I

Let me first sketch out some thoughts of my own about Hume's famous argument against rational belief in miracles; then I will turn to Beardsmore's paper.

It seems to me that we cannot sensibly evaluate Hume's argument until we answer this question: What sort of world do we live in? Do we live in a world with or without God? If we live in a world with God, does God intervene in human history, or not? That is, shall we be naturalists, supernaturalists, or perhaps deists?

Suppose we define these last three terms. Naturalism, let's say, is the doctrine which says: (1) nature alone exists (where 'nature' is the sum total of physical reality, that which could in principle be studied by methods analogous to those used in the natural sciences); (2) nature is eternal and uncreated; (3) nature is uniform, regular and continuous; there are no non-natural events; and (4) every event is in principle explainable in naturalistic terms. Supernaturalism, let's say, is the doctrine which says: (1) something else besides nature exists, viz., God; (2) nature depends for its existence on God; (3) the regularity of nature can be and sometimes is interrupted by God; and (4) such divine interruptions are humanly quite unpredictable and inexplicable. Deism, let's say, is a doctrine that shares with supernaturalists the claim that God created the world and set its natural laws in motion, and shares with naturalists the claim that nature, at least since the creation, is uniform and uninterrupted. Naturalists and deists agree that God never intervenes in the regular flow of events – there are no divinely produced voices, prophecies, visions, epiphanies, miracles or incarnations.
All people interpret their experience by means of a certain philosophical framework or world-view. Obviously, for committed naturalists or deists, it can never be rational to believe that a given purported miracle has occurred, no matter how strong the evidence for it. For such persons, to grant that a miracle has occurred is tantamount to admitting the falsity of their world-view. Equally obviously, committed supernaturalists will be open to the idea that miracles can occur, although they might be just as initially suspicious of actual miracle-claims as are naturalists.

As I say, I think the question Hume classically asked – Is it ever rational to believe that a miracle has occurred? – can only be sensibly answered by first asking what sort of world we live in. But there is a curious circularity lurking in the neighbourhood of any such attempt to answer Hume’s question. Let me try to explain what it is.

I believe that critics have shown (and Beardsmore agrees) that the case Hume makes against rational belief in miracles fails. The most critical problem, in my opinion, is that Hume seems to wield a principle of inductive inference that cannot be construed as sensible. We’ll call it HP (for Hume’s principle):

\[ \text{HP: If } n \text{ Xs have been experienced (where } n \text{ is some large number), and if thus far all of the Xs have turned out to be Ys, then the probability that the next X will also be Y is 1.} \]

Among several other texts that I could cite, note this:

There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the very nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.\(^4\)

Hume can only be taken as saying that when past human experience is uniform, i.e., when all the past Xs have turned out to be Ys, we have what amounts to a proof, a warrant for certainty, that all future Xs will be Y. That is, Hume holds that HP is true.

But as anyone can see, HP is far too blunt an instrument to constitute a helpful principle of inductive inference.\(^5\) Even if it were true – and it certainly is not – that the testimony of all past human experience is uniformly against the occurrence of miracles, we could only rationally hold that the probability of the truth of an