Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles by John Earman
Review by: Richard Swinburne
Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Mind Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3093794

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maternal love he missed as a child. Moreover, since the relevant desire is unconscious, Cecil certainly makes no judgement about the worth of such an attempt at the time of his action. Thus it appears that the price to pay for an account of akrasia which dispels its mystery amounts to nothing less than the denial that such a phenomenon, or at least so-called strict akratic action, exists.

Still, I should say that in a time when bookstores are overflowing with all kinds of self-help manuals advocating fast-food-like recipes for personal happiness—not to speak of its common surrogates, such as power and wealth—an attempt by a philosopher to reflect on what it takes for a human being to flourish should be welcomed. The importance of the questions which are raised, the clarity of the argument and broadness of perspective, make it a must-read for anyone who is curious to know whether philosophy has anything to say about happiness.

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Part I of **Hume's Abject Failure** constitutes a very detailed commentary on Section 10 (‘Of Miracles’) of Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Earman concludes that this is a largely unoriginal and really poor piece of philosophical reasoning. Not merely so, but Hume had no excuse for not doing better. For Hume makes sweeping statements about probability, entirely ignoring the more sophisticated work on probability being done in his day, especially by Richard Price. The slightly longer Part II of Earman's book contains extracts from writings of the century and a half surrounding Hume's *Enquiry* which show the context and subsequent development of the debate. They include general pieces about the epistemology of testimony (Locke), contributions to the eighteenth-century debate about the Resurrection (such as Sherlock and Annet), responses to Hume (Campbell), and more detailed work on the probabilistic principles involved in the assessment of testimony (Price and Laplace). They end with Babbage's brilliant (though not fully clear) demonstration that ‘it is always possible to assign a number of independent witnesses, the improbability of the falsehood of whose concurring testimonies shall be greater than that of the improbability of the miracle itself’. From this general result Babbage shows that if \( m \) persons have died without being resurrected and we use Laplace's rule that in that case the probability that 

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\text{person to die will not be resurrected is } \frac{m+1}{m+2}, \text{ even if } m = \]
1,000,000,000,000, the combined testimony that the \((m+1)\)th person was resurrected of eleven independent witnesses who tell the truth on 99 out of 100 occasions, will suffice to make that resurrection overall probable. Such is the improbability of independent coincident false testimony. These extracts fully support Earman’s thesis that many thinkers of this period dealt with the topic far more deeply and interestingly than did Hume.

Although Hume defines a miracle as a violation or ‘transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent’, most of his argument utilizes only the first part of this definition, according to which a miracle is a violation of a law of nature. Since Hume does not want to rule out such a thesis as logically impossible he needs a loose understanding of ‘law of nature’, and Earman provides him with this by understanding a ‘law’ as a lawlike statement \(L\) supported by ‘uniform experience’ in the sense of a large number of positive instances and (so far) no negative instances. In its most general terms Hume’s thesis is then that you need strong testimony to the occurrence of an event which if it occurred would be a violation of a law of nature if that testimony is to make the occurrence probable. But notoriously, in developing this obvious point which all his opponents would accept, Hume oscillates between claiming that there cannot be strong enough testimony to probabilify the occurrence of a violation, or at any rate testimony strong enough thereby to probabilify a religious doctrine, and claiming that there has not been so far in human history strong enough testimony to probabilify such an occurrence. Earman is merciless in highlighting the oscillation and showing the two stronger theses to be utterly without justification. Hume’s ‘straight rule of induction’, according to which enough positive instances of a purported law constitute a ‘proof’ of a law, (that is, give it a probability of 1) is (p. 31) ‘descriptively inadequate to actual scientific practice, and it is stultifying to scientific inquiry’. For any regularity, however well established in the past, strong enough testimony could show that an exception had occurred. Also, Earman claims, testimony to a miracle which is to be expected given one religious system but not another, confirms the former; but just how probable it makes it depends on the prior probability of the system. Whether miracles reported in the context of other religions count against a given religion or against the occurrence of miracles reported in the context of the latter, is also a delicate matter not to be settled by a sweeping Humean generalization. All depends on which and how many miracles of other religions are contrary to the predictions of a given religion, and the strength of the testimony in support of their occurrence. Hume wanted to establish a philosophical principle which would enable him rationally to deny the occurrence of such purported miracles as the Resurrection of Jesus without going into the detailed arguments for and against this being conducted in his time; but, claims Earman, such supercilious disdain for detail is unwarranted. Earman does agree with Hume that there has not been so far in human history enough evidence to show the occurrence of a miracle—but, very explicitly, he claims that he does
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not seek to justify this view which would require (p. 61) ‘difficult and delicate empirical investigations’.

Most of these philosophical points are very familiar to those who work in the field, though not necessarily to the average undergraduate who has read a couple of articles on the subject; and it is good to have Earman’s powerful and clearly unbiased support for them. What I personally found most valuable about this book (apart from the details of the historical context) is the discussion on Bayesian principles of the extent to which the improbability of an event requires stronger testimony to overcome it, the clarification of Babbage’s result about the force of multiple testimony to an improbable event, and the extension of this discussion to the force of multiple testimony to different improbable events. The whole discussion takes place largely (as Earman fully appreciates) on the over-simple supposition that the strength of a witness’s testimony is to be measured by the reliability of the witness on all other known occasions. For example, if the witness tells the truth (that is, both observes accurately and is honest) on 99 out of 100 occasions (k), Pr (t(M)/M & k)—the probability that if M occurs, the witness reports that it did rather than that it did not—is 0.99. Given that, we get the interesting consequence that if any event M which could be reported (for example, any result of a lottery) is as improbable as any other, then the probability that testimony to its occurrence is true is also 0.99. But if there are only two possible events which could be reported—one very probable a priori (for example, drawing a black ball from a bag containing 999 black balls and 1 white ball), and one very improbable (drawing the white ball from that bag)—then the prior improbability of an event greatly diminishes the probability that testimony to its occurrence is true. Earman then reasonably claims (p. 52) that ‘there is no uniform answer to whether the diminution effect applies to cases of religious miracles: it all depends on the details of the case’—in effect, how detailed is the description which the witness gives of the miracle. However, any resulting improbability can be overcome by the same testimony being given by many independent witnesses along the lines of Babbage’s theorem. Earman shows that we can get Babbage’s general result using only the assumption of the minimal reliability of witnesses—that is, on the assumption that for each of them it is more probable that he will say that M occurred if it did than if it did not. We do not need Babbage’s stronger assumption that each witness’s testimony is more likely to be true than false. The whole deployment of Bayesian analysis on these issues is very fine.

The trouble is, of course, with the simplifying assumption used in most of these discussions about how the strength of a witness’s testimony is to be measured. Many people who make honest and accurate reports on a certain proportion of occasions are very much less likely to make such reports in certain circumstances—they are much less likely to report accurately when they believe that they are perceiving something which they very much want to be true; or truthfully, when they have a deep personal interest in people not
knowing what really happened. But these latter generalizations are very broad ones. For some witnesses the opposite holds. Some people who do not normally observe goings-on very closely may do so when it seems that they are perceiving something of deep metaphysical significance. And some people may have a deep personal interest in others believing that a miracle occurred while not wishing for the publicity and contumely which would result from their reporting it. I can only say that if I myself witnessed what I thought was a clear case of a miracle, I would be very strongly tempted not to report it (I can just imagine what my philosophical colleagues would say!) while very much wishing that others would know that it had happened. And there is very good evidence that many people in our society today would react in a similar way—such is the tyranny of the orthodoxy of naturalism. In a British national survey conducted in 1986 by extended interview, nearly 40 per cent of those interviewed who claimed to have had a deeply significant personal religious experience said that they had never told anyone else about it before—a fortiori, they would run a mile before telling anyone that they had witnessed a miracle. And the probability of someone saying that they had witnessed a miracle when they believed they had not done so but were liable to be crucified (literally) for saying that they had, must be very small indeed; and that, of course, was the situation of some of the first Christians.

Probability is relative to evidence, and the more we know about the diversity in the reliability of different kinds of witness on different kinds of occasion, the harder it is to weigh up its effect on how probable it is that if a miracle M occurred in circumstances C witnessed by P, P would report it correctly; or if M did not occur in C, P would report that it did. Earman would not disagree with the need for very detailed evidence about the worth of testimony by particular individuals. But his unargued belief (stated on p. 61) that witnesses to religious miracles are unable to achieve the minimal reliability condition suggests to me that he is not sensitive to the enormous peer pressure in educated Western society against reporting what seems to be a miracle.

Earman goes along with Bayesianism, understood as the view that (p. 30) 'any procedure that proportions degrees of belief in violation of the probability axioms or dictates a belief change that is in violation of the rule of conditionalization is irrational'. Or at least he claims that 'there are arguments of some persuasiveness in favour of such a position'. But he denies (p. 31) 'that the constraints of rationality extend any further than this', and he seems here to imply that any distribution of prior probabilities is equally rational. Though he would not himself wish to ascribe a prior probability of zero to theism or to the occurrence of violations of laws, he implies that there is nothing irrational in doing so. Now, there may indeed by arguments of moderate persuasiveness for making your degrees of belief conform to the probability axioms at any given time, in terms of the disutility which will result if in order to achieve your goals you do too many actions licensed by beliefs which do not conform. But there seem to me no good arguments at all for not changing your prior
probabilities over time, and so for refusing to follow the rule of conditionalization—except the argument that you ascribed prior probabilities correctly at the initial stage, and so if you refuse to conditionalize on new evidence you will not ascribe posterior probabilities correctly. In our non-philosophical moments we all think that there are correct and incorrect ascriptions of posterior probabilities—on the evidence that the sun has risen at approximately 24 hours intervals for the past many centuries, it would be highly irrational to suppose that it was very probable that it would not rise tomorrow. From that kind of consideration together with the probability axioms, it follows that there are (very roughly) correct and incorrect ascriptions of prior probabilities. If we are Bayesians we have the task of specifying what the criteria are governing these. I believe that this task is achievable, by analysing the actual ascriptions of posterior probabilities to hypotheses in science or history which seem to us correct, and inferring thence the prior probabilities which alone would license these ascriptions. If we do this, we shall, I believe, find that hypotheses have greater prior probability, the smaller their scope (i.e. the less they claim) and the simpler they are (and simplicity is a notion susceptible to careful spelling out). And if we proceed along these lines we shall, I have argued elsewhere, find that a religious theory is just a large-scale world-view to be judged by exactly the same Bayesian criteria as a scientific theory; and that traditional theism has by the above criteria significant prior probability and substantial posterior probability because of its ability to predict many data, including the occurrence of a modest amount of testimony to the occurrence of miracles. If Earman does not like the way the argument is going, he must come to grips with its details. It would be good if his next book concerned Section 11 of the Enquiry.

The above criticisms concern only the occasional unargued views which form the framework within which the argument proceeds. But that argument itself is very clear, very cogent, and very apposite to present debates. As far as I can judge, Earman's analysis of the writings of others is almost invariably correct. And that makes it extremely improbable that he would badly misstate a view of mine expounded by me at considerable length. However, he writes (p. 79, n. 22): 'In The Concept of Miracle, Swinburne (1970) held that “all A's are B” can express a law even if it admits an unrepeatable counter instance. But he seems to have given up this view in the later The Existence of God (1979)’. I find the second sentence extraordinary. On p. 229 of the later book I wrote: 'it seems not unnatural to say that a purported law is no less a law for there being a non-repeatable exception to it; and then to describe the exception as a “violation” of the law’. I went on to develop that idea at considerable length, and to consider what evidence there could be for the occurrence of a violation. The extremely improbable does sometimes happen.

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