

SCHLESINGER AND MIRACLES

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George Schlesinger has recently presented a reply to Hume's argument concerning miracles. Schlesinger argues that probability theory and some simple assumptions about miracles show that testimony for a miracle increases the probability of God existing; furthermore this testimony can raise the probability of God existing enough that it is rational to believe that God exists. I argue that one of the assumptions that Schlesinger makes is false, and that the justification Schlesinger gives for it does not succeed. Thus I claim Schlesinger's reply to Hume fails.

In a recent article George Schlesinger presents a reply to Hume's argument concerning miracles.¹ Schlesinger's argument is an attempt to show that probability theory and some basic ideas about miracles yield the result that testimony for a miracle increases the probability of God existing. Furthermore, this testimony can raise the probability of theism to the point that it is rational to believe that God exists. Although I do not disagree with Schlesinger's conclusion, I do believe the argument he offers fails to justify that conclusion. Schlesinger's argument involves applying a theorem of the probability calculus to miracles, testimony, and the existence of God. I will argue that one of the assumptions Schlesinger makes in his argument is false, and thus his argument does not succeed.

Schlesinger's reply to Hume attempts to avoid the question of whether testimony for a miracle justifies belief that the miracle occurred. Instead, it focuses on whether testimony for a miracle supports the existence of God. Let us use the following abbreviations:

G = God exists;

H = A given miraculous event has taken place;

E = Witnesses testify to the truth of H.

The theorem of the probability calculus that Schlesinger's argument depends on is the following, which he calls (Ψ):

$$\frac{P(G/E)}{P(G/\neg E)} = \frac{P(H/E)}{P(H/\neg E)} \cdot \frac{P(G/H\&E)}{P(G/H\&\neg E)} \cdot \frac{P(H/G\&\neg E)}{P(H/G\&E)} \quad (\Psi)$$

Schlesinger uses the ratio $P(G/E)/P(G/\neg E)$ to measure whether testimony for



a miracle supports the existence of God. If the ratio is greater than one, the testimony raises the probability of God existing. If the ratio is equal to one, then the testimony is irrelevant to the existence of God. A ratio that is less than one implies that the probability of God existing is lowered by testimony for the miracle. Schlesinger uses general considerations about miracles to make claims about the three factors in the right half of (Ψ). From his assignments of probabilities he asserts that testimony for miracles supports the existence of God.

Schlesinger begins by claiming that the first term is greater than one, because $P(H/E) > P(H/\neg E)$. This assumption is relatively uncontroversial, and merely states that testimony for a miracle makes the occurrence of the miracle more likely to have occurred. Schlesinger next claims that the second term is at least one, because $P(G/H\&E)$ is not less than $P(G/H\&\neg E)$. Given that a miracle occurs, testimony for it does not lower the probability of God existing. Schlesinger then claims that $P(H/G\&\neg E) = P(H/G\&E)$, which would mean that the third term is also equal to one. Thus the ratio $P(G/E)/P(G/\neg E)$ is greater than one and testimony for miracles supports the existence of God. Schlesinger believes he has shown that the product of the three factors in the right half of (Ψ) is much greater than one, and hence testimony for a miracle significantly raises the probability of theism (p. 232).

The controversial step in Schlesinger's argument is the claim that $P(H/G\&\neg E) = P(H/G\&E)$. Schlesinger is working with an epistemic interpretation of probability; this is natural because we are interested in rational degrees of belief. Thus we are interested in how strongly a rational person would believe that a certain miracle has occurred, given that God exists and there is no testimony that the miracle occurred, and in how strongly a rational person would believe that the miracle occurred, given that God exists and that witnesses do testify that the miracle occurred. Contrary to Schlesinger, I propose that $P(H/G\&E)$ is greater than $P(H/G\&\neg E)$. Given that God exists, the testimony that the miracle occurred is evidence that the miracle occurred, and a rational person would believe that a specific miracle occurred more strongly if the person had testimony than without it. Otherwise testimony is irrelevant to knowledge of whether God performs a miracle. Upon Schlesinger's view, having testimony that a specific miracle occurred would not affect the rational degree of belief that the miracle occurred if one believed God existed. One would be in the position of basing one's belief that the miracle occurred only upon the fact that God existed, and not upon any claim that the miracle occurred.²

In order to illustrate the problems with Schlesinger's position let us consider a specific miracle, such as the parting of the Red Sea. We are interested in how strongly a rational person would believe that the Red Sea was parted, on the supposition that God exists and nobody claimed that it happened, and

in how strongly a rational person would believe that the Red Sea was parted, on the supposition that God exists and somebody did claim it happened. I think that it is very unlikely that the Red Sea was parted, given that God exists and nobody claims the Red Sea was parted. For example, I don't believe at all that the Mediterranean Sea was parted, the Caspian Sea was parted, or that the Sea of Galilee was parted. The reason I have such a low degree of belief in those events is because I have no reason at all to believe they happened. Now suppose somebody testifies that the Red Sea was parted. I now have some reason to believe the Red Sea parted, even if the witness is generally unreliable. Assuming that the witness is not some sort of anti-authority who lowers the probability of what he testifies for, I now have some reason, perhaps a very weak one, to believe that the Red Sea was parted. We see that testimony that the Red Sea was parted is relevant to our rational degree of belief that it was parted. The same appears to be true of any miracle, and hence it appears Schlesinger is incorrect when he claims that $P(H/G \& \neg E) = P(H/G \& E)$.

Another unintuitive aspect of Schlesinger's position is that testimony raises the probability of a miracle if we don't assume God exists, but once we assume God exists the testimony becomes irrelevant to the miracle. In defense of his claim that $P(H/E) > P(H/\neg E)$, Schlesinger says that "[i]t will not be denied by anyone, no matter how small a probability he is willing to assign to H, that in the absence of any testimony of the truth of H, H is even less probable than when there is no [sic] such testimony" (231). Evidently Schlesinger thinks that H is clearly more probable when there is testimony for H than when there is no testimony for it. However we see that Schlesinger is also claiming that an exception to the above claim is a person who in addition to receiving the testimony happens to become convinced that God exists. According to Schlesinger it is rational to raise your degree of belief that the miracle occurred if you acquire some testimony for it, but if you also learn that God exists then it is not rational to raise your degree of belief that the miracle occurred. To see how strange this is suppose we have two people, Oblomov and Chichikov, who have identical low degrees of belief that the Red Sea was parted, because they have never heard of it before. We tell Oblomov that a miracle occurred and the Red Sea was parted; as a result Oblomov revises his probability function and has a higher degree of belief that the Red Sea parted. We tell Chichikov that the Red Sea parted, and at the same time he comes to be certain that God exists; Chichikov does not change his degree of belief that the Red Sea parted. Oblomov tells us that he now has a stronger degree of belief that the Red Sea parted because he has a reason to believe it; somebody claims it happened. Chichikov tells us that he hasn't changed his degree of belief in the miracle. He says that it is true that he now has a reason to believe it occurred, because of the testimony, but

we must not forget that he has also come to be certain God exists. He tells us that if he had remained an agnostic like Oblomov, then he would certainly have raised his degree of belief that the miracle occurred. But, he informs us, since he also became a theist it is no longer rational for him to be affected in any way by reports of miracles; rationality requires that he ignore all testimony for miracles. On Schlesinger's position the existence of God has very unintuitive and unexpected implications for what it is rational to believe.

However we must now investigate Schlesinger's reason for claiming that $P(H/G \& \neg E) = P(H/G \& E)$. Schlesinger supports this by claiming that miracles were important in establishing theism in the world, but after theism has been established, belief in God is to be sustained or justified by other means. Our belief in God should now be based on other considerations:

The important implication of this view of the function of miracles for our present purposes is that in post-biblical times the religious welfare of an individual does not demand that he should have knowledge of every, or any, miracle that has taken place. Nowadays we are supposed to derive our faith by different means that have become available. It follows, therefore, that it makes no difference to the probability of a miracle whether or not I happened to have heard about it. In other words, the probability of H is wholly determined by the question whether God exists and whether at the time at which the event referred by H the circumstances characteristic to those, which from a religious point of view demand the occurrence of a miracle, obtained. This, of course, implies that $P(H/G \& \neg E) = P(H/G \& E)$ i.e., that the last factor equals 1 (p. 232).

According to Schlesinger, since modern faith in God is not supposed to be based on the knowledge of miracles, if we assume God exists then testimony for miracles is completely irrelevant to the probability of a miracle occurring.

Let us grant Schlesinger that in earlier times miracles were used to promote faith in God, but at the present time "we are supposed to derive our faith by different means that have become available" (232). However I do not believe Schlesinger is correct when he says "[i]t follows, therefore, that it makes no difference to the probability of a miracle whether or not I happened to have heard about it" (232). It may be the case that testimony for miracles, assuming God exists, raises the probability of miracles, while testimony for miracles does not raise the probability of God existing or raise it enough to be a basis for faith. Testimony for miracles may be relevant to our degree of belief in miracles without providing a basis for faith in God. Even if the reliability of testimony on the subject of ancient miracles is quite low it does not follow that testimony is completely irrelevant to the occurrence of miracles. There is absolutely no connection between whether testimony for miracles is relevant to our rational degree of belief in miracles and whether faith in God is supported by testimony about miracles. Hence Schlesinger's justification of his assumption fails.

If Schlesinger is correct in claiming that God does not intend us to base our faith on miracles, my hearing of a miracle may make no difference to whether God decides to perform the miracle. Whether or not I will hear of a miracle would be irrelevant to whether God decides to perform the miracle. Thus one might claim that on the propensity interpretation of probability, that testimony is irrelevant to the occurrence of the miracle. This is because my hearing of the miracle is irrelevant to whether God decides to perform the miracle, which is to say it is irrelevant to the propensity of God to perform the miracle. Upon the propensity interpretation of probability Schlesinger may be correct in claiming that testimony is irrelevant to the probability of a miracle occurring, and that “the probability of H is wholly determined by the question whether God exists and whether at the time at which the event referred by H the circumstances characteristic to those, which from a religious point of view demand the occurrence of a miracle, obtained” (232). However we are interested in degrees of rational belief and not in propensities.³ Although testimony for a miracle may be irrelevant to whether God decides to perform the miracle or to the propensity of the miracle to occur, we have already seen that the testimony is relevant to rational belief in the miracle.

From this we see that Schlesinger’s reply to Hume fails; Schlesinger has not shown that testimony for a miracle significantly increases the probability of theism. Schlesinger’s argument, that our degree of rational belief in a miracle is unaffected by testimony for the miracle if God exists, is flawed. Although Schlesinger has not demonstrated that testimony of miracles increases the probability of God existing, this does not mean that it is irrational to believe in God on the basis of testimony about miracles. It is possible that testimony about miracles raises the probability of God existing, even though $P(H/G\&E) > P(H/G\&\neg E)$. One of the other factors in (Ψ) may be great enough to offset $P(H/G\&E)$ being greater than $P(H/G\&\neg E)$. If testimony significantly raises the probability of a miracle occurring, then testimony can raise the probability of God existing, even though $P(H/G\&E) > P(H/G\&\neg E)$.

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NOTES

1. George N. Schlesinger, “Miracles and Probabilities,” *Noûs* 21 (1987), pp. 219-32. Future references to this work will be denoted in the text by page number.

2. One might also conditionalize on some background information, such as the historical situation, but this does not affect the basic problem.

3. Using a propensity interpretation of probability will not help Schlesinger’s argument, because on this interpretation neither $P(H/E) > P(H/\neg E)$ nor $P(G/H\&E) > P(G/H\&\neg E)$. Upon the propensity interpretation of probability, both $P(H/E) = P(H/\neg E)$ and $P(G/H\&E)$

= $P(G/H\&\neg E)$; hence $P(G/E) = P(G/\neg E)$, which is the denial of what Schlesinger is trying to show. The reason $P(H/E) = P(H/\neg E)$ is because the testimony is later in time than the miracle, and thus it seems very unlikely that it affects the propensity of the miracle to occur. The reason $P(G/H\&E) = P(G/H\&\neg E)$ is because the occurrence or non-occurrence of miracles and testimony is causally irrelevant to the existence of God; thus the propensity of God existing is not affected by whether a miracle and testimony for it occurs.