

Notes for HuVAT talk on David Hume

Isaiah Berlin: Humes philosophising are what today we would call introspective psychology p. 164.

Section in Keiron O'Hara's book about "conflation" of a priori/a posteriori with analytic/synthetic is in Chapt 5 section on Metaphysics towards the end p. 53f

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Hume on miracles read from Six Secular Philosophers p46f.

The great majority believe that the best evidence for religion is extraordinary events which are supposed by them to show the direct intervention of God in the course of history and nature. Such interventions are miracles. Hume's problem was to find out whether a reasonable man should believe that they actually occur. He regarded this as an **empirical** question. Being a historian, he saw it as a problem of weighing historical evidence. This was an entirely different approach from that of Spinoza, who disbelieved in miracles because he accepted the theory of the mechanistic order of nature. **A metaphysical answer would not satisfy Hume**; he wanted an empirical answer, for he saw that the mechanistic theory is itself false **if miracles do in fact occur**.

But when he examined the empirical origin of our conception of the uniformity of nature, he saw that this was evidence against the occurrence of miracles. We discover laws of nature by repeated observation of the same kinds of events happening over and over again under like conditions. This does not logically prove that nature is uniform in all her parts; but the accumulation of such generalizations strengthens our conviction that she is uniform. A law of nature is an expression merely of the most probable order of events, but this probability is practically as good as a certainty.

A miracle is, by definition, a violation of a law of nature. It is not an event which is unexplained merely by the laws we have already discovered; the world is full of such events, and **they show only the magnitude of our ignorance, not the hand of God**. No, a miracle is

an event inexplicable by any law of nature, discovered or yet to be discovered. It is, therefore, an event which would have to be judged to be improbable no matter how much we knew. A man who believes in miracles, therefore, not only believes in the power of God, but also disbelieves in the power of human reason to explain much of what is as yet unexplained.

The probabilities are always against the occurrence of a miracle; this follows simply from the definition, since a law of nature, of which a miracle is a violation, is a statement of the highest probability we have been able to ascertain. This does not show that miracles are impossible; it merely shows that the evidence for them must be overwhelmingly strong if it is to count against the great antecedent improbability of the event.

Since the laws of nature are highly probable and the occurrence of a miracle is highly improbable, and since anything that increases the probability of the one lowers the probability of the other, Hume set up a rule for the weighing of evidence of miracles. It was: "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."

This is the rule the historian uses in weighing evidence. Two contemporary documents conflict with each other: one document says Napoleon died in 1821, another says he was seen in Louisiana in 1826. Which is the more probable: that both are true or that at least one of the documents is mistaken? The answer is obvious. Now which is the more miraculous: that the sun should have stood still while Joshua's men finished slaughtering their foe or that the narrator has made a mistake? Hume thought the answer to this question was equally obvious.

We know enough about astronomy to infer that the stopping of the sun is exceedingly improbable; we know enough about human nature to infer that a false report of what happened during a great battle is not at all improbable. We know how even honest folk will occasionally embellish a tale to make a better story, for love of wonder and a delight in astonishing others are natural to man:

But if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast, and

imagine he sees what has no reality; he may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it with the best intentions in the world for the sake of promoting so holy a cause. Or even where this delusion has not place, vanity, excited by so strong a temptation, operates on him more powerfully than on the rest of mankind in other circumstances; and self-interest with equal force. His auditors may not have, and commonly have not, sufficient judgment to canvass his evidence; what judgment they have, they renounce by principle in these sublime and mysterious subjects. Of if they were ever willing to employ it, passion and a heated imagination disturb the regularity of its operations. Their credulity increases his impudence; and his impudence overpowers their credulity.

Applying, then, the ordinary canons of historical method and this realistic estimate of human frailty, Hume concluded that

there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood, and at the same time attesting facts performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of the world as to render detection unavoidable.

Hume believed that the acceptance of miracles is a poor foundation for religion, also, because the belief in them prevents us from making use of better evidence for the existence of God. This evidence is the presence of design and order in the majestic machine of nature. One cannot honestly appeal to this as the handiwork of a perfect Author of Nature endowed with omniscience and omnipotence and at the same time believe that the unusual, the inexplicable, the miraculous, show that there is a god intervening in the course of the nature He has established. If miracles occur and have any religious significance, they must indicate that there is a Particular Providence intervening to rectify nature for man's benefit or edification; if the order of nature exists and has any religious significance, it must indicate that there is a General Providence which established and now sustains nature in her awesome magnitude without the necessity of divine afterthoughts of particular miraculous intervention in the orderly course of nature. You cannot have it both ways, says Hume: order or intervention, but not both. And Hume thought that the argument from order was incomparably the better.

His analysis of the better argument is found in his posthumous work, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Natural religion means religious, or rather theological, beliefs based on the facts of nature, especially as they are disclosed in scientific discovery. The most important of the evidences is the order and harmony of nature, which is taken to indicate intelligent and beneficent design. Natural theology is contrasted to revealed theology, which is based on particular revelations in the Bible or in miracles or in the private revelations claimed by individuals, all of which speak to our faith instead of our reason. Natural theology, therefore, had a pre-eminent place in the cool Age of Reason, which was reacting against the obscurantism of an Age of Faith.

It is not possible, in a paraphrase or brief summary, to do justice to the *Dialogues*. One can summarize the arguments and conclusions of most of Hume's philosophical works, and regret only that in the summary the sharpness and wit of the style are lost; but one can hardly give even a résumé of the arguments and conclusions of the *Dialogues*, for there is not one straight line of argument leading to an inevitable conclusion. That such discourse is especially appropriate in a matter like religion, where Hume thought no certainty is possible, is acknowledged in the fact that this work was not composed as a treatise; it is a dialogue in which

It is possible to say that the development of science, in terms of the development of thinking by Hume/Kant to the notion of synthetic a priori, is to say it is the development of more and more synthetic a priori statements. Take for example Newton's theory of gravity. That it is one of the most successful and greatest scientific theories ever is to recognise its synthetic a priori nature. A few moments thought will show this. We can never get Hume's "constant conjunction" to apply to all scenes or experiences of gravitational attraction, for a start we can't bodily go to places like the sun or even Jupiter to repeatedly see that things will fall there just as do on earth yet we do say with virtual absolute confidence that they would. That is a synthetic a priori judgement at work!

Answers to some questions during discussion

David D: how Hume was treated personally the answer is generally

OK but much of this outcome was due to Hume's cleverness. Hume was a master of irony and he outsmarted the censors by this means many times. I talked about how Boswell regarded very well him even if rather with incredulity. Here is an example of his clever irony:

"To be a philosophical Skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian, he concluded, because if a man is not a skeptic, if he holds, on the contrary, that reason working on the data of experience can establish true answers to religious questions, these answers will not be the answers required by Christian theology. The only honest attitude for the Christian, therefore, is one of faith, not one of claiming to base orthodox belief upon reason.

"This does not mean that Hume favours faith above reason; it means only that if you insist upon being religious, you cannot appeal to reason to back up your faith. So for the second time Hume ironically and in a somewhat backhanded way seems to recommend faith beyond the sphere of reason's competence."

In response to Affie about the story she told which she regarded as a "miracle" was that was not a "miracle" in the sense that Hume was on about. A miracle in Hume's sense was given when I read out Hume's example of the Biblical story of the sun standing still for Joshua's men to kill off his foes.

Now there was a fair bit of discussion (especially following Lyndon's question) about Hume's notion of cause and effect - his "constant conjunction" (a phrase I did not get around to using) and induction - that something which has been repeatedly observed to happen before, contrary to previous experience now does not happen. But for practical purposes Hume accepted that what normally happens will always happen (his "law of nature") so for the sun to stop moving across the sky (as viewed by us with our 21st century minds! because we know that is only how it appears to us) that would be a miracle! Then his argument, following on, was that the likelihood of that claim being true is so slight relative to the likelihood of the story teller wanting to convey some agenda (political, religious etc.) that we would dismiss the claim that such a miracle happened (in favour of accepting that agenda).

For someone to lose their loved one in a disaster and finding them again is not a miracle in Hume's sense because no law of nature is denied; in the chaos following a disaster it is easy to understand how relatives can become lost only to be found again later even over terrible fear for the worse which becomes not supported by the evidence after the fact.

An important point for Lyndon which I did not have the presence of mind to mention at the meeting is that considering Hume in isolation it is possible to wonder how his apparent unreasonable scepticism could have led to modern science as it is argued.

We need to recollect that Hume's scepticism awakened Kant out of his "dogmatic slumbers". It was Kant who took the approach further in a positive way. So focussing on Hume is only part of the story for understanding the history of the rise of science, ultimately coming from him as argued, as we know it today.

Tony D about what Hume thought about free-will: I don't think Hume would have thought in those terms. I suspect but can't document, due to not having done the reading, he would have taken free-will for granted. That's because he took moral question very seriously, wrote volumes on the subject, and being an empiricist would have been sceptical about apparent conundrum about mechanism and free-will - well after all, sense-experience conveys to us that people do have free-will as an observable - a sense-experience!