

Alexander George  
*Reason and Religion: Romanell-Phi Beta Kappa Lectures*  
Amherst College  
February 23, 2012

Lecture II: “Truisms, Falsehoods, and Double Standards: Everyone against Hume”

1. Hume on testimony
  - a. An objection
  - b. A response
2. Challenges to Hume’s Second Lemma
  - a. Trivially true
  - b. Substantively false
3. Challenge to Hume’s consistency
  - a. Alleged double standards
  - b. Appreciating differences
4. The Lexicographer
  - a. Johnson’s dissent
  - b. Remembering where we are

Some quotations:

- (a) “The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any *connexion* which we perceive *a priori*, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them.” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (b) “I am then confident that he abuses terms, and confounds the ideas of things; since it is impossible for any one to be so selfish, or rather so stupid, as to make no difference between one man and another, and give no preference to qualities, which engage his approbation and esteem.” (Hume, “Of the Dignity and Meanness of Human Nature”)
- (c) “[He] makes use of a different language from the rest of his countrymen, and calls not things by their proper names.” (Hume, “Of the Dignity and Meanness of Human Nature”)
- (d) “It is indeed obvious, that writers of all nations and all ages concur in applauding justice, humanity, magnanimity, prudence, veracity; and in blaming the opposite qualities. . . . But we must also allow that some part of the seeming harmony in morals may be accounted for from the very nature of language. The word *virtue*, with its equivalent in every tongue, implies praise; as that of *vice* does blame: And no one, without the most obvious and grossest impropriety, could affix reproach to a term, which in general acceptation is understood in a good sense; or bestow applause, where the idiom requires disapprobation.” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”)
- (e) “But it is to be supposed, that the ARABIC words, which correspond to the ENGLISH equity, justice, temperance, meekness, charity, were such as, from the constant use of that tongue, must always be taken in a good sense; and it would have argued the greatest ignorance, not of

morals, but of language, to have mentioned them with any epithets, besides those of applause and approbation.” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”)

- (f) FIRST LEMMA: *If the falsehood of testimony on behalf of an alleged miraculous event is not “more miraculous” than the event itself, then it is not rational to believe in the occurrence of that event on the basis of that testimony.*

SECOND LEMMA: The falsehood of testimony on behalf of an alleged miraculous event of a religious nature is not “more miraculous” than the event itself.

HUME’S THEOREM: *It is not rational to believe on the basis of testimony (that is, on the basis of what other humans tell us) that a miracle of a religious nature has occurred.*

- (g) “There is no contradiction in saying that all the testimony which ever was really given for any miracle, or ever will be given, is a subject of derision; and yet forming a fiction or supposition of a testimony for a particular miracle, which might not only merit attention, but amount to a full proof of it.” (Hume, Letter to the Rev. Hugh Blair)
- (h) BOSWELL: “Sir, you come near Hume’s argument against miracles, “That it is more probable witnesses should lie, or be mistaken, than that they should happen.”
- JOHNSON: “Why, Sir, Hume, taking the proposition simply, is right. But the Christian revelation is not proved by the miracles alone, but as connected with prophecies, and with the doctrines in confirmation of which the miracles were wrought.” (Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*)
- (i) “I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me. But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep.” (John 10: 25-26)
- (j) “*Very* intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former.” (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*)
- (k) “Have we now so far lowered our sights as to settle for a relativistic doctrine of truth—rating the statements of each theory as true for that theory, and brooking no higher criticism? Not so. The saving consideration is that we continue to take seriously our own particular aggregate science, our own particular world-theory or loose total fabric of quasi-theories, whatever it may be. Unlike Descartes, we own and use our beliefs of the moment, even in the midst of philosophizing, until by what is vaguely called scientific method we change them here and there for the better. Within our own total evolving doctrine, we can judge truth as earnestly and absolutely as can be; subject to correction, but that goes without saying.” (Quine, *Word and Object*)