

# Practical Certainty and Cosmological Conjectures

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## Abstract

We ordinarily assume that we have reliable knowledge of our immediate surroundings, so much so that almost all the time we entrust our lives to the truth of what we take ourselves to know, without a moment's thought. But if, as Karl Popper and others have maintained, all our knowledge is conjectural, then this habitual assumption that our common sense knowledge of our environment is secure and trustworthy would seem to be an illusion. Popper's philosophy of science, in particular, fails to do justice to the distinction we ordinarily draw between secure knowledge and mere conjecture. But Popper's philosophy of science, in particular his attempted solution to the problem of induction, is defective. It fails to take into account that physics, in only accepting unified theories, even though endlessly empirically more successful disunified rivals are always available, makes the persistent metaphysical assumption that all disunified theories are false. Once this point is acknowledged, it becomes clear that a new conception of scientific method is required which sees science as making a hierarchy of metaphysical assumptions concerning the comprehensibility and knowability of the universe. This provides a framework of relatively unproblematic assumptions and associated methods of science within which much more problematic assumptions and associated methods can be critically assessed and improved. This hierarchical view seems at first to intensify the problem of distinguishing certainty from conjecture, in that it emphasizes that scientific knowledge, and even humble common sense knowledge, contain usually unacknowledged cosmological conjectures. But actually it explicates the basis we have for drawing the distinction between trustworthy knowledge and mere conjecture, and even goes some way towards providing a rationale for this distinction, in so far as one exists.

**Keywords:** Certainty, knowledge, induction, scepticism, perception, common sense, conjecture, physics, scientific method, corroboration, confirmation, simplicity, unification, Popper, physicalism, metaphysics, cosmology.

**Subjects:** [General Issues: Confirmation/Induction](#)  
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