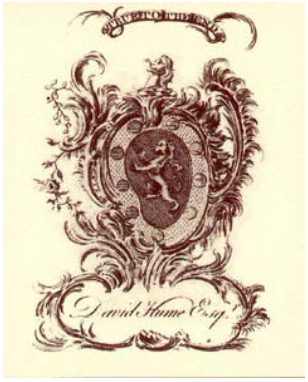

John Earman. ***Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles***
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JOHN EARMAN. *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 217. ISBN 0-19-512737-4, cloth, $47.50; ISBN 0-19-512738-2, paper, $22.95.

This book is divided into two parts. The first (73 pages plus notes and a two-page appendix on probability) is Earman's harsh critique of Hume's essay and its conclusions. The second part of the book (95–212) contains selections from primary texts of Locke, Spinoza, Clarke, and others, along with the text "Of Miracles," recording changes that Hume made. There is little in the way of explanation, a single paragraph in the preface, as to why these texts have been selected. Presumably, Earman sees each of these as containing something significant to contribute to the formulation of his theses in the first part of the book—especially his claim that Hume's arguments are largely derivative.

Earman thinks he is dealing a blow to Hume scholarship in general and to the commentary on Hume's essay on miracles in particular. He says,

> It is almost universally assumed, by Hume's admirers and critics alike, that "Of Miracles" offers a powerful and original argument against miracles. On the contrary, I contend that Hume's argument is largely derivative, almost wholly without merit where it is original, and worst of all, reveals the impoverishment of his treatment of inductive reasoning. Hume scholars will no doubt be enraged by this charge. Good! There has been too much genuflecting at Hume's altar. (vi)

And he continues, "to be blunt, I contend that 'Of Miracles' is an abject failure" (3). "Hume has generated the illusion of deep insight by sliding back and forth between various theses, no one of which avoids both the Scylla of banality and the Charybdis of implausibility or outright falsehood" (48). As it turns out Hume scholars have nothing to fear, and little to gain, from Earman's book. Those familiar with even a moderate portion of the literature on Hume's essay will recognise Earman's above contentions as anything but novel.

However, one who begins a book in this supercilious manner had better understand the argument that they claim so totally lacks merit. I do not think that Earman does. His repeated claims that Hume's "Of Miracles" is a morass of confusion is, in my view, a projection of his own confusions concerning Hume's position onto Hume.

To grasp Hume's principle argument in part 1 in "Of Miracles" and why it fails, it must be set not just in terms of his account of induction, but in the wider context of Hume's philosophy where his account of induction is itself based. Earman does not do this. In fact, he treats "Of Miracles" in almost total isolation from Hume's philosophy (Book 1 of the *Treatise* being most crucial), thereby losing any hope of seeing what is distinctive in the argument or of understanding it. Although Earman is aware of the fact that there is good reason to treat Hume's argument in the context of the *Treatise* (6), he ignores it. In a letter to George Campbell, Hume is explicit about the connection. It is not enough to talk about Hume's views on induction in general terms—in isolation from his more fundamental empiricist principles—because not even his views on induction can be understood in apart from his empiricism. Apart from this wider context of Hume's philosophy, his argument(s) in "Of Miracles" is bound to appear derivative. Earman misses what is distinctive about Hume's argument because he ignores (and he is not alone in this) the fact that the argument, along with Hume's account of induction is embedded in his empiricism.

Consider an interpretation of Hume's argument against justified belief in miracles that *does* make an explicit connection with his theory of *a posteriori* reasoning and empiricism. Even if this interpretation is not quite right (though I think it exactly right), it illustrates that what is distinctive about Hume's argument must be set in the context of his empiricism. Hume is explicit about this. Hume thinks that testimony, no matter how reliable, *can never* establish the occurrence of a miraculous event, in accordance with the principles of *a posteriori* reasoning—reasoning that is a type of causal reasoning according to Hume. He says:

> It being a general maxim, that no objects have any discoverable connection together, and that all the inferences, which we can draw from one to another, are founded merely on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; it is evident that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favor of human testimony. (EHU 10.5; SBN 111)

> This species of reasoning, perhaps, one may deny to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. I shall not dispute about a word . . . (EHU 10.5; SBN 111)

Thus, Hume thinks that if we justifiably accept testimony to an extraordinary event, then on the basis of past experience, we must liken ourselves to the Indian and search for natural causes of which we are unaware. This would

be for us the equivalent of the Indian moving north to "MUSCOVY during the winter" (EHU 10.10; SBN 114). (Think about the last astonishing thing you learned that nature could accomplish as a matter of course and you have a basic part of Hume's argument.) Hume insists his principles of reasoning about empirical matters, and his philosophical empiricism (i.e., his theory of "impressions" and "ideas") show that supernatural explanation cannot be justified experientially.

We need to ask, "What is it about experience, in the sense of expectations about future events or judgements about past events, that could justify the positing of a supernatural cause?" For positing such a cause is necessary if one is to justifiably believe some event to be a miracle. Hume would say that positing such a cause is speculative. It can have no basis in experience. Even if some event really were a miracle, whether it be a resurrection, or "the raising of a feather, when the wind wants ever so little of a force requisite for that purpose" (EHU 10.12; SBN 115), we would not be justified in believing that it was anything more than an extraordinary event. Extraordinary events are at the limits of (our) experience, the supernatural is beyond it. Hume says:

> Though the Being, to whom the miracle is ascribed, be in their case, Almighty, it [i.e., the miracle] does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable; since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience of his productions, in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to repeat observations, and obliges us to compare the instances of the violations of truth in the testimony of men with those of the violation of the laws of nature by miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable. (EHU 10.38; SBN 129)

For Hume, a "cause," insofar as it can be used as an item in reasoning from experience, can only be something that we can have an "impression" of. The cause of a miracle would have to be identified as something we could perceive, even if we were to posit some metaphysical "power" of this cause and attribute it speculatively to God. The "cause" of Lazarus's coming forth from the grave would have to be identified with Christ's beckoning—either his voice or some physical gesture—both of which we have "impressions" of and both of which are events "in the usual course of nature."

If a resurrection were well enough attested to warrant belief, then that event could still only be assigned status as an extraordinary event with a natural explanation. Hume is thus constrained by his empiricism. He is constrained in such a way that had he been at the shore of the Red Sea with Moses

when they were being chased (as in the C. B. De Mille movie version); and had Moses raised his staff and the Red Sea split up the middle (i.e., no low tide but raging waters on both sides); and had the Red Sea crashed to a close the moment the last Israelite was safe—killing those in pursuit; and had Hume himself lacked grounds for assuming he was hallucinating or perceiving events in any way other than as they were actually happening—Hume would still be constrained by his principles to deny that what he was witnessing was a miracle. This example suffices to show the unacceptability of Hume's argument. Indeed, assuming Hume would have agreed that had he been there with Moses, and had events transpired in a manner suitably similar to the way they are depicted in the film, then he would have (readily) agreed that he was justified in believing that a miracle occurred—then his argument against justified belief in miracles can be used as a *reductio ad absurdum.* Antony Flew is mistaken in his claim that "it be neither arbitrary nor irrational to insist on a definition of a 'law of nature' such that the idea of a miracle as an exception to a law of nature is ruled out as self-contradictory."[2]

A resurrection could only be well enough attested to be justifiably believed if it could be judged as somehow analogous with something in our past experience. If it is, then it must be considered a natural event because, for Hume, anything analogous to our experience is at least analogous in the sense of suggesting that it too has a natural cause. We experienced only that which occurs in nature and judgements based on that experience will not warrant positing causes outside of that experience. Suppose that some event actually was supernaturally caused. (Let us suppose Hume recognises this as a logical possibility in his essay, though I do not think it is given his analysis of causation and his empiricism.) Hume would say that we could not, on the basis of experience, attribute a supernatural cause to the event because we experience only natural causes (i.e., events occurring in the usual course of nature). If an event were supernaturally caused we could legitimately say that we "experienced" some supernatural event, but the sense of experience used here would be an equivocation on Hume's usage. This "cause," being transcendent, and not discernible by means of "sense impressions," "internal impressions," or "impressions of reflexion" could not be an item of experience at all as Hume sees it. Thus, because Hume thinks that every cause must be regarded as natural, he is committed to the view that one *could* justifiably believe that an extraordinary event had occurred, but *never* a miracle.

Hume's *a priori* argument against justified belief in miracles actually coalesces with his *a posteriori* argument against such justified belief. On *a posteriori* grounds we could never justifiably believe testimony to the miraculous because we could never judge the occurrence of such an event to be similar, in

relevant respects, to anything we have experienced. However, that a miraculous occurrence could never be judged relevantly similar to anything in experience (i.e., that there must be "a firm and unalterable experience" counting against belief in it) is something that we can know *a priori,* since *a priori* we can know that we cannot have an "impression" of a supernatural cause. It follows from this that on *a priori* grounds we can also rule out the possibility of justified belief in testimony to the miraculous.

It follows from what has been said that unless one accepts Hume's analysis of *a posteriori* reasoning as a type of causal reasoning, and also accepts his analysis of causation that ultimately rests on his theory of impressions and ideas—a theory that even staunch empiricists should reject as simplistic—there is no reason to accept *his* argument against the possibility of justified belief in miracles.

Reading Earman's statement—"to be blunt, I contend that 'Of Miracles' is an abject failure"—one would never know that just about every commentary on Hume's essay, historical and contemporary, claims his argument against justified belief in miracles on the basis of testimony fails. This is so even though commentators differ on such basic elements of interpretation as, for example, whether Hume meant to be offering an *a priori* or *a posteriori* argument in part 1 of the essay. Earman, mistakenly in my view, thinks that given the presence of part 2 of Hume's essay, it is an *a posteriori* argument that Hume offers in part 1 (22). Hume's argument fails because, as various commentator's have recognized in varying degrees, it is intrinsically connected to his inadequate theory of induction or *a posteriori* reasoning which in turn is intrinsically connected to his theory of causation and ultimately to his theory of ideas and impressions.

So Earman is right that Hume's argument fails. But in focusing on induction in isolation from Hume's empiricism he is unable to fully explain why, in the context of Hume's metaphysics, it fails, or indeed how the argument relies on Book 1 of Hume's *Treatise.* There is certainly nothing novel in connecting, as Earman has done, the failure of Hume's argument to his failed account of induction. Furthermore, although this is debatable, the irony in Earman's critique of Hume is at least twofold. It involves a reliance on Bayesian analyses that do not help one iota in the analysis of Hume's argument but are superfluous representations of it that beg the crucial questions of interpretation. One only gets out of the Bayesian equation what one puts in, and what one puts in is a function of interpretation. Secondly, most, if not all, of Earman's criticisms have already been made in some way in the literature—as he appears at times to acknowledge— so that even calling them derivative would be misleading. The "abject failure" here is not Hume's.

There are various versions of Bayes's theorem. Earman (27) employs the following:[3]

$$\frac{Pr(H/E\&K) = Pr(H/K) \times Pr(E/H\&K)}{Pr(E/K)}$$

Earman says (27)

> It is helpful to think of H as the hypothesis at issue, K as the background knowledge, and E as the new evidence. Pr(H/K&E) and Pr(H/K) are called, respectively, the *posterior* and *prior probability* of *H*. Pr(E/K&H) is called the *likelihood* of H; it is a measure of how well H explains E. Pr(E/K) is variously called the *prior likelihood or* the *expectancy* of E; it is a measure of how surprising the new evidence E is.

Bayesian analyses are prominent among recent and allegedly novel interpretations of Hume's argument. However, since there is no consensus on just what Hume's argument is, or exactly what he is trying to establish, it is impossible that any Bayesian analysis, or a recasting of the argument in terms of some version of Bayes's theorem, will not beg crucial issues of interpretation. In so doing, such analyses—in and of themselves—will also beg fundamental epistemological issues concerning, for example, evidence. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how recasting Hume's argument in a Bayesian form can clarify the structure or substance of the argument, as Earman claims, without presupposing what the argument is. I do not deny that there may be many useful applications of Bayesian analyses of probability, but they are not useful to figuring out want is going on in Hume's essay. Any reader not well versed in probability theory will find Earman's protracted technical discussions of Bayesian theorems (equations and calculations galore!) tedious and hardly to the point—even if one follows them.

The balancing of probabilities is of no use until it is decided what goes into the balance—that is, what constitutes the evidence that is to be subject to the balancing of probabilities. Hume's argument is all about what constitutes the evidence—what we can legitimately count as evidence as what we cannot—and how to figure out the probability of what is testified to *given* his theory of *a posteriori* reasoning. Bayesian analyses simply beg the question by *ignoring* Hume's account of *a posteriori* reasoning in favor of accounts of their own. The Humean will not agree with the Bayesian as to what Pr(H/K&E) and Pr(H/K), or Pr(E/K) is. That is the core of the problem and it shows exactly why Bayesian analyses can be of no use in disputing Hume on miracles. They ignore Hume's entire argument (in part 1 "Of Miracles").

Apart from independent philosophical arguments—arguments that would in effect undermine the relevance of a Bayesian analysis to the question of the credibility of reports of the miraculous—no such analysis can, in principle, prove that testimony can (or cannot) establish the credibility of a miracle.

NOTES

1 I quote from David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Passages are identified by section and paragraph number. I also supply page references to Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

2 Flew, "Miracles," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 5: 346–53, 349.

3 Cf., Earman, "Bayes, Hume, and Miracles," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 293–310.

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