

The standard view of belief in testimony

People can generally be relied upon to tell the truth.

But not always.

There are various circumstances that we have discovered by experience to be indicative of reliable testimony.

e.g., number, independence, and character of witnesses,
interest of witnesses in the outcome of the case,
possibility of deception or mistake
etc.

Wise judges accordingly proportion their trust in testimony to the quality of the testimony.

One of the circumstances affecting reliability of testimony is the intrinsic likelihood of the event reported.

Reports of maximally improbable events are therefore in themselves highly dubious.

Hume's view

Testimony is a case of conflicting causes rather than inconstant cause.

We do not treat the improbability of the event reported as a further reason to distrust the witness

Instead, we weigh the likelihood that the witnesses are saying something that will turn out to be true (apart from reference to the specific event they report)

against the likelihood of the event reported occurring in the circumstances reported (apart from considering that this particular report has been made)

That is, we weigh the likelihood of one causal relation obtaining against the likelihood of a second, entirely distinct causal relation obtaining

rather than assess the likelihood of a single effect of an inconstant cause

(An exception to either account and how to deal with it)

Reports of lottery winnings.

Here we have ordinary testimony to the occurrence of a highly improbable outcome (e.g., one chance in a million).

However, we also have ordinary testimony to the occurrence of a very common event (e.g., the performance of a draw in a lottery)

In this case the cause has a generic effect (a number was read out) that can take any of a vast number of specific forms.

No one of these forms is any more likely than any of the others

But we are assured by the testimony to the cause that one of them must have occurred.

Consequently any evidence suffices to elevate that one above its rivals, simply in proportion to the quality of the testimony.

The difference with marvels and miracles

This is a case where witnesses testify to the occurrence of a cause that has commonly been observed.

But they also testify to the occurrence of an effect that is inconsistent with what has always been observed to follow from that sort of cause on past occasions.

The difference is between testimony to a species of a generic effect of a cause,

and testimony to an anomalous effect of a cause (one that cannot be considered to be merely a specific instance of what is generally observed to follow from that cause)

An exception to the exception

A consistent series of maximally improbable events.

e.g., a prophet proves to be consistently able to predict the draw in a lottery

(or, to pick something less easily “fixed” to control the weather)

The received view of the place of miracles in religion

An intelligent and benevolent creator exists.

Such a being would have wanted to reveal important truths to us that we could not learn in any other way.

Such a revelation would have occurred earlier in history rather than later.

It would have been necessary for such a being to prove that he really is divine by doing something that only a divine being could do.

It is therefore to be expected that miracles would have occurred at least in earlier times.

Miracle stories therefore constitute an exception to the maxim that reports of maximally improbable events are in themselves highly dubious.

As long as the witnesses are decent, we can accept the testimony without demanding that it meet higher than normal standards.

Hume's contrary position

An intelligent creator of the universe is likely to be a being so vastly different from us that we are in no position to draw any conclusions about its motives, inclinations, and behaviour by analogy with our own case.

Our only recourse for drawing conclusions about the behaviour of such a being is experience of its behaviour.

To do that, we need to know when we are confronted with such a being.

To claim that it would perform miracles to prove itself to us is already to claim knowledge of what it would be disposed to do for us.

But we have no such knowledge prior to identifying it and observing its behaviour.

We cannot therefore conclude that miracles must have occurred.

At best, we can infer from testimony that they did as a matter of fact occur (or experience one for ourselves).

The question

Does testimony to miracles need to meet higher than normal standards to earn credulity?

The problem with testimony to miracles

There is a lot of it out there.

Most of it is demonstrably false or patently absurd and serves only to induce ignorant masses of people to embrace false religions and silly superstitions.

How are we to separate the authentic testimony from the inauthentic?

Tillotson's argument against belief in any revelation that conflicts with sensory experience

Consider the revelation the miracle story was told to authenticate.

Does the revelation contradict sense experience?

e.g., your senses tell you that you are eating bread and drinking wine, not eating flesh and drinking blood; but the revelation tells you it is flesh and blood you are now eating and drinking

Then it cannot be accepted on the basis of any miracle story.

Because it was past sense experience, transmitted by testimony, that lead the original witnesses to tell the story

And it is present sensory experience that leads you to doubt the revelation.

And a lesser evidence can never overcome a greater.

Hume's variation

Consider the testimony itself.

In the case of a miracle story, the testimony produces conflicting beliefs.

The testimony is:

1. To certain antecedent circumstances or causes.
2. To the occurrence of an event incompatible with everything that has previously been experienced to follow from those antecedent circumstances or causes.

The first part of the testimony arouses lively ideas of the normally observed consequence.

(in virtue of what has commonly been experienced to follow from that sort of cause in the past)

The second part arouses lively ideas of a miraculous occurrence.

(in virtue of our trust in testimony)

But the two beliefs are incompatible, so we cannot accept both at once.

Tillotson's verdict:

A greater evidence cannot destroy a lesser.

Hume's verdict:

In the case of testimony to a miracle, a wise person should only lend credence to the testimony if it would be more miraculous that the testimony should turn out to be false than that the event should have occurred.

(Even in that case, you only believe the testimony as strongly as its vivacity exceeds the vivacity of the contrary conclusion from experience.)

Hume's argument vrs. standard assessments of the strength of testimony

Standard argument:

The extraordinary nature of the event is one of the things that you take into account in assessing the strength of testimony. It makes testimony less credible, but need not make it incredible.

Hume's argument:

The testimony actually consists of two parts and each part ought to be assessed independently.

We make an independent assessment of the reliability of the witnesses (apart from considering the likelihood of the event they report)

And an independent assessment of the likelihood of the event (apart from reference to the testimony in its favour on this particular occasion)

Then we balance the one against the other.

Hume's argument vrs. standard assessments, cont.'d

In cases of inconstant causes we balance experience of cases where the cause has been followed by its effect against experience of cases where it has not been.

The impression or memory of the cause brings with it a unit amount of vivacity that is proportioned out among the various remembered consequences and recombined and subtracted to yield a belief that is a portion of the original unit amount

In the case of testimony to miracles, there are two causes leading to incompatible conclusions:

the antecedent event reported by the witnesses
the witnesses report of the consequent event

Here we are not dealing with portions of a common unit value of vivacity.

Implication of Hume's argument

Belief in the occurrence of miracles on the basis of testimony is in principle possible.

Because we are dealing with two distinct causal inferences, not an inference from a common cause

and this opens the possibility that, even though both are supported by a uniform past experience, the one cause may communicate so much more vivacity than the other that it compels belief or even conviction

even after “subtracting” the force of the rival occurrence

A specific example:

the “days of darkness”

Some qualifications

While credible testimony to a miracle could be given, none ever has been given in all the records of history.

And in any case where the interests of a system of religion are at stake, none ever could be given.

Hume's reasons for his qualifications

Against the historical occurrence of good miracle testimony:

- the witnesses to historical miracles have generally been few in number, of questionable intelligence and reputation (so not above being deluded or disposed to delude), inconsistent in their reports, and self-interested
- there are certain features of human nature that make us disposed to invent and transmit false stories of marvellous and miraculous events
- most of the miracles reported in history were performed in circumstances where good judges were not available to assess the case (they are reported to have occurred in remote and backward places)
- some of the best attested stories come from religions no one believes any more and that everyone rejects out of hand, e.g., Roman paganism and French Jansenism

Hume's reasons for his qualifications, cont.'d

Against the occurrence of miracles that support some religious system

- the witnesses can never be presumed to be disinterested, since they have a cause to advance
- the witnesses must always be supposed to be less critical and more prone to deceit because the interests of the holy cause and the agreeable passions aroused by the miracle story conspire to induce them to suspend their incredulity
- the witnesses can never be presumed to be immune to self delusion, since there can be no greater compliment than to fancy oneself chosen as a special favourite of the deity
- the miracle stories of different religious traditions constitute conflicting evidence