Commentary on Hitchcock

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For me, this paper does four interesting things. First, it dumps on the orthodoxy; and second, it supports commonsense. The conclusion is not the unqualified view that enumerative induction is fine, but that, as a person of commonsense might say, "It all depends." It depends on the background knowledge. That knowledge "about the kind and attribute with respect to which the inference is being made," determines whether an inference by enumerative induction gives a probable conclusion or not, a definite conclusion or not.

The paper begins with the promise of a quite new approach to enumerative induction, one that sets aside many of the commonplaces and sweeps the decks clean. There is then the tale of an unresolved conflict between Thomas and doubting Nolt, with the hope that the resolution of this "disagreement may shed light on our theorizing generally about enumerative induction and inductive generalization."

I don't know that Hitchcock resolves the disagreement—but he is like the ruthless referee who sends from the field equal numbers from both sides. But Hitchcock is only like such a referee, Hitchcock sends off a few fewer from Thomas's than from doubting Nolt's side.

In order to make the case, Hitchcock resorts to Bayesian probability calculus. He takes us through four scenarios. In each case we are shown how different circumstances lead to different conclusions, all under the umbrella of some sort of enumerative reasoning.

What we have here is not the case that Thomas is right for the wrong reasons, but that Thomas is only sometimes right for reasons which might be wrong, but might be right. It all depends.

But I said earlier that the paper did four interesting things—for me anyway. So far I have cited only two. The third is that it convinced me. What is the fourth?

Well—it goes like this. At one point Hitchcock says that "we might suppose that the prior probability, independently of our new evidence, that the 50th marble to be drawn is blue is the same as the probability that a randomly selected marble from the set of all marbles now existing on earth is blue. Let us call this probability 'p'." I wondered what p might be.

As I sat at my computer, with the 256 colour display, I thought that p might be one over two hundred and fifty-six. But then I had a look at the palette of screen colours and realised that there were many blues. Of course, we could take the six colours—red, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet, plus black and white, to give us one over eight. Alternately again, we could take the double-cone colour solid with red, green, blue and yellow round the rim, and black and white at the peaks, to give us one in six. Six and eight look better. They are in betting range. Also, 256 is far too big a number. If I were betting, 256 to 1 would really be too much to comprehend.

My worry is about the use of numbers. Now I said that Hitchcock had convinced me. But, I am in the strange
position of having been convinced by an array of number-based cases, and of having this conviction arise in a context in which I suspended my great scepticism about the use of numerical probability in argumentation. But then, this paper was developed in the face of a disagreement about the probability that some conclusion is true.

In this context, one might agree to suspend one's suspended judgement and get on with the controversy. In that context, Hitchcock is quite convincing. But I am still worried.

I doubt that, in so far as Hitchcock comes down on the side of common sense, this is the way to back up common sense. A whole gaggle of questions begin to appear.

Can we back up common sense approaches to enumerative argumentation with anything other than number based arguments? After all, we are talking about 49 and 50 marbles.

Does anyone teach fuzzy logic to informal logic classes?
Can we replace quantitative reasoning with qualitative reasoning?
And so on ...

I guess that all of this is prompted by my anti-anti-psychologism. Numbers raise the spectre of anti-psychologism. When we talk about reasoning rather than logic, I think we must be careful that we don't fall into the bad old ways of Frege. Just because he was stunningly successful with logic (in an altogether anti-psychologist way), it might not follow that we have to emulate his anti-psychologism in a study of reasoning.

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