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prove that the earth is round ? Go ahead and try ! Will you rely on your senses or will you have to draw on the opinions of experts ?

WHY DO WE BELIEVE THAT THE EARTH IS ROUND ?

George Orwell Somewhere or other I think it is in the preface to saint Joan Bernard Shaw remarks that we are more gullible and superstitious today than we were in the Middle Ages , and as an example of modern credulity he cites the widespread belief that the earth is round. The average man , says Shaw , can advance not a single reason for thinking that the earth is round. He merely swallows this theory because there is something about it that appeals to the twentieth-century mentality. Now , Shaw is exaggerating , but there is something in what he says , and the question is worth following up , for the sake of the light it throws on modern knowledge. Just why do we believe that the earth is round ? I am not speaking of the few thousand astronomers , geographers and so forth who could give ocular proof , or have a theoretical knowledge of the proof , but of the ordinary newspaper-reading citizen , such as you or me. As for the Flat Earth theory , I believe I could refute it. If you stand by the seashore on a clear day , you can see the masts and funnels of invisible ships passing along the horizon. This phenomenon can only be explained by assuming that the earth's surface is curved. But it does not follow that the earth is spherical.

Imagine another theory called the Oval Earth theory , which claims that the earth is shaped like an egg. What can I say against it ?

Against the Oval Earth man , the first card I can play is the analogy of the sun and moon. The Oval Earth man promptly answers that I dont know , by my own observation , that those bodies are spherical. I only know that they are round , and they may perfectly well be flat discs. I have no answer to that one. Besides , he goes on , what reason have I for thinking that the earth must be the same shape as the sun and moon ? I cant answer that one either. My second card is the earths shadow : When cast on the moon during eclipses , it appears to be the shadow of a round object. But how do I know , demands the Oval Earth man , that eclipses of the moon are caused by the shadow of the earth ? The answer is that I dont know , but have taken this piece of information blindly from newspaper articles and science booklets. Defeated in the minor exchanges , I now play my queen of trumps : the opinion of the experts. The Astronomer Royal , who ought to know , tells me that the earth is round. The Oval Earth man covers the queen with his king. Have I tested the Astronomer Royals statement , and would I even know a way of testing it ? Here I bring out my ace. Yes , I do know one test. The astronomers can foretell eclipses , and this suggests that their opinions about the solar system are pretty sound. I am , to my delight , justified in accepting their say-so about the shape of the earth. If the Oval Earth man answers what I believe is true that the ancient Egyptians , who thought the sun goes round the earth , could also predict eclipses , then bang goes

my ace. I have only one card left : navigation. People can sail ship round the world , and reach the places they aim at , by calculations which assume that the earth is spherical. I believe that finishes the Oval Earth man , though even then he may possibly have some kind of counter. It will be seen that my reasons for thinking that the earth is round are rather precarious ones. Yet this is an exceptionally elementary piece of information. On most other questions I should have to fall back on the expert much earlier , and would be less able to test his pronouncements. And much the greater part of our knowledge is at this level. It does not rest on reasoning or on experiment , but on authority. And how can it be otherwise , when the range of knowledge is so vast that the expert himself is an ignoramus as soon as he strays away from his own specialty ? Most people , if asked to prove that the earth is round , would not even bother to produce the rather weak arguments I have outlined above. They would start off by saying that "everyone knows" the earth to be round , and if pressed further , would become angry. In a way Shaw is right. This is a credulous age , and the burden of knowledge which we now have to carry is partly responsible. 100Test 下载频道 开通 , 各类考试题目直接下载。详细请访问 [www.100test.com](http://www.100test.com)