

INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

LECTURE SIX

THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Who should be King in the Country of the Blind?

The Argument from Having Had a Religious Experience Oneself

The Principle of Credulity:-

Roughly, if it seems to a subject that something, X, is present, then - all other things being equal - it is reasonable for him or her to believe that X really is present.

Question: Why collect our beliefs according to the Principle of Credulity, rather than some other principle?

Answer: To avoid global scepticism

Question: Are other things always not equal in the case of religious experiences?

Answer: Unclear

Most promising way of justifying a positive answer depends on showing that the diversity in the contents of the World's religions is so great that on the truth of any of them the majority of people who come to beliefs on the basis of their religious experiences must come to false beliefs
- Car's seeming to you to be blue example

'Hypothetical Conclusion no. 1'

If it seems to you that there is a God and the testimony against its being true that there is a God is not very great or mutually consistent in itself, then it could be overall reasonable for you to take its seeming to you that there's a God as raising the probability that there's a God, possibly even as making it more probable than not that there's a God.

The Argument from Other People's Testimonies to Having had Religious Experiences

Question: Why is it reasonable for those born blind in the Country of the Blind to ignore Nunez's testimony as to the existence of a world of colour and yet unreasonable for those born blind in our society to ignore our testimony to the same effect?

Answer: In our society, testimony of sighted people numerous and largely consistent

'Hypothetical Conclusion no. 2'

To the extent that there are a substantial number of people testifying in an essentially consistent way to the existence and character of a spiritual world, that is a reason for those who have not themselves had any experience of this world to believe that it exists and has the character to which these peoples' collective testimony bears witness.

Overall Conclusion

The Argument from Religious Experience might be a good inductive argument for the existence of God or might – even failing that - contribute something to a good cumulative case argument for the existence of God. Whether or not it actually does either of these things depends on how widespread and consistently-theistic religious experiences are.

My own view (as stated, but not backed up by the necessary engagement with empirical evidence, in the lecture) is that the Argument from Religious Experience is (at least) a good argument for the falsity of Physicalism for everyone who hasn't had what I'd call an 'Irreligious Experience'. See my paper in the suggested reading below for what an 'irreligious experience is'. And see cautionary note at end of this lecture.

SUGGESTED READING

H. G. Wells, *The Country of the Blind* (Full text available online)
R. Swinburne *The Existence of God*, page 254 and following
T. J. Mawson, 'Praying to Stop Being an Atheist', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, (2010)

THE ARGUMENT FROM REPORTS OF APPARENT MIRACLES

The Classic Version of the Argument

The Gospels tell us that Jesus was raised from the dead. Surely only God could have performed such a feat and thus surely the Gospels give us reason to believe that there's a God; and indeed to believe that this God has endorsed one religion - Christianity - over and above the others.

HUME'S A PRIORI ARGUMENT

A miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.

Something's gone wrong.

- Straight banana example

'Laws of Nature' ambiguous:

Objective – the laws nature really follows, independently of our experience

Subjective – our best guess at what the objective laws are, based on our experience

Tidied-up Humean definition:

A miracle may be most accurately defined as a transgression of an objective law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent.

Resultant problem?

We only have epistemic access to subjective laws and so we could never tell with complete certainty whether or not a particular event satisfied the description of miracles specified in the revised definition.

Not fatal to Hume's argument - There are all sorts of things one can form reasonable beliefs about without certainty and this is one of them.

How to separate (epistemically) a falsifying case of a putative law from a miracle

- simplicity of hypothesis is guide to truth and the hypothesis 'There's a God plus simple objective laws of nature' might be simpler overall than the hypothesis 'There isn't a God, but there are much more complicated objective laws of nature'
- one can come to some reasonable beliefs about what sorts of events God, were He to exist, would have good reason to bring about
Existential significance

Sub-conclusion:

Hume's a priori argument against the rationality of believing in miracles on the testimony of others fails.

HUME'S A POSTERIORI ARGUMENTS

1) **There is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested to 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.**

Questions: a) Are the qualities that Hume says are relevant to the assessment of the reliability of witnesses really relevant?
b) Is it plausible to suppose that those who testify to the occurrence of miracles are under-endowed with the sorts of properties that make for reliable witnesses?

Answers: a) Some trivial – good sense and integrity; the others irrelevant – education and learning
b) Hume gives no reason for thinking it is.

2) People want miracle stories to be true, because their being true would make them feel better and the fact that they want them to be true tends to lead them to give miracle stories more credence than they deserve.

Response: There is the emotion of which Hume speaks, but it's not as corrupting as Hume suggests.

Not many of us believe in Father Christmas, although it would undoubtedly give us a lot of pleasure to do so.

3) **It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.**

Response: We have to admit that our ancestors were indeed - relative to us - ignorant of the way the natural world works, but we can form reasoned judgements about what could (psychosomatic illness) and could not (resurrections) be naturalistically explained.

4) Hume's 'Contrary Miracles Argument' = the miracles attested to by the various world-religions mutually undermine one another

Suppressed premise = the supernatural order cannot be such as to allow genuine miracles in the context of a variety of religions

One could challenge this premise in a number of ways.

Overall Conclusion:

Hume's assault on the Argument from Apparent Miracles has secured him the potential for a limited victory.

He has shown that, unless the miracles associated with one religion are attested to by better witnesses and/or have better exterior evidence in their favour than those associated with another, it is not reasonable to prefer one religion over another on the basis of the frequency of its miracle stories.

He has *not* shown that it is always irrational to believe in miracles on the testimony of others.

'Hypothetical Conclusion no. 3'

An Argument from the Reports of Apparent Miracles could in principle be an inductively valid argument for God's existence and - even if it did not reach this standard - it could in principle contribute something to an inductively sound cumulative case argument for the existence of God.

SUGGESTED READING

D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section X

J. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, chapter 8

CAUTIONARY NOTE

First, you'll have noticed that this week I've left my conclusions hypothetical. This is because, I claim, whether or not these arguments do 'in practice' live up to what I've argued in the lecture is their promise 'in principle' depends on various empirical factors, empirical factors being things that I didn't want to get bogged down by discussing.

In particular, with respect to Hume's argument against the rationality of believing in miracles on the testimony of others, the most discussed case is of course that of the (alleged) resurrection of Jesus. One could in principle 'short-circuit' the discussion here if one was in receipt of a religious experience which seemed to one to be of the resurrected Jesus (and the argument from religious experience had worked; see first half of the lecture).

But if one's not got that to put into the balance when deciding what it is overall reasonable to believe in this case, one has to get into the details of New Testament scholarship. When were these gospels written? Did at least a couple of their authors copy from another? That sort of thing. One can't get further without getting up out of the Philosopher's armchair (and moving to the Theologian's armchair).

Second, you'll have noticed that the material on side 3 of this handout hasn't been covered in the lecture; this is solely due to lack of time and not due to lack of importance.

Do have a think about those points of Hume's that I've numbered 1 – 4 above and whether or not you agree with my sketched analysis.

Then, drawing the points made in this cautionary note together, you'd have to think about whether or not Hume's points 1 to 4 or some proper subset of them do apply to any particular miracle report or reports, e.g. those of the (alleged) resurrection of Jesus, before you could know what, on balance, you had reason to believe.

Next week, we move on from considering arguments for the existence of God to considering those against. Naturally, that is to leave much unsaid. Of all the arguments for the existence of God that haven't got any coverage so far, 'the' (there are several) moral argument for the existence of God is the most significant. Peter Byrne's piece on Stanford gives a good overview. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-arguments-god/>. It's thus worth looking at if you have time.

T. J. Mawson