

The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 19

Hume: Induction, causation (positive proposal)

THE PROBLEM OF INDUCTION. The conclusion that Hume purports to establish by the end of section 6 is that past experience permits us no ‘just’ inference to any (factual) proposition about unobserved phenomena. No factual belief about the unobserved is justified. We have to appreciate the significance of this for empiricist philosophy. Its central premiss is that knowledge can only be based on experience. But any theoretical knowledge must involve general propositions. Such propositions will contain claims about the unobserved. However, it now seems that no such proposition will be warranted. Consequently, the project of empiricism is bound to collapse.

THE REALITY OF THE PAST. Similar problems can be formulated for our knowledge of the distant past. I cannot observe the past, and of the distant past I have no memory either. I can only make inferences about it based on my observations. But any such inference will again appeal to the Uniformity principle. (See Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, ch. VI.) So I have pretty much robbed myself of any reasonable belief beyond my memories and current observations.

THE REALITY OF MEMORY. Well, at least I am entitled to my memories—that is, I am entitled to believe all sorts of facts I am able to recollect. But is this so? It is reasonable for me to trust my memory, because so far it has been found trustworthy. If I have evidence to the contrary, then I should not trust my memory. Now any belief in the reliability of my memory should again rely on my past experience (what else?). If so, my confidence again falls prey to the same sceptical manoeuvre, as my belief about the future or about the distant past.

STRAWSON’S OBJECTION. One might object that Hume’s reasoning is wrong at a very basic level. What Hume is supposed to have established is that there is no good reason to infer any claim about the unobserved. But consider: we obtain evidence from past experience. The more evidence there is for the occurrence of a certain future event *E*, the more credence we should assign to the belief that *E* will occur. How else can we assign credence to beliefs? Now the fact of constant conjunction of *F*s and *G*s in the past should count as evidence in favour of the future occurrence of *G* given *F*. Thus to ask whether we can legitimately use inductive inferences is like asking whether it is legitimate to believe in the occurrence of *E* in proportion to the available evidence. (Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory*, 256–57)

The critic here does not advance any justification of induction. He rather professes to not be able to understand what kind of justification could be required for inductive procedures. Compare this to the question ‘Is the legal system of China legal?’ We may very well ask whether a particular regulation is legal—i.e. whether it contradicts certain laws of the given legal system, say the Chinese one. But it is meaningless to ask whether the Chinese legal system as a whole is legal. (If you say that it may be illegal by the lights of the international law, you will implicitly render meaningless the question ‘Is the system of international law legal?’) By the same token, I may very well evaluate individual instances of inductive inference, but I cannot evaluate the inductive inference as a whole.

This analogy with law is instructive, though not in the way that Strawson intended it to be. For even though we cannot well ask whether International Law (or Chinese Law, or French Law) is legal, we can still ask whether it is ‘acceptable’. We can ask whether it yields regulations and verdicts that to us appear unjust. If its implications are in this sense unacceptable, we are prepared to amend the system. If, on the other hand, we have a regulation or a verdict which contradicts a law we are unwilling to violate, then that regulation or verdict will be rejected. To think that a given legal system is not to be amended under any conditions is presumably to think of it as having some external standard of justification (e.g., a Divine command), or else to uphold a queer dogma as unconvincing, as it is repugnant.

Remark 1. Without going too far into this issue, observe that a utilitarian justification of the sanctity of the legal system is perfectly compatible with the possibility of amending it—when the costs outweigh the benefits.

Taking this line of thought one step further, consider also what kind of justification we can offer for deduction. If we do not want to postulate some self-evident truths, we once again will be engaged in the procedure of mutual adjustment of rules and inferences.

So the right task is not to justify induction as a whole—that is, e.g., not to ask why to believe the Uniformity principle—but rather to sort inferences into good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. Now, reverting back to Strawson’s claims, we see that one assumption he makes is that constant conjunction presents, by definition (being an analytic truth, as he says), good evidence for a generalisation. This evidence not being fully conclusive, in any case affords us rational inferences about the unobserved.

This contention should be challenged. On its own, the bare fact of constant conjunction offers us no good evidence. Sometimes constant conjunction indicates accidental correlations, whereas on other occasions it indicates lawlike correlations. Only in the latter case it should be rational for us, even according to the critic, to draw inferences about the unobserved.

Example 2. Every word I have spoken to you occurred before the last sentence of today’s lecture. It would none the less be irrational for you to conclude that every word I will ever speak to you will occur before the last sentence of today’s lecture. By contrast, every word I spoke to you was in English. Then it is rational for you to think that every word I will ever speak to you will be in English. (Indeed so: if I begin speaking to you in German, you will be at least mildly surprised.)

Thus the illustrious critic was right to point out that we should rank our beliefs based on evidence, and that there can be no justification of induction, especially if we mean by that some proof of the Uniformity principle based on an external assumption. All the same, he appears to have missed the more important issue, that we must be able to tell good evidence

from bad. Hume in effect claims that this is impossible. Unless we are allowed the use of the Uniformity principle, all evidence is bad.

This sweeping sceptical conclusion, charming as it may be, sounds a little dogmatic, especially if we recall the problematic foundation of the theory of ideas it is based upon. Modern approaches (Goodman) take more seriously the idea that there *are* good and bad inductive inferences and try to offer some ways of positively characterising the distinction between them.

NECESSARY CONNECTION. The belief in the unobserved is a product of imagination. Where the causes and effects resemble each other, our minds tend to form a belief in the causal connection. Where, on the other hand, there is no resemblance, we tend to deny any possibility of the causal relation. Hume eventually concludes that the belief in causation is a product of the ‘sensitive’ part of our nature. T 1.3.13.19
T 1.3.9.13
T 1.4.1.8

Overall, this discussion between sections 2 and 13 is supposed to be a lengthy detour on the way to the discovery of the idea of necessary connection. In the first fourteen paragraphs of section 14 Hume aims to establish that we have no impression of ‘power’ or ‘force’ associated with causal connection.

As a sample discussion, consider T 1.3.14.12 sometimes printed in the Appendix (‘Some have asserted. . .’). As we saw earlier, Locke’s view of liberty rested on the premiss that we are intimately acquainted with the active power of will in ourselves. Perhaps the very same view was shared by Berkeley as well.

Now, Hume asks, where is the *impression* of that power? All that we ever observe is a series of various impressions. Indeed, some elements in the series tend to repeat themselves in a certain order (i.e. have been repeated in the past), but that does not deliver any further impression of power.

The conclusion Hume draws at this stage is not that the concept of cause is illegitimate, and not that any talk about causes is meaningless. The conclusion is rather its legitimacy must be sought elsewhere. The discussion in §§15–20 is supposed to deliver an outline of the positive view. The repeated occurrence of objects, in this or that order, does not inform us of any new property of them—a property that we can infer from the mere fact of the series of impressions. Secondly, the objects themselves do not change merely as a result of appearing in a series on past occasions. Thus we are left only with the fact of resemblance between different series on different occasions, which fact—for it to be real—has to be observed by the mind. So the true source of the idea of causal power is just that resemblance. Necessity presents to us as a ‘determination of the mind’. The conclusion is that necessity ‘exists in the mind’. T 1.3.14.14
T 1.3.14.17
T 1.3.14.18
T 1.3.14.20
T 1.3.14.22

THE NEW RIDDLE OF INDUCTION. As we have already seen, the line of reasoning just sketched is open to the objection that, while some constant conjunctions do in fact give rise to the idea of necessary connection, *other* constant conjunctions with all the residual resemblances do not give the mind any of the alleged determinations. That is, even conceding this curtailed doctrine of necessity, we still face the same problem of distinguishing between accidental and lawlike generalisations.