

Miracle by Equivocation

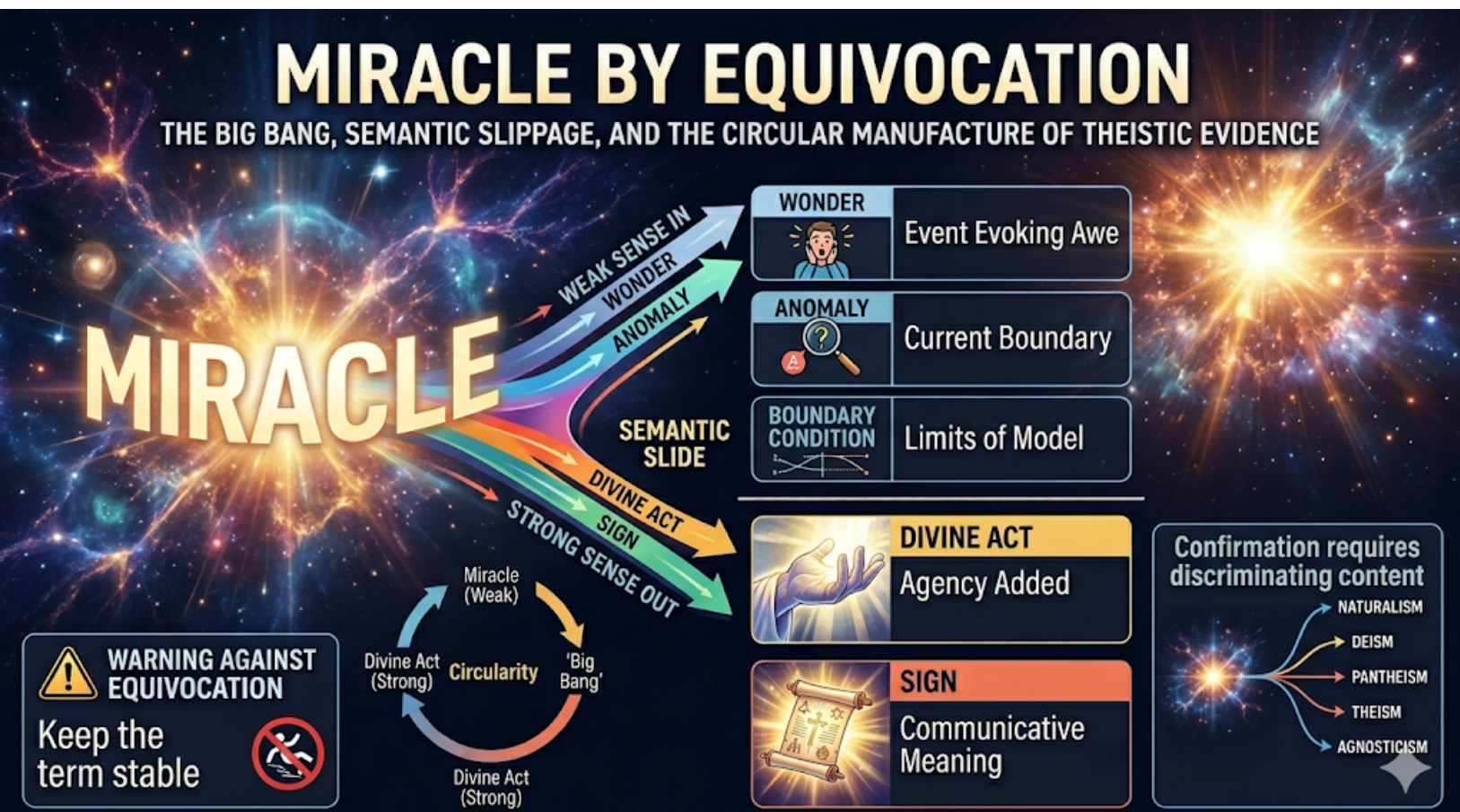
The Big Bang, Semantic Slippage, and the Circular
Manufacture of Theistic Evidence

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A visual preview:



Abstract

Calling the Big Bang a "miracle" can be rhetorically powerful because the term carries both wonder and theological agency. This paper argues that the argument often depends on equivocation. If miracle means an astonishing or currently unexplained event, the Big Bang may be miracle-like only in a loose aesthetic sense. If miracle means an act of God that violates or transcends natural order, then the theological conclusion has been built into the premise. The paper distinguishes wonder, anomaly, boundary condition, divine act, and evidential sign. It then shows how apologetic rhetoric slides among these meanings to convert cosmological mystery into theistic confirmation. The result is not a denial that cosmology raises profound metaphysical questions. It is a refusal to let semantic inflation do the work of evidence.

Introduction

The Big Bang is an ideal apologetic stage. It is vast, difficult, origin-like, and existentially charged. It invites awe. It also sits near the boundary where ordinary imagination fails. When apologists call it a miracle, the word feels plausible before it is analyzed.

But "miracle" is an unstable term. It can mean a violation of natural law, a providential act, an event with religious significance, a surprising occurrence, a healing, a sign, or simply something wonderful. Arguments gain force when these meanings blur. The Big Bang is wonderful, therefore miraculous. Miracles imply God. Therefore the Big Bang points to God.

The problem is not that the Big Bang is unimportant. It is that the word miracle can smuggle agency into description. If the conclusion is that God acted, that conclusion needs argument. It cannot be obtained by first stretching miracle to include cosmological awe, then contracting miracle to mean divine action.

This paper provides a semantic audit. It distinguishes senses of miracle, tests which sense applies to cosmology, and asks what evidential work remains once equivocation is removed.

Five Meanings of Miracle

The word miracle carries at least five meanings. First, it can mean wonder: an event that evokes awe. Second, it can mean anomaly: an event not currently explained by available theory. Third, it can mean boundary condition: an event or state near the edge of a model's domain. Fourth, it can mean divine act: an event caused by God. Fifth, it can mean sign: an event intended to communicate religious meaning.

The Big Bang may qualify under the first sense. It is awe-inspiring. It may qualify under some versions of the third sense, depending on cosmological model. It does not automatically qualify under the fourth or fifth. Those senses add agency and intention.

The equivocation occurs when the argument begins with the weak senses and concludes with the strong ones. "The Big Bang is miraculous" may be acceptable if it means "awe-inspiring." It is not acceptable if the next sentence treats miraculous as "divinely caused" without further support.

Semantic discipline therefore matters. The critic need not deny wonder. She needs only ask which sense is being used and whether the conclusion preserves that sense.

The Circularity Problem

If miracle means divine act, then calling the Big Bang a miracle already presupposes God. The argument becomes circular: the Big Bang is a divine act; divine acts are evidence for God; therefore the Big Bang is evidence for God. The key premise contains the conclusion.

If miracle means unexplained event, then the conclusion weakens. Unexplained events do not automatically support God. They support the more modest claim that current explanation is incomplete. The history of science is filled with phenomena that were once unexplained and later naturalized. This does not prove every anomaly will be naturalized, but it warns against turning ignorance into agency.

Hume's discussion of miracles is relevant not because his argument settles every

issue, but because he saw that testimony and background expectations interact ([Hume, 1748/2000](#)). Earman criticizes some of Hume's formulations, yet he also shows that miracle reasoning requires careful probabilistic structure rather than slogans ([Earman, 2000](#)). A word cannot substitute for that structure.

The circularity problem is especially acute in cosmology because the Big Bang is not an observed local interruption of known law. It is part of the model by which we describe the early universe. Treating it as a violation already assumes a standpoint outside the relevant lawlike order.

Boundary Conditions Are Not Magic Tricks

Cosmological boundary questions are strange. They involve time, space, causation, and physical law at regimes where ordinary categories strain. But strangeness is not magic. A boundary condition is not automatically a supernatural intervention.

Hawking's popular work emphasized that questions about what happened "before" the Big Bang may be ill-formed under some models ([Hawking, 1988](#)). Whether or not one accepts those models, the conceptual lesson remains: boundary physics is not ordinary event physics. It should not be forced into a picture of God interrupting a pre-existing natural order.

The violation model of miracle fits cases where there is a stable order and an event appears to break it. The Big Bang, by contrast, is often discussed as part of the origin or early structure of the order itself. Calling it a violation of natural law may therefore misclassify it. Which laws are being violated if the laws describe the universe whose early state is under discussion?

The better language is epistemic humility: the Big Bang marks a profound explanatory boundary. That boundary may motivate metaphysical inquiry. It does not by itself license the stronger predicate miracle in the divine-act sense.

A Semantic Validity Test

The equivocation can be represented formally. Let M_w mean miracle as wonder, M_a miracle as anomaly, M_d miracle as divine act, and G the proposition that God exists. The weak premise is $B \rightarrow M_w$ or perhaps $B \rightarrow M_a$, where B is the Big Bang. The apologetic conclusion requires something like $B \rightarrow M_d$ and $M_d \rightarrow G$.

The inference is invalid unless a bridge premise is supplied: $M_w \rightarrow M_d$ or $M_a \rightarrow M_d$. But those bridge premises are false or at least highly controversial. Many wonderful events are not divine acts. Many anomalies are not divine acts. Wonder and anomaly do not entail agency.

Thus the valid argument would need to be: B has features F ; F is much more probable if God intentionally acts than if no God exists; therefore B confirms God to some degree. That is a legitimate structure. But it is no longer the simple claim that the Big Bang is a miracle.

The semantic validity test asks whether the meaning of the key term remains constant from premise to conclusion. In many Big Bang miracle arguments, it does not.

The God-of-the-Gaps Variant

Some defenders reject the charge of equivocation and say the real point is explanatory: naturalism cannot explain the Big Bang, while theism can. This shifts from miracle language to inference to best explanation. The shift is legitimate only if the theistic explanation is specified enough to compete.

"God did it" can be thin. Which features of the Big Bang does theism predict? A beginning? A lawlike expansion? Low entropy? Life-permitting constants? Hidden divine agency? Vast lifeless space? If all outcomes can be incorporated after the fact, explanatory superiority is difficult to establish.

The God-of-the-gaps worry is not that gaps never matter. Explanatory gaps can be evidence when a hypothesis predicts them or explains their specific structure. The worry is that the gap is being used as an empty slot into which agency is inserted

without independent constraints.

Oppy and Mackie both press versions of this concern against theistic explanation: the explanatory gain must be weighed against the cost of the hypothesis and its own unexplained commitments (Mackie, 1982; Oppy, 2006). A divine mind at the boundary of cosmology is not cost-free.

Wonder Without Ownership

One reason miracle language persists is that purely technical language can feel existentially thin. The Big Bang invites wonder, and religious vocabulary gives wonder a home. Critics should not sneer at that impulse. Awe is a legitimate human response to cosmology.

The mistake is to treat wonder as ownership. A person can be moved by the scale and strangeness of the universe without concluding that a particular theology has explained it. Wonder is phenomenological. Explanation is inferential. Meaning is existential. These categories can interact, but they should not be collapsed.

This distinction helps preserve what is valuable in the rhetoric while removing the illicit inference. Say the Big Bang is astonishing. Say it provokes metaphysical questions. Say it unsettles complacent materialism if one wishes. But do not say it is a miracle unless the sense of miracle is specified and defended.

Wonder becomes intellectually dangerous when it is converted into evidence by semantic slippage. The emotional force of awe then substitutes for a likelihood comparison.

Miracle as Sign, Not Mere Cause

The strongest religious use of miracle language is not merely causal. A miracle is often a sign: an event whose significance lies in its communicative relation to a divine purpose. A healing, exodus, resurrection appearance, or prophetic sign is not just unusual. It is taken to disclose intention.

The Big Bang does not obviously fit that sign structure. It is not addressed to an

audience in an ordinary historical setting. It does not contain interpretable content that selects one theological message over another. It is a cosmological condition inferred through theory, observation, and model-building. Its grandeur is undeniable, but grandeur is not the same as communicative specificity.

This distinction matters because a sign must be legible. If a sign equally supports classical theism, deism, pantheism, simulation theory, axiarchic metaphysics, or unknown physical necessity, it is not a strong sign for any one of them. The more generic the event, the weaker the sign function.

Calling the Big Bang a miracle therefore risks flattening two different notions: cause and sign. Even if one argued for a transcendent cause, a further step would be needed to show that the event communicates the purposes of the God of any particular tradition.

One Data Point and a Large Hypothesis

The evidential scale is also mismatched. Theism is a large hypothesis. It includes claims about mind, agency, value, creation, providence, moral order, possible revelation, and sometimes specific doctrines. The Big Bang, by itself, is one feature of cosmology. One feature may be relevant, but it cannot carry the whole hypothesis without help.

This is not an objection to using cosmology in cumulative-case reasoning. A cumulative case may draw on existence, order, consciousness, moral experience, religious experience, and historical claims. But cumulative reasoning is different from declaring a single cosmological boundary a miracle. It requires showing how each strand changes the comparative probability of the whole view.

When one data point is asked to support a large hypothesis, elasticity becomes tempting. If a beginning supports God, the beginning is emphasized. If a model lacks a beginning, contingency is emphasized. If lawlike order is discovered, law is emphasized. If apparent disorder appears, mystery is emphasized. The hypothesis can become too adaptable.

The Big Bang may belong in a larger metaphysical conversation. It should not

be made to do more than it can. At most, it raises questions about dependence, contingency, and explanation. The move to miracle adds agency, intention, and religious significance that the data point alone does not supply.

Competing Theological and Non-Theological Readings

Even if one grants that the Big Bang is metaphysically suggestive, it is underdetermined among many readings. A classical theist may see creation. A deist may see initial design without ongoing providence. A pantheist may see manifestation. A Platonist may see mathematical structure. A naturalist may see a boundary of current theory. An agnostic may see a question not yet answerable.

The miracle label often suppresses this underdetermination. It makes the theistic reading sound like the immediate meaning of the event rather than one interpretation among competitors. But interpretation requires contrastive support. Why this God rather than an impersonal ground? Why intentional creation rather than necessary structure? Why miracle rather than boundary law?

Van Fraassen's caution about empirical adequacy helps here ([van Fraassen, 1980](#)). Scientific models can be powerful without settling every metaphysical interpretation. Cosmology may describe an early state or boundary behavior while leaving ultimate metaphysics open. The gap between model and metaphysics should not be filled by a rhetorically inflated word.

The underdetermination does not make theology irrational. It makes quick theological ownership irrational. A serious argument must engage rival readings, not merely baptize cosmic mystery as miracle.

What Would Actually Confirm Theism?

The critique becomes more constructive if we ask what kind of cosmological fact would confirm theism. Confirmation would require a feature more expected on theism than on relevant alternatives. It would need specificity, not merely strangeness. It would

need to discriminate between divine agency and impersonal boundary structure.

For example, a universe whose large-scale structure contained stable, interpretable, morally serious information addressed to conscious agents would be more sign-like than a generic beginning. A cosmos whose laws predictably favored embodied moral communities might be relevant to some theistic expectations. A pattern tightly linked to independent theological commitments would be more probative than a bare boundary.

The actual Big Bang evidence does not function that way on its own. It indicates expansion history, early density, cosmic microwave background structure, nucleosynthesis, and model-dependent boundary questions. These are scientifically rich, but they do not by themselves contain the semantic or intentional markers that miracle-as-sign requires.

Thus the criticism is not that cosmology could never matter to theism. It is that the miracle argument must earn its theological predicate. Wonder, boundary, and unexplainedness are not enough. Confirmation requires discriminating content.

Violation, Creation, and Dependence

The word miracle also blurs three distinct relations: violation, creation, and dependence. A violation interrupts an established order. Creation brings an order into being. Dependence says the order exists because of some deeper ground. These are not interchangeable.

If the Big Bang is treated as a violation, the argument imagines a lawlike order already in place and then imagines an exception. But cosmology is not describing a rabbit pulled from a hat inside a pre-existing universe. It is describing early universe structure and perhaps the boundary of the order itself.

If the Big Bang is treated as creation, the claim has moved from physics to metaphysics. Creation is not simply a first event. It is a dependence relation between reality and a creator. That relation may be defended philosophically, but it cannot be read straight off an expanding-universe model.

If the Big Bang is treated as dependence, then "miracle" is again the wrong

word unless communicative divine action is added. Dependence may be continuous, necessary, or metaphysical rather than spectacular. The miracle label therefore hides distinctions that should be doing explicit argumentative work.

Rhetorical Pacing and the Manufacture of Obviousness

The Big Bang miracle argument often works by pacing. First, invite awe. Second, call the event a miracle in the loose sense. Third, allow the theological sense of miracle to become emotionally available. Fourth, present skepticism as resistance to the obvious. The sequence manufactures obviousness before the key inference is examined.

This pacing is effective because each step feels small. Awe is reasonable. Miracle-as-wonder is rhetorically permissible. Theistic interpretation is culturally familiar. But the cumulative result is a change in claim type: an aesthetic response becomes an evidential conclusion.

Slowing the pacing changes the dialectic. Awe becomes a starting point. Wonder becomes a psychological response. Boundary physics becomes a scientific and philosophical question. Divine action becomes a hypothesis needing support. Once the steps are separated, the argument no longer feels self-evident.

The repair is not emotional austerity. We need not strip cosmology of grandeur. We need only prevent grandeur from becoming a premise by stealth. Good philosophy lets wonder motivate inquiry without letting it decide the result.

Conclusion

The Big Bang may be wondrous, puzzling, and metaphysically provocative. It is not thereby a miracle in the theological sense. If miracle means awe, the conclusion is weak. If miracle means divine act, the premise is question-begging. If miracle means unexplained, the inference to God requires additional argument.

The repair is simple: keep meanings stable. Cosmological mystery deserves serious philosophy, not verbal inflation. Once equivocation is removed, the Big Bang can

still inspire inquiry, but it no longer functions as a ready-made divine signature.

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