



THE MAGICIAN'S TRICKS: HONEST SA'ID AND THE MAGICIAN

The Philosophy

You can hear an 'In Our Time' and 'Philosophy Bites' about Avicenna here:

<http://philosophybites.com/2007/09/peter-adamson-o.html> (<http://philosophybites.com/2007/09/peter-adamson-o.html>)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00855lt> (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00855lt>)

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In a colourful career Avicenna proved the existence of god, amalgamated all known medical knowledge into one big book and established a mind body dualism 600 years before Descartes and still found time to overindulge in wine and sex.

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The first of these stories has been written to allow children to explore the concept of knowledge. Inspired by the Islamic philosopher Avicenna's (980-1037) Flying Man argument (see The Flying Man & The Falling Man story) it asks first, how can you know things without each of your senses? and then secondly, what can you possibly know without any senses? At each stage of the story ask the children to imagine that they are Sa'id and then ask them how they might know whether Naseem has been gambling with their remaining senses. This should get harder as their senses are removed.

STIMULUS

Sa'id was 12 years old and very honest. He was so honest he was incapable of lying. Sa'id worked as a servant for his uncle Naseem who was a magician. Naseem was very clever but he had a vice that he just could not quit. He was a gambler. Naseem's wife, Heba, who was always worried about Naseem spending the money they needed to live on, made Sa'id promise to keep an eye on Naseem for her and to tell her when he gambled. Sa'id promised that he would try to keep an eye out.

Shortly afterwards Naseem and Sa'id were walking home when they passed a house. Naseem stopped them and tied up their donkeys and told Sa'id to wait outside while he went in, as he said, 'to conduct some business'. While Naseem was inside Sa'id crept up to the window and peered inside. He saw his uncle gambling at a table with some other men. He could also tell from Naseem's expression that he wasn't winning.

That night Naseem was in trouble with his wife for having been gambling.

The next day Naseem went back to Sa'id and said, 'Did you tell Heba that I was gambling the other day?'

Sa'id could not lie. 'I did.'

'But I wasn't gambling,' lied Naseem.

'I know that you were, Uncle,' said Sa'id.

'How did you know I was gambling?' Asked Naseem.

'I saw you with my own eyes,' he confessed.

'Blast your eyes!' Naseem exclaimed and with that he cast a spell that meant Sa'id lost his sight.

'If he can no longer see,' thought Naseem, 'I will be able to gamble without getting caught.'

The next day they passed the same gambling house and Naseem went inside to gamble, confident that Sa'id would not know this time.

That night Naseem was told off again!

When he found Sa'id the next morning he said again, 'How did you know that I was gambling?'

'I could hear you through the window,' said Sa'id.

This time Naseem cast a spell that meant that Sa'id lost his hearing.

The next day they passed the gambling house again and Naseem entered once more.

And that night Heba told him off again! 'How did you know I was gambling again?' He asked again.

But of course Sa'id couldn't hear him without his ears so Naseem just hit him across the back of the head. Sa'id knew exactly why he had hit him, so he told him: 'When I was getting your clothes ready in the morning I found your money pouch among your clothes and I could feel that it had more than halved in weight so I knew that you had been gambling again and because I promised Heba I had to tell her.'

This time the spell removed his sense of touch. Naseem was now much more relaxed. Without his sight, hearing or touch surely Sa'id would not be able to know if he had been gambling.

But that night he was told off again and this time Heba shouted at him louder than before.

'HOW DID YOU KNOW?' He screamed at Sa'id the following morning though he knew full well that he couldn't hear him. Then Naseem hit him across the head again so that Sa'id knew that he was angry but Sa'id couldn't feel anything either so he didn't know that Naseem was angry. Sa'id just sat there sniffing the air, as that was almost all he could do. This gave Naseem a clue: he found the clothes he had been wearing the night before whilst gambling and he sniffed them. They smelled of tobacco and coffee: the aromas of the gambling house, and he realised that Sa'id had known because of the smell of his clothes. Naseem then cast a spell to remove Sa'id's sense of smell. Then he remembered that he still had his sense of taste so he cast one more spell to remove his tongue too, just in case. Without his tongue Sa'id wouldn't be able to tell Heba either, thought Naseem.

'I'm free at last!' He shouted.

The next day he went gambling again knowing that Sa'id could never know that he'd been gambling without any of his senses. He could finally relax and gamble without fear of being told off.

That night he got the worst telling off ever. 'HOW DID YOU KNOW AND HOW DID YOU TELL HER?' He screamed at Sa'id, but Sa'id had no idea that Naseem was even there because he could neither feel, smell, hear, see nor taste. Naseem was going crazy not knowing how Sa'id had known and how he had managed to tell Heba. Eventually it was too much for Naseem so he cast one last spell to return Sa'id's senses to him and demanded that he tell him how he had known and how he had been able to tell Heba. But Sa'id was no fool and when he realised that he had got his senses back, he sprung to his feet and ran away before Naseem had a chance to cast any more spells.

So, Naseem never got to find out how Sa'id had known that he was still gambling. How do you think he knew?

Task Question 1:

- ✓ How do you think he knew that Naseem was still gambling?

Task Question 2:

- ✓ If someone had, like Sa'id, lost all their senses, would they know anything at all? If so, what?

Nested Questions

- ✓ Is the brain like a sense organ?
- ✓ What can your brain know without any senses?
- ✓ What would you know if your memory was removed too?

STIMULUS CONTINUED

Sa'id didn't know. But Heba did. Heba had known because Naseem had been gambling every night before so it stood to reason that he would gamble every night to come. Heba had simply come to believe that Naseem would gamble every night and so she reasoned that he had been gambling last night too... ..And she was right. He had.

1. Heba believed that Naseem was gambling every night.
2. It was true that Naseem was gambling every night.
3. She believed it because he had gambled every night before and so reasoned that he would gamble every night in the future.

Task Question:

- ✓ Do you think Heba did know that Naseem had been gambling?

Nested Questions

- ✓ Is she right to think that he will gamble every night in the future because he has gambled every night in the past?
- ✓ Can you predict the future from what has happened in the past?