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Problems of Knowledge

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The Poor Turkey

Famous philosopher Bertrand Russell has the story of the turkey of a farm. Every day the farmer comes out and feeds the turkey at 7am, the turkey begins to wonder if this is an event that is predestined to occur, if it is a law of nature. From then on the turkey makes a scratch on the ground each day that he is fed at 7am. After making 364 scratches the turkey knows that the next day he will be fed at 7am, the next day is Thanksgiving and the turkey is not fed. The turkey story from Bertrand Russell shows the idea of induction and some of the problems with it. In our lives we are all turkey and everything we assume is the farmer feeding us. If the farmer continues to feed us we will never see a problem, and why should we? However the farmer may stop feeding us one day and we’ll be feeding him.

What is induction? Induction is in its essence is assuming that because something has happened before that it will continue to do that in the future. Induction when compared to deduction the difference is that deduction is based on reasoning from laws, it connects ideas to conclusions. Induction plays a huge role in everyday life. If we did not use induction every moment of our lives would be chaos and confusion. We would not be able to know how to proceed or what to do after one event ends. You would wake up in the morning not knowing if your were going to do anything you have done any other day. Induction is even more important in science and science theories. Without induction everything we consider science would not be plausible. For instance gravity, you see something is thrown up in the air you assume it’s going to fall because that's what always happened. So we induct that because gravity has always made the object fall to the ground that it will again. Science is based off of induction and induction is so vital to maintaining all scientific theories. For without induction there would be no science because everything observed would be considered a one time occurrence of chance.

Though induction provides the basis for science and many things in daily life there is a major problem with it. The issue with induction is that when you assume something is going to happen all the time you begin to consider it a fact without being able to link the idea to the conclusion. You begin to believe that your inductions are really deductions. Furthermore when you begin to view your inductions as fact when your induction fails you are left with no facts or truths left. Assumptions should never become facts without precise links to the outcomes. Induction leaves no room for errors or changes because once something differs the induction is now incorrect and has to be completely disregarded. Not only is there this problem with induction and inductive reasoning but there is also the issue of saying that because something has worked in the past means it will continue to work.

The past is not necessarily a good guide for the future. Just because something has worked in the past does not mean it will continue to work in the future. This is not only in the case of science but take history, people inducted that because having slaves in the past had worked that it will continue to work in the future when in all actuality that was not the case. Saying that because it has worked in the past does not serve as good evidence for inductions. When you say that something will continue to happen because it has in the past you are turning assumptions into pseudo facts and those can lead to detrimental events.

So if we are the turkey making these induction about the farmer we must be prepared for one day the farmer to eat us. Induction is a dangerous game that we as humans like to unknowingly play. There are many issues that arise when we start making inductions about the world around us. Nothing is determined or set and we should leave that as it is. The past cannot lead us but can make us go astray.