Vindicating Strawson

PETER HUTCHESON
Southwest Texas State University

Strawson's so-called "dissolution" of the problem of induction in *Introduction to Logical Theory* has prompted a number of criticisms, Wesley Salmon's frequently cited "Should We Attempt to Justify Induction?" perhaps being the most notable. However, I think that Strawson's position has been attacked unjustly, the criticisms stemming from a failure either to identify precisely the problem Strawson brands as "muddled" or to consider Strawson's arguments in their context. Once those points are clarified, I think that I can show that many of the criticisms of Strawson's position simply do not work. Far from dismissing every formulation of the problem of induction as confused, Strawson's position actually implies something much like or identical to Salmon's.

Let us sort out the problem first of all. Some philosophers, including Salmon, Reichenbach, Feigl and Kneale, conceive of the problem of induction in such a way that proving, "If any method is successful, induction is successful" constitutes an answer. Let us follow Black and Salmon in referring to such philosophers as "practicalists." Now a successful rule is one that yields a true conclusion from true premises. Of course, different rules will have differing track records. The reliability of a rule is a function of the frequency of the rule's success. The idea is to show that a carefully chosen inductive rule, such as Reichenbach's rule of induction by enumeration, is at least as reliable as any rule. Thus, Salmon regards the problem of justifying induction as the problem of justifying a choice from among the wide variety of possible inductive rules ("SJI," p. 33). The practicalist does not intend to prove that induction *will* be successful, a task that, in Nelson Goodman's words, would require prevision, rather than philosophical explanation (FFF, p. 62). Rather, the practicalist's task is to show that induction will be successful *if* any alternative method will.

But the success of induction must be distinguished from its rationality, since it can be rational to believe something that is false. P.F. Strawson argues that

1. The universe is such that induction will continue to be successful;

is a *contingent* statement for which we have inductive evidence while at the same insisting that

2. It is rational to have a degree of belief that is proportional to the strength of the evidence in its favor;

is *necessarily* true. It is on the basis of this distinction that Strawson dissolves a problem of induction. "What people have done is to run together, to conflate, the question to which (1) is an answer and the quite different question to which (2) is an answer; producing the muddled and senseless questions: 'Is the universe such that inductive procedures are rational?' or 'What must the universe be like in order for inductive procedures to be rational?' " (ILT, p. 262). To the extent that *those* questions formulate the problem of induction, Strawson's reply is that the problem is misconceived, as no state of the universe could affect the *rationality* of induction. But it is noteworthy that the dissolution of *that* problem does not imply a similar response to the practicalist's question about the success of induction. It is misleading, therefore, to speak of Strawson's attempted dissolution of *the* problem of induction, as if that problem were formulated by a single question upon which every philosopher agreed. For the same reason, it is misleading for Salmon to assert that Strawson's answer to the ambiguous question, "Should we attempt to justify induction?" is a straightforward "no." The nature of the "justification" must be clarified before any response can be given.

Let us be fair to Salmon. There is a passage in which Strawson says that the only non-trivial formulation of the problem of induction is as a muddled question (ILT, p. 257). If it can be (or has been) shown that the practicalist's question is meaningful, then either Strawson is mistaken or the difference is basically a terminological one having to do with what one is willing to call the problem of induction. More on this later. For the time being, it is important to bear in mind two things: (i) There are two distinct problems that are called the problem of induction; and (ii) Strawson's view that one question is muddled does not commit him to saying that the practicalist's question is senseless. We are now in a position to evaluate some criticisms of Strawson's arguments.

Two of Strawson's arguments are so well-known and frequently cited that they have acquired names: the "ordinary language" and "need for standards" arguments. But Strawson uses two other arguments that are singularly neglected in the literature, and which have a strong bearing on the assessment of his position. I shall call them the "chaotic world" and "successful method" arguments. Let us consider the chaotic world argument first.

The point of the chaotic world argument is to prove that the success of induction is a contingent fact, whereas the rationality of induction is a necessary truth. It runs roughly as follows:

1. It is possible for the world to become chaotic (i.e., "all the uniformities we have observed in the course of things will cease to operate tomorrow").
2. Such a world would be one in which it would be impossible to form rational expectations about what *specifically* will happen. (In other words, it would be impossible to derive true conclusions from true premises inductively. We are supposing that if there are any regularities at all, they are too complex for us to ascertain them.)
3. If (1) and (2), then the success of inductions is a contingent matter of fact (contingent upon the uniformity of nature).
4. But it would be rational to expect further irregularities in such a chaotic world (even if the world should suddenly become non-chaotic).
5. It is rational to expect further regularities in our non-chaotic world.
6. If (4) and (5), then induction is rational in all possible worlds.
7. If induction is rational in all possible worlds, then it is necessarily true that it is rational to have a degree of belief that is proportional to the evidence in its favor.
8. So, the success of induction is a contingent fact.
9. Thus, it is necessarily true that it is rational to have a degree of belief that is proportional to the evidence in its favor (ILT, pp. 260-262).

Salmon comments on an argument Max Black formulates and rejects, which might seem to constitute a repudiation of Strawson's chaotic argument. "The first thesis — that induction must be applicable in every possible world — is, I believe, mistaken, but it is no necessary part of the practicalist position. The practicalist does not hold that induction *must* work. He holds that if any method works, induction does. With Black, we may reject the first thesis as incorrect, but this does no damage to practicalism" ("SJI," p. 35). The crucial question is "What do 'applicable in' and 'work' mean?" If those words meant 'rational,' then Salmon and Black both would be repudiating Strawson's chaotic world argument. But Salmon's reference is to Black's argument for the conclusion that induction could be systematically unsuccessful, a position that Strawson endorses in

the chaotic world argument. Furthermore, Salmon depicts his practicalist position in terms of the success (as opposed to the rationality) of induction on the previous page ("SJI," p. 34). So, neither author takes exception to Strawson's view in those passages.

The same is not true of the ordinary language argument, to which a number of authors have taken exception. Strawson's arguments can be summarized as follows:

1. If someone were to give solid inductive grounds in response to the question, "What good reasons do you have for believing x, which is as yet unobserved?", he would have answered the question properly.
2. It is necessary that it is rational to have a degree of belief that is proportional to the evidence in its favor.
3. It is necessary that the strength of the evidence for a generalization is a function of the number of favorable instances and the variety of circumstances in which they have been found.
4. So, to ask whether it is reasonable to place reliance on inductive procedures is like asking whether (2) and (3) are true.
5. Proportioning the degree of one's belief to the strength of the evidence is what 'being rational (reasonable)' *means*.
6. So, either the answer to the question in (4) is trivial, or the question makes no sense (ILT, pp. 256-257).

Time and again philosophers have urged that the ordinary language argument is wholly unsatifactory. L.J. Cohen, for example, claims that ". . . the argument from ordinary language overlooks questions about the rationale, as distinct from the facts, of ordinary usage" (II, p. 189). Harré says much the same thing. After classifying the ordinary language argument as a paradigm case argument, he adds that it can be used to convince us that people do say it is adequate to its conclusion, but cannot convince us whether people ought to accept it as adequate (ILS, p. 127). J.O. Urmson argues that Strawson's ordinary language argument is unsound because paradigm case arguments do not settle questions regarding evaluative terms like 'good,' 'reasonable,' and 'valid' (JI, p. 79). Salmon contends that the ordinary language argument amounts to a treatment of science as a sacred cow, vindicating induction on the basis for the widespread social acceptability of science. According to Salmon, Strawson's argument fails to legitimize the cognitive claims of science (RPS, p. 604).

I think that the critics attempt to make essentially the same point about Strawson's argument: that it involves the neglect of questions about the rationale for ordinary usage. The ordinary language argument only proves *that* we use 'solid inductive grounds' and 'good reason for belief about something as yet unobserved' interchangeably, but does not show *why*, if at all, we should do so. Rather than evaluate the particulars of each critic's attempt to prove that conclusion, let us address directly the question of its truth.

If the ordinary language argument were Strawson's sole argument regarding the problem of induction, then the criticism would be well-founded. But the ordinary language argument is followed by three different arguments. In point of fact, the ordinary language argument is not intended as a self-contained statement of Strawson's position at all. Not even the conjunction of the ordinary language and need-for-standards arguments were thus intended, since after presenting both argument Strawson writes:

> "It seems, however, that this way of showing the request for a general justification of induction to be absurd is sometimes insufficient to allay the worries that produce it. And to point out that 'forming rational opinions about the unobserved on the evidence available' and 'assessing the evidence by inductive standards' are phrases which describe the same thing, is more apt to produce irritation than relief. The point is felt to be 'merely a verbal' one; and though the point of this protest is itself hard to see, it is clear that something more is required. So the question must be pursued further" (ILT, p. 258).

It seems that Strawson predicted correctly how the argument would be received if it were considered apart from his other arguments. Unfortunately, he was not able to avert such criticisms by including additional arguments.

This reply is insufficient, to be sure, since it must be shown that the additional arguments do address the question about the rationale for ordinary usage. Let us consider each of the three arguments in the order of their appearance.

The first is the need-for-standards argument, which is roughly as follows:

1. In order for the question "Is induction a justified or justifiable, procedure?" to make sense, there must be some independent standard in terms of which one can judge its justifiability.
2. But there is no independent standard when the question is about inductive standards themselves, the question being comparable to

the question "Is the legal system as a whole legal?"

3. So, the question makes no sense.

Salmon criticizes this argument on the grounds that it implies conventionalism and erroneously identifies justification with validation.

How does Strawson's theory ostensibly imply conventionalism?

> "If the foregoing theory is correct, empirical knowledge is, at bottom, a matter of convention. We choose, quite arbitrarily it would seem, some basic canons of induction; there is no possiblity of justifying the choice. They are arbitrary in the sense that cognitive considerations do not force their acceptance. It is perfectly conceivable that someone else might select a different set of inductible canons, and if so, there would be no way of showing that one set was better than another for purposes of gaining factual knowledge" ("SJI," p. 39).

What does Salmon mean by 'cognitive considerations do not force their acceptance'? Evidently he means that there would be no way of showing that induction was better than an alternative for purposes of gaining factual knowledge. Note how Salmon refers to a different set of *inductive* standards. But Strawson makes no attempt to repudiate the claim that a *specific set* of inductive canons can be justified, his argument being confined to very general neccessary truths such as those in the ordinary language argument, which immediately precedes the need-for-standards argument. Any alternative to *those* canons simply would *not* be inductive. Thus, either Salmon has misinterpreted Strawson's argument, or the word 'inductive' must be dropped altogether, the alternative set of canons simply not being inductive.

If Salmon has in mind an alternative method, then I think that his complaint that inductive standards are, on Strawson's theory, chosen arbitrarily is based on overlooking the argument that immediately follows the ordinary language and need-for-standards arguments. Since not even the conjuction of those arguments is intended as a self-contained statement of Strawson's position, we need to consider the "successful method" argument, which is roughly as follows:

1. Any alternative method of finding out things about the unobserved is successful or unsuccessful.
2. If it is unsuccessful, we have no reason to rely on it, and only inductible canons could justify rejecting it as unsuccessful. (Straw-

son suggests it is not a method of finding things out at all, presumably because one does not find out if the method is unsuccessful.)

3. If the method is successful, on the other hand, it must be one for which there is inductive support (Strawson illustrates this point with an example, which could be called "the guessing method.")

We may add to Strawson's argument the following premise:

4. If (3), then if any method is successful, induction is.
5. So, if any method is successful, induction is successful.

The rationale behind (4) is that if any method is successful, then induction would be a successful means of ascertaining its success. It should be noted that (5) is *identical with* the practicalist's conclusion. True, Strawson does not specify any specific rule. Unlike a practicalist, Strawson confines his argument to the idea of proportioning one's belief to the evidence in its favor. It should be noted, however, that a practicalist would want to vindicate all and only those rules that conform to that idea. I submit that this argument proves that accepting inductive standards is not a matter of arbitrary convention. The grounds for accepting or rejecting any method of finding out things about the unobserved *must*, after all, be inductive. Hence, if we accept or reject any method, we must accept induction. The thesis that Strawson's position implies conventionalism, therefore, stems from disregarding arguments that must be taken into account if the position is to be understood.

I say "arguments," since the successful method argument is not the only one that Salmon fails to consider. After all, the chaotic world argument is supposed to show that accepting the canons of induction would be rational in all possible worlds. If that argument is sound, it likewise proves that accepting inductive canons is not arbitrary. Whereas the successful method argument addresses the question about the success of induction, the chaotic world argument answers the question about its rationality.

But Salmon also maintains that Strawson erroneously identifies justification with validation. To validate a rule, principle or proposition is to derive it from more basic rules, principles, or propositions. Salmon grants that Strawson has shown that induction in general cannot be validated, but insists that it does not follow that induction cannot be vindicated. Vindicating inductive standards would consist in showing that adopting those standards is well-adapted to achieving a certain end, that of attaining correct

predictions and true conclusions (''SJI,'' pp. 39-40; cf. RPS, p. 603). The argument, according to Salmon, contains an equivocation.

It is true that Strawson uses the word 'justification' in the need-for-standards argument, and does not distinguish *explicitly* between validation and vindication. But is Strawson's argument ''. . . tantamount to a denial that vindication is a kind of justification'' (''SJI,'' p. 39)? No. Since Strawson provides the sort of vindication Salmon seeks in the very next argument, Strawson is not denying that vindication is a kind of justification. Although Strawson uses the word 'justification' in the need-for-standards argument, therefore, I think that the sole intent of that argument is to show that induction in general cannot be validated.

Salmon notes that philosophers differ on the purpose induction is supposed to serve, as far as philosophical vindication is concerned. Salmon identifies Strawson as one of those authors who believes that we should try to justify induction as a tool for establishing reasonable beliefs, since it is impossible to prove that induction will yield true ones (''SJI,'' p. 40). Salmon then notes that 'reasonable' is virtually synonymous with 'justifiable,' which reintroduces the alleged ambiguity between validation and vindication. Salmon takes this to be a ''fatal objection'' to Strawson's approach. I think I have shown already that this is not so. It would be a fatal objection only if Strawson dismissed all possible formulations of the problem of induction on the basis of a proof of this impossibility of validating induction in general. Although Strawson does not use the *words* 'validation' and 'vindication,' the *substance* of his successful method argument constitutes a vidication.

Is Strawson's answer to the question, ''Should we attempt to justify induction?'' a straightforward ''no?'' The answer is ''no.'' If the question is ''Should we attempt to show what the universe must be like in order for induction to be rational?'', then Strawson's reply is that the question is muddled. But if the question is ''Should we attempt to prove that if any method is successful, then induction is?'', then it must be noted that Strawson answered that question, and thus does not consider his answer to the question about the rationality of induction a response to the question about its success. I infer that the difference between Salmon and Strawson is basically verbal. There is less disagreement than has been supposed.

I think I have shown that the frequent allegation that Strawson does not show that we ought to accept induction is unfounded. Strawson argued, after all, that the rationality of induction is necessarily true. Further, I showed that his argument can be expanded to derive: if any method is

successful, induction is. We ought to accept necessary truths. Further, if our goal is success, we have no alternative but to accept induction. I have vindicated with a Strawsonian vindication.

NOTES

Black, Max. *Problems of Analysis*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1954, chapters 10-12.

Cohen, L. Jonathan. *The Implications of Induction*. London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1970, Part VI. Textual abbreviation: II.

Goodman, Nelson. *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. Third edition. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973. Textual abbreviation: FFF.

Harré, R. *An Introduction to the Logic of the Sciences*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd. 1960. Textual abbreviation: ILS.

Salmon, Wesley. "*Inductive Inference.*" in Baruch Brody, ed. *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970, 597-617. Textual abbreviation: RPS.

Salmon, Wesley. "Should We Attempt to Justify Induction?" *Philosophial Studies* 8, #3, (April, 1957), 33-48. Textual abbreviation: "SJI."

Strawson, Peter F. *Introduction to Logical Theory*. London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1952, chapter 9. Textual abbreviation: ILT.

Urmson, J.O. "Some Questions Concerning Validity." in Richard Swinburne, ed. *The Justification of Induction*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974, 74-84. Textual abbreviation: JI.