

Intuition Can Result from Conscious Reasoning*

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Abstract

What is the epistemic import of having an intuition? That depends on what intuitions are. This paper addresses a issue of relevance to the second question, namely whether intuitions are states with a certain etiology. I argue that, contrary to common opinion, intuition can be the result of conscious inference.

Many thinkers require that in order for a mental state to count as an intuition the state's etiology must meet certain requirements. These requirements are of two broad types: either the state must have a certain etiology, or it must lack it. An example of the former is the requirement that the state derive "from one's understanding of one's concepts" (Bealer 2004: 13, 2008: 191, see also Boghossian 2009: 119, and BonJour 1998: 101). An example of the latter is the requirement that the state must *not* derive "from enculturation . . . perception, introspection, testimony, or inferential reasoning, singly or in combination, not even through the channel of memory" (Sosa 2006: 211). I shall focus on one part of the requirement enunciated in this quotation, namely on the widely shared view that in order to count as an intuition, a mental state must not result from conscious reasoning (Boghossian 2001: 636, Cohen 1986: 75–6, Gopnik and Schwitzgebel

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1998: 77, Lynch 2006, Plantinga 1993: 106, Pust (2000: 44–5, Forthcoming); but compare Huemer Huemer 2005: 101). This requirement is, I believe, incorrect.

I stress that my aim is not to partake in (or start) a quarrel about how we should use the word ‘intuition’; I take this to be a merely verbal dispute (see Chalmers 2011) which we should do well to avoid. More interesting questions are whether there is a class of mental states which constitutes a good candidate for a psychological kind—a kind which cuts the mind at its natural joints—and which deserves the label ‘intuition’ well enough, and, if so, what its characteristics are. The aim here is to contribute to our understanding of questions such as these.

To that end, let us distinguish two claims:

- (a) there is a class of mental states such that having a particular etiology is *not* among the essential features of such states, which constitutes a good candidate for a psychological kind; and
- (b) we lack reason to think that there is a nearby class of mental states such that having a particular etiology *is* among the essential features of such states, and which constitutes a psychological kind.

A good way to defend (a) is to provide a positive characterisation of a class of mental states without making reference to etiology, a class that deserves the label ‘intuition’ well enough, and whose members share important and interesting features—perhaps they can play a certain epistemological role, for example—thus supporting the view that the members of the class constitute a psychological kind. I have such an account to offer, but presenting and defending this account requires more space than is available. I shall therefore focus on claim (b), which is, I shall argue, true.

Consider the view that intuitions are *experiences* of a certain kind: contentful experiences with a certain phenomenal character. Let us say that when a person has such an experience with the content *p*, then it *seems* to her that *p*, and let us also add to the view that, precisely due to its par-

ticular phenomenal character, simply having an intuition that p provides the subject with some *prima facie* justification to believe that p . (This is the view I happen to favour, but, as I said, I am not defending it here.)

It is true, of course, that one can come to believe a proposition p by reasoning one's way to p , and that this *need* not involve its coming to seem to one that p in this sense (see e.g. Bealer 1992: 102).¹ But why should we think that a process of conscious inference with p as its conclusion *cannot* result in it seeming to the agent that p ? If the interest is to delineate a good candidate for a psychological kind there seems to be no reason to require an *absence* of conscious deliberation or conscious argument beforehand.

In fact, laying down such a requirement from the outset seems *ad hoc*. Even those who restrict their attention to what they call 'rational' or 'philosophical' intuition do not ban antecedent conscious deliberation about the concepts involved in p immediately before the intuition arises. For example, no one thinks there should be a ban on thinking about the logical connectives, or about the law itself, before having the intuition that one of de Morgan's laws holds. As Bealer points out, it is precisely when you consider these things that the law suddenly *seems* true to you (1992: 101). It is hard to see what reason one might have to allow the deliberation that goes on beforehand to take any form whatever, *except only* the particular form of an argument. The presumption should therefore be that intuition is not restricted in its etiology, and we need an argument to deviate from this view.

Joel Pust has recently presented an argument for such a restriction:

[U]nless intuitions are non-inferential they cannot serve ... as the ultimate premises in philosophical argumentation and analysis. Philosophical practice treats intuitions as basic, as not

¹It is a separate and interesting question whether one must have an intuition corresponding to *each transition* in a proof or argument, as Locke arguably thought (Locke 1689/1996: §§4.2.1–4.2.7).

admitting of further inferential support, and this provides us with a reason for requiring of any genuine intuition that it not be the result of conscious inference. (Pust 2000: 45)

Similarly, L. Jonathan Cohen, to whom Pust attributes his argument, argues that “[i]f intuition is to provide the ultimate premises of philosophical argument, those premises should not themselves be the conclusions of further reasoning” (Cohen 1986: 76). It is reasonable to assume that the widespread acceptance of the view that intuition cannot result from conscious inference is at least largely due to sympathy with similar reasoning.

I want to make two comments about this argument. First, Cohen and Pust are concerned in particular with *philosophical* intuition. Given that project, perhaps it makes sense to limit the candidates for what we call ‘intuition’ according to the role intuition is thought to play in theory construction. If, however, the interest is in delineating a good candidate for a psychological kind, that is getting things the wrong way around.

But second, let us distinguish two senses of being ‘non-inferential’. In one sense, *S*’s intuition that *p* is non-inferential if it is not the result of—in the sense of being *caused by*—conscious deliberation. In another, the intuition is non-inferential just in case *S*’s justification to believe that *p* after having the intuition does not wholly rest on the support *p* receives in virtue of being the conclusion of an argument.

To provide foundational justification, intuition must be non-inferential in the second sense. But why think it must be non-inferential in the first sense? I can think of no other reason than the belief that the two do not come apart.

But in fact, clearly they do. To see this, imagine that I do not grasp de Morgan’s laws, and that you set out to explain them to me:

Assume that it is not the case that *p-and-q*, which is to say that *p-and-q* is false. One way for that to happen is if *p* is false. In

that case, p and q are obviously not both true (we just said that p is false). And if p and q are not both true, p -and- q is false. So one way for p -and- q to be false is for p to be false.

Naturally, another way to get the same result is for q to be false instead: the reasoning is just the same. And a third way is if p and q are *both* false. But if p -and- q is false, one of these three things has to be the case: either p is false, or q is false, or both p and q are false. There is no other way.

Now, not - p -or- not - q is true in exactly those three situations; when either one of p and q is false, or both p and q are false. So, you see, if it's not the case that p -and- q , it is the case that not - p -or- not - q .

To be sure, this is not the snappiest of arguments. But it *is* an argument. It is valid, and one direction of one of de Morgan's laws is its conclusion. In a similar fashion, you could have explained the other direction to me. But it is surely possible that at the end of such explanations it comes to *seem* to me that the transformation in question is valid. After all, that seems to be the point of the entire affair. But if it really does seem to me that way, why should we think that this cannot provide foundational justification for that belief?

Had I been a little quicker I might have arrived at the point where I could 'just see' that the transformation holds, simply by staring at $\neg(p \ \& \ q) \leftrightarrow (\neg p \ \vee \ \neg q)$ for a while. But my being able to 'just see' that the transformation holds can just as much be the result of your patient explanation (along with that of the other direction)—a result of you *arguing* that it does. Why should the value of my being able to *just see* this depend at all on what took place just before? If I really do *just see* it, my justification for believing $\neg(p \ \& \ q) \leftrightarrow (\neg p \ \vee \ \neg q)$ does *not* rest wholly on the support this receives in virtue of being the conclusion of an argument. It rests in part on the fact that I *just see* it to be so, that I have the intuition that it is so.

If p is the conclusion of an argument, it cannot provide foundational justification if it is justified *only* because it follows from premises that are also justified. But it is no bar to the intuition that p providing foundational justification for believing that p *because p seems true*, that what allows or prompts it to seem true is an argument. On the view of intuition outlined above, for example, the question is simply whether the right kind of experience obtains. If it does obtain, what brought this about is neither here nor there.²

A restriction on the etiology of intuition to the effect that it may not be the result of conscious deliberation is, in the absence of argument, *ad hoc*. The argument that intuition may not play a theoretical role it is thought to play—that of providing foundational justification—fails. Absent further argument we therefore lack reason to think that there is a class of mental states which deserves the label ‘intuition’ well enough, which constitutes a psychological kind, but which cannot result from conscious reasoning.

²Knowledge about what brought the experience about might defeat the justification the experience provides. I set this aside here.

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