

Editorial: Uri Geller

Public curiosity is much wider than the range of practical and moral issues, and the bearing of philosophy on matters of public concern accordingly extends to abstract and theoretical questions. In recent months the theory of knowledge has been discussed almost daily in the press and on radio and television in connection with the feats of Mr Uri Geller. A Professor of Psychology who refused to watch the television programme in which Mr Geller bent spoons by will-power has been compared to the Cardinals who refused to look through Galileo's telescope. He could defend himself by a judicious use of Hume's argument against miracles. The argument uses a principle that every man uses every day in his ordinary affairs: the principle that the antecedent certainty of a conclusion may be so great as to amount to a good reason for rejecting an argument that purports to overturn that conclusion. Of course mistakes can be made in the application of this as of any other principle; and the Cardinals were undoubtedly wrong in their conclusion. But it does not follow that they were being irrational or even unreasonable in the light of the evidence available to them. The oriental potentate described by Edgar Allan Poe had good reason for refusing to believe in steam engines or in ice and snow.

At least until Stanford University or some other authority can furnish further and better particulars than have so far been published, that is where the matter stands. It is certain that feats more amazing than those performed by Mr Geller are performed daily and nightly at children's parties and in variety theatres. As Hume said, we must proportion our belief to the evidence, and nobody who does that can persuade himself at this stage that Mr Uri Geller has any power not available to Mr David Nixon.

The progress of science requires scepticism about surprising claims quite as much as it requires open-mindedness to new ideas. The two requirements will naturally often appear to conflict, and it will sometimes be made to appear that we have to choose one of them as a permanent posture to the exclusion of the other. That way lies unreason, in one or another of its myriad forms.