

David Hume, Of Miracles (Section X of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*)

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General Consideration About When We Are Justified in Believing Something

Claim: Our experiences and observations of the world serve as the foundations of our beliefs.

- If we always see b after a, we are justified in thinking b will follow a the next time we see a.
- “A hundred instances or experiments on one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance” (74).

General Principle of Reasoning: “In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence” (74).

- Believe what you have the most evidence for believing.

Applying the General Principle to the Case of Testimony

Observation: We form beliefs on the basis of what people tell us, provided we think them reliable; we rely on people’s *testimony*. (74).

Claim: Sometimes we have reason not to believe someone’s testimony. For example:

1. Sarah tells me Rob jumped 15 feet in the air yesterday.
2. Sarah’s testimony is some evidence that Rob jumped 15 feet in the air.
3. No one has jumped 15 feet in the air before, and Rob is not athletic.
4. That no one (including very athletic people) has jumped 15 feet in the air and that Rob is not athletic serves as some evidence that he did not jump 15 feet in the air.
5. The evidence supporting his not jumping is stronger than the evidence supporting his jumping.
6. General Principle of Reasoning: I ought to believe what I have the most evidence for believing.
7. Thus, I ought not to believe Sarah.

General Observations about Forming Beliefs on the Basis of Testimony

- We weight testimonies against each other
 - “We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent asseverations” (75).
- “The more unusual the events claimed to have happened, the less reason to believe the witness.
 - “But when the fact attested is such a one as has seldom fallen under our observation, here is a contest of two opposite experiences; of which the one destroys the other, as far as its force goes” (75).

Testimony and Belief in Miracles

Question: What is a miracle?

Answer: “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature” (76).

Claim: We should not believe that some event occurred or will occur that flouts the laws of nature.

Argument:

1. Laws of nature are so-called because of the frequency with which certain events occur; those events are experienced/observed with great frequency.

2. The great number of cases in which we observe things conforming to the laws of nature amounts to extremely strong evidence that the world will continue on that way, and that it has been that way in the past.
 - Examples: given that we have seen everyone die, and the sun rise every day, we have extremely strong evidence for thinking each one of us will die, and that the sun will rise tomorrow, and also that everyone in the past died, and that the sun rose before we were born.
3. Miracles, by definition, are events that do not conform to anything close to our typical experiences; they are utterly out of the ordinary.
4. The extremely small number of cases of people observing miracles provides very little evidence that they will occur or ever occurred.
5. We should balance the evidence on either side (we should apply the general principle of reasoning noted above).
6. We ought not to believe that a miracle ever will or ever has occurred.

Question: Could we ever have reason to believe someone's testimony when the claim a miracle occurred?

Answer: You should only believe the witness if a) his saying something false would be more miraculous than the miracle to which he attests, or b) that it would be an even greater miracle for something other than what he claims to have happened (77).

Further Reasons for Thinking "There never was a miraculous event established" (78)

1. There have not been sufficiently reliable sources to believe in miracles (78).
2. We are given to believe in miracles because it feels good (78-9).
 - People *love* to tell others juicy stories; people love to gossip.
3. Alleged miracles happened before but seem to happen much less now.

Question: What could explain this?

Answer: We have much better explanations for how the world works (*e.g.* people are not possessed by demons, but rather have epilepsy) and we are better at determining when someone is tricking us.

- What explains widespread belief in the past is, in part, their ignorance.

4. The Problem of Different Religions and Different Miracles (79-80).

- i. Different religions claim different miracles occurred.
- ii. All these religions claim that they occurred on the basis of testimony contained in a religious text.
- iii. But some of these claims contradict the claims of other religions.
- iv. Not everyone can be right.
- v. Thus, religious texts contain unreliable testimony.

Question: Is there a reason for thinking the testimony of those in the Christian Bible more reliable than the testimony of those in the Koran, or any other religious text?

5. The tellers of miracles have reason to lie (86).

Summary: 87-88