

Epistemology Reading Questions - Hume

Section X: Of Miracles

Part I

1. How proud is Hume of his argument against miracles?
2. Are we ever led into error by causal reasoning?
3. What is the relevance of Hume's example about expecting a week of better weather in June than in December in Scotland?
4. Do we ever make errors in inference when the combination of events on which the reasoning is based has been constant and uniform?
5. To what do the wise proportion their belief?
6. How does proof differ from demonstration and from probability?
7. How common, useful, and necessary is reasoning based on human testimony? On what does such reasoning depend?
 - a. On past experience of human veracity [truthfulness] and of the conformity of events to reports about them?
 - b. On the relation of cause and effect?
8. When does the evidence given by human testimony have the status of probability? When does it become proof?
9. What factors will enhance the force of testimony? What factors will diminish it? (Is the improbability of the reported event one of these diminishing factors?)
10. What is the significance of Plutarch's remark "I should not believe such a story were it told me by Cato"?
11. Did the Indian prince who refused to believe the accounts of snow and ice, reason justly?
12. What does Hume mean by a miracle?
13. If a reported event is miraculous, is this circumstance direct and full proof *against* its occurrence? What if the testimony to the miracle is so solid that its falsity would be miraculous, or even more miraculous than the wondrous event?
14. What should a rational person conclude if he or she finds a miracle supported by absolutely incontrovertible testimony?

Part II

15. Has any miraculous event ever been attested to by testimony so solid as to constitute a proof?
16. Hume gives four reasons why no miracle is ever supported by absolutely incontrovertible testimony. What are these reasons?
17. Why are the miracles of one religion proof against those of another?
18. Has the evidence (testimony) for any miracle ever amounted to a proof? To a probability?
19. What are profane miracles? What examples does Hume give? How do they differ from religious miracles? Might it ever be rational to believe in them? If so, why can't it ever be rational to believe in religious miracles?
20. Why does Hume reject religious miracles even more strenuously than profane ones?

21. How does Hume assess the miracles related in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible)?
22. How does Hume purport to reconcile his views about miracles with the Christian religion? Is his proposed reconciliation successful? Do you think he's sincere about it?