TESTIMONY, INDUCTION AND REASONABLE BELIEF

Many, perhaps most, of our beliefs about the world are acquired on the basis of testimony. Not only do we often believe what we are told, but if we were never to accept the word of others, then our belief sets would be extremely meagre. The contents of many of our testimonial beliefs are empirical generalisations, such as the philosophers’ old favourite: “All swans are white”. Empirical generalisations are, of course, at the heart of the problem of induction. But discussions of the problem of induction seldom acknowledge the role that testimony plays in the acquisition of beliefs. In this paper I examine Alan Musgrave’s version of the (Popperian) critical-rationalist solution to the problem of induction; in particular, its application to testimonial beliefs. I conclude that critical rationalists have a problem devising an epistemic principle for testimonial belief that does not either allow any belief-content to be reasonably believed or makes reasonable testimonial beliefs unattainable.

1. THE PROBLEM OF INDUCTION

Does Karl Popper’s critical rationalism provide a solution to the problem of induction? Alan Musgrave believes that it does. Many others are not so sure. Indeed, many others are sure that it does not.

According to Musgrave (1999, p. 315), the problem of induction, as Popper sees it, is to avoid the conclusion of the following argument from Hume:

We do, and must, reason inductively.
Inductive reasoning is logically invalid.
To reason in a logically invalid way is unreasonable or irrational.
Therefore, we are, and must be, unreasonable or irrational.

In order to by-pass exegetical issues, Musgrave suggests that we call this argument a ‘Humean’ argument. For similar reasons, let us call the solution that Musgrave discusses a ‘Popperian’ solution. For the most part I shall confine my discussion to the particular version of the solution discussed by Musgrave in his 1999 paper ‘Critical Rationalism’. Although he has discussed this Popperian solution in a
number of earlier publications, his introductory remarks to the 1999 paper have the air of a frustrated author making one further attempt to convince his critics. So we have grounds for supposing that it provides a reasonably definitive version of the Popperian solution according to Musgrave.¹

The Popperian solution aims to avoid the conclusion of the Humean argument by rejecting the first premise. But it seems quite easy to reject the first premise. To reason inductively is to argue, for example, from the fact that all experienced swans are white to the conclusion that all swans are white. Perhaps we do reason in this way. But we need not. We might, instead, ignore the evidence and conclude that all swans are green. We might even attempt to justify such a belief by appealing to the principle that one ought to believe whatever seems most appealing, or whatever one would most like to be true, or whatever the bible says. Unfortunately, to acquire beliefs in this way is clearly unreasonable, so rejecting the first premise on this basis does not avoid the irrationalist conclusion of the Humean argument. What the Popperian needs to do is not just to deny that we must reason inductively but to demonstrate that there is a reasonable alternative to inductive reasoning.

Inductive reasoning takes us from beliefs about the immediate evidence of our senses to beliefs that transcend that evidence. It is evidence-transcendent beliefs that are at the heart of the problem of induction. Implicit in the Humean first premise is the notion that inductive reasoning is the only potential starter as a rational means of acquiring evidence-transcendent beliefs. Because inductive reasoning is invalid and, hence, unreasonable, it follows that evidence-transcendent beliefs are unreasonable. Why is inductive reasoning the only starter as a rational means of acquiring evidence-transcendent beliefs? Well, the beliefs at issue are contingent beliefs about the way the world is, so it would seem that the only rational support for such beliefs must come from evidence about the way the world is. But that sort of evidence, the evidence of our senses, is, by definition, not evidence-transcendent. We appear to have no choice but to proceed from non-evidence-transcendent beliefs to evidence-transcendent beliefs. But to so proceed is to reason inductively and, thus, to be unreasonable.

With the claim that evidence-transcendent beliefs are unreasonable in place, the Humean can then restate the original argument as:

Evidence-transcendent beliefs are unreasonable.
We do, and must, have evidence-transcendent beliefs.
Therefore, we are, and must be, unreasonable.

The Popperian task becomes that of avoiding this irrationalist conclusion by demonstrating how we may acquire evidence-transcendent beliefs that are reasonable without resort to inductive reasoning. Critical rationalism is offered as the solution.

I have merely sketched the argument that Musgrave employs to take us from the first Humean argument to the role of critical rationalism in avoiding irrationalism,

¹ It is not, however, Musgrave’s final word. Another, shorter article appeared in 2004. So far as I can see that paper contains nothing that affects the points I make here.