

Knowledge and Reality

Induction

Outline Hume's famous argument concerning induction, and what you take its aim to be. Then discuss some of the attempts that have been made to respond to it. Which response do you consider the most promising? Does Goodman's "New Riddle" of induction add anything to Hume's problem?

READING

The asterisked items in the list below are selected from the Faculty's official reading list; those not selected are still worth reading, but I suggest you leave those till later. I have added several other items that are worth considering, but you should not feel obliged to read everything!

* David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) – any reasonable edition will do – Sections IV and V. This is on the Web at <http://etext.leeds.ac.uk/hume/ehu/ehupbsb.htm>.

*Section IV contains perhaps the most famous (indeed notorious) philosophical argument ever composed in the English language, expressed much better than in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. However although the general thrust of the argument is clear enough, understanding exactly what Hume is up to is tricky, having been the subject of a lot of recent interpretative debate. The following article is my own attempt to get this straight, and I'm recommending that you look at the numbered sections (the others too if you wish!), to set the argument in a bit of historical context, both in respect of Hume's predecessors and his own generally positive view of science:*

Peter Millican, "Hume's Sceptical Doubts Concerning Induction", in Millican (ed.), *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* (OUP, 2002), chapter 4, §2, §3, §3.1, §3.2, §7.2, §11.

Bertrand Russell was probably the most influential philosopher of the early twentieth century, and he thought very highly of Hume. His presentation of the Problem of Induction in his well-known introductory book remains a good read:

* Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (OUP, 1912), chapter 6.

Various attempts have been made to defeat Hume's sceptical argument, and a good discussion of the three most popular non-probabilistic attempted methods is provided by Swinburne:

* Richard Swinburne, *The Justification of Induction* (OUP, 1974), Introduction.

My own PhD thesis gives a very brief discussion of these three methods, explaining why none of them impacts on Hume's position as I interpret it:

Peter Millican, *Hume, Induction, and Probability* (University of Leeds, 1996), chapter 7, pp. 105-16, available from <http://www.davidhume.org/>

Most of the second half of my PhD discusses probabilistic attempts, including one by Mackie which is worth reading as much for its general discussion of the problem as for his attempted solution:

* J. L. Mackie, "A Defence of Induction", in *Perception and Identity* (Macmillan, 1979), pp. 113-30.

*Ayer's reply to Mackie's attempt is less interesting in my view – it just takes for granted that any a priori notion of probability is a non-starter. If you want to see a more focused response, see chapter 11 of my aforementioned PhD thesis (pp. 174-84), which spells out rather more completely the line of criticism in my "Mackie's Defence of Induction", *Analysis* 1982, pp. 19-24, written while John Mackie was my B.Phil. supervisor. If you like this sort of thing, then Simon Blackburn's somewhat similar attempt, in his book "Reason and Prediction" (referenced below) chapter 7, is criticised in chapter 12 of my thesis.*

Another form of attempt to justify induction is by appeal to postulated "Natural Necessities". Perhaps the best discussion of this approach is given by Foster's book on Ayer:

* John Foster, *Ayer* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985 & 1999), III 1-5, pp. 197-239.

*The Humean response to this will be to question the coherence of the notion of "natural necessity". I attacked a similar attempt in "Natural Necessity and Induction", *Philosophy* 1986, pp. 395-403 (see PhD thesis p. 170), but am genuinely*

unsure how to judge this debate. The natural necessity idea is certainly intuitively appealing, and the Humean rebuttal can appear a bit too “easy”. We get into deep waters about the nature of necessity, which go beyond what it’s reasonable to cover under the present topic. A nice overview of these issues is given by pp. 250-3 in Blackburn’s introductory book:

Simon Blackburn, *Think* (OUP, 1999), pp. 211-7 (“Plausible Reasonings” and “The Lottery for the Golden Harp”) and 250-3 (“Straightjackets and Laws”).

Nelson Goodman famously came up with a “New Riddle of Induction”, to add to Hume’s “Old Riddle”:

* Nelson Goodman, “The New Riddle of Induction”, in *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* (Harvard University Press, 1983 – though it doesn’t matter which edition you read), chapter 3.

*Blackburn gives two good discussions of the Goodman issue, the earlier of which is more focused on the topic of this essay, the later on problems in Philosophy of Language (see also pp. 211-7 in his book *Think*, above):*

* Simon Blackburn, *Reason and Prediction* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), chapter 4.

* Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language* (OUP, 1984), pp. 69-82.

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