



or no prior experience with any of these (particularly metaphysics and action theory) will, I think, have a hard time making it through this book.

This will not be the last book on omissions. While Clarke does an admirable job laying out the broad outlines of various debates pertaining to omissions and offers a wide variety of interesting examples to chew on, it does not deliver a full-orbed, positive theory of omissions. Perhaps, however, this is the most that we can (and should) expect from a book that tries to make a substantive contribution to a largely disorganized field of research.

*Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Account*, Volumes 1 and 2, by Craig S. Keener. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. Pp. 1210. \$65.00 (hardback).

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In his two-volume magnum opus, *Miracles*, Biblical scholar Craig Keener engages in a philosophical analysis of the reliability of miracle claims. Although the book's subtitle and the author's specialization might suggest an exegetical focus, the two central themes of the book are scrutinizing and critiquing David Hume's anti-supernaturalism and presenting an astonishing collection of eyewitness claims of miracles in antiquity as well as in the modern era. For this review I will concentrate on his philosophical argumentation.

Keener's main interest in writing a book on miracles is "challenging the Western anti-supernaturalist readings of the Gospels and Acts" (2). He realizes that this challenge cannot be undertaken without taking into account non-Biblical miracle claims in order to maintain coherent rationality criteria for historiography. Keener names his two central theses right at the beginning: "eyewitnesses do offer miracle claims" and "supernatural explanations . . . should be welcome on the scholarly table along with other explanations often discussed" (1). Keener's second thesis is thus rather weak: Instead of arguing for "supernatural theism," he merely claims that it should not be ruled out a priori (8): "[I]f one presupposes neither theism nor nontheism, one must examine evidence for particular miracle claims inductively to see if a pattern emerges" (161).

In the first part of the book, Keener presents early Christian evidence for miracle claims (21–34) and miracle claims outside Christianity (35–65), afterwards comparing both sides (66–83), most notably Early Christian and Jewish miracle accounts (71–72). Here, Keener evaluates the *genre question* as critical: while miracles are often presented "to make a homiletic point concerning a teaching," New Testament miracles intend to "validate

Jesus's person and mission rather than just a particular teaching" (73). In conclusion, Keener claims that "miracle reports in the Gospels and Acts are generally plausible historically" (7).

In the second part of the book, Keener criticizes materialistic anti-supernaturalism, trying to unmask it as an unsubstantiated worldview. A miracle is defined as an "extraordinary event with an unusual supernatural cause." He raises the question whether God is "bound by the orderly processes of nature" (87), highlighting that the term "contrary to nature" has in the past mainly been used to make claims regarding moral law (natural law) and not regarding the abrogation of laws of nature (87). Keener fails to engage with theological (for example neo-Thomist, divine hiddenness or theodicy-related) arguments against interventionism; just as Alvin Plantinga does in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, he simply presumes that if there is a God who created the laws of nature, there is no reason why He should not abrogate them from time to time. Later in the book he first quotes Polkinghorne ("After all, God is the ordainer of the laws of nature, not someone subject to them"), followed by the rather strong thesis that "[n]o one who believes in historic monotheistic understandings of God would deny the possibility of God influencing the system of nature" (129).

Under this presumption that theism implies possible interventionism, he concludes that interpreting miracle claims as consequences of actual miracles might *sometimes* be the most parsimonious (and therefore most rational) explanation (103). Keener then offers a widespread critique of Hume's argument against miracles: "One cannot inductively prove a negative without examining every possible instance" (105, cf. 167). Hume's a priori exclusion of supernaturalism resulting from his deistic worldview is deductive (cf. 143) and thus inconsistent with his inductive epistemology as well as with his account of causation. When defining a divine miracle as God abrogating the laws of nature, one cannot simultaneously hold that laws of nature are only regularities which we come to know by induction from a great number of singular events (134: "Natural law is, after all, merely our construct of how nature functions").

Keener claims that Hume's argument is not only inconsistent due to deduction but also circular. Hume wants to prove anti-supernaturalism by defining criteria for testimony which by definition rule out any evidence for supernaturalism. Keener responds by arguing that if one adopted Hume's criteria for the credibility of eyewitness claims for non-miraculous historic events, one would need to "rule out *any* historical testimony to any event"; this is why moderate empiricists view Hume's rejection of testimony as irrational (148). Hume's a priori anti-supernaturalist presumption is exposed with his quote that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle" (145), contradicting a moderate reading of Hume according to which only "miracle testimony in history so far had been untrustworthy" (149). The charge is that "Hume prevents his own argument from being falsified by rejecting evidence that contradicts his thesis" (162). Accordingly, even miracle claims that fulfilled Hume's evidential criteria

(recent, public, attested by many witnesses) were rejected by Hume (165) on similar grounds as they are today: any person who claims to have witnessed a miracle is irrational for making such a claim and is therefore not a reliable witness.

A general critique of Hume's epistemology involves the correlation of the unusualness of an event and the unreliability of a report concerning it (157). Keener regards such a correlation to be "methodologically fallacious" and exemplifies this with an historic example: "[O]n March 1, 1950, all fifteen members of a church choir arrived late for choir rehearsal . . . that church building exploded . . . their lateness prevented any lives from being lost" (157). Although the probability of a supernatural explanation, if not excluded a priori as a genuine possibility, is by definition rather low, the described event might (if interpreted as a random conjunction of singular accidents) be attributed an even smaller epistemic probability. If we were to dismiss all testimony below a certain probability level, we would need to dismiss all claims about very improbable events, for example a friend's claim about having won the lottery; this is why Keener believes that Hume's "principle of relative likelihood" (158) is rendered absurd.

Later, another argument of Hume is discussed: that "incompatible religions claim miracles and thus . . . their claims cancel each other" (193). Keener responds that it is a logical fallacy to reject strong claims simply because weaker ones [with contradictory implications] exist (197).

In the third part of the two-volume work, Keener surveys supernatural claims in various times and cultures. He claims that Hume's anti-supernaturalism is strongly ethnocentric (223), citing studies that show that "socialization rather than exposure to science account for most of the skepticism" towards miracles (215): "Plausibility structures—what intuitively strikes us as rational—are culturally determined" (211). Most worldviews, says Keener, "affirm the reality of supernatural phenomena" (205). In the chapter "Majority World Perspectives" (211–263), the global sociology of supernaturalism is analyzed, concluding with a remark that supernatural phenomena such as healings "seem to appear with special frequency in cultures and circles that welcome them" (263). Based on this evidence, Keener concludes that the "modernist assumption that genuine miracles are impossible is a historically and culturally conditioned premise" (764), even insinuating "ethnocentric elitism" (762) to his opponents.

In the following chapters, numerous examples for supernatural claims are collected, including ones from Asia (264–308), Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean (309–358), from earlier Christian history (359–425), and the recent West (426–507). A separate chapter gathering dramatic stories about healings, raisings, and nature miracles is added (508–600). The collection includes the famous report of the raising of Jeff Markin, who fully recovered after reported to be brain-dead and without heartbeat for forty minutes (577–578). Like all other miracle claims, Keener relays these reports without any critical comments, which does not mean that he accepts them unquestioned; he wants these reports to be discussed without assuming

that they must be wrong due to their supposedly contradicting the laws of nature. Keener does not want to argue for the historicity of any singular report, but claims that given the large number of eyewitness claims throughout history, it is irrational to dismiss all of them. This is even more true when we are dealing with cases that do not obviously contradict the laws of nature but only occur with an extremely low probability. Regarding nature miracles, he claims that the majority of reports “need not imply activity *impossible* in nature, but the collocation of events can prove extraordinary” (592). Given “the abundance of eyewitness claims to what we consider nature miracles, there is no reason to doubt that eyewitnesses in Jesus’s day could have made similar claims in what they believed” (598–599).

In the fourth part of the book, Keener discusses alternative explanations regarding miracle claims, among those fraud (614–615), temporary healing through emotional arousal (617–619), medically documented beneficial effects of religious belief on physical health (620–624), and psychosomatic elements of faith cures (630–644). Applying Occam’s razor on placebo interpretations of Jesus’s healings, he comes to the conclusion that, if one does not rule out supernatural explanations from the beginning, the explanation involving a real miracle is definitely simpler and thus more plausible than reformulations involving psychosomatic elements (636). In the chapter “Biased Standards” Keener discusses the alternative explanation that most events regarded as supernatural are scientifically possible yet statistically very unlikely events. He criticizes that scientific studies (and even the Vatican) exclude all miracle claims that can be explained as highly unlikely natural phenomena; analyzing the famous Vancouver study on the correlation of prayer and healings he found that even in its introduction the authors commit to the thesis that God only works through natural causes; furthermore he claims that the study is not representative (648–650). Keener lists “spontaneous remission, psychosomatic illnesses, or exaggerated rumors” and the attribution of significant improvements of patients to “suggestion and mass hypnotism” (649) as ad hoc naturalist explanations (646). Keener acknowledges that in many cases the natural explanations are more plausible (cf. 759: “Some claims of supernatural healing are clearly false”), but there are also cases in which a supernatural explanation is more plausible (653–656), even if normal natural factors cannot be ruled out (759). Keener concludes that many “employ criteria specifically designed to screen out any evidence that might support the objectionable conclusion of supernatural causation” (711).

The last round portraying miracle reports (712–759) ends with a list of particular miracle claims Keener finds to be convincing. In order to conclude whether a supernatural explanation seems more plausible for a particular case, he applies credibility criteria such as the personal connection to the witness, whether psychosomatic elements are conceivable, and how frequently comparable events occur.

Keener definitely establishes his first thesis (“eyewitnesses do offer miracle claims”) by showing that the supposed uniformity of human

experience is false, since there were and still are millions of miracle claims around the world, throughout different eras and different cultures (763), and a large number not easily dismissed. His reproduction of sociological analyses regarding the belief in supernatural events backs his thesis. Accordingly, Keener challenges anti-supernaturalists for a better argumentation: "In today's postmodern climate, those who would deny the possibility of miracles need to provide supporting arguments more effective than an appeal to a nonexistent consensus or an appeal to the 'uniformity' of human experience" (761).

I will now focus on specific philosophical and theological issues in Keener's work. Keener makes two interesting points regarding interventionism. The first is that if natural law comprises both what is naturally and "*supernaturally possible*," one could view God "as an agent modifying causal conditions . . . without 'violating' natural law" (133–134). No miracle would then be violating natural laws, but only contradict our construct of natural regularity. Later, Keener is open to defining God's working through the created order "at a higher level" (181). The second point is that he compares divine action with human action (134). Keener explicitly presumes that agents by definition can modify causal conditions without violating the laws of nature: "Because it focuses on repeatable natural events, physical science does not predict all specific actions of intelligent agents. . . . We do not speak of human actions as violating nature simply because the laws of physics do not predict them" (182–183). Therefore, if our understanding of natural law must be indeterministic not only by integrating randomness but also allowing for human intervention, there cannot be a conflict between science and divine intervention (cf. 184–185). Keener neither discusses theories about how human and divine interventions correlate nor scrutinizes what kind of divine actions would be conceivable under this analogy; he only mentions the often-held claim that God is working through human agents (179) and explores divine actions through visions and dreams in an appendix (870–884). At another point he refers to the analogy again, stating that science "depends on predictions of the physical world; its method is not meant to provide mathematical predictions of human (or divine) actions" (609). An argument derived from this claim could be: if the possibility of divine actions is ruled out as unscientific, any (free) human action must be ruled out, too.

Keener does not only bring counterarguments against a Humean epistemology, but he also attacks anti-supernaturalism with arguments from philosophy of science: "Science is meant to address nature's regularities, not anomalies" (152). Just as theists are often charged with using a God-of-the-gaps explanation, most naturalists explain naturalistically inexplicable events by promising a naturalistic explanation in the future—Keener calls this optimistic view *naturalism-of-the-gaps* (187), later described by a quote saying that "in cases where something appeared to be a miracle, it might simply reflect a law of nature not yet discovered" (652–653). However, dogmatically excluding the existence of an intelligence outside nature is,

so Keener, unscientific (198); maybe the metascientific belief in the world's rational intelligibility held by scientists even entails a belief in God (199). Another attack on anti-supernaturalism involves the possible fear following from accepting its consequences: rejecting potential supernatural explanations "from utilitarian fear of where they could lead also prejudices the discussion" (207).

What may repeatedly strike critical readers is Keener's repetitive and depreciative use of the term "closed-minded," applied to everyone who does not regard supernaturalism as a serious possibility when engaging with miracle reports: "There is some sufficiently strong evidence today to meet an open-minded nonsupernaturalist's bar of proof, if never that of a closed-minded antisupernaturalist" (607). One wonders whether there might exist any reasonable or open-minded anti-supernaturalists. Another issue alienating many readers, especially philosophers, is the fact that hundreds of reports of supernatural events are interwoven with philosophical and theological arguments, many of which appear in different forms in various chapters. A clear separation of miracle collection and epistemological argument would clearly be advantageous.

Furthermore, although he does a fine job in presenting and discussing Hume's epistemology, I do not think that Keener has managed to establish his second thesis, that accepting supernaturalism for some cases is more plausible than the alternative. Here, the remarks on the correlation of prayer and healings are crucial. Keener notices that one needs to take into account all prayers without effect: "Not only are many not healed . . . , many have died without healing even in movements that emphasize healing, despite abundant prayer for them" (605). When depicting the Vancouver study he observed that "the [study's] committee emphasized the dashed hopes and disappointed faith of those not cured" (650). In the appendix, Keener adds that his personal struggles "now are for the vast numbers of people in the world . . . who need healing of some sort or another and do not have it" (767). What appears here as a remark in his "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" should have been a major argument in the philosophical discussion. At the point where this discussion is rudimentarily conducted, Keener employs a hidden *divine hiddenness argument*. Miracles are not scientifically proven yet, because they do not "happen commonly enough to allow a statistical perspective on what proportion of these occasions happen during prayer" (663);<sup>1</sup> "if one prays for a thousand generically sick patients, the odds are good that many will recover with or without prayer and even with or without medical treatment" (673);<sup>2</sup> it is

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<sup>1</sup>A related argument for the non-predictability of miracles which implies that they cannot be scientifically dealt with is that "we cannot always predict a personal deity's future actions. . . . If miracles happened with absolute regularity, we would view them as part of the course of nature; their occurrence beyond providence in nature allows them to function more specifically as signs revealing God's activity and character" (741).

<sup>2</sup>Keener even refers to studies analyzing miracle claims in Lourdes: One of them shows that less than 0.02% of sought cures happen, "certainly significantly lower than the expected

“difficult to procure statistics for supernatural healing claims here” (704); supernatural healing claims are “more common . . . in settings least accessible to modern controlled clinical studies . . . especially among the poor” (704); one “wonders whether a deity acting like the God of the Gospels and Acts would be expected to offer ‘signs’ by participating as an actor in a controlled experiment” (710). Although Keener does not specifically give an argument here, it seems as he wants to say that God chooses to act only in cases which cannot establish a strong argument for his existence, possibly in order to maintain the freedom of non-believers not to believe. God might usually act only in a way such that the results of his acting are indiscernible from coincidence. This claim would fit well to Keener’s observation that miracle claims are “surprisingly common” in regions where such events are expected (761). Another manifest claim worthy to be discussed would be whether faith or at least “open-mindedness” is a requirement for the possibility that miracles occur, as could be deduced from Jesus’s failure to heal in his hometown of Nazareth.

Keener’s analysis and critique of Hume, although trivial for most philosophers, manages to establish his case. His remarks on science and faith (692–697) concluding that all science rests on metaphysical assumptions should be basic knowledge for philosophers, but since the targeted audience is broader, Keener was well-advised to integrate Feyerabend’s claim that different scientific paradigms are incommensurable. Keener often calls for a paradigm shift to re-integrate possible supernaturalism into a scientific paradigm (691). There are numerous interesting and debatable arguments a philosopher can find between the lines. Keener’s task of reconciling faith and science by confining both is highly respectable. Unfortunately, theological discussions about God’s possible confinement regarding special intervention is not to be found, neither an elaborate analysis of the Thomistic argument that God can *only* act through secondary causes, nor a discussion whether the theodicy problem can only be solved by either advancing skeptical theism or non-interventionism.

Altogether, Craig Keener offers an astonishing collection of supernaturalist claims. This book might be the best collection of miracle reports so far, not only because of the number of reports listed, but also due to a vast amount of quoted sources and an enormous bibliography. This collection is combined with a thorough philosophical analysis and discussion of Humean naturalism. By merging the descriptive and the normative approach Keener should succeed in making those readers arbitrarily dismissing supernaturalist claims as implausible not only rethink their metaphysical assumptions, but also critically evaluate claims regarding supernatural events, whether they are dealing with free human action or with divine action in the world.

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reported cure rate through medical science.” This means that the “cure rate is abysmally low—perhaps no better than one would find in hospitals dealing with the same number of ‘incurable’ patients” (678–679).