

HUME'S PROBLEM OF INDUCTION

the 30-second philosophy

3-SECOND THRASH

How do we know that the future will be like the past?

3-MINUTE THOUGHT

Peter Strawson claimed that the rule of induction requires no justification since part of what it means to be rational is to reason inductively. Max Black claimed that a particular inductive inference can be justified by the rule 'infer that the future will be like the past', and that this rule is justified since it has worked in the past. Hans Reichenbach tried to prove that if there is a reliable way to infer the future from the past, then induction will be reliable. None of these responses meet Hume's challenge head on, since they don't show that the rule of induction is reliable.

David Hume reflected on the fact that we often reason from what has been observed in the past to what will be observed in the future. For example, from the fact that all emeralds so far observed are green, we may infer that emeralds observed in the future will also be green. This reasoning is called 'an inductive inference'. Hume formulated this rule of induction: infer that regularities observed to hold in the past will be continued into the future. He then observed that inductive inferences following this rule are not deductively valid. It is logically possible for 'all observed emeralds are green' to be true although 'all emeralds are green' is false. Hume asked: 'If inductive inferences are not valid, then why should we think that they reliably lead us towards truths?' Perhaps all the emeralds observed so far are green, but starting tomorrow they will be blue. Hume argued that there cannot be a non-circular argument that shows his inductive rule does lead to truths, even if it generally does. Hume thought that although there is no justification of induction, it is part of our human nature to make inductive inferences. Many philosophers have taken his argument as a challenge to produce a non-circular demonstration that induction is reliable, but so far no one has succeeded and if Hume is right no one ever will.

RELATED PHILOSOPHIES

see also
GOODMAN'S GRUESOME RIDDLE
page 46

POPPER'S CONJECTURES & REFUTATIONS
page 48

3-SECOND BIOGRAPHIES

DAVID HUME
1711–1776

HANS REICHENBACH
1891–1953

MAX BLACK
1909–1988

PETER STRAWSON
1919–2006

30-SECOND TEXT

Barry Loewer

As soon as he found the blue emerald, he began to question everything: The Sun had risen every morning of his life so far – but will it come up tomorrow?