

The Evils of Inductive Skepticism¹

DONALD CARY WILLIAMS

THE SOBER AMATEUR who takes the time to follow recent philosophical discussion will hardly resist the impression that much of it, in its dread of superstition and dogmatic reaction, has been oriented purposely toward skepticism: that a conclusion is admired in proportion as it is skeptical; that a jejune argument for skepticism will be admitted where a scrupulous defense of knowledge is derided or ignored; that an affirmative theory is a mere annoyance to be stamped down as quickly as possible to a normal level of denial and defeat. It is an age which most admires the man who, as somebody has said, “has a difficulty for every solution.” Whether or not this judgment is fair, however, it is safe to say, with Whitehead, that “the theory of induction is the despair of philosophy—and yet all our activities are based upon it.”²

So prodigious a theoretical contretemps cannot remain a tempest in the professors’ teapot. The news that no foundation is discoverable for the procedures of empirical intelligence, and still more the proclaimed discovery that there is no foundation, and still more the complacency which recommends that we reconcile ourselves to the lack, condemn the problem as a “pseudo-problem,” and proceed by irrational faith or pragmatic postulate, will slowly shatter civilized life and thought, to a degree which will make the modernist’s loss of confidence in Christian supernaturalism, so often cited as the ultimate in spiritual cataclysms, seem a minor vicissitude. The demand that rational man adjust himself to a somewhat bleaker universe than he once hoped for is only one large

¹ From *The Ground of Induction*, 1947, pp. 15–20.

² A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York, 1925, p. 35

and picturesque instance of the sort of re-orientation which inductive intelligence, in its very nature, continually imposes, and well within the proved capacities of human reason and good-will. To dispute the rational validity of induction, however, is to deny that reason and good-will have a purchase on reality, to deny mind's hope of acclimating itself to any world whatever, natural or supernatural.

The word that the house of empirical intelligence is built on a marsh of illogic has already spread outside academic precincts, and has gone far to poison and enervate the lusty confidence with which our Western culture for some centuries was on its way to conquer the world of nature and to discipline the madder human vagaries. For Western culture—any hopeful, humanitarian, knowledgeable, and right culture—depends on induction not merely in its parts, to justify its particular scientific inquiries and political inventions. It depends on induction altogether and in principle. *Spes est una in inductione vera.*³ It is an inductive civilization, striving always vigorously to strike out the line of that robust and sensitive mean between dogmatism and skepticism, between stiff tradition or intolerance and namby-pamby indifference, which is characteristic of the organon of inductive science. The ruck of our citizens, of course, may still ignore the despair of the logical priesthood and continue for a long time in the kindly toils of custom, re-enacting in daily affairs the technique of their ancestors though its rationale be vanished. They must inevitably be dispirited thereby, however, being rational animals after all, and the signs of debacle are already visible along an ever widening front.

“Most physicists,” laments the philosophical physicist N. R. Campbell, “have a horror of logic and regard an accusation that their doings conform to logical principles as a personal insult.”⁴ They accept their hypotheses by rules of the guild, handed down inarticulately from academic father to son in the laboratory, and are correspondingly undisturbed by the edict of the logicians that their doings after all do not conform to logic. In this innocence their researches also may coast along indefinitely, by rote, like the rhythm of performing elephants. Already, however, scientists pay a certain price for their disdain of abstract principle, in the embarrassing figure they sometimes cut when trapped into pontificating concerning material not regulated by the mores of their profession. Even in their specialties, furthermore, nemesis dogs them, for as physics, biology, or psychology advances, and the relation between hypotheses and evidence becomes more subtle and remote, the sheer mass and quality of evidence becomes less important, and the logical laws of evidence,

³ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, aphorism 14 in the first book.

⁴ N. R. Campbell and H. Jeffreys, “Symposium: Measurement and its importance for Philosophy”, *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XVII* (London, 1938), p. 121.

the more delicate and derivative principles of induction, become much more important. The derivative principles may themselves, to be sure, be worked out almost unconsciously, by simple inductive trial and error, and accepted on animal faith. But the results of so blind a method must be much inferior to a strictly analytic precision, justifying them from first principles of inductive cogency, continuous in turn with the system of mathematics and the syllogism. For what it may be worth, my own judgment, a diffident outsider's, is that the present impasse in physical theory is due mostly to confusions of logical principle.

While the disablement of induction plays bob with the pedestrian undertakings of the special sciences, it will do worse with the more delicate and immense topics of metaphysics and morals. On these sciences, where sound induction is most needed and least practiced, devolves the final duty of informing man where he stands and by what route he can attain salvation, in this world or another. They become pointless mummery, and the relativity of ethical judgment becomes irremediable, as soon as we dispute the ultimate validity of argument from the perceived to the unperceived.

More concretely, the implications of inductive skepticism and its eventual effects stretch down into the most intimate projects of common sense and out into the widest reaches of politics, domestic and international. If there is no rational difference between a sound scientific conclusion and the most arrant superstition, there is none between a careful investment and a profligate speculation, between a just and wise decision of a court and a flagrant miscarriage; men are hanged by a process of selection as conventional as eeny-meeny-miney-mo or the human sacrifices of the Aztecs. Indeed, there is no reason on however much theory or experience to turn the steering wheel to follow a curve in the road, or to expect gunpowder to explode, seeds to grow, or food to nourish.

In the political sphere, the haphazard echoes of inductive skepticism which reach the liberal's ear deprive him of any rational right to champion liberalism, and account already as much as anything for the flabbiness of liberal resistance to dogmatic encroachments from the left or the right. The skeptic encourages atavistic rebellion with "Who are we to say?" and puts in theory the forms and methods of democracy on a level with the grossest tyranny. No life at all is possible without the guidance of candid belief, but the trust in democracy peculiarly involves an induction that since it has been satisfactory in the past, it will be satisfactory in the future, and, more than that, the confidence in democracy is a confidence in the inductive method in political action. We have trusted men to find right ways of living together by the means of debate and experiment because we trusted what is essentially the scientific method to be logically competent to converge on the political facts

of life. The instant this trust is destroyed, the gestures of democracy, also become a senseless habit, decelerating like the spin of a flywheel come unkeyed from the driving shaft. Skepticism need not lead directly to cruelty, but it can apologize for a cruel regime, and it provokes a cruel regime because men who believe there is no truth knowable by inductive agreement feel impelled to impose an official myth by methods beyond the pale of criticism or compassion. Political confidence in induction, furthermore, is a far more fragile and theoretical attitude than the inductive confidence of common sense or even of science. Animal necessity and the impact of immediate results will hold us true to inductive method in the homely exigencies of housekeeping, wage-earning, or gun-making; but the profits of inductive reasonableness in morality and politics are diffuse and long delayed, unlikely to keep the habit going when once logical conviction has died. It is unlikely, in short, that a civilization can survive whose characteristic purposes conflict with its fundamental logic and which hence does not *believe* in what it *does*.

To make the matter more pressing, the surrender of the skeptic is in effect no mere refusal and *dolce far niente*. Having spiked the guns of reason, he has invited positive unreason to invade the citadel. All conscious and moral existence is a little clearing in the festering jungle of superstition, whose prowling terrors are fought off only by the courage and confidence of those who know what it is to know. Even within our circle now every doubt which unnerves the defenders of empirical reason is exploited by agents of the enemy, persons who are hostile to reason on principle: the logic haters, mystery lovers, and spell-binders. The obsequies of inductive logic are no sooner austere announced by the skeptic than they are exultantly celebrated by enthusiasts reveling in the opportunity to advance some extra-scientific dispensation: life, or will, or feeling, imagination or intuition, poetic *Schwärmerei*, pure Reason, revelation, dumb religiosity, authority, ecclesiastical tradition, or tribal animus. The extreme of meticulous incredulity thus joins hands again with utter credulity, and Europe and America, like sick Rome, are ready to fall prey to any quackery.