

## USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of [www.epsociety.org](http://www.epsociety.org).**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to [www.epsociety.org](http://www.epsociety.org)!***

# Do Miracles Require Extraordinary Evidence?

Robert A. Larmer  
Department of Philosophy  
University of New Brunswick  
Fredericton, New Brunswick

**Abstract:** One often finds the rationality of belief in miracles dismissed on the basis of the claim that extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence. I examine this claim and find it wanting.

The possibility of justified belief in miracles is frequently rejected on the basis of the claim that extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence, the supposition being that such a body of evidence is not available. Although the case can certainly be made that there does exist an extraordinary amount of evidence for events plausibly viewed as miracles,<sup>1</sup> a question which must be asked is whether it is true that justified belief in such events requires extraordinary evidence.

The failure of Hume's claim that miracles must be conceived as violating the laws of nature and thus that the evidence for the laws of nature must inevitably conflict with the evidence for miracles leads to an important conclusion; namely that, unless there exists a conflict between two relevant bodies of evidence, it only takes a modest amount of evidence to justify belief that an event has occurred, even if the event is rare or unusual. We routinely accept claims with low pre-evidence probabilities on the basis of limited testimonial evidence. If my son, who does not buy lottery tickets, phones to tell me that he found a lottery ticket lying in the street and that when he took it to the store he was informed that it was the winning number for a jackpot to which he is now entitled, it would seem irrational to inform him that I cannot accept his report, since extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. The point, put differently, is that his claim constitutes, in itself, strong evidence for the event he reports.

If the critic is to dismiss miracle claims on the basis that extraordinary events demand extraordinary evidence, in the sense in which that phrase is

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Craig Keener's *Miracles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2011).

usually employed, he will have to make reference to some conflicting body of evidence that undermines the confidence we would otherwise place in the positive testimonial evidence for miracles. There seem two strategies the critic might employ; one at a very general level, the other at a much more specific level.

### Objections at a General Level

At a very general level, the critic could attempt to argue that the evidence against theism is so strong as to outweigh any positive evidence for miracles. But exactly how is this to be argued? Aquinas seems correct in his observation that the two fundamental objections raised against belief in theism are 1) all that occurs can be explained without reference to God, and 2) the existence of evil.<sup>2</sup> Regarding 1), this is an appeal to Occam's Razor, namely that entities should not be multiplied needlessly. If all phenomena can be explained most simply without reference to God then belief in God is unjustified. An appeal to Occam's Razor, however, cannot be the basis upon which to dismiss evidence for events that would most plausibly be understood as miracles. If one asserts that there are no rabbits in the woods on the grounds that no evidence has been forthcoming, one cannot then reject reports of someone finding positive evidence for their existence in the form of tracks or scat, by insisting that it has already established there are no rabbits in the woods. Analogously, one cannot justify disbelief in God on the basis that there is no evidence for His existence and then insist that evidence for miracles cannot be accepted, since it has already been established that theism is false. Occam's Razor states not that one should not multiply entities, but that one should not multiply entities *needlessly*. It cannot serve, therefore, as a reason to insist that the evidence for miracles must be of extraordinary strength to justify belief in their occurrence. Michael Licona is, therefore, correct in his claim that

it is the responsibility of the historian to consider what the evidence would look like if she were not wearing her metaphysical bias like a pair of sunglasses that shade the world. It is not the responsibility of the evidence to shine so brightly that they render such glasses ineffectual.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 2, Article 3. *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis. (New York: Random House, 1944) Vol 1. p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*. (Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2010) 196.

Regarding 2), the existence of evil is routinely raised as an objection to accepting theism. Can the critic develop a Humean-type balance-of-probabilities argument in which the existence of evil is taken as evidence against the occurrence of miracles, thus justifying the conclusion that an extraordinary strength of evidence is required if belief in miracles is to be rationally justified?

Arguably, the critic cannot. Attempts to demonstrate that there is logical inconsistency between asserting the existence of God and acknowledging the existence of evil have failed. Critics of theism employing the problem of evil are forced to argue not that the existence of evil disproves God in any absolute sense, but rather that it provides strong evidence against theism.

The question which must be asked, however, is whether alternative views of reality can better account for evil than theism. If they cannot, if theism provides the most adequate understanding of the nature and existence of evil that we possess, then the existence of evil cannot be taken as evidence against the existence of God. To put it paradoxically, if evil is a feature of the world that cannot be simply explained away, to use C.E.M. Joad's words, as "a by-product of circumstance, the result of imperfect development or inadequate training,"<sup>4</sup> but is rather best accounted for by theism, then this is a reason to accept, rather than reject, theism over other world-views.

If world-views other than theism do not allow us to view events such as the Jewish Holocaust or the Rwandan Genocide as fundamental instances of evil, then this is reason to think that, despite whatever difficulties theists have in explaining the existence of evil, their world-view is superior to world-views which ultimately explain away the existence of evil in terms of some presumably more basic concept.

Theism's main rivals in providing a comprehensive understanding of reality are naturalism and pantheism. Arguably, neither provides as adequate an understanding of the nature and existence of evil as theism. Much can be said in support of this claim. In the present context it is sufficient to note that, to the degree that naturalism is unable to acknowledge the reality of agent causation and libertarian free will, it cannot provide an adequate account of moral evil, and that, to the degree that pantheism negates any ultimate

---

<sup>4</sup> C.E.M. Joad, *God and Evil*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1942) 175.

distinction between good and evil, it cannot be said to provide an adequate account of evil.

As regards naturalism, it is generally agreed that libertarian free will and the theory of agency it implies are incompatible with naturalism. Libertarian free will is possible on the assumption of an agent with the capacity to act or refrain from acting, but naturalism which only recognizes ‘event-event causation’ has no place in its ontology for such agents.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that naturalists typically either deny the existence of free will or insist on defining it in a compatibilist manner, despite the fact that either option negates attributing moral responsibility.

As regards pantheism, the insistence on reality being constituted by an all-embracing unity leads pantheists to deny any ultimate distinction between good and evil. Insofar as pantheists conceive of evil as a problem, they think of it as a logical problem of how unity can exist within an impersonal all-embracing divine reality that exists outside of any moral categories, and thus cannot be described as being good or evil. Thus Michael Levine suggests that “the very idea of evil may be something the pantheist wishes to eschew.”<sup>6</sup>

If one is to avoid reducing the concept of evil to some presumably more basic concept one will find oneself having to embrace a theistic world-view. To claim, as naturalism seems to imply, that the concept of moral responsibility is a chimera, and thus that we could never attribute moral responsibility to the Nazis for the atrocities they committed, violates our deepest intuitions. To claim, as pantheism seems to imply, that drawing any distinction between good and evil is to engage in confused inadequate thinking, and thus be unable to view the slaughter of almost 800,000 Tutsi by Hutu extremists as genuinely evil, is again to violate our deepest intuitions. If evil *qua* evil is a concept that only theists in the final analysis are entitled to employ then the critic cannot maintain that the existence of evil provides a body of counter-evidence to theism, such that events plausibly regarded as miracles could not be accepted in the absence of extraordinarily strong evidence for their occurrence.

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, John Bishop, *Natural Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1989), 40.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Levine, “Pantheism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/pantheism>. (Retrieved June 30, 2011).

## Objections at a Specific Level

At a very specific level, the critic might attempt to argue that the positive evidence for miracles is subverted or outweighed by the evidence we have regarding the unreliability of testimony under certain circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, there are instances where the person reporting a miracle cannot be considered reliable, but on what grounds is the critic entitled to assume that this is invariably the case? It will not do for the critic to decree from his or her armchair that because some reports of miracles come from unreliable witnesses that all or the majority of reports of miracles can therefore be discounted. It cannot be assumed that the majority of miracle claims have been found fraudulent and that there thus exists a large body of counter-evidence such that any specific miracle-claim must have an extraordinary amount of evidence in its favor before it can be accepted. *Abusus non tollit usum*; that testimony is sometimes of questionable worth, hardly establishes that it is always of questionable worth. Unless there are specific reasons to think that someone is an unreliable witness, that is to say an existing body of evidence pointing to her unreliability, we would normally think her testimony should be accepted rather than rejected, since the most basic principle of assessing evidence is to accept as much evidence as possible that permits the development of a coherent account consistent with the evidence. John Henry Newman is thus correct in his observation that,

a miracle ... calls for no distinct species of testimony from that offered for other events ... it is as impossible to draw any line, or to determine how much is required, as to define the quantity and quality of evidence to prove the occurrence of an earthquake, or the appearance of any meteoric phenomenon... But in any case the testimony cannot turn out to be more than that of competent and honest men; and an inquiry must not be prosecuted under the idea of finding something beyond this, but to obtain proofs of this.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> This is the tack taken by Hume in Part II of the *Essay*. For a description and criticism of his arguments see my *The Legitimacy of Miracle*. (U.S.A.: Lexington, 2014) 133-140.

<sup>8</sup> John Henry Newman, *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1890) 73.

## Conclusion

Unless there exists a body of counter-evidence against the occurrence of events plausibly viewed as miracles, it is a mistake to claim that rational belief in their occurrence can only be justified on the basis of extraordinarily strong evidence. Put simply, even modest evidence for such events gives good grounds for believing they occurred, unless such evidence conflicts with other evidence tending to disconfirm them.

Various suggestions as to what might constitute counter-evidence against the occurrence of miracles have been examined and found wanting. Miracles should not be conceived as violating the laws of nature, so it is illegitimate for Hume and his followers to insist that the evidence for the laws of nature must be taken as in conflict with the evidence for miracles. Similarly, there seems little reason to take seriously the claim that the existence of evil must be taken as providing evidence against miracles. In light of this, and in light of the fact that a basic epistemic principle is that we accept as many pieces of evidence as is consistent with developing a coherent account of what actually took place, the burden of proof is upon the critic to explain his or her rejection of miracle accounts.

*Robert A. Larmer is Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, New Brunswick.*