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## Review: Philosophy and Miracle: The Contemporary Debate

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morally superior. This argument loses its force when one looks at the facts: inequality exists in all existing socialist countries; inequality seems to be linked more with the stage of a country's development than it does with its political-economic system. It is perfectly acceptable to dream about how things might be in one's conception of an ideal world. One must be careful, however, not to mix this dream with reality. The socialist utopia does not exist, has never existed, and, if Berger is correct, will never exist. If we reject capitalism on the grounds that it is unjust, we must propose a morally superior alternative that is also feasible.

This emphasis on "the facts" is surely the principal strength of this book. While the break with positivism—and its overemphasis of objectivity in science—is to be welcomed, there is a tendency to use this break to justify ideologically-based assertions that cannot stand up to even a casual confrontation with the empirical record. Christians appear particularly prone to this tendency. We evaluate systems normatively (as we should) but cannot seem to separate the possible from the impossible, the realistic from the unrealistic. We are too easily taken in by moral sounding rhetoric which amounts to nothing more than wishful thinking.

Take, for example, the case for "democratic socialism," a system which has broad appeal in Christian circles. Most Western socialists today will tell you that what passes for socialism in the Soviet Union and its satellites is not socialism at all. True socialism is democratic socialism; indeed some would argue that socialism means democracy in all spheres of life, from the family, to the work place, to the government. Yet Berger searches in vain for even one example—past or present—of democratic socialism. The lack of even a single example suggests that there is more at work here than historical accident. Indeed, Berger argues persuasively that the centralized power required to maintain a socialist economy is incompatible with democratic government.

My enthusiastic endorsement of this book carries only one qualification: even a sympathetic reader will note the uneven quality of the propositions as judged from the perspective of the evidence presented and with regard to their potential falsifiability. Some, as written, are virtually unfalsifiable. Take this one, for example: "If capitalist development is successful in reaching economic growth from which a sizable proportion of the population benefits, pressures toward democracy are likely to appear." What is a "sizable proportion"? How "likely to appear"? Failure to be more precise insulates the proposition from potentially falsifying evidence.

Berger would, I suspect, welcome (though not necessarily agree with) such criticism. For it is this sort of scholarly exchange which sharpens our understanding and promotes the advancement of our knowledge. He may have overstated the extent to which we can come to know through employing a falsificationist methodology. But he is surely correct in reminding us of how easily we can be led astray by a methodology which ignores the empirical record.

**David Basinger and Randall Basinger**, *Philosophy and Miracle: The Contemporary Debate*, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986, 124 pp., \$39.95, ISBN 0-88706-709-3.

Reviewed by Gary R. Habermas, Liberty University

With their case clearly presented in five chapters, David and Randall Basinger's argument may be briefly summarized in five corresponding propositions. (1) The Basingers

define a miracle as "a permanently inexplicable event directly caused by God" (p. 23). (2) The historian may not reject miracle-claims on a priori grounds so as to disallow reports of such events before they can be investigated "on a case by case basis" (p. 51). (3) Yet, miracles still can never be justifiably identified as permanently inexplicable events (p. 71). (4) With regard to the issue of divine action in an occurrence, one can only be *personally* convinced that God has performed an event. But epistemic certainty in any objective sense is unjustified (p. 100). (5) Additionally, to argue for God's action is essentially to argue for a certain world view, an argument in which all relevant data need to be considered (pp. 9, 116–117).

The Basingers' argument is helpful at several junctures. For instance, the first chapter, concerning a definition of miracle, involves a worthwhile discussion favoring the claim that such a definition ought not include the normal requirement that a miracle must break the laws of nature (pp. 12–15). Although many scholars disagree, the position argued here certainly warrants consideration. The treatment of the relationship between history and miracle is fair to the critical position against miracles, concluding not only that miracles cannot be rejected in an a priori manner (as is still quite common) but that counterinstances which are not repeatable do not destroy the laws of nature (Chapter II).

My friendship with the authors notwithstanding, I think that there are also major weaknesses in this volume. For instance, I think that the words "permanently inexplicable," as utilized in (1), and the proposition that an event can never be justifiably identified as a miracle as in (3)–(4), are both based on mistaken assumptions.

Initially, the process of apologetic reasoning for a miracle is virtually always inductive in nature, meaning that it is open to future research. So with regard to permanent inexplicability, to investigate historical issues requires us (whether we like it or not) to come to results which are *presently* verifiable, with no future guarantees. Also, even those (few?) apologists who hold that miracles can be established as permanently inexplicable, would in most cases still be interested in studying and answering any *future* claims that such events were not acts of God. This translates, at least in practical terms, into present inexplicability.

Additionally, several philosophers have argued that certain rare miracle-claims are not only presently inexplicable, but it appears that applicable laws will have no explanatory power in the future, either. For instance, cancer is the sort of thing for which one *would* expect to discover a future cure, whereas the resurrection of Jesus (in a glorified body) would presumably be much more troublesome for the naturalist, in that not only is it presently inexplicable, but there are no hints how it could ever be explained. So while Richard Swinburne, for example, holds that laws and conclusions concerning miracles are always corrigible, he can still hold that some events, if they occurred, are physically impossible.

Lastly, to hold that one must have permanent inexplicability and then to add that miracles can never be objectively recognized because such knowledge is unobtainable, is to refuse ever to reach a conclusion on a crucial issue. Almost any scientific (or other factual) conclusion could be treated similarly: maybe we should just wait and see if the prevailing view will change in the future. In sum, to include the concept of permanent inexplicability is undesirable because it entails unnecessary propositions such as (3).

This reviewer also objects to the contention, in propositions (3) and (4), that miracles can never be objectively identified. The Basingers' thesis depends both on the validity of the concept of permanent inexplicability and on their assumption that the differences between the various religious "holy writings" make such recognition very difficult, if not impossible (p. 96). What prevents us from utilizing appropriate criteria in checking claims

concerning these competing scriptures? In fact, some recent efforts in comparative studies appear to indicate that there are ripe opportunities to compare these texts.

Additionally, there are good grounds for claiming at least theoretical possibility for the recognition of provisional cases of convergence, where the verification of the factual side of a relevant miracle-claim was accompanied by the plainly religious message of a major religious personage. Could such cases not provide some compelling reasons at least to seriously consider the claims of God's action in the event(s) in question? Christian theism appears to have just such historical corroboration for its chief miracle-claim, the resurrection of Jesus, especially when considered in conjunction with his Person and teachings. In fact, atheist Antony Flew (who dominates much of the critical perspective in the Basingers' work) recently admitted that the last point is a valid one: if Jesus' resurrection was demonstrated, then even the naturalist would have to be open both to Jesus' claims to be God and to his world view, even if it meant changing one's naturalistic perspective.

The Basingers' proposition (5) should be briefly mentioned, namely, that the subject of miracles also involves the issue of world views. Here again the discussion reaches an impasse regarding the knowledge of God's action on anything but a level of personal conviction.

While one's world view is undeniably crucial in one's outlook on a miracle-claim, world views also ought not to be held against substantial relevant evidence to the contrary; they ought to be based at least partially upon the facts. The resurrection of Jesus has some strong implications for a world view largely because it does not stand alone as a brute fact of history, but must be interpreted within the context of Jesus' claims and teachings.

The Basingers also claim that if we allow a miracle to stand as evidence in favor of a world view we should likewise entertain the evidence *against* theism derived from the problem of pain and evil. I thought this discussion in the last chapter was not as well reasoned as the rest of the volume. Why should the theist feel the threat of the Basingers' false dilemma of choosing between God's goodness and His omnipotence, especially when there are many other options for the theist which are never addressed? I think that explaining the resurrection, Jesus' claims, and the entire case for Christian theism along with evil, constitutes a much stronger position than explaining the same data from a naturalistic perspective.

In current discussions of religious epistemology, positions which arrive at various levels of uncertainty (such as one's having personal assurance only) are popular. The Basingers' presentation in this volume is an example of this trend. While it is a good representation of the contemporary stance of some scholars, I believe that it seriously underestimates the strength of the evidence for miracles and its overall relevance to the Christian theistic world view.