**Dissolving the problem of induction (P F Stawson)**

**Source: Alexander Bird’s Philosophy of Science**

We saw that the attempts to justify induction lead to circularity or regress of ever more

general propositions and inferences about the unobserved. One escape route might be to

suggest that there may be some form of reasoning in this chain which does not need any

independent justification. Perhaps we can start from a point at which the request for

further justification is somehow illegitimate or redundant.

This view is taken by Sir Peter Strawson. He says that it is a confusion to ask what

reason we have to place reliance on inductive procedures. His argument is analogous to

an argument that purports to show that it is confused to ask what it is that makes

deductive reasoning valid. He first points out that it is only individual instances of

deductive reasoning or particular forms of deductive reasoning that can rightly be called

valid. To ask what makes deductive arguments in general valid is to ask something

senseless. For deductive arguments are not valid in general. Deductive arguments are

often invalid. Someone may make a mistake or commit a logical fallacy. So the

appropriate question is: What makes a particular deductive argument valid? Strawson’s

answer is that this is a matter of applying deductive standards. And whether something,

e.g. *modus ponens,* counts as a deductive standard is analytic, that is to say, is simply a

matter of the meanings of the words concerned.

Similarly, it is only individual inductive arguments that can be assessed, not inductive

reasoning in general. In the case of inductive arguments it is not validity for which they

are assessed, but reasonableness. On the basis of certain evidence it may be reasonable to

make a certain claim or it may not. It will be reasonable insofar as the evidence strongly

supports the conclusion, and unreasonable insofar as the evidence is weak. Such claims

are clearly analytic. Furthermore, says Strawson, it is analytic that the strength of

evidence is related to the number of favourable instances and the variety of the

circumstances in which they have been found. So he says, “to ask whether it is reasonable

to place reliance on inductive procedures is like asking whether it is reasonable to

proportion the degree of one’s convictions to the strength of the evidence. Doing this is

what ‘being reasonable’ means in such a context.”

Strawson’s point can be summarized as follows. Asking for the justification of

induction in general is misplaced. What we can ask about is the justification of individual

inductive arguments. And here justification is a matter of showing the argument to be

reasonable. That, in turn, is a matter of applying the standards appropriate to inductive

arguments. Those standards do not stand in need of justification, since they are what

gives meaning to such phrases as “reasonable inductive argument”. Just as the metre rule

in Paris is a standard for something being a metre long. We do not need to justify this, for

“one metre long” means the length of just that rod.