Assessment 4
Confirmation

Guide to Responding

*Describing an account of confirmation* involves specifying, in an abstract way, the conditions under which the account takes scientific evidence to either *confirm* (provide positive support for) or *disconfirm* (provide negative support against) scientific hypotheses, and then giving examples (of hypotheses and evidence claims) in which these conditions are present or absent.

For example, here is a partial sample description of an account of confirmation that I’ll call “Accommodationism” (an account which, I should note, no one has ever held):

 Accord to Accommodationism, a piece of scientific evidence confirms a scientific hypothesis when the hypothesis correctly predicts the evidence, and disconfirms the hypothesis when the hypothesis incorrectly predicts the evidence.

For example, Newton’s theory of mechanics predicts that the planets trace an orbit around the sun, and that these orbits approximate the shape of ellipses. Astronomical observations of the positions of the planets provide evidence that the orbits of the planets around the sun are approximately elliptical. Since Newton’s theory of mechanics correctly predicts this evidence, Accommodationism implies that the evidence about the shape of planetary orbits confirms Newton’s theory of mechanics.

[Note that the description of this account is incomplete, because it does not provide an example that illustrates the “disconfirmation” condition of Accommodationism.]

*Describing differences between two accounts of confirmation* involves identifying ways in which the accounts would provide inconsistent verdicts regarding whether a piece of evidence confirms or disconfirms a hypothesis.

*Providing an exposition of how an account purports to avoid or to solve a problem* involves three elements: first, a statement of the problem; second, statements of the main claims given as reason to accept that problem; and third, a demonstration that the account entails that one of those claims is misleading or mistaken.
You should be familiar with Hume’s problem of induction, as well as with the main claims given as reason to accept that problem, from Assessment #3. Your primary task, accordingly, is to describe how a proponent of each account of confirmation might either reject as false or dismiss as irrelevant one of the main claims for accepting Hume’s problem. Use the reading materials in subunit 3.2 for help with your exposition.

To assess which of two accounts better explains the role of inductive reasoning in scientific practice is to provide an argument to the effect that one of the accounts provides more insight into, or a better understanding of, why scientists use (or avoid) inductive reasoning. This generally involves identifying some positive feature of one account that the other does not have (in which case, the former account is better), or identifying some negative feature of one account that the other does not have (in which case, the latter is better).