

STROUD ON HUME ON INDUCTION

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A common interpretation of Hume's arguments on inductive reasoning is that he succeeds in showing that the conclusions reached by induction are not rationally justified or "determined by reason" only on the implausible assumption that the only beliefs which are rationally justified are those supported by deductively sound arguments. The main basis for this interpretation seems to be Hume's claim that if our inductive conclusions are to be rationally justified then the evidence or experience on which we base these conclusions must be supplemented by what has come to be called the Uniformity Principle, i.e., the principle that "instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same." (*Treatise*, Bk. I, Pt. III, Sec. VI). Hume, of course, argues that this principle can never be known to be true; but it would seem that in thinking that our inductive reasoning can only be rationally justified if supplemented by this principle, he must be thinking that only in this way will it be made deductively sound. So he must be thinking that only beliefs supported by deductively sound reasoning can be rationally justified. If this is right, then Hume can hardly be said to have 'refuted induction,' since he doesn't even consider, let alone refute, the possibility that our inductively arrived at beliefs are based on reasoning which, though not deductively sound, nevertheless, rationally supports its conclusion.

Barry Stroud has offered an interpretation of Hume's discussion of induction which is supposed to show both that Hume attempts to refute the possibility of nondeductively sound but still rationally justifiable inductive reasoning and that this attempt is troublesome, not obviously fallacious.¹ In this paper I will try to show that, whether or not the argument which Stroud offers is the one that Hume actually had in mind, it is not one which presents any real difficulty to anyone trying to 'justify induction.' The sort of inference in which both Hume and Stroud are interested may be represented as follows (using Stroud's labeling):

(PE) All observed As have been followed by B.

(PI) An A is observed now.

Therefore, (FE) A B will occur (Stroud, p. 53).

Clearly, this argument is not as it stands deductively sound even if the premises are true. Still, we might want to say that a person who reasons in accordance with this pattern, that is, who on observing *As* constantly conjoined with *B* in the past, and a currently occurring *A*, comes to believe a *B* will occur, is not thereby reasoning badly. Stroud attributes to Hume the view that this is not correct, not because the above pattern needs some additional premise, such as the Uniformity Principle, to make it deductively valid, but because in order for my belief in *FE* to be a reasonable belief it is not enough that this belief be formed merely after or in conjunction with belief in *PE* and in *PI*. Even if *PE* and *PI* in fact constitute good reason to believe *FE*, it might be that I don't realize this and only believe *FE* because of a lucky guess or a reading of bird entries. I will presumably believe a whole lot of things besides *FE*, so the fact that some of the other things I believe are, unbeknownst to me, good reason to believe *FE*, will not be itself make my belief in *FE* reasonable.

What more is needed then in order to make my belief in *FE* reasonable? At the very least, Stroud thinks, it would seem that I must believe that the evidence I have (namely *PE* and *PI*), in fact, constitutes good reason to believe *FE*. That is, I must also believe.

(*R*) *PE* and *PI* are reason to believe that a *B* will occur (Stroud, p. 62).

But Stroud interprets Hume as saying that even the addition of *R* to my set of beliefs is still not enough to make my belief in *FE* reasonable and not just because *R*, *PE*, and *PI* together do not entail *FE*, which of course they do not. The problem is that my belief in *R* must *itself* be reasonable. If I believe *R* only as a result of a lucky guess or of reading bird entries then, again, my resulting belief in *FE* would not be reasonable. That is, Stroud interprets Hume as saying, "every inference from the observed to the unobserved is such that it is reasonable or justified only if one has reason to believe that observed instances provide reason to believe a certain statement about unobserved instances" (Stroud, pp. 66-67).

So the question becomes whether there can ever be any reason to believe *R*. Stroud then interprets (or perhaps "reconstructs") Hume as arguing that *R* cannot be a necessary truth because it is easy to think of cases where two sorts of things are merely accidentally 'conjoined' over a long periods of time and "if it is possible for two sorts of things to be merely accidentally correlated in different circumstances over a long period of time, then a constant conjunction's having held in the past is not of necessity reason to believe that it will continue into the future" (Stroud, p. 65). But neither can my belief in *R* be justified on the basis of past observations justify my belief or give me good reason to hold it. But, as Hume says, this would be "evidently going in a circle, and taking for granted, which is the very point

in question." So, Stroud says, "it follows that no one ever has a reasonable belief about the unobserved" (Stroud, p. 67).

This argument has an undeniably Humean ring, though whether it is the argument which Hume 'really' had in mind seems open to question. In any case, however, it is unpersuasive, since it rests on a very dubious premise. Stroud argues that in order for my belief in *FE* to be reasonable or justified, it is not enough merely that I reasonably or justifiably believe *PE* and *PI* even if in fact (though perhaps unbeknownst to me) *PE* and *PI* constitute good reason to believe *FE*. This seems correct since it is still possible that I believe *FE* only as a result of a lucky guess and if so then my belief in *FE* won't itself be reasonable. Stroud thinks that the further element needed to make my belief in *FE* reasonable is a reasonable or justified belief that the evidence I have constitutes good reason to believe *FE* (in short, a reasonable belief in *R*).

But this can't be right, as an example will show. Suppose that, parallel to *FE*, I believe that (*RW*), "The Raiders will win their next game." Parallel to *PE* and *PI*, I believe, with good reason, that (*RB*) "The Raiders have the best players and coaches in the league." Finally, parallel to *R*, I believe, with good reason, that (*R**) "RB constitutes good reason to believe *RW*." Is my belief in *RW* now reasonable? Stroud would seem to have to say it is but it seems that in fact, for all that has been said so far, it might not be. It might be that my reason for believing *RW* has nothing to do with my belief in *RB* or *R**. It might be that my reason for believing *RW* is that I believe that (*LH*) "The Raiders always win their next game whenever I wear the lucky hat I am now wearing."

To say that my reason for believing *RW* is that I believe *LH* is to say, roughly, that my belief in *LH* explains my belief in *RW*, that is I did not believe *LH* I would not believe *RW* is justified, i.e. I reasonably believe something which is in fact good reason to believe *RW*, still my belief in *RW* is not itself actually a reasonable belief since my (actual) reason for believing it not a good reason for believing it. So if this example is accepted it shows that even adding that I reasonably believe *R* (or *R**) is still not enough to guarantee that my belief in *FE* (or *RW*) is reasonable.

A similar example suggests that I can reasonably believe *FE* (or *RW*) even though I do not believe *R* (or *R**). Suppose that I reasonably and justifiably believe *RB* and this is my reason for believing *RW*, but I have never given a moments thought to the relatively abstract question of what sorts of things constitute good reason for believing other sorts of things. In particular *R** has never so much as crossed my mind. I neither believe nor disbelieve it. If we grant (as let's do) that *RB* is in fact good reason to believe *RW*, then isn't the fact that this is my reason for believing *RW* enough by itself to show that my belief in *RW* is reasonable? We can't now say, as was said before, that in this situation my belief in *RW* might just be

a lucky guess since such things are ruled out by saying that RB is my reason for believing RW.

Taken together, then, these two examples suggest that my reasonable belief in R, even when added to my reasonable belief in PE and PI, is neither sufficient nor necessary to make my belief in FE reasonable. If this is right then the Hume/Stroud argument against the rationality of induction will fail since it depends on a false premise, namely that in order for my belief in FE to be reasonable, I must reasonably believe R. It might be thought that one could reply to my attack on the Hume/Stroud 'refutation of induction' by claiming that my argument depends on an equivocation between two senses of "reasonable." In what might be called the 'psychological' sense, my belief, that p, is reasonable just in case *my reason* for believing p is in fact a good reason to believe p. In the 'epistemological' sense, my belief that p, is reasonable just in case something (or some things) which I believe constitutes good reason to believe p. The claim would then be that my attack on the Hume/Stroud argument uses the psychological sense of "reasonable" while the 'problem of induction' is th problem of whether any beliefs are actually epistemologically justified, i.e., the problem of whether any beliefs are reasonable in the epistemological sense of "reasonable."

The problem with this is that even if it is correct it does the Hume/Stroud argument no good because that argument pretty clearly depends on the psychological sense of "reasonable." The whole idea that in order for my belief in FE to be reasonable something more is needed beyond my reasonable belief in something which in fact constitutes a good reason to believe FE. which is essential to the Hume/Stroud argument, is the idea that while my belief in FE may be (epistemologically) reasonable, it is not (psychologically) reasonable. Speaking of the person who is doing all this believing, Stroud says, "If his past and present experience of As and Bs in fact gives him good reason to believe that a B will occur . . . then although in one sense he has good reason to believe what he does, still his believing that a B will occur has not yet been shown to be reasonable or justified" (Stroud, p. 61). It may indeed be that there is something 'fishy' about shifting back and forth between these two senses of "reasonable" but if so this is not a point which can be used in defense of the Hume/Stroud argument.

NOTES

1. Barry Stroud, *Hume*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, pp. 42-67. References in the text refer to this book.