

David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles*
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. ix + 106 pp.

John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xi + 217 pp.

Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. xii + 101 pp.

The three books under review are the harvest of three very smart philosophers approaching Hume's essay on miracles from three very different directions. In *Hume, Holism, and Miracles*, David Johnson argues that Hume begs the question by assuming that uniform experience tells against miracles. Johnson is more interested in criticizing 'Humean' reconstructions of the original argument that would make us doubt biblical accounts of miracles. For the most part, his criticisms of these reconstructions succeed.

After definitional and historical stage setting, John Earman argues in *Hume's Abject Failure* that we should attribute a crude principle of induction to Hume and that the other principles Hume advances in his essay are trivial, false, or unoriginal. According to Earman, questions about the reliability of testimony require careful, case-by-case examination and Hume misuses philosophy in order to take an illegitimate short cut.

Robert Fogelin sets himself three tasks in his *Defense of Hume on Miracles*: first, to offer a coherent reading of §10 of the first *Enquiry*; second, to show that Hume doesn't think that his argument in Part 1 of that section suffices to show that we shouldn't believe in miracles; and, third, to reply to Johnson and Earman. The replies are a mixed bag, but Fogelin succeeds in his other two tasks.

I'll begin by saying something in defense of Hume's decision to ignore the details of the Bible (beyond the practical consideration that blasphemy was against the law). I'll then try to adjudicate some of the disputes between our authors.

1 Is Most Testimony for Religious Miracles False?

One of Hume's central epistemological theses is that causal connections can't be seen or deduced in particular instances but only appear upon looking at surrounding cases. It is certainly true that in *some* cases you can't determine whether A causes B by looking closely at A or B. For instance, you can't tell by looking closely at a particular doctor and a particular woman whether hand washing prevents childbed fever. Likewise with probability: whether B was probably preceded by A might be knowable only by looking at surrounding similar cases and not by careful examination the details of B. If accounts similar to biblical miracle narratives aren't usually preceded by the events that they describe, then, *ceteris paribus*, biblical miracle narratives probably weren't preceded by the events they describe.

Earman sees that something like this is going on in Part 2 of Hume's essay (53) and offers warnings against being impressed. First, Earman notes, "as with all frequency data, the reference class is crucial" (53). True, but *testimony for religious miracles* seems to be a projectible, natural epistemic class from which probabilistic conclusions can be drawn. Second, though Earman is himself sympathetic to Hume's claim that most reports of miracles are mistaken (48, 59-61), he is underwhelmed by Hume's survey of pagan and Catholic miracles, since "no attempt is made in any of these cases to give a detailed presentation of all the circumstances and all the evidence, eyewitness and otherwise, that would allow one to make an informed judgment as to the credibility of the alleged miracle" (45). Indeed, where Hume goes into detail he usually emphasizes the number and quality of the witnesses in favor of the miracle. A Martian reading §10 would have no idea how Hume's description of Vespasian's cures is supposed to show the unreliability of miracle reports.

Of course, Hume wasn't writing for Martians. He was writing for educated British Protestants who were certain that no Roman emperor ever had miraculous powers and who considered Spanish Catholicism to be a paradigm of superstition. Hume didn't need to convince his readers that God hadn't intervened on behalf of a beleaguered Catholic sect. He treats these evaluations as shared premises.

2 Circularity and Reconstructions

Johnson offers a deft argument that Hume considers 'proofs' to be nonstatistical inductions with known premises (12-13). He goes on to argue that Hume's argument in §10 begs the question by assuming a "uniform experience" in favor of the laws of nature that rises to the level of proof (18-20). Fogelin replies that when Hume appeals to 'uniform experience' he is contrasting "*wide and unproblematic* testimony" with "isolated reports" (20). Later, Fogelin writes that we are assessing not a conflict between two kinds of experience but between testimony of miracles and common experience (37).

The first reply seems better to me, but it's important that we mean the right thing by 'unproblematic.' We shouldn't think that Hume begins with premise that the testimony in the Bible is of an untrustworthy sort. As Fogelin argues (15-17), up through the end of Part I of §10, he allows the possibility that some actual testimony for miracles might rise to the level of 'proof'. The Bible is problematic in the sense the truth of its miracle reports is what's ultimately in dispute. Hume's inductive premise is that, setting aside the disputed events of the Bible, there's been uniform experience against miracles. This premise would not be accepted by Catholics, or by believers in Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim miracles, but it would have been accepted by Hume's intended readership.

Because he thinks that Hume's own argument begs the question in an uninteresting way, Johnson considers various reconstructions. Against Mill's version that it's always best to not posit unexperienced causes, Johnson replies that sometimes scientists do posit unexperienced causes and there's no reason why the best explanation for a phenomenon can't be supernatural (Ch. 5). Against Flew's argument that we need to believe in basic regularities in order to do history, Johnson replies that we don't need to believe in every law in order to do any history (Ch. 6).

Johnson (Ch. 7) offers a surprising response to J.H. Sobel's 1987 Bayesian reconstruction of Hume's argument. Sobel had argued that if we set the prior odds of a miracle infinitesimally low, then, given a finite chance of mistaken testimony, we ought not believe in testimony of miracles. I think that setting the chances of a miracle infinitesimally low is as good as begging the question against the defender of miracles. But Johnson zigs where I would have zagged. He argues that when you learn of the testimony of the miracle, you learn of the occurrence of the miracle. In a Bayesian context, to say that something is learned is to treat it as unproblematic and certain for the problem at hand. In effect, Johnson sets the probability of the miracle given the report of the miracle at 1, without allowing even an infinitesimal possibility that the report might be false.

3 Odds Before and After Testimony

A central thesis of Johnson's book is that the improbability of a fact before testimony doesn't entail its improbability after the testimony. He makes the point emphatically and well, observing that you might rationally believe a Weather Bureau prediction that it will snow on June 1st in Manhattan (31). You might likewise believe a generally trustworthy witness who says that she found a red marble in an urn even though vast previous sampling

had found only green marbles there (25-26). He concludes that no Humean argument can ever bridge the gap between the premise that miracles are improbable before they are attested and the conclusion that we shouldn't believe reports of miracles.

Fogelin disagrees. He argues that you would rationally disbelieve a normally reliable source who told you that George Bush had walked across a swimming pool on a tightrope and that you would rationally disbelieve someone who told too many stories of coincidental celebrity encounters (10-13).

Earman uses Bayesian technology to reach the Solomonic conclusion that prior improbability of the attested fact sometimes reduces the reliability of testimony and sometimes doesn't (Ch. 17). He recasts an example from Richard Price to show that imperfectly reliable testimony can be trusted for lottery numbers, so long as erroneous testimony isn't biased in any particular direction (for example, if there's a thousand-ticket lottery and the chance of misreporting a 79, given that misreporting has occurred, is one in a thousand). On the other hand, Earman explains, if there's an urn with a single white ball and 999 black balls and a witness to the drawing who has a 10% chance of calling black 'white' or white 'black,' it follows that when the witness reports that a drawn ball is white, there's only a 1 in 112 chance that it actually is white. There are many more black balls, so false testimony of white draws will swamp the rare true attestation of a white one. If the proportion of erroneous testimony in favor of a miracle wouldn't fall as fast or faster as the prior odds of a miracle become smaller, then the prior improbability of the miracle diminishes the reliability of the testimony.

A necessary condition for the probable truth of testimony that an event has occurred is that the prior odds of that event be greater than the prior odds of the testimony occurring without the event. Sobel offers a proof of this theorem and argues that it captures the

intention behind Hume's maxim ("no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish").¹ Earman rejects this interpretation on the grounds that, if we adopt it, three sentences later Hume would make the mistake of asserting that having the prior odds of a miracle be greater than the prior odds of the false report arising is not only necessary but also sufficient for the credibility of the received report. Earman saves Hume from this subtle error by steering him to the triviality that we shouldn't believe testimony of a miracle unless it's probably true (40-41).

Whether Hume realized it or not, the theorem is true. Johnson records Hume's requirement that witnesses must be "beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others" and asks, "but what is needed for *that*, and why?" (Johnson 79). The answer to the second question is that in order for a report to be probable, the prior odds of its being invented have to be smaller than the prior odds of the reported fact. If the prior odds for a miracle are very low (as Johnson is willing to grant) then the prior odds of invention must be even lower. Johnson follows up by asking, "Is canonization perhaps sufficient?" which is my favorite line in his book.

4 The Nature of Hume's Argument

Fogelin offers "a coherent reading—something like a narrative" (2) by going through Hume's essay and interlacing quotations from the text with a running, accurate commentary. This perhaps isn't the deepest way to engage a historical text (first Hume says this, then he says that) but it makes it harder to go astray.

¹ *Logic and Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 312-19, 331-33.

The clear-sightedness that characterizes his interpretation of Hume seems to abandon Fogelin when he reads Johnson's book. Johnson, quoting Richard Swinburne, asserts that Part 1 of §10 is supposed to show "that the evidence against the occurrence of any purported miracle is normally likely to be extremely strong and to outweigh by far the evidence in favor of the occurrence" (Johnson 2). In response, Fogelin writes, "this characterization of part 1 as having a self-contained argument concerning miracles is simply false" (34). But Fogelin himself argues that Part 1 of Hume's argument is a self-contained argument for the sub-conclusion that "we are *entitled* to apply very high (ultrahigh) standards to the testimony intended to establish the occurrence of a miracle" (30), and, if the standards are ultrahigh, then they normally won't be met, which is all that Swinburne and Johnson attribute to Hume.

On this matter, Earman is Fogelin's true adversary. Earman argues that Hume endorses the straight rule of induction, according to which "if n As have been examined and m have been found to be Bs, then the probability that the next A examined will be a B is m/n ." As a corollary, "if $m=n$, then the probability that the next A will be a B is 1" (22-23). Hume believes that uniform experience supports the laws of nature. If Hume believes in the straight rule, his rejection of miracles will be absolute and unrevisable.

In favor of this reading, Earman notes that Hume describes his argument as "of a like nature" to Tillotson's argument against transubstantiation, which is "decisive" and should "*silence* the most arrogant bigotry and superstition" (Earman 4). Earman also cites Hume's dismissive treatment of purported miracles supported by strong testimonial evidence (31-32) and emphasizes that in some editions of the *Enquiry* Hume writes, "no Testimony for any kind of miracle can ever possibly amount to a Probability, much less to a Proof" (45).

Earman (32) acknowledges that Hume does claim, in the *Enquiry* and in correspondence, that there might be a conflict of proof against proof. He also acknowledges that Hume's maxim seems to give conditions for when we might justifiably posit that a miracle has occurred and that Hume spells out testimony that would justify belief in an eight-day eclipse (22). Earman doesn't concede that these texts undermine his interpretation, but rather concludes, "there is a disturbing slipperiness to Hume's aims and conclusions" (ibid.).

Fogelin criticizes Earman's interpretation because (among other reasons) the straight rule is incompatible with Hume's thesis that the course of nature may change and also incompatible with his skeptical argument that all knowledge degenerates into probability (48-49). Here I side with Fogelin. Hume's argument resembles the argument he attributes to Tillotson by balancing evidence of one type against evidence of another, and not by silencing any possible disagreement. The falsity of pagan and Catholic miracle stories is a premise, not a conclusion, in Hume's argument. Hume would reject the hypothetical religious testimony of Elizabeth's resurrection because, in his words, "men, in all ages, have been so much imposed on by ridiculous stories of that kind" (Fogelin 29).

Hume has two arguments against believing in the reliability of particular accounts of religious miracles: first, from the unreliability of past testimony of that sort, and, second, from the prior improbability of miracles. After Hume denies in the first edition of the *Enquiry* that testimony for miracles "can ever possibly amount to a Probability" he continues by writing, "even supposing it amounted to a Proof, 'twould be opposed by another Proof, deriv'd from the very Nature of the Fact, which it would endeavour to establish" (Earman 45). The second, opposing proof is the uniform experience in favor of the laws of nature. So, the initial improbability arises from some other source, presumably, the past unreliability

of religious testimony. If this is right, then Hume's claim that testimony of miracles can't amount to probability doesn't rely on the straight rule but rather on the principle that if most As haven't been Bs, then the next A probably won't be a B.²

The books are all worth reading. Fogelin provides the best interpretation of Hume, Earman the best discussion of the epistemology of testimony, and Johnson the best treatment of reconstructions of Hume's argument.

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² I thank Mike Bergmann for helpful comments.