

Plausibility

1910 | Note (Notes on Art. III) [R] | CP 2.662

I shall in these notes endeavor to mark the three ways of falling short of certainty by the three terms *probability*, *verisimilitude* or *likelihood*, and *plausibility*. ... Beginning with *Plausibility*, I will first endeavor to give an example of an idea which shall be strikingly marked by its very low degree of this quality. Suppose a particularly symmetrical larch tree near the house of a great lover of such trees had been struck by lightning and badly broken, and that as he was looking sorrowfully out of the window at it, he should have happened to say, "I wonder why that particular tree should have been struck, when there are so many about the place that seem more exposed!" Suppose, then, his wife should reply, "Perhaps there may be an eagle's eyrie on some of the hills in the neighborhood, and perhaps the male bird in building it may have used some stick that had a nail in it; and one of the eaglets may have scratched itself against the nail; so that the mother may have reproached the male for using such a dangerous stick; and he, being vexed with her teasing, may have determined to carry the piece to a great distance; it may have been while he was doing this that the explosion of lightning took place, and the electricity may have been deflected by the iron in such a way as to strike this tree. Mind, I do not say that this is what did happen; but if you want to find out why that tree was struck, I think you had better search for an eyrie, and see whether any of the eaglets have been scratched." This is an example of as unplausible a theory as I can think of. We should commonly say it was highly improbable; and I suppose it would be so. But were it ever so probable in all its elements, it would still deserve no attention, because it is perfectly gratuitous to suppose that the lightning was deflected at all; and this supposition does not help to explain the phenomenon.

[—] By *Plausible*, I mean that a theory that has not yet been subjected to any test, although more or less surprising phenomena have occurred which it would explain if it were true, is in itself of such a character as to recommend it for further examination or, if it be *highly* plausible, justify us in seriously inclining toward belief in it, as long as the phenomena be inexplicable otherwise.

1910 [c.] | Letters to Paul Carus | ILS 274-5; CP 8.222-223

The names which I would propose for general adoption for the three different kinds of *acceptability* of propositions are

plausibility
verisimilitude
probability

The last alone seems to be capable of a certain degree of exactitude or measurement

By *plausibility*, I mean the degree to which a theory ought to recommend itself to our belief independently of any kind of evidence other than our instinct urging us to regard it favorably. All the other races of animals certainly have such instincts; why refuse them to mankind? Have not all men some notions of right and wrong as well as purely theoretical instincts? For example, if any man finds

that an object of no great size in his chamber behaves in any surprising manner, he wonders what makes it do so; and his instinct suggests that the cause, most plausibly, is also in his chamber or in the neighbourhood. It is true that the alchemists used to think it might be some configuration of the planets, but in my opinion this was due to a special derangement of natural instinct. Physicists certainly today continue largely to be influenced by such plausibilities in selecting which of several hypotheses they will first put to the test.