

# Chapter 3: David Hume

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How do I know?

# Hume Overview

- Grew up in Scotland (1711-1776)
- Often considered the greatest English speaking philosopher
  - Most English speaking philosophers focus on one subject in philosophy
  - Hume writes about several philosophical topics and tries to tie them together in a coherent picture of humanity
    - Morality, Religion, Knowledge, Being, Causation, Emotions, Art etc...
- Extreme Skeptic

# Hume Overview

- Controversial - “Reason is slave to the passions”
  - We create reasons to believe things we are emotionally invested in
  - Causation is just expectation - we don't have any real explanation for cause and effect
    - Uniformity is not intelligible
    - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTbZoKEOkUg>
  - Radical Empiricist
    - Rough definition: If I don't see it, it doesn't exist
    - Everything is based in experience
      - Thinking about a unicorn is just taking things we've experienced and combining them

# Controversy Cont.

- Religious Beliefs:
  - Believes humans create God(s) in their own image
  - Not an Atheist - skeptical Agnostic
- Order of Creation:
  - Popular theory: Man is slightly animal and mostly divine
    - Closer to divine than animal
  - Hume's theory: Man is slightly divine but mostly animal
    - Closer to animal than divine
    - Recall Boethius: The divine is all but incomprehensible
  - Popular theory overestimates human reason
  - Hume: we don't understand what reason is

# On Miracles (How do I know?)

- How do I know that today is Tuesday?
  - First: I probably have to believe it is Wednesday
  - Second: It is true that today is Tuesday
  - Third: How do I provide evidence for my belief?
    - Memorization, look at a calendar, ask an astronomer
    - Varying levels of acceptable justifications
- More Difficult: How do I know a miracle happened?
  - Written authority - testimony

# How do I know?

- Testimony
  - When our beliefs are influenced by the words and expressions of others
  - Mostly reliable - occasionally unreliable
    - Different eye witness accounts from the same event
- False Reports
  - Influenced by self interest or for the protection of others
  - Embellishment
  - Mistake
  - Nonchalance of previous information

# How do I know?

- Improbable Reports
  - We usually don't believe them
    - Even if they do turn out to be true, it wouldn't be a good idea to believe it just because I said so
  - Not *impossible*
  - Of two improbable reports, we will believe the one which is most probable according to our reason.
- Miracles:
  - Improbable events
  - Accounts are not even eye-witness

# How do I know?

- Miracles (Continued):
  - In a sense, Miracles have to be *impossible*
  - Must contradict laws of nature



# Hume - “ME Sketch” Argument

- Hume sketches the following argument:
  - a. Receive report of a possible Miraculous Event (ME)
  - b. Asked to believe that ME actually occurred
  - c. ME must be contrary to all of our experiences and to our best theories concerning laws of nature
  - d. If we consider c, then it seems we have *very good reason* to believe that ME did not occur.
  - e. The report is the only evidence to justify our belief that ME occurred

# Hume - “ME Sketch” Conclusion

- What if the source of the report is from a very trustworthy person?
- Hume: At best, it would be equally reasonable to believe that ME occurred.
  - a. Never greater - due to C.
    - C. counts against all of *our* experiences - our own self-trust

# First reply to ME Sketch

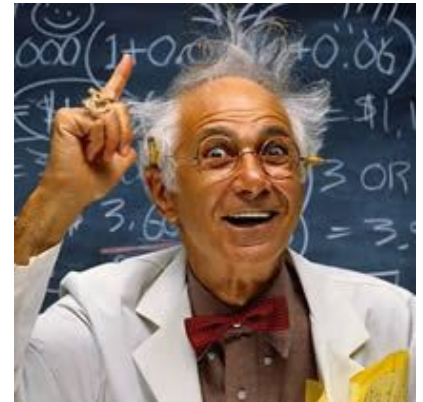
- First Reply (misses the point according to EC):
  - a. Hume based his sketch on the belief that ME's are *at the very least* extremely improbable
  - b. Consider the following reports:
    - i. The report that Abraham Lincoln rose from the grave
    - ii. The report that Jesus rose from the grave
      1. If you deny (i) based on it being highly improbable, then
      2. You should also deny (ii) for the same reason
  - c. (i) isn't given serious consideration, as opposed to (ii), based off *who* believers take Christ to be. (Messiah)

# First reply to ME Sketch

- This reply doesn't get us very far
  - a. Hume is concerned with *how* people come to form beliefs concerning ME
    - Once beliefs are formed, the outcomes are not surprising
  - b. The first reply is trying to make people look inconsistent
    - This is unfair
    - Doesn't take the full picture into account
  - c. The first reply is interesting, but ultimately doesn't establish anything new.

# Second reply to ME Sketch

- Second Reply:
  - a. It is not strange for someone to believe in ME's of a different flavor
  - b. Events happen all of the time which are contrary to laws of nature
    - Scientific discovery leads to revising laws of nature
  - c. Why don't we treat scientific discoveries in the same way we treat ME's (in the religious flavor)?



# Second reply to ME Sketch

- Hume: Testimony isn't sufficient to revise scientific laws
  - a. A single time occurrence isn't enough
  - b. The same effect has to be witnessed over and over again
  - c. Natural law will be revised if (b) happens
- Hume: An ME stops being an ME if it revises natural law
  - a. If an event can be replicated, it was never a miracle
- Conclusion: It isn't uncommon for nature to act outside of its usual patterns.
  - a. I.E. anything might be possible
  - b. We should be cautious with testimony