

David Hume
1711-1776

An Overview of his Empiricist Philosophy

H ultimately derives the contents of the mind from experience.

"Perceptions" are the mind's contents in general.

There are two kinds of perceptions: impressions and ideas.

Impressions: the immediate data of experience (e.g., sensations.)

Ideas: copies or faint images, in our thinking or reasoning, of our impressions.

(Plainly for H ideas are images.)

Ideas always correspond to impressions, but are less vivid.

While ideas are consequent impressions, there are "impressions of reflections."

Ultimately, however, all ideas are grounded in impressions of sensation.

What about the idea of substance? There is no such *idea*. We have only a collection of sensations: red, sweet-smelling, velvety to the touch. But there is no *idea* of the substance "roseness."

Then what about causality (a huge notion in the history of philosophy)?

No one has ever had an *impression* of causality. Instead we have an impression of a relation between objects: contiguity, temporal priority, constant conjunction.

We conclude that water "causes" fire to be extinguished only by repeated observation. (Plainly H has denied Aristotle's fourfold "cause" and is thinking only of efficient cause. Recall Ockham.)

It appears that the future instances (e.g., of water and fire) will resemble past instances; i.e., "the course of nature continues uniformly over time."

However, [1] we can't *intuit* the certain uniformity of nature,

[2] we can't *demonstrate* it.

Then can't we establish this principle by reasoning from our experience in terms of probability?

NO!

Note the following:

All science has to do with predicting the future on the basis of the past.

But for us to predict the future, nature has to be uniform; i.e., the fut. must resemble the past.

However, the uniformity of nature can only be established by observation.

Yet observation is always of the past and present, never of the future.

Therefore we can speak of the uniformity of nature w.r.t. the future only by *assuming* it.

But this assumption is exactly what we are trying to establish.

Therefore science appears to rest on an unprovable assumption. (We can't *prove* that the future is going to resemble the past. No amount of observing uniformity in the past guarantees uniformity for the future.)

Therefore, said H, while a miraculous event isn't self-contradictory (i.e., we can't judge a miracle impossible simply by examining the notion), a miracle, given the uniformity of nature, is unlikely; so very unlikely as to be incredible.

Our supposition that water extinguishes fire (and will in the future) isn't founded on an argument re: causality; it's founded on "habit" or "custom." "Custom", a propensity of the mind to attribute causality subjectively, allows us to move beyond experience or observation to generalization. E.g., if I see smoke, custom has me infer fire, even though I may not perceive fire. Still, if someone challenges me about the validity of my inference, I shall ultimately have to resort to empirical verification: uncover fire.

What has Hume Achieved?

- [1] He has rid the phil'l world (he thinks) of the Aristotelian/Thomistic notion of causality.
- [2] He has articulated what is *meant* when we say "A causes B." In other words, he has denied teleology: there's no God-implemented purpose or goal or end or development in nature; there are just the three relations that we observe.
- [3] He has magnified enormously an empiricist understanding of everything.

NB: All cosmological argument for God is deemed worthless in that
 no one has ever perceived God's contiguity to the world;
 "temporal priority" has no meaning w.r.t. what we can observe of God. (We can't observe anything.)
 constant conjunction (between God and world) has no meaning here.

Hume on Miracle

NB: H defines miracle as "a violation of the laws nature." (Has anyone observed such?)
First Two Arguments: since we haven't the experience of miracle, we have to rely on witnesses. We must distinguish between the credibility of the witnesses and the intrinsic probability of the event.
 No *witness's testimony* is strong enough to "give us full assurance."
 The *intrinsic probability of the event* is so low that it couldn't be lower.
Third Argument: The testimony adduced to support miracles arises from untrustworthy people.
Fourth Argument: The miracle story used to buttress one religion is undermined by the miracle story in another religion.

Criticisms of Hume

- [1] H dismisses too readily the role of eyewitnesses, esp. eyewitness as someone known to be credible.
- [2] H doesn't consider the publicly recognizable effects a miracle might leave; e.g., the man born blind is made to see. Bystanders can observe that he sees.
- [3] [i] H's understanding of probability is one-sided. He assumes that the probability of an event is determined *entirely* by the frequency with which it occurs. (Where would this leave the historian, who knows that an event certainly occurred, even though historical events occur only once?)
 [ii] Also, the probability of an event depends on the agent of the supposed event: if God is little more than a sentimental notion, or little more than a Deistic "world-winder-upper", then of course miracle is highly improbable. But if God is GOD, the world's creator, preserver and redeemer (*acting* to set it right when it is disordered, and acting so as to have it fulfil his purpose for it), then that event which is highly improbable of itself becomes much more probable *in this context*.
 Crucial here is the *kind* of miracle we are discussing. Contrast canonical and apocryphal miracle stories in the life of Jesus.
- [4] Is there a place for philosophical argument that shows the issue of God to be a genuine issue and not a pseudo-issue? (See Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Think About God: A Guide for the 20th Century Pagan*.)
- [5] H is arrogant w.r.t. pre-modern cultures. They still knew that virgins don't become pregnant.
- [6] To be sure, there are people who relish the sensational; there are as many who are immovably skeptical.

A Comment on Hume's Assumptions

[1] H says that all "ideas" are less vivid than impressions (unless one is insane or dreaming.) What about the vividness of prophets, apostles, saints and mystics w.r.t. God? NB the difference between actuality and reality.

[2] H never gets beyond miracle as violation of the law of nature. [i] He seems not to be aware, from his def'n of miracle, that if a law of nature can be violated (H doesn't deny the *possibility* of miracle) then there's no law. [ii] Because he disregards all considerations of God's character and purpose, he never comes to see that miracle may be extremely *likely*.

[3] H never distinguishes between observation and awareness. That which we can't observe empirically isn't thereby precluded from rendering us aware of it.
Aristotle: the mark of educated people is that they expect the degree of precision that the subject-matter allows. H grasps nothing of the subject-matter.

[4] H never discusses the aspect of miracle that is most significant in scripture: sign.

[5] H doesn't distinguish between the experimental and the observational. The falsifiability criterion is crucial for the former but not for the latter.

[6] Many discussions of miracle assume that the point of the miracle is its evidentiary significance. But the "sign" of the miracle, according to scripture, can be discerned only the spiritually attuned. Throughout scripture the fact of miracle *doesn't* render people any less "stiff-necked"; i.e., it has *no* evidentiary significance.

[7] Surely a healthy skepticism is always in order. Still, if we can't rule out the appearance of Mary to people in Portugal if Moses and Elijah appeared to Peter, James and John. See the example of Anthony Bloom.

[8] H lefthandedly tells the truth in the last paragraph of *Miracles*. To assent to miracle is to be aware of a continuous miracle in oneself. (Since faith is not a *natural* human possibility, according to scripture, the presence of faith is *always miraculous*.)

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