Jack Crumley, “Induction”

Jack Crumley is Professor and Chair of the philosophy department at University of San Diego. He specializes in epistemology, which is the philosophical study of knowledge (the name derives from the Ancient Greek word επιστήμη. He is the author and editor of a number of high quality textbooks in the field. The excerpt we’ll be reading is from his introductory epistemology textbook, which I read and loved as an undergrad. I think it’s a very good introduction to philosophical skepticism, which is the view that lots of natural and commonly held beliefs are open to serious doubt.

Although Crumley is the author of the reading, the focus is not on Crumley’s own views. Instead, Crumley’s focus is on describing David Hume’s famous problem of skepticism about inductive reasoning, which is different from deduction, as you’ll recall. Toward the end, he presents some ways of trying to solve the problem. Whereas deductive reasoning tries to show that something must be true, inductive reasoning tries to show that something is likely to be true.

You’ll notice that ten pages are missing from the middle of the file. This is because the larger chapter is meant to cover Hume’s skepticism as well as the skepticism inspired by the 17th Century French philosopher René Descartes (which is also called Cartesian skepticism). We’ll cover Descartes and his views a bit later in the unit, but for now there’s no need to confuse things, so the parts about his views have been taken out.

Notes:

• p. 10: The term “epistemic” comes from the same ancient Greek root. It’s the adjective form for talking about epistemological stuff.

• p. 10: Cartesian skepticism, roughly, is the view that we are rationally justified in believing only those things we are absolutely certain about, or about which we can rule out all doubts. In other words, we should suspend judgment about anything we cannot be certain of, because we cannot be sure that we’ve got things right in the absence of certainty. In this context, “indubitable” means “unable to be doubted.”

• p. 11: Barry Stroud is another active professor of philosophy, who specializes in the very problem you’re reading about. He teaches at UC Berkeley.

• p. 12: Modus ponens and hypothetical syllogism are kinds of deductively valid inferences. You’ll recognize modus ponens as the “trick” we’ve been using to make obviously valid arguments. Just to refresh your memory, though, modus ponens says that if we know that $p$ and $if p then q$ are true, then we can be sure that $q$ must be true. And hypothetical syllogism says that if we know that $if p then q$ and $if q then r$ are true, we can be sure that $if p then r$ is true. It’s just a double application of modus ponens.
• p. 13: Pay special attention to the inset on types of induction. If you need a refresher, have a look at the introduction to the Wikipedia entry on “Inductive Reasoning”.

• p. 17: The inset about reasons and causes doesn’t make a lot of difference to Crumley’s presentation of Hume, but it makes quite a lot of difference to the Catherine Elgin paper we’ll read at the end of this unit. People who think justification comes from the agent’s reasons are known as internalists because they privilege evidence that is internal to the agent’s mind, and those who think justification comes from the causes of belief are known as externalists because they privilege evidence from outside the agent’s mind.

• p. 18: Remember, there are pages missing here. Continue on p. 28 at the italic heading.

• p. 28: The idea that knowledge does not require certainty is a common response to Cartesian skepticism, which we’ll look at soon.

• p. 28: P. F. Strawson was an important mid-20th Century Oxford philosopher.

• p. 28: In this context, “analytic” means something like “true in virtue of meaning,” as in the proposition all bachelors are male.

Questions to think about:

1. Just how widespread is inductive reasoning? Would it be a big problem if it turned out we were never justified in believing the conclusions of inductive inferences?

2. How does the vicious circle surrounding induction arise?

3. Do you think that a belief needs backing by an argument to count as rational? Why/why not?

4. How exactly would Crumley’s proposed solution to the circle work in practice?

5. Between the two, which solution do you prefer: Strawson’s or Crumley’s?