Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 20 | Issue 3

Article 8

7-1-2003

John Earman, HUME'S ABJECT FAILURE: THE ARGUMENT AGAINST MIRACLES

Robert Sloan Lee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Lee, Robert Sloan (2003) "John Earman, HUME'S ABJECT FAILURE: THE ARGUMENT AGAINST MIRACLES," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200320345

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol20/iss3/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

BOOK REVIEWS

Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles, by **John Earman**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xi and 217. \$39.95 (cloth), \$21.95 (paper).

ROBERT SLOAN LEE, Wayne State University

Just like many other communities, it can be difficult to disabuse the philosophical community of some of its long-held beliefs. One such belief is that Hume proved, in "Of Miracles" (Chapter X of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*), that testimonial evidence cannot substantiate belief in miracles. Many philosophers hold that Hume's argument constitutes an original and decisive blow against the defender of miracles. However, John Earman – who is no advocate of Christian theism – has set out to disabuse the philosophical community of this belief. Here, he summarizes his own damning critique of Hume:

So to be blunt, I contend that "Of Miracles" is an abject failure. It is not simply that Hume's essay does not achieve its goals, but that his goals are ambiguous and confused. Most of Hume's considerations are unoriginal, warmed over versions of arguments that are found in the writings of predecessors and contemporaries. And the parts of "Of Miracles" that set Hume apart do not stand up to scrutiny. ... And to cap it all off, the essay represents the kind of overreaching that gives philosophy a bad name. (p. 3)

These are strong words, but by the end of the book there is little doubt that the charges are well founded. The book is divided into two parts: Earman's own treatment of Hume's argument and an anthology of eighteenth and early nineteenth century selections bearing on the argument. Each part will be discussed in turn.

The first part of the book (a mere seventy pages) provides Earman's support for his charge of abject failure. The first seven chapters cover Hume's own religious orientation, explore the origins of Hume's essay in its historical context, and discuss the concept of miracle itself. Chapter Eight outlines the structure of Hume's essay, and the remaining chapters deal primarily with considerations of probability as applied to Hume's argument, position, and aims.

One axis of Earman's critique focuses on Hume's straight rule of induction. According to the straight rule of induction, "if n As have been examined, all of which were found to be Bs, then if n is sufficiently large, the probability that all As are Bs is 1" (pp. 22-23). For example, when we have seen enough dead men stay dead, we can infer the presumptive law of nature – namely, that all dead men stay dead – is certain. Upon this straight rule of induction, Hume crafts his first argument against miracles:

A (Hume) miracle is a violation of a presumptive law of nature. By Hume's straight rule of induction, experience confers a probability of 1 on a presumptive law. Hence, the probability of a miracle is flatly zero. Very simple. And very crude. This "proof" works not only against resurrections but against, say, the "miracle" of a violation of the presumptive law of conservation of energy. Little wonder then that those of Hume's contemporaries who had a less crude view of how induction works found no merit in Hume's "proof." (pp. 23-24)

Earman goes on to show how adopting the straight rule of induction, in addition to forcing the conclusion Hume wanted about miracles, also forces Hume into other intractable difficulties. First, it ends up stultifying scientific inquiry – and Earman explains why dropping (or weakening) the straight rule deflates Hume's argument against miracles (Chapter Thirteen). Second, Hume's straight rule of induction faces obvious counterexamples, such as the story of the Indian prince who, because he lived in a warm climate, refused to believe reports that water can become a solid (Chapter Fourteen). Earman goes on to explain why modifications of the straight rule of induction are useless in overcoming this counterexample and why Hume's discussion of it is largely "an attempt to muddy the waters of the Indian prince" (p. 34).

In contrast to Hume's straight rule of induction, Earman discusses Laplace's rule of succession which is endorsed by Hume's contemporary, Richard Price (Chapter Twelve). Laplace's rule of succession avoids the difficulties of Hume's straight rule. According to Laplace's rule, the probability that a future number, r , of trials of As will show that they are Bs (given one's background knowledge and given that a number, n , of previous trials of As yield the result that they were Bs) is determined by adding 1 to n and then dividing that sum by itself plus the number of future trials, r . Of course, Earman states all of this, and much else besides, with the probability calculus. Using " $H(r)$ " to represent the hypothesis that the next number of trials of As will turn out to be Bs, using " K " for one background knowledge, and using " $E(n,n)$ " to represent the number of past A's that have turned out to be B's, Earman states Laplace's rule of succession as follows:

$$\Pr(H(r)/E(n,n) \& K) = \frac{n+1}{n+r+1}$$

This formalized statement of Laplace's rule provides a taste of the probability nomenclature that fills most of the chapters handling issues of probability. As a result, the audience capable of distilling the full value of Earman's book will be restricted to those who have some facility with the probability calculus.

While Earman thinks that Hume's essay is ambiguous enough to ascribe the straight rule of induction to Hume, Earman thinks that part two of Hume's essay is superfluous under this reading (pp. 21-22). So, other chapters (some of them heavily laden with probability notation) discuss issues that come to the foreground when one lays aside Hume's straight rule. These issues include Hume's maxim (viz., that one should believe testimony only when the probability of the testimony exceeds the probability of the event attested to), Hume's diminution principle (viz., that the degree of confirmation that testimony provides to an event is inversely proportional to the unusualness of that event), the status of testimony-based multiple witnessing to an event, and the question of whether miracle reports can confirm religious doctrine. On this last issue, Earman concludes:

I do not presume to know how these issues are to be resolved. I insist only that, first, they are paralleled by similar issues in the assessment of how, say, low probability events in a cloud chamber serve to probabilify theoretical hypotheses in elementary particle physics and, second, that there are no in principle obstacles to a positive outcome in either science or religion. (p. 67)

Only those who have a great deal of facility in the probability calculus will find these chapters fluid reading.

Not all of the topics discussed by Earman can be covered here, but one chapter deserves closer attention before reviewing the anthology included in Earman's book. Chapter Sixteen attempts to ascertain Hume's goals in the light of the second part of Hume's essay. Earman argues that Hume vacillates between three different theses, which Earman takes as a mark of "Hume's uncertainty about what he wanted to prove and also of his (perhaps unconscious) doubts about what his arguments establish" (p. 44). The *weak thesis* is that, given susceptibility to deception, passion and other deleterious influences one must exercise caution in evaluating claims to the miraculous. The problem with this thesis is that it is merely a platitude – and a platitude that was already articulated and endorsed by Hume's contemporary opponents (p. 44). The *strong thesis* is that no testimony can ever prove – or even make plausible – the occurrence of a miracle. Of course, Earman explains (earlier in the book) how this absurdly strong thesis leads to intractable difficulties. The *middle thesis* is that in no particular recorded case is the testimonial evidence strong enough to establish the credibility of the miracle in question. Earman points out that the difficulty with this thesis is that Hume makes no genuine attempt to give "a detailed presentation of all the circumstances and all the evidence, eyewitness and otherwise" of any particular miracle report (p. 45). Earman observes that Hume simply fails to enter into the debates of his contemporaries. In particular, Hume avoids discussing the details of the resurrection of Jesus which served as a much discussed focal point in the eighteenth century debate on miracles. Earman concludes this chapter with the challenge: "Commentators who wish to credit Hume with some deep insight must point to some thesis which is both philosophically interesting and which Hume has made plausible" (p. 48). Indicating his pessimism with respect

to meeting this challenge, Earman says, "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" (p. 48).

The second part of the book is an anthology including Hume's own essay along with other selections from primary texts pertaining to Hume's argument. These selections are drawn from the work of John Locke, Benedict de Spinoza, Samuel Clark, Thomas Sherlock, Peter Annet, Richard Price, George Campbell, Pierre Laplace, Charles Babbage, and one anonymous selection (perhaps by George Hooper). Of special interest are the very hard to find essays of Thomas Sherlock, "The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus" (1729), and Peter Annet, "The Resurrection of Jesus Considered: In Answer to the Tryal of the Witnesses" (1744). These selections were so interesting that it is disappointing that the entire essays could not be included. Richard Price's reply to Hume is so substantial that one wonders how most philosophers ever got the general impression that Hume dealt a devastating blow to miracle reports. It seems that Price's work even caused Hume to second-guess himself (pp. viii, 24, and 45). Anyone familiar with the current debate surrounding the concept and evidential status of miracles may be surprised to see how much of the current debate simply reiterates the debate of the eighteenth century.

Despite the inclusion of an appendix intended to serve as a primer for the probability calculus, this is not a book for the beginner. The appendix is much too brief and awkward to serve a genuine primer to the newcomer. There are a few minor typos, and almost all of the more substantial endnotes should have been incorporated into the body of the text. Moreover, Earman's definition of a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature overlooks an ambiguity in the term "violation" – between the suspension of a law of nature and the falsification of a law of nature. Unfortunately, overlooking the former meaning forces him to treat the laws of nature as merely presumptive and this complicates his analysis of Hume's essay. Nevertheless, Earman's book should compel Hume enthusiasts to reconsider their enthusiasm concerning Hume's argument against miracles. Earman sets out a potent case for the claim that Hume's "Of Miracles" essay is largely derivative, marred by ambiguities, and entirely without merit in its probabilistic reasoning.

God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature edited by Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff. Oxford University Press, 2002, Pp. 252. \$49.95

J.R. LUCAS, F.B.A., Fellow of Merton College, Oxford.

After the aridities of Logical Positivism there has been an outburst of philosophizing about traditional metaphysical topics. Philosophers, acknowledging the inability of their intellects to comprehend, but knowing, with St Augustine, that to stay silent would be even worse, dare to think about God and time. And in recent years much thought has been given to the relation