

What is referred to?

# **Inductive Inference and Its Natural Ground**

An Essay in Naturalistic Epistemology

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## Chapter 5

### Our Native Inferential Tendencies

“Inference” refers to natural tendencies of mind that contradict, for example, probability theory.

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The literature on human inferential tendencies which began to emerge in the early 1970s had a strikingly pessimistic tone. Tversky and Kahneman, in an early and extremely influential paper (1971), argued that our “intuitive expectations are governed by a consistent misperception of the world” (p. 31). Nisbett and Borgida spoke of their experiments as having “bleak implications for human rationality” (1975, 935). The catalog of inferential errors which we are naturally inclined to commit seemed limitless: we routinely violate the probabilistic law of large numbers by confidently making judgments about populations on the basis of extremely small samples (Tversky and Kahneman 1971); we judge the objective likelihood of an event on the basis of the ease with which we may recall events of that type, even when there is very good reason to think that the latter is no indication whatever of the former (Tversky and Kahneman 1973); we have an unseemly attachment to our beliefs, holding on to them even when our evidence has been completely undermined (Ross, Lepper and Hubbard 1975); we seem subject to an illusion of power over events which are clearly not within our control (Langer and Roth 1975); our degree of confidence in our own judgments far outstrips our objective reliability (Oskamp 1965). The list goes on and on.<sup>1</sup> Were a visiting anthropologist from another planet to read these studies, the only conclusion could be that we are a pathetic lot, fortunate to be able to muddle through our daily lives without serious mishap.

That this was the obvious conclusion to draw from the literature surely suggests that this work presented a one-sided picture of our inferential abilities. Nisbett and Ross report that a colleague of theirs commented, on reading a draft of their review of the literature, “If we’re so dumb, how come we made it to the moon?” (1980, 249). This question points in the direction of a legitimate challenge to the starkly pessimistic tone of much of this work. It is not surprising then that the early work met