

Pierce and Popper.⁷⁸

4.6 Induction and Infallibilism

Surely, one may think, historical philosophers were aware that most ordinary beliefs are based on inductive inference. So, if Classical Infallibilism is true, then historical philosophers must have been either widely sceptical or strangely convinced that inductive inference was infallible. But both seem absurd.

As surprising as it may seem to contemporary epistemologists, that is exactly what we find. Many philosophers had an extremely restricted view of what we know, excluding *e.g.* knowledge of the future, or knowledge acquired by testimony, or almost all perceptual knowledge. Locke is a case in point. Others had infallibilist views about inductive inference. I think that could be argued about Ancient and Medieval accounts of inductive inference in terms of the acquisition of “pre-notions” (either by observation or divine illumination). But I will simply mention one striking modern instance. In his *System of Logic*, Book 3, Mill aims at giving conditions for “correct” induction. He writes:

“Some [inductions], we know, which were believed for centuries to be correct, were nevertheless incorrect. That all swans are white, cannot have been a good induction, since the conclusion has turned out erroneous.”

By contraposition, if an induction is “good”, its conclusion is not erroneous. Undoubtedly, Mill thought that the validity of induction depended on an objective, substantial feature of our world: its “uniformity”. And unlike Kant, it did not think that the uniformity of the world was somehow demonstrable. But he appeared to think that, given that uniformity, some inductive methods are truth-entailing.

⁷⁸Peirce introduced the term “fallibilism” and defined it as the doctrine “that we can never be sure of anything” or “that we cannot attain absolute certainty concerning matters of fact” (Peirce, 1950, 58–9). He took that to involve the rejection of the aim of knowledge: “there will remain over no relic of the good old tenth-century infallibilism, except that of the infallible scientists, under which head I include [...] all those respectable and cultivated persons who, having acquired their notions of science from reading, and not from research, have the idea that “science” means knowledge, while the truth is, it is a misnomer applied to the pursuit of those who are devoured by a desire to find things out” (Peirce, 1950, 3). Popper (1972, 228) calls himself “fallibilist” as well. He does talk about “scientific knowledge”, which he claims to be in continuity with ordinary knowledge and to be the object of traditional epistemology—Plato, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Mill and Russell (Popper, 1959/2002, xxi–ii). However, he allows “knowledge” to be falsified, hence false. Whether or not that is a legitimate extension of “know”, it is closer to Carneades’s notion of probable opinion than to historical and contemporary notions of knowledge.