

Hume, “On Miracles,” *Enquiry* Section X

Belief and evidence

“A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.” (388)

Probability vs. proof

How “uniformly” does past experience speak on the given question? Perfectly? Then we have “proof.” Otherwise we have “probability,” the degree thereof depending on the ratio of positives to negatives. (388)

The evidence of human testimony

We believe what someone says only because human beings have *usually* been found to tell the truth. Here we have mere “probability” (389)

“Prodigies” and “wonders”

Contrary to the *usual* course of nature. They are improbable, but not impossible. (390)

Miracles

(i) Violations of laws of nature; (ii) Caused by a supernatural agent. (391, 392 fn20)

Uniform experience argument

The laws of nature are known to be laws only if they are backed by a perfectly uniform experience. So the more evidence you have for the law of nature that has (supposedly) been violated, the more evidence you have *against* its supposed violation. This yields a “proof” against miracles. A superior proof is possible in principle, but even if one could be produced the miracle story would only be probable. (391-2)

The “greater miracle test” for human testimony

Don’t believe a miracle story unless it would be an even greater miracle for the witnesses to be lying or mistaken than for their story to be true. (This is just a clever way of saying you shouldn’t believe the story unless the “proof” of the reliability of the witnesses is *vastly superior* to the “proof” of the law of nature that would be violated if that story were true.) (392)

Four points about the history of miracle stories

1. There have never been sufficiently many witnesses of the right sort. (393)
2. Surprise and wonder excites us and causes belief (393-5)
3. Miracle stories are most abundant in “ancient and barbarous nations.” (395-7)
4. Stories of miracles worked on behalf of different religious systems cancel each other out. (397)

Some examples (397-400)

See especially Cardinal de Retz's skeptical report on the case of the man whose leg grew back. (398-9)

Hume tries to apply his principles to some imaginary cases (401-3)

- Suppose that "all authors, in all languages" agreed that "from the first of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days." (402) Hume says he would believe it happened. But instead of saying that a miracle occurred, we should look for natural causes.
- Even if all historians were agreed that Queen Elizabeth died, was buried, but a month later appeared and reigned for another three years, Hume would conclude that she had only "pretended" to be dead. (402)

Hume's ironic conclusion

Christianity can't pass the test of reason, but that's ok because it is supposed to be a matter of faith, not reason. Indeed, Christianity is *so* improbable that it takes a miracle for anyone to believe it. (403-4)