

Miracles, Evidence, and Agent Causation

A Review Article

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The Miracle Myth: Why Belief in the Resurrection and the Supernatural Is Unjustified. By Lawrence Shapiro. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 168 pages. \$27.95.

The goal of philosophy professor Lawrence Shapiro's recent book, *The Miracle Myth: Why Belief in the Resurrection and the Supernatural Is Unjustified*, is to "convince you that no one has had or currently has good reasons for believing in miracles" (xiv; also 12, 14). Rather than focusing on whether or not a miracle *has* occurred, Shapiro is more concerned with how it could ever be *known* that one did occur (xv, 84–5). Ultimately, his complaint is with the epistemological justification for believing that a miracle has occurred rather than the ontological reality *per se*.

Shapiro writes clearly and his arguments are easily followed. This clarity contributes to formulating disagreements, clarifying the overall case, and reconsidering the data (xiv, 1, 77). The goal in this article will be to identify

ABSTRACT: Here we interact critically with the volume *The Miracle Myth: Why Belief in the Resurrection and the Supernatural Is Unjustified* (Columbia University, 2016) by University of Wisconsin philosopher Lawrence Shapiro, who contends that even if miracles occur, proper epistemological justification is unattainable. In addition, he argues that the historical evidence for Jesus's resurrection is deeply problematic. We engage Shapiro's philosophical and historical arguments by raising several significant issues within his own arguments, while also briefly providing some positive reasons to think that if a miracle did occur, one may be epistemologically justified in believing it.

several areas of disagreement and explain why Shapiro's objections fall short of his intended goal.

Objection One: Background Assumptions and Other Explanations

Chapter 1 introduces basic philosophical principles of justified true belief such that the following chapters may properly analyze whether one may be justified in believing that miracles do occur. Chapter 2 more crucially begins with Shapiro's definition of a miracle as "events that are the result of supernatural, typically divine, forces." According to Shapiro, "The best evidence for the presence of supernatural activity is that activity's vast improbability" (18). As such, these occurrences are vastly improbable and should not be confused with other events that are improbable but not miraculous (19–20, 21, 58, 60, 78–81). Miraculous events are *so vastly improbable* that we "naturally infer" a supernatural cause (21, 59–61).

Miracles, then, are much more improbable than other unlikely events. Shapiro presents two criteria for determining if a miracle has occurred. It should be "unlike anything we have seen before . . . contrary to everything we know about how the world works" and it "must be the product of supernatural and typically divine agency" (25).

Chapter 3 contains Shapiro's first of two major arguments against belief in miracles: such events could never be identified as supernatural. They could always have natural causes (29–31, 42–8). For example, Shapiro considers the account of Aaron's staff turning into a serpent and grants the occurrence for the sake of the argument (41ff.). But a number of alternate explanations could equally be possible. How would we know that God was the cause of the event instead of, say, seventeen gods, an unknown natural cause, or even aliens (46–8, 52)! Such explanations may be silly, but Shapiro asks why they are any sillier than God.

For Shapiro, one needs to consider the "plausibility of the background assumptions and the multitude of hypotheses that could make sense of the observations" (48–9). Assumptions about God's nature and personality are ultimately speculations that cannot be justified (44, 49, 50–1, 55, 56, 58). Further, other possible explanations could explain the data (46–8, 49, 51–2, 54–5, 56, 58, 84).

Objection Two: Bayes's Theorem and Historical Evidence

Chapter 4 contains Shapiro's second objection, focusing on historical epistemology. He argues that Bayes's Theorem and the base rate fallacy apply to testimonial evidence and highly improbable events (61–81). Reminiscent of David Hume, Shapiro asks, "What is more likely—that the event really happened, as the witness reports, or that some other explanation for the testimony is true" (71; cf. 133)? Thus, it is always more likely that we are incorrect when thinking that we have observed an event as improbable as a miracle. Shapiro uses this reasoning to undergird the subsequent chapters in order to show that even if an event met the standards that would satisfy historians, it would still not be enough to justify belief in miracles (92, 110, 112–13, 116–17, 130, 132, 134).

Shapiro's Historical Evaluations

Chapter 5 considers the tools that historians use in determining historical events, examining Caesar's crossing the Rubicon and the Mormon's claim of Jesus visiting America. Shapiro rejects the Mormon claim on historical grounds: for "something as improbable as that, we should expect something even better than the best historical evidence and certainly better than the zero evidence that we do have" (106).

The same complaint is raised in chapter 6 against Jesus's resurrection. Rather than discuss evidence that Christian scholars have presented, Shapiro allowed skeptics Bart Ehrman and Richard Carrier to outline the historical case for Jesus's resurrection (110, 113). Jesus's resurrection is not well-attested because the authors were biased, ignorant, and superstitious (118–24, 134). Textual criticism indicates that the New Testament writings are so corrupted that they would be unrecognizable to the original authors (124–8, 134). In short, the historical evidence is "not even a teensy bit better than the evidence that Jesus walked the Americas" (110).

The final chapter discusses whether or not we should care if belief in miracles is justified. Lastly, Shapiro provides two very brief appendices. These examine miracles as violations of natural law and the possibility of an immaterial mind affecting the natural world.

Critical Analysis of Shapiro's Objections

Some crucial moves could be made initially that would adjust significantly Shapiro's treatment of the odds of miracle-claims such as the resurrec-

tion. For example, one could pose the existence of a God who could act in the world. David Owen, a critic who also employs antecedent improbabilities to disallow miracles, acknowledges freely that the notion of God's existence could change everything.¹ As noted below, Shapiro's own Exodus example does precisely this. Additionally, if highly evidential near-death experiences indicate the likelihood of an afterlife, then we would have to be open to special cases of the afterlife, like Jesus's resurrection.²

In examining Shapiro's arguments, we will keep most of the focus on the philosophical and epistemological issues. Specific historical claims regarding the resurrection are quite detailed, and thus beyond the scope of this article, and Shapiro acknowledges readily that he is not a trained historian (54, 91, 111, 113). This weakness leads him to several methodological and historical mistakes (for example, there is no mention of the very best historical data, as well as misunderstanding his own skeptical sources (Ehrman, for example) and so on).

Analysis of Objection One

How should a miracle be defined? Defining what a miracle would be, even in hypothetical terms, has been a notoriously challenging task. Shapiro, like many others, offers a definition that fails to do justice to the full concept, where key components are lacking and denying a path to justification on *a priori* grounds. For example, his definition requires the assumption of a supernatural cause since miracles are events that are so vastly improbable that we "naturally infer" a supernatural cause. We naturally infer a supernatural cause, according to Shapiro, since the event cannot be explained through natural laws or it is utterly contrary to them. In fact, "These occurrences count as *supernatural* only if they have no explanation in terms of the natural world" (30 (emphasis in original); also 20, 24, 31–2, 58).

Defining miracles this way appears more akin to "God of the gaps" reasoning. If one "knows" a supernatural agent has acted simply because they cannot explain it naturally, then they are arguing from ignorance rather than from any positive evidence or argumentation.³ Shapiro's definition places

1. David Owen, "Hume Versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities," in *Miracles*, ed. Richard Swinburne (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 132.

2. Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 60–2.

3. Robert Larmer points out that it is difficult to find arguments that are truly made from ignorance as there are usually positive reasons that are ignored, not clearly presented. Larmer, "Is There Anything Wrong with 'God of the Gaps' Reasoning?," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 52 (2002): 130.

the believer in an indefensible epistemic position, one he later chides them for holding (82)!⁴

To rework differently one of Shapiro's own lines: he should not be allowed to help himself to a definition that entails the very conclusion that he wishes to establish. That's just bad reasoning (cf. 131). Ultimately, Shapiro's definition creates artificial limitations on our ability to recognize whether a miracle has occurred. These inappropriately impose *a priori* epistemological restrictions that significantly derail his subsequent objections to belief in miracles.

Decades ago the Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne noted the important distinction between scientific and agent/intentional explanations.⁵ He pointed out that many events that "can be explained by the intention or purpose of an agent can also be explained in scientific terms."⁶ The moving of one's hand to pick up a knife, for example, could be explained scientifically (that is, the nervous system) or it could be explained in terms of an agent's intention (that is, to use the knife in order to accomplish some goal). A significant difference between these two types of explanation is that the latter requires a context in order to properly evaluate it as an explanation whereas the former may not.

Shapiro appears to conflate these two types of explanations. Although he recognizes that agency is important in defining a miracle, he essentially treats it as a tautology since his second criterion, which refers to supernatural agency (God, angels, and so forth), "describes the feature that actually makes an event miraculous" (25). This is important as one considers Shapiro's primary complaint, namely that one could never know the motives or intentions of a supernatural agent without unjustified assumptions (44, 50).

Shapiro appears to believe that these assumptions are unjustified because (1) he fails to properly consider the context in which these events occur and (2) he holds to a view of miracles that is similar to "God of the Gaps" reasoning. Gaps do not require a context, but understanding the actions of an agent do. Philosopher Stephen Davis notes that context provides patterns and meaning "within which we can understand a certain event as fitting what we understand to be God's [or an agent's] purposive activity."⁷ The actions

4. Shapiro complains that believers in miracles assume that "God" is the active agent, when it is possible that any number of agents could have been the cause (i.e., demons, aliens, etc.). This is true, as will be discussed below, *if* one considers the event devoid of an immediate context.

5. Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970), 53–7. See also Richard Taylor, "Two Kinds of Explanation," in *Miracles*, ed. Richard Swinburne (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 103–13.

6. Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, 55.

7. Stephen T. Davis, "God's Actions," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 168. Similarly Habermas, "Since miracles are not self-interpreting, other contextual parameters need to be involved" (*Risen Jesus*, 89; see also 65). Mike Licona, whom

of an agent within a context provide information about the agent and their intention.

By not considering the context in which an agent's actions are taken, Shapiro has removed our ability *a priori* to recognize or identify such intentions. Without evaluating the context in which an event occurred, all one can do is make unjustified speculations about the agent's intentions. Imagine if one were asked to provide the intentions of a human agent who had just cut another human with a knife without examining the context. How could one possibly know whether that agent performed a surgery or a murder?

Contrariwise, examining the context will enable us to better recognize if the agent used the knife *in order to* save a life or take it. Over fifty years ago philosopher Richard Taylor pointed out that any "true assertion that something *does* occur *in order that* some result may be achieved does seem to entail that the event in question is not merely an event, but the act of some agent."⁸

Furthermore, miracles are generally understood to function as signs or pointers towards God's nature, purposes, or personality.⁹ Their very purpose is to communicate something intelligible.¹⁰ Larmer rightly observed that "the contexts in which [miracles] occur enable them to serve as revelatory of God's nature and purposes."¹¹ Ben Meyer goes further when he writes that "the historian is positively concerned with action not only as taking place in a given context and having a given impact on it but also as a revelation of the agent. For, action is symbolic."¹² If we want to know the intentions for which an agent acted *in order to* achieve some goal, we must look at the context in which it occurred. By doing so we can better grasp how human agents act *in order that* some end may be achieved and so too with divine agents.¹³

These concerns are highlighted by Shapiro's use of the account in Exodus in which he treats the event as historical in order to highlight unjustified

Shapiro references in his book, also notes the importance of context in determining a miracle. Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 163–6, 171.

8. Taylor, "Two Kinds of Explanation," 107 (emphasis in original). Taylor rightly adds that even if an agent's "actions were quite unprecedented, they would nevertheless be understood, intelligible, and in that sense explained, if they did satisfy these conditions—that is, if they could be truly represented as an appropriate means to some end" (*ibid.*, 112).

9. Robert A. Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 3, 22–3, 87. Craig Keener points out that miracles could also confirm one's message and serve an authenticating function (*Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1:61–4).

10. Miracles are frequently seen as teleological revelations of God. Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 148–62, 187–8; Habermas, *Risen Jesus*, 63, 66.

11. Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 32.

12. Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 167. This is also emphasized in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43, 184–7, 305, 347–689.

13. See also Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, 57; Keener, *Miracles*, 1:182–4.

assumptions such as “God expresses Himself through might.” While it is true that God may not always express himself through might, this situation is one in which he could do so. How do we know this? Given that Shapiro grants the truthfulness of the account for the sake of the argument, we can say a few things about it.

First, in Exodus 3:6, God specifically identifies himself to Moses as the active Agent involved. Second, in 3:7ff God informs Moses of his desire to lead Israel out of Egypt and that Pharaoh will not let them go unless a “strong hand,” that is, force, is used (3:19–20; 6:1). Third, Moses recognizes another problem: how would those who were not present know that Moses is telling the truth? In other words, how are Israelites going to know that God revealed himself to Moses (the same question Pharaoh and Shapiro also have)? God tells Moses to perform one of three different signs that will serve to confirm his message (4:3–9). Fourth, Pharaoh has no fear of God nor sees any reason to obey him, thus he sees no reason to listen to Moses’ plea (5:2).

These four brief considerations shed an incredibly valuable and important light on the context of the event considered by Shapiro. They provide the context from which we can know that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the Agent involved, but also why believers would think that God would express himself through his power. God made it known that only through the use of his strong hand would Pharaoh release the Israelites. Thus, the point of God expressing himself through his might serves to show that the God of Israel has greater power and authority than does Pharaoh.

It becomes evident that by considering an event apart from the context, Shapiro misses the forest for the trees. Not only does God communicate beforehand how he would express himself, but his messages are confirmed through these miraculous acts. Given their context, these divine actions tell us something about the Agent behind them. He is incredibly powerful, is able to act in our world, desired to save Israel from Egypt, and had foreknowledge of how Pharaoh would react.

A final interesting point worth noting is that Shapiro’s confusion regarding agents acting within a context may help explain why he does not understand how an event could be considered a miracle if it were to occur by natural means (30). The problem again is the absence of contextual consideration. Human agents use natural means in order that they may attain certain goals or desires. There seem to be no reasons why, *a priori*, supernatural agents could not also use natural processes if desired. Many scholars have acknowledged that God could use both the ordinary and the extraordinary to achieve his goals.¹⁴

14. Historian Brad Gregory writes, “The central conceptual category would be divine action consonant with the achievement of God’s purposes, which, if God is real, might be pursued ordinarily via the normal course of divinely established natural processes as part of his ordered creation, but sometimes could be pursued extra-ordinarily through miracles” (“No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008):

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the God of Israel as the Agent*

A lesser complaint by Shapiro is this: How would one know that God caused Aaron's snake to eat the other snakes rather than multiple gods or aliens being the cause? This is a rather surprising complaint from a philosopher. First, Ockham's razor gives us no reason to suppose a plurality of gods or agents when they are unnecessary.¹⁵ Further, there are issues surrounding the viability of polytheism in general.¹⁶

Second, the identity of the active Agent is made clear in the Exodus account that Shapiro grants for the discussion. Moses also recognized that the Israelites would want to know whether he were really acting on God's behalf (as would Pharaoh), on his own self-interest, or was simply deluded. Thus the signs performed by Moses and Aaron serve to authenticate their message and the One who gave the message its authority.

Third, in this context there is no evidence to support alien intervention (51). While theistic evidence is not Shapiro's goal either, he is still missing the issue of the agency being invoked. If the most likely view is rejected, then of course Shapiro would need to entertain other causes. But in the context that Shapiro himself introduced, God is the most likely active Agent rather than aliens or other options. It is important here to recall that Shapiro's argument is that it is virtually impossible to believe a supernatural agent caused a miracle—but it is clearly the best option in the context.

Analysis of Objection Two

Shapiro's second objection is that miracles must be understood as highly improbable. We can hardly even imagine what it would take to show that they actually occurred (57–61).

Another A Priori Restriction

We noted above that Shapiro rejected miracles *a priori* via his definition and appeared to do so again with his methodology. Here too, we find yet another *a priori* problem. Shapiro claims he is merely requesting extraordinary

510–11. Davis has also argued that God can act in natural and nonnatural ways ("God's Actions," 165). See also Keener, *Miracles*, 1:110, 131, 133, 181.

15. Swinburne writes, "Unless we have good reason to do so we ought not to postulate the existence of more than one god but to suppose that the same being is responsible for all miracles. This follows from the basic principle of reasoning that we ought to postulate the existence of no more entities than are sufficient to account for the phenomena to be explained (the principle called 'Ockham's razor'—*entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*)" (*The Concept of Miracle*, 59).

16. Larmer briefly provides three additional reasons to reject polytheistic explanations and favor monotheistic ones in the context of miracles (*The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 151–2.)

evidence for an extraordinary claim but he is actually demanding a standard of evidence that could never be attained.

At numerous points Shapiro makes the claim that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence (85, 89–90, 106, 112–13, 116–17, 132, 134). He argues that even historical standards are not enough to show that an event as improbable as a miracle has occurred (92, 106, 110, 112, 117, 132). This is certainly a strange claim given that part of the historian's job is to determine what has actually occurred in the past!

Shapiro also questions the reliability of testimony as evidence for miracles and, similarly to Hume, wonders whether or not we should accept someone's testimony or just assume that they were mistaken or lying (71, 73, 78). Given the extreme unlikelihood of a miracle (58, 60, 78–81) we should believe that it is more likely that the testimony is unreliable. Importantly he argues against those who use such a claim merely as a smokescreen for *impossibly* high demands (85, 89–90). Regrettably, Shapiro makes the same mistake himself.

First, he argues that because "miracles are so many times more improbable than any of these ordinary sorts of things, justification for believing in them requires evidence that's *supergood*" (134 (emphasis in original)). However, having the *right* evidence is more appropriate and crucial for establishing past events than stacking up *extraordinary* or *super* evidence. Shapiro seems to tacitly acknowledge this point as well when he suggests that if we are to believe that Jesus's resurrection is the best explanation, then "the evidence has to convince us that no other explanation for the reports is more probable" (112). But again, we need the *right* evidence. The alleged cause of an event should not be used to argue whether or not an event has occurred, for these are two separate questions. To do otherwise is to artificially limit both history and science.

Second, the evidentiary bar is so high that Shapiro admittedly does not even know what the bar looks like! Shapiro writes that "'Supergood' is, I grant, not easily quantified, but *whatever it amounts to*, it will be better than the evidence that justifies our belief that Caesar crossed the Rubicon" (134 (emphasis added)). It is strange that he demands "super" evidence for miracles but admittedly does not know what this adjective means in terms of evidence and our epistemological access to such "evidence."¹⁷ Ultimately, we do not need some vague, undefined *extraordinary* evidence.¹⁸ Besides,

17. However, as Licona remarks, "Probabilities are not determined by our personal interests in a matter" (*The Resurrection of Jesus*, 192).

18. Keener makes some similarly strong points in this regard as well.

One objection to the lottery analogy is that whereas a particular individual winning the lottery is merely improbable, it is not incredible, since *someone* may win the lottery. By contrast, it is argued, 'That an elephant flew over London yesterday is incredible.' Granted that the latter is incredible, it would not be incredible if a deity known to make elephants fly in other cases or to be the kind of deity we would have

what the skeptic often defines as *extraordinary* evidence generally remains *just beyond* the best data that we can possibly ever get, so it is *impossible a priori*, even though Shapiro denies that this is his view.

Bayes's Theorem

Shapiro writes that “if you wish to argue that your beliefs in miracles are justified, you need to do something very difficult: you need to demonstrate that the evidence for miracles meets this supergood standard, or you need to deny a mathematical fact” (142). This incredibly high standard also relates to the perceived unreliability of testimony. As Shapiro was mistaken regarding a “supergood standard,” he is also mistaken in his analysis and application of the “mathematical fact” for testimony.

First, it is questionable whether or not a scientific test serves as an appropriate analogy to human agents and historical inquiry.¹⁹ Keener's thoughts on the incredible numbers of miracle-claims around the world are helpful here. A central thesis of Keener's work that argues against Shapiro's probability calculus is that miracles are reported far more frequently than often discussed, they occur across the globe, and by those at all levels of education.²⁰

Second, and mathematically more damaging, Shapiro treats a medical test as though that were the end of the discussion (63–8). One could easily avoid the base rate fallacy, which Shapiro raises, by taking multiple tests. If additional tests are given, then the probability of their diagnosis as being correct increases exponentially. The same could be said for events that are as improbable as miracles when there are multiple independent witnesses. Of course there is always the possibility that one person could be mistaken or lie, but when there are a number of witnesses or physical types of documentation (for example, medical records or video), then this can dramatically change the probability calculus. Thus, while Shapiro's mathematical equations appear correct, they do not supply the mathematical clincher that shows that testimony is unreliable. In fact it shows the reliability of testimony when there are multiple witnesses.

Conclusion

Despite Shapiro's many claims to be charitable (92, 102, 112, 157), he makes many not-so-generous remarks. For example, in his analogies for those who believe in miracles he uses an inebriated fellow at a bar and a talking frog (1–3), a ten-year-old girl, aliens (68–74), and his young daughter

good reason to believe might make them fly. No such deity is reported, but reports of other naturally incredible events (as well as merely unusual ones) are often attributed to deities. (*Miracles*, 1:158–9)

19. Similar issues may be raised in Shapiro's section on justifying improbable events (78–81).

20. Keener, *Miracles*, 1:105, 205, 209, 213–14, 238, 263; 2:761.

playing telephone (93). While these rhetorical examples ignore many modern, sober-minded adults (including those with PhDs) throughout the world who claim to have witnessed a miracle, perhaps the biggest problem is that Shapiro artificially limits our epistemological access to miracles through three inappropriate, *a priori* restrictions (definitional, methodological, and evidential) in seeking to confirm his argument.

We also noted that he ignores the religious context that is important to understanding the actions of an agent within that context as well as failing to recognize why various causes are more reasonable than others. Lastly, his use of Bayes's Theorem is too shortsighted and can actually be used to increase the probability of a miraculous event in a miraculous event.

It may seem to some that it would be very ambitious for Shapiro to achieve his goal with only two arguments in a popular-level book. Shapiro overstates his case by arguing that it is not possible to know a miraculous event has occurred and a simple response would be to pose a hypothetical scenario in which we were able to recognize that God had probably acted in the world. We even saw that the Exodus example provided by Shapiro himself should be sufficient to show that it is at least possible to recognize the cause of a miracle. However, this does not mean that all the questions pertaining to the miraculous have been addressed or discussed (for example, miracle claims in other religions, unanswered prayer, and so on). We have simply sought to show on several grounds that Shapiro's arguments against belief in miracles have failed.

Early in this essay, we also mentioned that if God existed and/or if an afterlife were shown to exist, either of these possibilities would open the prior probabilities door and the evidence bar for actual miracles would change considerably. In fact, either situation could flip the likelihoods in the exact opposite direction, as Richard Swinburne has argued.²¹ After all, if there is a God, he could possibly choose to act in Jesus's resurrection. And if there is an afterlife, the very realm of resurrection itself would presumably exist. So we *must* plow ahead and pursue the evidential arguments.

21. Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).