

The Suicidal Induction

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Abstract

The Pessimistic Induction is a central argument for scientific anti-realism. It has been charged, in this author's opinion rightly, with committing a base-rate fallacy. Here, we press a different objection to the Pessimistic Induction, which is that the reasoning it employs against scientific realism cannot work without undermining the Pessimistic Induction itself.

The Pessimistic Induction is a leading, perhaps the main, argument against scientific realism, understood as the view that science does a good job of telling us the truth about the natural world, both in its observable and its unobservable respects. Simply put, the argument is that since a great majority of scientific theories that have been proposed so far have turned out to be doubtful (especially when it comes to unobservables), it is reasonable to suppose that every scientific theory will eventually turn out to be doubtful (at least when it comes to unobservables).¹

¹See esp. (Laudan, 1981). We say "doubtful" rather than "false," since even a

Proponents of the Pessimistic Induction have been charged with committing a base-rate fallacy, and it seems to us that the Induction stands guilty as charged. Here, we press a different criticism of the Induction.²

Suppose that science's track record is as poor as proponents of the Pessimistic Induction maintain; suppose, that is, that the vast majority of scientific theories proposed thus far have subsequently been cast in doubt. And suppose that the Pessimistic Induction commits no base-rate fallacy.

Well, however poor science's track-record may be, it is at least no poorer than philosophy's. The claim that the vast majority of philosophical theories proposed thus far have been cast in doubt is, if anything, less controversial than the claim that the vast majority of scientific theories proposed thus far have been cast in doubt. So, if the scientific track-record gives us a reason to doubt all scientific theories, then the philosophical track-record gives us a reason to doubt all philosophical theories, including the philosophical theory known as scientific anti-realism.

We can put the point more sharply. Consider the class of arguments in

proponent of the Pessimistic Induction should admit that there is always at least some small chance that a theory that has been cast in doubt by new evidence might come back into favor with the emergence of yet newer evidence.

²See (Lewis, 2001), (Lange, 2002), and (Magnus & Callender, 2004). The main argument in favor of scientific realism—the No Miracles Argument—has also been criticized for committing a base-rate fallacy: see (Howson, 2000, 35-60), (Lipton, 2004, 196-98), and (Magnus & Callender, 2004).

favor of scientific theories. If a given scientific theory is doubtful, then so too must be any argument in favor of it. So, if the Pessimistic Induction applies to scientific theories, it also applies to arguments in support of scientific theories: since a vast majority of scientific theories have been cast in doubt, a vast majority of the arguments in favor of scientific theories have been cast in doubt, and so we should doubt all arguments in support of scientific theories.

But whatever confidence we may have that the vast majority of scientific arguments advanced thus far have been cast in doubt, we should have even greater confidence that the vast majority of *philosophical* arguments advanced thus far have been cast in doubt. And if the fact (supposing it to be a fact) that the vast majority of arguments advanced thus far in support of scientific theories have been cast in doubt gives us a good reason to doubt all such arguments, then the fact (supposing it to be one) that the vast majority of philosophical arguments advanced thus far have been cast in doubt gives us a good reason to doubt all philosophical arguments, including the Pessimistic Induction.

The upshot is that we should be persuaded by the Pessimistic Induction only if we have good reason to doubt the Pessimistic Induction. But, of course, we should be persuaded by the Pessimistic Induction only if it is not the case that we have good reason to doubt the Pessimistic Induction. By negation introduction, it follows that we should not be persuaded by the Pessimistic Induction.

References

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