



## **David Hume: 18th Century Philosopher**

*Hume's theory of induction*

### **Winifred**

In this audio recording we are going to hear a conversation between Christina Chimisso author of Book Four and Peter Kail, Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at St Peter's College Oxford, about Hume's theory of induction.

### **Cristina**

Peter, I would like to ask you why do we still read Hume's work?

### **Dr Peter Kail**

I think Hume is a fascinating philosopher because he is concerned with what he calls in the enquiry "the whimsical condition" of human kind. One way to understand what is meant by that is Hume recognises that we are part of the natural world and in many sense we are just like animals and that's what his so called naturalism is. And on the other hand he recognises that we are reasoning creatures who seek to try and understand the fundamentals of the universe so we are different from dogs in that respect. What's whimsical about this though he thinks is that our capacities are just like the animals, which means that it's impossible for us really to ever penetrate the nature of the world and yet we have this desire. So unlike Aristotle, who claimed that the desire to know is an indication that we can actually do it Hume thinks that we have a desire to know that we are frustrated about and that we need to come to terms with it.

### **Cristina**

So do you think this is still very important relevant to us?

### **Dr Peter Kail**

I think it's a wonderful philosophical attitude that quite often is not given its due but Hume is the best exemplar of and other philosophers have followed suit.

### **Cristina**

Of course Hume is very important for his criticism of induction and he is still remembered for that. Why is it so? Why did he write so long about induction, criticising it and explaining what it was?

### **Dr Peter Kail**

Well let me explain what the problem of induction that is associated with Hume is first and then later on I will try and draw up one of the replications of it, the implications of it. Typically we think what we've seen happen in the past is a good guide to what happens in the future. It's not infallible but nevertheless it's reasonable. So here's an example. If you see – if you've had experiences of bees stings penetrating your skin it's been followed by pain. So next time you see a bee sting penetrating someone's skin you immediately think pain will follow. And we think that's a kind of sensible, rational thing to expect. Another example of a fairly basic induction we have is that every time I take a Paracetamol it relieves the fever I've had. My experience of that is basically every time in the past every time I've had a Paracetamol it's relieved the fever so here I take another one and I have the expectation that it will do so. But now that belief is premised on the idea that the future quite generally or what happens in the future quite generally resembles what has happened in the past quite generally. But now how do we know that the future will resemble the past? It's not as it were a self-evident truth because we can always imagine that the course of the world will change radically tomorrow. So we might say look we've observed in the past that the future has resembled the past and so it's rational to think that tomorrow the future again will resemble

the past. But of course that's just assuming the point at question namely it's a sensible thing to think namely the future will resemble the past.

**Cristina**

So what conclusion shall we draw from that Hume thinks?

**Dr Peter Kail**

Well what Hume thinks and what other people have drawn are two very different things so a number of people have drawn the conclusion that human beings are completely irrational and that although we like to think of ourselves as inferring what will happen from what has happened is a perfectly sensible rational thing to do it's just as bad as peering at the tea leaves in the bottom of a cup or looking at chicken entrails and that Hume's conclusion is a radical form of scepticism that says that we have no justification for how we think. A slightly different way of taking this is that Hume is trying to show that the processes that we use to think about how the future will occur are not any different in kind from those that are operative in the rest of nature. So for example my dog has expectations that he's formed from past experience so when he sees a can of a particular shape he starts salivating and jumping up and down and is very excited. And he is forming a basis kind of inference about what will happen in the future on the basis on what he has seen happening in the past. And Hume's conclusion here is not that as it were this is a bad thing to do instead his conclusion is that the way that our mind operates is just the same as that of dogs or any other animals. And so there isn't any difference in kind between us and the rest of creation.

**Cristina**

So can you explain to me a bit more? From what you said I understand that there is no rational proof that past instances of past events and future events would be similar

**Dr Peter Kail**

That's right.

**Cristina**

On the other hand Hume thinks that it's a natural thing to rely on the past to have a guidance for the future. So how does he reconcile these two things? Can you repeat and explain it a bit more may be with some examples or –

**Dr Peter Kail**

Well I think that the main point is simply this. You could say that what Hume is saying is that those kinds of forms of thought, the kind of general principle that we operate with, is something that's completely arbitrary and utterly irrational. But that's a claim not about human beings but that's a claim about logic per se. Instead Hume is simply saying look this is what we rely on and what it is that causes us to rely on that is no different from what causes the dog to rely on it.

**Cristina**

What is this?

**Dr Peter Kail**

It's simply something called custom or expectation. It's simply the way in which our minds gear themselves into the natural regularities that we have and we simply acquire habits of inference. But it's very, very important to notice that's a claim about how human beings minds operate and not which is not the same thing as saying that operating like that is in any way a bad or irrational or crazy thing to do.

**Cristina**

So can you explain to me the difference between what you say it's not a bad thing, I understand, but then you say also it's not an irrational thing. But I thought that Hume said that is not based on reason so how can we distinguish these two views of rational –

**Dr Peter Kail**

Well you could say irrational is to do is to think something that you shouldn't given certain other thoughts that you have. So if for example I think snow is cold and I think this stuff is snow for me then to infer from that this stuff is not cold is somehow going against a principle of reason. But when Hume says that our inferences are not based on reason he is not saying it's going against something that we otherwise acknowledge. He is just saying look the dog's inference is not based on reason. It's not that we grasp some principle that in virtue of which we draw the inference it's simply something that we do.

**Cristina**

And it works very well I think for every day life. What about the sciences? Shouldn't we have something more secure than just habit? Shouldn't we have rational proof, a logical proof that what we are saying the sciences actually true

**Dr Peter Kail**

I think we then return to what I call the whimsical condition namely we may as philosophers really seek and strive and feel uncomfortable with the idea that fundamentally the way we are working is no different in kind. It's very different and complex in degree from what operates with my dog. But fundamentally we are no different in that kind. And of course Hume is rather - Hume we might say is complacent or some of us might say that he has got the right kind of attitude that that kind of quest for foundations is not something we will ever get.

**Cristina**

Two centuries later Karl Popper, the Twentieth Century philosopher, argued against Hume that induction should not be using the sciences. Who do you think is right?

**Dr Peter Kail**

Well I think Hume is right.

**Cristina**

I am not surprised

**Dr Peter Kail**

Because again I think Popper drew from Hume a lesson that a lot of people have drawn namely that what Hume is saying is that induction is a bad thing. But I don't think that's what Hume is intending at all. He is saying that induction is the principle of inference that we use all the time. It would be impossible for reason to justify reason but to say that simply it can't be justified for reason to move then that it's a bad thing is a step too far.

**Cristina**

So you agree also with Hume that we will never be able to justify induction in a logical way

**Dr Peter Kail**

I wouldn't like to be so – so confident that we will never.

**Cristina**

Because this is an induction itself –

**Dr Peter Kail**

But nevertheless I think Hume's claim that we could never justify it in that way seems to me to be quite a very plausible argument.

**Winifred**

Thank you very much indeed. Thank you.