

BOOK REVIEW

**Andrea Aguti, *Il miracolo. Saggio di filosofia della religione*
(Morcelliana, 2025). Pp. 224. € 20.00. ISBN 8837240082.**

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Andrea Aguti's *Il miracolo. Saggio di filosofia della religione* addresses a number of issues that are central to the philosophical examination of miracles: What are miracles? Is it reasonable to believe in them? Does the existence of miracles provide evidence for the truth of theism? And finally, what are the main philosophical objections to miracles, and how could they be countered? The book's main thesis is that the modern definition of miracle as a violation of the laws of nature should not be hastily dismissed and that, once the fog of certain arguments against miracles has been dispelled, belief in miracles proves reasonable and, in turn, renders theism more probable than atheism.

From the standpoint of philosophy of religion – and in light of a comprehensive overview of the existing literature – the author invites the reader to reflect on miracles as a fundamental element of faith. Despite existing preconceptions against the topic, belief in miraculous events remains widespread. It is therefore important, the author argues, to overcome the sense of embarrassment often associated with this theme and to subject the latter to serious philosophical analysis. In other words, the book resists the common tendency of contemporary theology to treat miracles as irrelevant to faith.

Andrea Aguti is among the most esteemed philosophers of religion in Italy, and his book stems from a double intellectual heritage: his classical, continental training and his more recent engagement with so-called analytic philosophy of religion. The two backgrounds enable him to both accurately reconstruct the historical and contextual development of the debate on miracles (from early Christianity to the present day) and analyze, evaluate, and reformulate specific positions within a theoretically robust and well-documented framework. For the scope and precision of its analysis, as well as for the specific theses advanced, the book constitutes a fundamental resource for anyone wishing to engage with the topic. Although the subtitle modestly describes the work as an essay, it is in fact a concise yet incisive treatise.

The reader is guided to the aforementioned central theses across 16 chapters, organized in two parts. In the first part, Aguti undertakes the task of defining what is meant by miracle as an extraordinary and inexplicable event, caused by one or more supernatural agents, and endowed with religious significance (21). This definition allows us to distinguish miracles from *magic* and *prodigies*: miracles are passive, i.e. they are the effect of a supernatural agent, whereas magic is active, i.e. produced by a human being. Aguti concludes: 'The criterion for distinguishing miracles from magical enchantments or paranormal phenomena is to be found in the diversity of their cause and of their purpose' (29; hereafter, my translation). Moreover, miracles further have *religious significance* in that they convey and confirm

a religious worldview for the observer (which does not mean adopting an antirealist position, according to which the miracle exists only as interpretation and not as fact). A religious worldview is 'the cognitive and emotional disposition to believe that one or more supernatural powers are capable of acting in nature in such a way as to exert a beneficial influence on the human being' (199).

In the third chapter of the first part, situating miracle within classical theism, Aguti distinguishes between an *interventionist* conception (whereby miracles are interventions from God that violate, suspend, or surpass the laws of nature) and a *non-interventionist* one (traceable to various forms of panentheism, such as that of Arthur Peacocke, according to whom God acts not from outside but from within the world). In defense of the first conception, Aguti refers to Aquinas and his responses to the objections that a miracle would be ontologically, logically, or morally impossible. The *non-interventionist* model, by contrast, is deemed ambiguous: if everything is miracle (since every event is seen as an effect of God's action), then, according to Aguti, the specificity of the miracle itself is lost (79).

After contextualizing the modern critique of miracle within Renaissance naturalism and the development of modern science (chapter 4), the author revisits the thinking of the main critics of the notion of miracle: Spinoza, Hume, Kant, and Feuerbach. He then examines (chapter 6) the apologetic strategies of Samuel Clarke, Joseph Butler, William Paley, and John H. Newman, along with the theoretical proposals of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. In keeping with Aguti's intellectual training, chapter 7 addresses Catholic apologetics (Franz Hettinger and Maurice Blondel) and the semiological approaches of Romano Guardini and Walter Kasper.

In contemporary literature, Aguti identifies a turning point in C.S. Lewis's book *Miracles* (1947), especially for its distinction between *scientific* and *naturalistic* worldviews. Only the latter exclude miracles as a possible explanations of events. Science itself, by contrast, may in some cases admit a supernatural cause as the best explanation, insofar as it allows for the occurrence of a counter-instance to a law of nature without necessarily abolishing that law. In agreement with Lewis, Aguti writes: 'The supernaturalistic explanation based on miracle proves different from a scientific one, but without renouncing the features proper to explanation in general' (103). Another key author referenced in this chapter is Richard Swinburne (1970, 1989), who argues that the violation of a law of nature may plausibly be explained by appealing to the action of a deity. Aguti concludes that if the naturalistic worldview is not accepted, 'miracle provides evidence in favor of theism and thus possesses apologetic value' (110). As a deep connoisseur of analytic philosophy of religion, he continues by analyzing the discussion surrounding Swinburne's position as developed by David Basinger, David Corner, and Robert Larmer.

In the second part of the book, Aguti analyses several specific issues: (a) whether a miracle is to be understood as an extraordinary and inexplicable event; (b) whether it must be conceived as a violation of the laws of nature; (c) whether testimony to miracles can be considered reliable; (d) whether a miracle can constitute an argument for theism; (e) whether it should be regarded as divine action; (f) what it means to say that a miracle is a *sign*; and (g) whether a miracle raises a moral problem.

Since we cannot delve into each individual issue in detail, I will focus on those I regard as most relevant, with the purpose of advancing a critical observation (from a theoretical standpoint, since the book is exhaustive and clear from a historical perspective). Concerning (a), Aguti distinguishes between an *enigmatic* phenomenon (temporarily inexplicable) and a *mysterious* one (permanently inexplicable). A miracle is a mystery: drawing also on Swinburne, Aguti maintains that there may be counter-instances to natural law which, being unique, remain permanently inexplicable. A rational attitude, therefore, 'seems to begin from the available evidence, and if we encounter extraordinary events

that are scientifically inexplicable, the hypothesis of a suspension or violation of natural laws by one or more supernatural causes cannot be excluded from the range of possible explanations' (132).

Closely connected to (a) is (b): Aguti seeks to show that the definition of miracle as a violation of the laws of nature remains the best option available. If God is the creator of natural laws, then He may contravene them, if He so wills – *de potentia absoluta*, as it were. The miracle, in this perspective, is logically possible and follows from God's free nature. One can accept that natural laws might be otherwise (by divine intervention): they are not necessary to the point of being inviolable even by God.

Nor is it necessary to posit that natural laws allow for miracles by virtue of their indeterministic quality (introducing a degree of flexibility in the course of natural events). Even in this case, Aguti highlights that one should still speak of *quasi-violation*, since 'indeterministic laws nonetheless give rise to predictions with a certain degree of reliability. Otherwise, an indeterministic world would be one governed by chance' (146). There is therefore no reason, in Aguti's view, to question the coherence of the notion of miracle as violation of natural laws. Drawing on an effective metaphor by R.L. Purtill, he likens a miracle to the granting of clemency by a President: such an act is an exception but does not violate or suspend the legal order, because it is provided for by law (149).

Regarding (d), Aguti maintains that the *argument from miracle* (which infers God's existence from the occurrence of miracles) is *abductive* in nature, is an inference to the best explanation, and only probable. The argument does not deny that the naturalistic explanation of any event is possibly true, but only claims that it is less probable. If a miracle is possible, it can become an argument in favor of theism (173): 'To recognize miracles is to recognize the epistemic legitimacy of inferring one or more supernatural causes from events that science cannot explain' (176).

This latter claim, however, is problematic. Let us suppose, as a thought experiment, that a miraculous healing, inexplicable by science, were in fact achieved through highly advanced (i.e. undecipherable to humans) alien technology, operated by alien beings who secretly and imperceptibly govern the world. Would this explanation be as rational as the hypothesis of supernatural agency? At first glance, it would: it is quite likely that aliens exist, and plausible that they possess more advanced technology; moreover, their secrecy might be accounted for by their benevolent nature: they want to respect the natural evolution and freedom of other species, and so they only intervene occasionally to aid certain individuals without being too present (indeed, this explanation is similar to the theodical reasoning often invoked to justify God's mysterious activity). Why would such aliens assist us occasionally through what we perceive as miracles? Maybe to give us hope, to encourage belief in God: maybe they know that such belief is evolutionarily useful, leading eventually to a fuller scientific worldview. As one can see, it is easy to construct a best explanation which does not entail the existence of God.

This *argument from aliens* rests on the adage that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, with the added element that – according to Aguti's own criteria – it would not be mere magic but miraculous, since it involves intentional agency beyond human control. Even if we suppose that such alien technology will remain forever unknowable to us, rendering the miracle permanently inexplicable, we would still not be justified in inferring a supernatural agent, since the alien hypothesis remains a plausible explanation. In other words: from an incomprehensible event we can only infer the existence of an unknown cause (which can therefore be either natural or supernatural).

What does this *argument from aliens* demonstrate? That the supernatural is not necessarily the best available explanation. Belief in miracles is rationally possible, but it is a choice not grounded in greater probability. Both the naturalistic explanation (through aliens) and

the theistic one are acceptable accounts, but ultimately faith is required in either case. Faith is faith precisely insofar as it demands trust in a position (the existence of God) that is no more reasonable or probable than its alternatives (such as atheism).

Of course, some might object that the existence of God is a more coherent explanation than aliens for many aspects of our world (although this remains doubtful: what element of our world could not be explained by positing invisible, benevolent aliens with inscrutable technology?). However, even granting this, a question re-emerges (one that Aguti addresses, though he ultimately rejects this position): belief in miracles seems reasonable if one already believes in God, not vice versa. In other words: only if naturalism is rejected (for reasons independent of miracles) can one hold that the best explanation for certain events lies in a supernatural cause.

Beyond these possible objections – assuming they are valid – Aguti's text compels us, through the topic of the miracle, to reconsider our broader beliefs and worldviews. For this reason, it is an important, even indispensable, reading for those who look for arguments in defense either of their belief in miracles or in naturalistic explanations.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

References

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