

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
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Millgram, Chapters 4 & 5

Chapter 4

- In this chapter Millgram argues that there aren't viable alternatives to practical induction with respect to achieving unity of agency. The contributions of practical induction are *necessary*.

- Some candidate alternatives:

One might try to derive one's decisions from one, or a few, very general principles: hedonism, understood as the idea that one ought to perform the action that gives oneself, or others, the most pleasure, might be an example of such a principle. Then there are the layers of instinct, habit, prejudice, inclination, and personal quirkiness that a Kantian might call empirical character, and which might serve as a guide when considerations conflict. Or a policy of adjusting one's system of ends in the direction of greater coherence might seem promising: what effect such a policy will have is going to depend, in part, on just what coherence is taken to be; but, given the understanding of unity of agency with which we are working, it seems likely that on most plausible renditions of coherence, the more coherence, the more unity. Kant's Categorical Imperative can be read as a relative of this last proposal, in that it imposes a complicated consistency condition on one's intentions, part of which is the requirement that like cases be treated alike. Consistency of this kind is, again, a plausible contributor to unity of agency. (68)

- Millgram won't criticize these candidates individually. Instead, he puts forth 3 necessary conditions which, he claims, no alternative to practical induction can meet.

- First condition:

... an *alternative* to practical induction must not help itself, directly or indirectly, to the results of practical induction. (69)

Millgram argues that empirical character fails this condition.

◦ Second condition:

If we are looking for an alternative to practical induction, it cannot, therefore, be a method that learns from experience. Practical induction allows us to learn our way around new domains as we enter them; a technique that does not must evidently come pre-equipped for all possible domains of human decision making. (70)

Q: Is this too strong, though? E.g., is practical induction the only way to learn from experience?

◦ Third condition:

We have a third constraint already put in place by the arguments of Chapter 2: we cannot, in one way or another, just make up our practical judgments as we go. If we do this, we will be putting ourselves in the position of having assumed backward-directed inferential commitments that it is obvious we cannot meet; that is, it will be apparent to us that we have no real reason for having the practical judgment that could underwrite whatever practical conclusions we might consider drawing from it. (70)

• Thought experiment: Imagine a holy text — the Super-Talmud — that offers practical judgments relevant to all of the decisions of everyday life. If the Super-Talmud isn't a successful alternative to practical induction, then nothing will be successful.

• Unity of agency requires continuity of plans, as well as some predictability and consistency of outcomes.

A life consisting of plans uniformly disrupted and policies always violated is not a single continuing life at all, and the creature who inhabits it is something less than a temporally extended agent. (73)

◦ If the Super-Talmud was not predictively successful and did not generate good outcomes, then it would be abandoned. We would revert to practical induction.

Any actual scheme of practical judgments that people are able to live *by* must be informed, by practical induction, of what people are able to live *with*. If the Super-Talmud is not so informed, and if it gives guidance on enough of the domains in which decisions are required of us, then its followers will be constantly facing inedible sandwiches and like surprises. (74)

◦ Nor would the Super-Talmud be helpful at resolving conflicts due to one's empirical character. Rather, it would simply introduce further, likely competing, considerations into the deliberative mix. See the example about Carol, p. 76. Here we have a case that supposedly illustrates the Super-Talmud's inability to provide *synchronic* unity of agency.

• Two options: Have the agent completely adjust to the Super-Talmud or have the Super-Talmud completely adjust to the agent.

◦ The former is simply psychologically unrealistic.

... there turn out to be things you just plain can't stand, or can't give up, or simply don't like, or turn out to like anyway — or to which the proposed practical judgments seem blankly irrelevant. No matter how thoroughly you are taught, say, the virtues of socialism, and that economic equality matters more than the material and political inconveniences that are its price, you still may not be able to put up with what turn out to be more than just inconveniences; and even economic equality itself may be much less palatable than it seemed, once you finally get it. (79)

◦ The latter option has the Super-Talmud's practical judgments fit the psychological reality of human nature rather than, say, be arbitrary pronouncements. But we cannot learn about human nature without employing practical inductions.

◦ The Instrumentalist's spin:

On the instrumentalist view, what I am primarily learning about, when I find open and friendly smiles to be delightful, is my desires. (Presumably, that I desire to be smiled at in certain ways.) I could just as well have arrived at the same conclusion in any of several other ways. I might have imagined the smiles, and introspectively observed my own affective response; or I might have been told by an observant friend (or therapist) that I want to be smiled at; or I might, as happens in philosophical fiction, literally have had my head examined. (81)

Millgram responds to the Instrumentalist by claiming that such knowledge could not be attained through non-experiential means.

Q: But couldn't the Instrumentalist hold that there are other ways of acquiring knowledge of our desires through experience, besides practical induction?

- Empirical character cannot provide us with judgments to meet the open-ended possibilities we can confront.

Empirical character fails to meet the second condition we imposed on the Super-Talmud; it does not equip one to cope with all, or even more than a very narrow range, of the possible domains of human activity. (82)

- How effective are these criticisms of Kantianism and hedonism?

It is all very well to have determined that honesty is not just the best, but the only policy; but if, on the one hand, you plan to tell the truth, and, on the other, start finding yourself in situations where you cannot go through with it (perhaps where, you realize, telling the truth is the morally repugnant easy way out), then, if you cannot draw inductive conclusions and change your policy, your plans will go nowhere. If you have nothing to go on but the pursuit of pleasure, even once you find it to be an intolerable bore, sooner or later you will not be pursuing much of anything. (83)

Chapter 5

- We must rely on practical induction because the world presents novel situations.

There is no fact more basic than the pervasiveness and persistence of genuine novelty. Ecclesiastes was just plain wrong: there *is* something new under the sun, almost all the time. And so there is too much to be known because there is always something new to know. This is why we have to be able to learn. (89)

Q: But what kind of induction is needed in order to handle novelty?

- Millgram offers the inventions of the automobile and clock as historical events that introduced novel concepts and concerns.

- Millgram asks us to assume the perspective of a designer assigned the task of designing a creature prepared to handle novelty. If we want this creature to use an alternative to practical induction, Millgram claims that we will have to design it in something like the following manner.

Since the creature will not learn from experience, it must come from the factory equipped with a set of interests and concerns that determine its assessments of situations, options, and so on. We will, at the outset, assign it only four interests, to which we can give labels: Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll. The creature acts only to advance these interests, and its experiences do not make it adjust these interests in any way. (95)

◦ Millgram then imagines sending this creature to college. But, is Millgram's conclusion about what would happen to this creature correct?

... the creature is faced with large decisions that have only the most tenuous connection with its interests; for example, it must make choices among — to use matching labels — Courses, Majors, Extracurricular Activities, and Student Organizations. Strictly in terms of its interests, it does not really make a difference what the creature decides to do. And so it will fail to live up to the practical demands of the situation it is in: it will fail to decide, or decide badly, or decide in ways that fail to project coherent plans and patterns of action into its world. Once it gets to College it will cease to be a functioning agent. (95)

◦ Nor, he argues, is it any more helpful to provide our creature with more pervasive interests.

Plausibly pervasive interests and concerns — happiness, success, pleasure, even the altruistic aim of bettering the world — will not substitute for practical induction, because one needs to learn, as one encounters new kinds of situations, what success, happiness, and so on would *be*, in a situation of this or that kind — and these lessons turn out to be *practical* lessons, which we can learn only by practical induction. (96)

But, why can't this lesson simply be the discovery of the existence of an object that satisfies one's desires (such as Hume allowed)? Also, remember that this, for Millgram, must be a *practical*, as opposed to a theoretical, induction.

- Natural selection can also imitate practical induction to equip non-deliberating life forms with successful coping strategies.
- The world's novelty also provides an explanation of the defeasibility of our practical judgments.
- Millgram considers the objection that practical induction reduces to theoretical induction.

That suggestion proposed factoring a putative practical induction into, on the one hand, a fully theoretical induction, and on the other, instrumental reasoning proceeding from a desire matching the conclusion of the theoretical induction. (In our earlier example, the conclusion of the theoretical induction was a general view about the taste of hot polenta, and the matching desire was for something that tastes like *that*.) (102)

And here is Millgram's response:

Now I have been claiming that we need practical induction because of the way in which new and unanticipated domains of activity open themselves up to us. In these new domains, we cannot be expected to have guiding desires of the degree of generality requisite to organize our plans, decisions, and actions. After all, we have had no opportunities to come to have them. So when a theoretical induction in a newly-opened domain concludes, there will be no matching desire waiting to meet it. (103)