

Intuition: A Brief Introduction

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Intuition, in the sense at issue here, is an occurrent, conscious mental state with representational content, in which it seems to a person that things are a certain way. Examples include its seeming to Ann that if something is red it is coloured; its seeming to Bob that the sentence: “The boy the man the girl saw chased fled” is ungrammatical; its seeming to Cam that rationality precludes simultaneously believing both that things are a certain way and that they are not that way; its seeming to David that everyone prefers pleasure to pain; and its seeming to Emma that necessarily, for all numbers, if x is greater than y , and y is greater than z , then x is greater than z .

The core methodological question about intuition is:

Do philosophers use intuition in legitimate ways?

How analytic philosophers use intuition varies. Moreover, some uses of intuition—such as for hypothesis-generation—are uncontentious (Bengson 2014). The contentious use of intuition is as a source of justification for belief. Is Ann justified in believing the proposition she intuited, and so also justified in using it in various ways, for example as a premise in reasoning?^{1,2} Are Bob, Cam, and the others?

To judge whether philosophers use intuition in legitimate ways, we must first know how they use it, and, in particular, whether they treat it as a source of justification. The dominant view is that this use is widespread (see e.g. Bealer 1987; Bealer 1992; Goldman 2007; Cummins 1998; Pust 2000; Pust 2001; Weinberg et al. 2001; Weinberg 2007; Williamson 2007; Sosa 2006, and many others).

This view has recently been challenged, by Max Deutsch (2010, reprinted in the section on Experimental Philosophy; Deutsch 2015), and Herman Cappelen (2012); I focus here on Cappelen. Much of that work is dedicated to arguing that how intuition is actually used by philosophers is an empirical question. But this is obvious. Of more interest is the claim is that even in cases where it looks like intuition is used as justification it might in fact not be used in this way, since there are better explanations of what is going on.³ The argument that philosophers do not use intuitions is

¹ One need not choose between treating a proposition as fully justified or not justified at all; propositions are justified to various different degrees. We may think of this as the degree of belief (‘credence’) an agent is justified in having when in possession of the evidence. I ignore this complication in what follows.

² Answering ‘yes’ emphatically does *not* commit a person to claiming that the fact that she has the intuition that p can be *used as a premise in reasoning* to a justified belief that p (as Earlenbaug and Molyneux (2009), for example, seem to think). Intuition might justify belief in a direct way, which does not require arriving at the belief (and much less, a justified belief) through reasoning. See (Pryor 2000; Silins 2008; and Koksvik 2011, Chapter 6) for discussion.

³ For example, that the proposition in question is part of the common ground (Cappelen 2012, 119). I do not intend to suggest that this explanation is plausible across the board, but it is plausible for some cases of philosophers use of ‘intuition talk’. It is widely recognised that intuition talk—uses of ‘intuition’, ‘intuitive’ and cognates, but also of many other phrases, such as ‘what we should / would say’, ‘it seems that such-and-such’, etc.—is at best extremely loosely connected with the mental state at issue here. This point has been made many

deeply flawed, however, since it relies on an understanding of intuition, and of how intuition justifies belief, which (to my knowledge) no one now endorses. For one, someone who regards the intuition that p ⁴ as a source of justification for the belief that p is still very unlikely to treat p as justified *simpliciter* “despite a complete absence of reasons and evidence ... in support of it” (Cappelen 2012, 135). Believing that one’s intuition that p justifies the belief that p , seeking further justification for that same belief, and even in the context regarding it as very important to obtain further justification, are obviously compatible.⁵ One might well believe, and proponents of the view that intuition justifies belief in fact typically do believe, that intuition provides *defeasible* (and partial) justification for belief.

Moreover, the claim that intuition has a certain phenomenal character is in no way jeopardised by philosophers typically failing to remark on this fact. Those who use intuitions as a source of justification may not notice that it has this character, even if it does. This is so even if the phenomenal character is crucial to the epistemic role having an intuition can play.⁶ In fact, there is a perfect parallel of this situation in the case of perception. According to an influential view of the nature of perceptual justification (Pryor 2000, n. 37; Pryor 2004, p. 357), perceptual experience has a distinctive phenomenal character which is crucial to its epistemic role. It would obviously be absurd to suggest that people failing to mention—or even notice—that perception has the relevant phenomenal character when they in ordinary life justify belief by reference to perception somehow puts pressure on this theory. One thankfully need not understand how justification works to have it.

In what follows I assume that intuition is used as a source of justification often enough for the core methodological question about it to be of interest.

So, is it legitimate to use intuition as justification? Only if having an intuition in fact justifies the intuiter in believing the proposition for which she uses it as justification. The texts in this section of the reader are all in different ways concerned with whether this is so.

First, whether intuition justifies belief almost certainly depends on what the nature of intuition is (Koksvik 2011; Bengson 2010; Chudnoff 2011b). There is no widespread agreement on this, or even anything approaching orthodoxy. Three broad categories of views are worth highlighting. *Eliminativists* argue that there is no unified phenomenon here to investigate: there are really no such things as intuitions (Smith 2000, 23-4).⁷ *Reductionists* hold that the explanatory work purportedly to be done by intuition can be carried out without loss by other mental states, perhaps in combination with other machinery, such as dispositions. Views of this type are usually *doxasticist*, holding that the work can be done by beliefs, acquisitions of belief (‘judgements’), or dispositions to believe.⁸ Finally, *antireductionists* claim that regarding intuition as a mental kind

times, for example by George Bealer, who consistently notes the use of ‘seems’ as a hedging term (from at least his 1992 onward), and by John Bengson (Bengson 2010, p. 10).

⁴ ‘The belief/intuition that p ’ is philosophical jargon, the point of which is to abstract away from the particular to the general. Here I want to abstract away from particular instances of intuitions, and corresponding beliefs. So I am not just talking about the intuition that torturing the innocent is wrong, and the corresponding belief, but about any intuition/belief pair.

⁵ David Chalmers makes essentially this point (2014, pp. 539-40).

⁶ That intuition has a certain phenomenal character, and that this is crucial to its epistemic role, are claims defended in detail for example by Chudnoff (2011) and myself (Koksvik 2011).

⁷ Williamson (2007, pp. 214ff) could also be classed as an eliminativist. I regard him here as a doxasticist, but nothing hinges on this.

⁸ Views of this kind have been proposed by Lewis (1983, p. x), Plantinga (1993) and van Inwagen (1997), and endorsed by Williamson (2007). See also Cummins (1998, p. 119) and Ichikawa and Jarvis (2009).

yields increased explanatory power.⁹ George Bealer has long defended an antireductionist view of the nature of intuition (e.g. in his 1992). More recently several detailed accounts have been put forth, according to which intuition is irreducible, but where its similarity to perception is emphasised (Bengson 2010; Bengson 2015; Chudnoff 2011b; Chudnoff 2011a; Koksvik 2011).

Views of these different types are likely to give different answers to the core methodological question. An eliminativist *might* say that we cannot give a systematic answer: the answer is sometimes yes, sometimes no. But she is more likely to say that philosophers do not use intuition in legitimate ways, since she thinks that it is obscure what intuition is supposed to be. On the other hand, a doxasticist is more likely to think that intuitions can transfer but not provide justification. If I believe that p , and competently deduce from p that q , the latter belief is justified only if the former was justified to begin with.¹⁰ A doxasticist view of the nature of intuition thus does not easily support the view that having an intuition can provide initial, or *foundational*, justification.

But there are good reasons to think that intuition can provide just such justification (Bengson 2010; Bengson 2015; Chudnoff 2011b; Chudnoff 2011a; Boyd & Nagel 2014; Koksvik 2011). Intuitions seem to justify both propositions never before considered, and propositions running contrary to a person's beliefs. Consider the proposition that if your shoes are parallel, they are not not parallel. Even if you have never before considered it, you may just now have been induced to have this intuition, and so may have become justified for the first time in believing it. Or consider Gettier's famous paper (Gettier 1963). Many who read it believed that knowledge is justified true belief, but had their belief overturned by the intuitions they had while reading. Antireductionist views are more easily amenable to the view that a person can acquire justification for the first time by having an intuition. Those who think that intuition can work in this way might therefore be drawn to such accounts.¹¹

The first text in this section is an excerpt from Elijah Chudnoff's recent book *Intuition* (2013), in which he develops a view of intuition as intellectual perception. According to Chudnoff, intuitions are non-sensory experiences that immediately justify beliefs about abstract matters, and that "purport to, and sometimes do, put us in a position to gain knowledge" (p. 3). Beginning with Plato, he examines how this idea arises in a number of prominent thinkers, explains how the view differs from other views of the nature of intuition, and situates it in an account of a priori knowledge.

Supposing that intuitions justify belief, the next question is *which* beliefs they justify. The simplest view is that having an intuition that p justifies the belief that p . However, many intuitions have subject matters which raise a problem for this view.

Consider, for example, Emma's intuition about the transitivity of the 'greater than' relation over numbers. Benacerraf (1973) argues that sentences such as that which expresses Emma's intuition commit us to the existence of numbers in the same way that sentences like "the chair is taller than the table" commit us to tables and chairs. At the same time, an account of what such statements are about must also allow for an explanation of how to "link up what it is for p to be true with my

⁹ A mental kind cuts the mind at its natural joints (see Bird & Tobin 2015 for natural kinds generally).

¹⁰ I bracket here justification of a coherentist type, which at any rate would need much wider interconnected webs to take effect.

¹¹ There are other options, notably virtue or competence based approaches, see e.g. (Sosa 2007a, pp. 59-62) and (Ludwig 2007). However, it is far from obvious that such views are able to account for the novel and revolutionary character of intuitive justification, especially insofar as they are committed to the claim that "intuition is an expression of antecedent knowledge" (Ludwig 2007, p. 137). Views of this kind are forcefully challenged (on different grounds) in (Chudnoff 2014).

belief that *p*" (p. 667). It must make it possible to explain how humans can come to know the relevant truths. But when intuitions are about numbers and relations, or moral properties like goodness or justice, or modal properties like necessity, it is unclear how human beings could be appropriately 'linked up' to them.¹²

This challenge, and a way of responding to it, is the topic of Alvin Goldman's article. There are different ways, he argues, to interpret what our intuitions are about. They might be about Platonic forms; abstract entities in a realm not spatiotemporally connected to ours. They might be about natural kinds, divisions in nature wholly independent of human inquiry. Or they might be about concepts. Goldman argues that on one understanding of what concepts are we can both validate philosophical use of intuitions and demystify the connection between us and that which our intuitions are about.

The most important challenge to this view is simple. When we discuss knowledge, truth, justice, or intentionality, we are, at least on the face of things, not interested in anything to do with *us* at all. In particular, we are not debating thought, or the constituents of thoughts (concepts). What we care about are aspects *of the world*: what *justice* is, the nature of *intentionality*, and so on. Someone tempted by a view like Goldman's would need to explain why these appearances are deceptive.¹³

We have touched on challenges from a perceived lack of clarity about the nature of intuition, and from the connection between intuitions and what they are about. Aside from these, perhaps the most widely discussed recent challenge to the use of intuition in philosophical methodology comes from empirical work.¹⁴ An influential claim is that intuitions "vary from group to group in a manner inconsistent with philosophers' reliance on them" (Weinberg 2007, p. 319). Intuitions are claimed to vary with cultural or ethnic background (Weinberg et al. 2001), gender (Stich & Buckwalter 2011), order effects (Swain et al. 2008), the perceived cleanliness or otherwise of the conditions of assessment (see Tobia 2014 for an overview), and other factors irrelevant to their truth.

There are a variety of responses. One is to point out that variation in intuitions, even systematic variation with factors irrelevant to truth, does not suffice to undermine intuition as a source of justification, since other sources, including perception, are subject to the same types of variation. For such variation to be a challenge, intuitions of different groups would have to be "deeply at odds" with each other, but we lack evidence that this is the case. (See Boyd & Nagel 2014, §5, who also offer powerful criticism of the robustness of the data, and the interpretations for which it has been used. See also Sosa 2007.)

Another line of response questions whether the experiments manage to measure people's *intuitions*, or, alternatively, the subset of intuitions that philosophers use (see Pust 2014, §4.2 for an overview). After all, respondents may fail to have intuitions about the cases at issue, their answers may fail to track their intuitions even if they have them (Ludwig 2007; Bengson 2013), or respondents may use intuitions that do not result from conscious argument, where philosophers often use those that do (Koksvik 2013).

¹² For discussion and development of the challenge, see e.g. (Field 1989, pp. 230-9); see also (Linnebo 2006) and (Bengson 2015, §6.) A very different response to Goldman's is presented in (Bengson n.d.); see also n. 5 therein for references to others who press Benacerraf-type concerns.

¹³ This challenge is raised e.g. by Kornblith (2002) and Williamson (2007), see also (Ludwig 2007). Williamson also dismisses a number of arguments for the view that we are in fact interested in concepts (or words, or meanings) and not the world.

¹⁴ For an informative general discussion, see (Pust 2014, §4).

Here we take a step back, and focus on whether the use of intuitions in philosophy is unavoidable. If it is, we must either find appropriate answers to the challenges, including the empirical one, or give up on the relevant parts of philosophy altogether.

Joel Pust examines two prominent arguments for scepticism about philosophical use of intuition, and unearths the common ‘explanationist’ premise, namely that a subject is justified in believing “only those propositions which are part of the best explanation of *S*’s making the judgements that she makes” (Pust 2001, p. 231). Pust argues that there is a principled obstacle to supporting the premise. It can only be supported, he argues, by either claiming that it is intuitive, or that it is supported by epistemic intuitions about cases. In either case, making the case for the premise involves treating intuitions as evidence, something which the very premise at issue says that one may not do (p. 245). The critique of intuitions is thus epistemically self-defeating.¹⁵

Jonathan Weinberg responds in his ‘How to Challenge Intuitions Empirically Without Risking Skepticism’ (Weinberg 2007). He argues that the critic must explain why intuitions should not be trusted in a way that avoids making use of the particular class of intuitions the critic disparages, without providing a criterion that also applies to sources of evidence which the critic wants to keep. The answer, Weinberg argues, is that a number of intuitions are *hopeless*, in that we lack the capacity to detect and correct errors which we have in the other cases, such as perception (p. 327). In reply, Thomas Grundmann (2010) has both challenged the claim that intuitions are systematically worse off than other sources of justification with respect to hopefulness, and argued that hopefulness is not a necessary criterion for providing justification. Alternatively, one might insist that intuition constitutes a natural kind, and that (absent defeaters), all instances of it provide justification (Koksvik 2011), thus undercutting Weinberg’s ‘divide and conquer’ strategy of throwing out some intuitions while keeping others.

The limitations both on the number and length of original texts included in this section, and on this introduction, entail that the reader has at best received a very partial introduction to some of the core methodological issues surrounding intuition. It does not constitute an overview of the landscape, nor a picture of the state of the art with respect to the selected issues introduced. For this it will be necessary to read much more widely. The references, and the annotated bibliography, are a good start.

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FURTHER READING

Bealer 1992

Bealer defends what he terms the ‘standard justificatory practice’—which includes a reliance on intuitions—against empiricist attack.

Cappelen 2012, Deutsch 2015

Book-length challenges to the view that intuitions form an (important) part of philosophical methodology.

Chudnoff 2013, Bengson 2015, Koksvik 2011

¹⁵ A classical and more wide-ranging defence of the self-defeat claim is (Bealer 1992). See also (Bealer 1998) and (Boyd & Nagel 2014, §4). For a short and illuminating discussion of a certain type of self-defeat argument see (Silva 2013).

These sources independently develop detailed accounts of the nature of intuition and of how intuition justifies belief. While there are important differences between the views proffered they also share certain core features, notably i) emphasis of the similarity between perception and intuition, ii) insistence that the phenomenal character of intuitional experience is relevant to its epistemic role, and iii) the claim that intuition, when all goes well, immediately justifies belief—that is, it justifies belief in a way that does not rely on the subject's being justified in believing anything else.

Ludwig 2007

Articulates a competence-based account of how intuition justifies belief, and defends it against challenge from empirical results on the variability of intuitions.

Pust 2014

An advanced encyclopedia article, touching on a wide range of issues in the philosophy of intuition.

DePaul and Ramsey 1998.

An important early collection of papers on intuition, from the perspectives of both psychology and philosophy.

Williamson 2007

A wide-ranging work on how philosophy is and ought to be pursued. Core claims include that philosophical exceptionalism is false (there is no method distinctive of philosophical inquiry, nor does philosophy have a distinctive subject matter), that the linguistic and conceptual 'turns' in philosophy were mistakes (because philosophy is in general not properly concerned only with the meanings of words or the contours of concepts), and that what philosophers call intuitions are really only judgements of a kind that is required in a wide range of human thought.

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