti argue that if the Standard Model of particle physics (SM) is true, then the resurrection of Jesus did not occur and physical things can only causally interact with other physical things. I argue that neither point follows.

Keywords: Standard Model, Particle Physics, Resurrection, Robert Greg Cavin, Carlos A. Colombetti, Naturalism, Supernaturalism

I

Let me begin with some metaphysical assumptions with which I approach the question of miracles and thus the resurrection of Jesus. As human beings experience the world, we observe certain natural regularities. Day follows night, light moves faster than sound, things tend to fall toward earth. Some such regularities we call natural laws. A natural law is simply a description of the way the natural world repeatedly behaves.¹ Natural laws are human inventions—ways of describing uniformities that we observe in the world. They do not cause things to happen. As human inventions, they are abstract objects and hence causally effete. They describe what has regularly and uniformly happened in the past, as far as we know, and thus what we can expect to happen in the future. A true law of nature correctly describes what regularly, naturally, and uniformly happens.

Let us say that one such law of nature is gravity. Defining this term in a common sense and even simplistic way, we can say that gravity is a natural phenomenon in which all things with mass or energy are physically drawn

¹ There are other views of natural laws that I find less persuasive; e.g., Armstrong’s necessitarianism. See D. M. Armstrong, *What Is a Law of Nature?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139171700>.



toward each other. Near the earth, gravity describes the observed fact that things that are heavier than air—when left unsupported in the air—tend to move toward the center of the earth.

But *why* is gravity true? Why is it that physical objects tend to fall? One possibility is to say that this is simply the way that things naturally behave and that is the end of the story.² “Naturalism” is a metaphysical worldview that roughly says: (1) The only thing that exists is the physical universe (i.e., there are no non-physical entities like spirits, souls, gods, or God). (2) Every event that occurs can, in principle, be explained in terms used in the natural sciences (i.e., there are no miracles, permanent anomalies, or inexplicable mysteries). And (3) true natural laws, whatever they turn out to be, always hold.

As a theist, I reject naturalism in favor of “supernaturalism.” This worldview holds: (1) The physical universe exists because God—an omnipotent and non-physical being—brought it into existence, along with all true natural laws. (2) God has the ability and perhaps occasionally the intention to bring about events that, apart from God, would not naturally have occurred; they are usually called miracles. (3) Accordingly, not all phenomena can be explained in purely scientific terms; some occurrences can only be explained by the activity of God.³

What exactly are miracles? That is a controversial and much-discussed question in the philosophy of religion. Cavin and Colombetti seem to understand a miracle as God interacting with the world, which of course they insist never happens. I will accept that basic definition, amplified only slightly: a miracle is God intervening in the natural order to bring about an event that apart from God’s intervention would not otherwise have occurred. It is but a short step to say that a miracle amounts to God violating one or more natural laws.⁴ So I will understand a miracle as Richard Swinburne does,⁵ i.e., as a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law that is brought about by God.

² There are deeper explanations of gravity in physics, but I am going to ignore them because they are not relevant to my argument.

³ I realize that there are other worldviews than these. Some people, for example, believe in God and creation but in virtually all other respects are naturalists. They are usually called deists.

⁴ Theistic philosophers have tried out other notions of miracles; e.g., Michael Murray’s Leibnizian suggestion that events like the resurrection were frontloaded by God into the creation and so do not require any natural law to be violated. But for simplicity’s sake, I will stick with the older idea.

⁵ Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, New Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-00776-9>.

heavens and the earth? I do not know whether C&C believe in divine creation, but Christians do. We have no problem whatsoever with the idea of God, a non-physical being, interacting with energy. I thus conclude that this argument from C&C goes nowhere.

Second, C&C argue that it is only rational to believe a proposition if its probability is greater than 0.5. And, in the vast majority of cases, that is certainly true. But there is a kind of case where it is not true, where the rationality requirements are looser. Suppose we are trying to explain some phenomenon; there are four and only four mutually exclusive explanations, A, B, C, and D. Suppose that A, B, and C, so far as we can tell, each have a probability of 0.1 (and thus the probability that one of them is true has a probability of 0.3). And suppose that the probability of D is 4.5. This would doubtless be a case where much is unknown and more research is needed. But suppose further that, for some pragmatic reason, we must now choose one of the four. Then I would argue that it is rational to believe D.

But that is not my position on the resurrection of Jesus. C&C assert that “[Davis] thinks he is justified in believing R [that Jesus was raised] even though it has a low probability” (p. 50). I accept that the prior probability of the resurrection of Jesus is low. But assuming supernaturalism (as I do) together with the evidence and background information, I think the probability of R is well above 0.5.

VI

Toward the end of their paper, C&C range into biblical studies in support of the idea that the resurrection of Jesus is a legend. They argue that the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels are not credible. I will not comment on their arguments, although I believe they are answerable;¹⁸ I will just point out that I was puzzled why they felt the need to go there. They argue repeatedly that SM, *by itself*, entails that Jesus was not raised from the dead. If they are correct about that—and I still find it breathtaking that believe it—there is no need at all to consider evidence.

Natural laws do not cause, force, or require things to happen, like a king or legislature. They allow us to expect or predict what will very probably

¹⁸ See Stephen T. Davis, “The Gospels are Reliable as Historically Factual Accounts,” in *Debating Christian Theism*, ed. J. P. Moreland and Chad Meister, trans. Khaldoun A. Sweis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 417–29 and N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

happen. Physicists, these days, are searching for a “theory of everything” (TOE), a grand theoretical framework that will combine general relativity (gravity) and quantum field theory. It will be stronger than SM. It will, so they hope, be able to explain everything. But not even that theory, once achieved, will rule out the possibility of God, miracles, or the resurrection.

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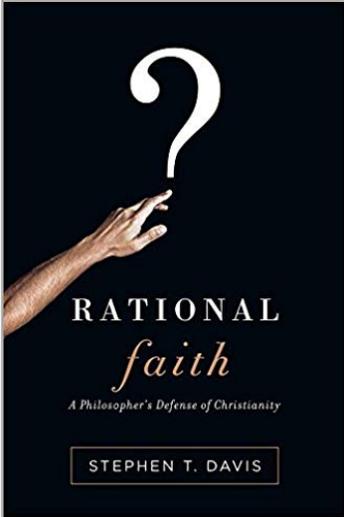
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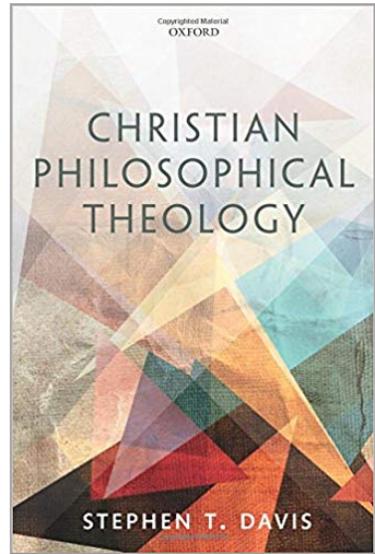
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