

INTUITIONS AS EVIDENCE: AN INTRODUCTION[†]

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For *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evidence*, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio & Clayton Littlejohn (Eds.), forthcoming 2021

Penultimate Draft (12/21/2020)

Some insight into the epistemological standing of rational intuition can be gained by considering, not its philosophically interesting instances (e.g., the Gettier intuitions), but its philosophically un-illuminating ones.

To that end, consider the following situation:

Condition A: *Snopes is seated at a table. Situated directly in front of her is a lit candle and she is looking at the candle attentively. The background conditions are entirely normal (e.g., Snopes' visual system is standard for most human beings, there are no holographic images or deviant causal chains, etc.). In this condition, Snopes forms the belief that there is a candle in front of her.*

Given Condition A, is Snopes' belief (i.e., that there is a candle on the table in front of her) justified? If you are like most people, you will probably agree that it is. No great philosophical insight is required for this judgment; it is simply a routine example of justified belief and we recognize it as such.

But what does it mean to say that “we recognize it as such”? What, more specifically, is the epistemic basis of your belief that Snopes' belief is justified? When pressed on this question, many people respond with some variant of, “Well, it just seems like she would be justified in the situation as you describe it.” And with that almost dismissive response, we find ourselves smack in the middle of one of the most contentious debates in epistemology, the debate over the evidential status of intuition. While the empiricist sees in such a response little more than an evasive non-answer, the rationalist detects the whiff of a commonsense commitment to a significant type of evidence based on nonperceptual seemings.

For the purposes of this paper, I will treat empiricists as philosophers who reject the existence of any substantive capacity for a priori knowledge beyond that which can be accounted for in terms of what

[†] I would like to thank John Bengson, Daniel Z. Korman, and Clayton Littlejohn for extensive comments.

Hume called “relations of ideas” or other similar intellectual capacities. Rationalists are as those philosophers who maintain that there is at least one such capacity, namely, intuition. The dispute, therefore, is not – at least not in the first instance – over the bare possibility of a priori knowledge, but of its basis and extent.¹ In this discussion, “intuition” is something of a term of art. Presumably any adequate theory of intuition will have to respect many of the phenomena we ordinarily count as intuitions, seemings, or intellectual perceptions. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that the rationalist is required to fully respect any such pre-theoretical categories or our pre-philosophical understanding of such phenomena.²

In the remainder of this chapter, we will see what can be done to fill out and further motivate the rationalist picture. In §I, I develop two related arguments that purport to show that intuitions are epistemically indispensable in the sense that, without reliance on them, our epistemic capacities are far more minimal than we pre-theoretically take them to be. In §II, I provide a positive outline of how intuitions are able to play the epistemic role that allows us to recover these capacities. Finally, in §III, I consider some nuances of the view developed here and consider some recent challenges from the field of experimental philosophy.

I. Two Arguments for Rationalism

It is possible to read Descartes’ *Meditations* as opening with a rationalist gambit: (1) first, to argue that even the totality of our perceptual evidence is unable by itself to secure an adequate foundation for any of our knowledge claims, and (2) to show that there is another source of evidence (“clear and distinct perception”) which, when included as a distinct, *sui generis* source of evidence, allows us to recover all or most of what we pre-philosophically thought we knew about the world. Descartes’s argument, thus, aims at the heart of empiricism, claiming not only that eschewing intuition will leave us unable to capture *recherché* a priori knowledge but even very basic knowledge of the external world. This general

¹ As the arguments in the next section suggest, it may be that judgments concerning “relations of ideas” involve intuitions and, correlatively, that empiricists are unable to give a satisfactory account of any a priori knowledge. In this respect, Quine in “Truth by convention” (1936) represents what may be the purest form of empiricism. But this issue need not be assumed, or even settled, for the purposes of this paper.

Some philosophers will not fall neatly into this categorization. In such cases, it is unclear whether we should characterize them as reluctant empiricists, rationalists with a non-standard theory of intuition, or rationalists who genuinely offer a substantive, non-intuition-based theory of the a priori.

² I note here that this way of drawing the distinction may count philosophers who accept intuitions but give a reductive analysis in terms of other, “empiricist-friendly” cognitive states as empiricists. For example, philosophers who attempt to reduce intuitions to beliefs (e.g., Gopnik and Schwitzgebel 1998) or inclinations to believe (e.g., Sosa 1998) might be counted as falling on the empiricist side of this discussion. Whether or not they do count as empiricists depends on their theory of the evidential status of these states. This seems to me the right result if the empiricist/rationalist distinction is to have any teeth, but a full discussion of this issue is well beyond the scope of this chapter.

argumentative strategy (what I will hereafter call the Cartesian Program) is an extremely attractive one for defenders of intuition. After all, rationalists do not merely claim that intuition is a convenient add-on to intellectual inquiry, but an indispensable element of such inquiry. If they are correct about this, then removing our reliance on it should (epistemically speaking) bring us up short.

But the Cartesian Program promises a second benefit, namely, to locate intuitions in our epistemological framework. Just as a neuroscientist may learn the function of a certain region of the brain by studying cases of brain injury in which that region alone is damaged, so the epistemologist may be able to determine the unique epistemic contribution(s) of intuitions by considering what (if anything) is left unsupportable in their absence. The strategy, moreover, promises even to discriminate between competing theories of intuitions by showing that some, but not others, are adequate to this epistemic task.

1.1. The Starting Points Argument

While Descartes' attempt to carry out the second step of the Cartesian Program was ultimately flawed, his effort to carry out the first step is considerably more powerful – and not merely because he assumes an infallibilist theory of knowledge. Even if we accept fallibilism, it is possible to see that a broadly Cartesian argument undermines the radical thesis that perception is the only basic source of evidence.³

One such argument is Bealer's (1992) Starting Points Argument, SPA (see also Ichikawa 2016). Bealer begins by noting that, as a matter of fact, we routinely make use of intuition in formulating our view of the world. This is particularly true in our judgments of categorization. For instance, the empiricist maintains that intuition does not count as a form of sensory perception. That seems clearly correct and it is an essential thesis of empiricism. This judgment, however, depends on making use of intuition as *prima facie* evidence.⁴ But empiricists maintain that intuitions do not count as evidence. Thus, either their view is inconsistent or unsupported.

In response, empiricists could claim that they do not use intuition as evidence, but merely as a guide for constructing their theories – which are ultimately supported on non-rationalist grounds. This response, however, leads to a second dilemma. On the one hand suppose that intuitions are reliable in aiding theory construction. Then there is no clear, non-question begging rational for excluding them as evidence. On the other hand, suppose that they are not reliable. In that case, the empiricist has limited resources for routing out the errors they *ex hypothesi* interject into their theory. After all, there will surely

³ Although empiricists generally allow for other sources of basic evidence, such as introspection, memory, and analytic connections (Hume's relations of ideas), including these sources does not appear to significantly help the empiricist in responding to the criticisms we will consider below.

⁴ After all, we do not see that intuition is not a form of perception, nor is it merely a trivial analytic truth.

be some appropriate systematization of those errors that goes undetected if intuitions themselves are rejected or unreliable.

A second, more promising, response is to maintain that such judgments merely involve our capacity for concept application. However, in order to avoid the SAP, the empiricist must deny that the process of concept application does not itself involve intuitions and yet still serves to ground the epistemic standing of the resulting beliefs. There is reason for skepticism on both counts. First, as already noted, this theory does not reflect ordinary cognitive phenomenology. When I consider whether or not intuition is a form of sensory perception, it seems to me that it is not. Moreover, the fact that this seems correct is a significant reason, and perhaps the only reason, I have for accepting the claim. As difficult as it may be, imagine your cognitive situation if it lacked such a seeming. In that case, you might try to resolve the question by remembering something you learned or by inferring the correct answer from other things you know. But lacking those resources, you would be at a loss as to how to proceed. Worse still, if some sub-doxastic concept application process (even a reliable one) simply spit out a belief, you would be as baffled by the result as if an Evil Demon had done the same. This last point underscores an important result: Even if concept application is a sub-doxastic, non-intuition based, process, our reasons for accepting the deliverances of that process involve us in the use of intuitions as *prima facie* reasons.

It should be clear that the SPA satisfies both conditions of the Cartesian Program. First, it identifies a significant domain of knowledge – our knowledge of (non-trivial) categorical relationships – that cannot be grounded in perceptual evidence alone. Importantly, this failure has extremely widespread consequences, potentially threatening us with full-blown skepticism. After all, the epistemic undermining of our categorical judgments would have systematic and devastating epistemic effects across all of our claims to knowledge. And, second, positing intuition as a source of evidence promises to restore what we pre-theoretically take ourselves to know.

1.2. The Argument from Epistemic Agency

The significance of the SPA can be extended in a novel direction. Let PE be the totality of one's perceptual experience at a given moment. We may suppose that these will be propositions having the following form:

It perceptually seems (or has perceptually seemed) to me as if things are thus and so

It is plausible that on this basis one could come to know certain, basic facts about the external world, for instance, that things are (or were) thus and so. Specifically, let A be a (possibly proper) subset of PE and let φ be some proposition of the form “Things are thus and so”. Then it is plausible that the subject should be able to establish the following for at least some instances of φ :

1. $A \vdash \varphi$

(Read (1) as asserting that on the basis of A, one may justifiably (rationally) judge that φ .) However, establishing this connection (i.e., the connection here represented by “ \vdash ”) between A and φ requires more epistemic machinery than merely having some perceptual evidence.

To begin with, notice that the inference indicated in (1) is intended to be *creditable to the subject*; that is, the subject is to infer (come to know that) φ *on the basis* of A. But arguably, achieving this feat requires that the subject recognize both the evidentiary status of the members of A and the inferential nature of the connection holding between those propositions and the conclusion, φ . After all, if the subject did not recognize the members of A as having evidential relevance (to φ), then they could hardly claim to have inferred φ from them (see BonJour 1997).⁵

It is true that in the absence of such recognition φ might have arisen out of A in some manner that accorded with such an inference. But there would be no inference that the subject herself made. Boghossian makes this point forcefully with respect to reliabilism:

[I]t is very hard to see how if something I do is backed neither by something like a perception nor by something like an inference it can count as justified at all. It is, of course, the promise of a reliabilism about justification that it is able to make sense of such a possibility. But I [find] reliabilism inadequate, for failing to connect with a thinker's responsibility for his cognitive practice (Boghossian 2001, 634; emphasis added).

The same point applies to any broadly externalist theory of inference.⁶

It is clear, however, that the sort of recognition involved in these cases is not perceptual; one does not (perceptually) see A's being evidence for φ . Instead, the recognition is in some sense intellectual. Moreover, it is important to note that the kind of recognition invoked above is knowledge entailing. For instance, one cannot recognize $2 + 2$'s being identical to 4 without knowing that $2 + 2 = 4$. It follows that the subject must not only recognize, e.g., A's having evidential relevance (for φ), but that they must know that it has this relevance. (Similarly, if the subject does not recognize the relationship they discern between A and φ to be inferential in nature, it again seems wrong to say that they have in fact made an inference.)

A natural first pass for the empiricist would be to suggest that this sort of recognition is grounded in a very quick inductive inference of some variety. Unfortunately, this approach (and any other relying

⁵ This point need not involve us in Carroll's Regress (Carroll 1895) because it is possible to construe the kind of recognition involved here as a *non-propositional* attitude (see Grzankowski & Montague (2018) for discussion), as will be discussed in §II below. It is also important not to “overintellectualize” what is involved in recognizing evidentiary status or inferential connection.

⁶ The argument being developed here is quite general and does not depend on our starting with perceptual evidence specifically.

on inference) leads immediately to a vicious regress. For whatever evidence the induction is based on will have to be (nonperceptually) recognized as such. This, in turn, will require a second inductive inference, and so on *ad infinitum*.

If successful, the Argument from Agency shows that empiricist epistemology paints an impoverished picture of our epistemic resources. In addition to our other epistemic capacities, it appears that we need some way of accounting for the kind of recognitional states that tie our information processing capacities to our standing as epistemic agents. The states in question are essential to providing us with ownership over our epistemic activities and require knowledge that cannot be accounted for on purely empirical grounds.

II. Theories of Intuitions

Assuming that no satisfactory response to either or both of the preceding arguments can be found, it remains an open question as to what intuitions are. There are two general classes of theories about intuitions, reductionist theories (Gopnik and Schwitzgebel 1998; Kornblith 1998; Sosa 1998) and non-reductionist theories (Bealer 1992; Pust 2000; Huemer 2001; Chudnoff 2011a; Bengson 2015). Reductionist theories suffer from two general shortcomings. First, many of the proposed states to which intuitions are to be reduced are not able to play the epistemic roles isolated in the previous section. Suppose, for instance, that one proposes to reduce intuitions to a privileged subset of beliefs or inclinations to believe. It is unclear how to circumscribe this privileged set in such a way as to account for our categorical knowledge, as the SPA requires. The Cartesian Program places heavy demands on an adequate reductive theory because it requires that the reducing states play the epistemic role we isolated for intuitions above. Second, most proposed reductions are subject to straightforward counterexamples. Paradoxes (in which all of the premises of an argument are *intuitively* plausible and yet a contradiction results from their joint acceptance) are a rich source of such counterexamples. For instance, it can seem to me that every predicate defines a set and yet I can fail to believe (or even be inclined to believe) this principle because I know it gives rise to Russell's Paradox (Bealer 1992; Chudnoff 2011a; and Bengson 2015). For these reasons, we will turn our attention to non-reductive theories.

1. Propositionalism vs. Non-propositionalism

Standardly, intuitions are understood to be paradigmatic representational states, and specifically a type of propositional attitude. There are at least two reasons for this choice. First, "intuition reports" (whether involving the quasi-technical term "intuition" or the more colloquial vocabulary of "seeming") canonically involve 'that'-clauses occurring in the second argument place.⁷ On one influential view, 'that'-clauses are singular terms that refer to the propositions expressed by their embedded sentences.

⁷ For brevity, I am here using the parochial "'that'-clause" to refer to the larger class of finite complement clauses.

This language-centered argument, however, is weakened by alternative semantic analyses of ‘that’-clauses that do not treat them as denoting expressions (see, e.g., Russell 1906/08; Jubien 2001; Moltmann 2003; Forbes 2018). Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Moffett 2003), even if ‘that’-clauses do denote propositions, it does not follow that intuitions have those propositions as their contents.⁸

A second reason for thinking that intuitions are propositional attitudes is epistemological. Adapting a traditional point (e.g., see Bengson, *et. al.* 2011) concerning perceptual experience, one might claim that since intuitions are epistemically poised to justify beliefs, they must be the sorts of things that can stand in justificatory relations to beliefs. Since justification is a relation between propositions, intuitions must have propositional content. This epistemological consideration, however, is not dispositive. To understand why, consider the following pair of sentences:

2. It intuitively seems to x that two and two is four
3. x believes that two and two is four

The epistemological argument maintains that the content of intuition must be propositional because it is propositions that stand in logico-inferential relations to one another. But in these basic cases, the propositional content of the intuition and the belief are identical. And while it is true that p implies p , this sort of self-justification does not seem to be what proponents of this argument had in mind.⁹ Instead, what seems to justify our belief that two and two is four is *the intuition itself*, not its content. But if that is so, then there is no particular motivation for assigning propositional content to intuitions (or, for that matter, perceptions) in order to ground the inferential connections (see Turri 2009; also Ramsey 2019).

In response, advocates of propositionalism might try to appeal to a principle like Huemer’s theory of phenomenal conservatism (cf., Chudnoff 2011b and Bengson 2015):

PC: If it seems to S that P , then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some justification for believing that P (Huemer 2007, 30).

The idea would be that unless the content of the seeming and the content of belief are identical, PC would be implausible. In such cases, the belief that p is justified by the intuition that p , and the logical connection between their contents enables the latter to play this role with respect to the former, rather than various other beliefs, whose contents are not logically connected to the content of the intuition in the same way. Evidently, however, this is not so. Since PC is not an inference principle, its plausibility does not depend on content-identity or inferential relations. All that is required is that, whatever sort of content

⁸ For example, intuitions might instead be relations to a corresponding state of affairs that is the truth-maker for that proposition.

⁹ This is particularly true for the perceptual case that they were considering since the relevant propositions (e.g., that there is a computer in front of me) are not candidates for being self-justifying.

intuitions may have, this content makes it plausible to think that a corresponding belief is justified in virtue of this intuition.

What sort of non-propositional content might serve this role? Historically, the main alternative to a propositionalist view of intuition is a neo-Kantian theory according to which intuitions put us in direct, non-mediated contact with some external entity (see e.g., Gödel 1947, Parsons 1969). Arguably the most natural class of entities to invoke here are not objects *per se*, but states-of-affairs (where states of affairs are understood as complexes composed of objects and universals or tropes). So analyzed, intuitions would be non-propositional attitudes. The view, moreover, comports nicely with the analysis of ‘that’-clauses given in Moffett (2003). On that view, such clauses are intensional abstracts that uniformly denote propositions. However, in certain syntactic contexts the form of predication involved (descriptive predication; Bealer 1993) specifies the content of the attitude as the state-of-affairs that serves as the truth-maker for that proposition. Putting nuance to one side, the modified version of PC would be reformulated as follows:

PC*: If S intuits a state-of-affairs, *s*, (where *s* is the truth-maker for some proposition *p*) then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some justification for believing that *p*.

PC* takes the intuition to justify the corresponding belief in virtue of the metaphysical connection between propositions and their truth-makers. It seems to me that PC* enjoys at least as much epistemic plausibility as PC and so a propositional formulation of phenomenal conservatism cannot be used to favor propositionalist theories of intuitions over non-propositionalist theories.

Given this stalemate between propositionism and non-propositionalism, one might wonder if anything significant is at stake between the two views. In the next section, I will argue that the key difference lies in how the two views articulate the epistemic import of intuitions and, specifically, how they make sense of principles such as PC or PC*. I will further argue that the non-propositionalist is better able to account for this import.

2. *Reliabilism and Presentationality*

The question of the epistemic import of intuitions is not independent of the general problem of how to account for the epistemic import of basic evidence in general (i.e., evidence capable of stopping the regress of reasons). Specifically, it is a desideratum of a theory of basic evidence that there be a uniform, general account of such evidence that explains why basic evidence is basic. Given this, it is no surprise that contemporary rationalists have increasingly compared intuition with perception in an effort to illuminate the evidential status of intuitions. This strategy has the merit that, if successful, opponents of intuitions cannot merely dismiss them as mysterious cognitive bogeymen since they will have the same epistemically relevant features as uncontroversial sources of evidence.

2.1. *Modal Reliablism*. Bealer (1987, 2000) argued that candidate sources of basic evidence – including rational intuitions – count as basic evidence because they are modally reliable. Specifically:

A candidate source of evidence is basic iff for cognitive conditions of some suitably high quality, necessarily, if someone in those cognitive conditions were to process theoretically the deliverances of the candidate source, the resulting theory would provide a correct assessment as to the truth or falsity of those deliverances.

Bealer’s proposal does not entail that *we* are in suitably high cognitive conditions or even that our intuitions are reliable. This is salutary because it generalizes a moral one might draw from the so-called New Evil Demon Problem for reliablism (Cohen 1984), namely, that it is epistemically rational to rely on basic sources of evidence even in (unrecognized) epistemically unfavorable conditions. For instance, it is epistemically rational to rely on perception even in the event that we are (unknowingly) controlled by an Evil Demon.

There are a number of potential problems for modal reliablism, however, including versions of the generality problem (Sosa 1996; see Bealer 1996 for a response) and questions about whether or not perception qualifies as a basic source of evidence without *ad hoc* stipulations on what counts as “suitably high” cognitive conditions. However, a more important concern for present purposes is that modal reliablism (whether correct or not) seems to leave out something manifest in intuitions themselves that makes sense of our epistemic reliance on them as basic. In the following subsections, I will discuss some ways of explicating his feature.

2.2. *Presentationality*. The most compelling way for the propositionalist to understand the epistemic basicness of intuitions is in terms of its presentational characteristics (Bengson 2015; Chudnoff 2010). Bengson provides the following characterization:

Among those contentful states that are representational, some are also presentational: they do not simply represent the world as being a certain way [as in, e.g., belief]; in addition, they present the world as being that way (716).

According to Bengson, presentational states have several important features relevant to their epistemic import. Here we will consider four:

- Presentational states are baseless in the sense that they are not formed on the basis of other cognitive states
- Presentational states are nonvoluntary in the sense that they are things that happen to a cognitive agent rather than things a cognitive agent does.
- Presentational states are compelling; they dispose a cognitive agent to assent to their contents

- Presentational states (seem to) rationalize the cognitive action of forming a corresponding belief concerning their contents.

Given these features, Bengson argues that intuitions, understood as presentational states, are plausible candidates for a thesis such as PC presented above. The basic idea is that in presentational states, some content is presented as true in a way that seems to be out of our cognitive control and yet which also seems to rationalize corresponding doxastic actions (such as belief formation).

One important moral one might draw from Bengson's analysis is that the epistemic role of intuition is usefully characterized in terms of rational doxastic action.¹⁰ Indeed, it might be useful to think of PC as a two-part thesis, as follows:

PC1: If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, it is rational for S to judge and/or form the belief that p

PC2: If it is rational for S to judge and/or form the belief that p, then S thereby has at least some justification for believing that p

This two-part thesis provides one way of developing the idea that foundational beliefs are justified: their justification obtains in virtue of the rationality of forming the belief.

Despite this feature, there is an important lacuna in Bengson's proposal. In order to see the worry, let us distinguish between the following:

- a. A proposition being presented as true, and
- b. Our being presented with a proposition's truth.

In the first case, we would in ordinary speech characterize the proposition as coming across as true or as striking us as true.¹¹ These locutions don't fully respect the distinction I am pointing to, but the phrases place no emphasis on *why* the propositions strike us in this way. In this sense, the alethic basis of the state is (or may be) opaque. In the second case, however, what is presented is that which makes the proposition true. The basis for thinking the proposition is true is clear, since we are presented with its truth-maker.

I take it that Bengson's proposal is adequate to capture the first, but not the second of these phenomena. To see why this matters, consider the four features of presentational states listed above. The first three are intrinsic to presentational states themselves. The fourth, however, concerns the normative or evaluative features of such states. Presumably this fourth feature holds in virtue of the fact that presentational states are baseless, nonvoluntary and compelling. But the general class of baseless, nonvoluntary and compelling mental states seems far too broad to underwrite the normative condition. After all, the psychological literature is filled with atypical intrusive thoughts that plausibly satisfy these

¹⁰ Essentially the same point is made in Moffett 2007 with respect to traditional epistemic conservatism. Bengson himself resists moving in this direction.

¹¹ There are both extrinsic and intrinsic presentations. For instance, when someone assertively utters a sentence, S, that means p, p is (extrinsically) presented as true. But it is the intrinsic version that is relevant to intuition.

three conditions but which do not (even seem to) rationalize corresponding beliefs and which would be unwelcome bedfellows. Bengson's fourth condition seems to require something additional and this suggests that he has not fully unpacked the cognitive state he is aiming to isolate.

One possibility is provided in Chudnoff (2011b, 2013). According to Chudnoff, the phenomenology of presentations involves two, intimately connected seemings: (1) a seeming to fact-intuit that *p*, and (2) a seeming to be intellectually item-aware of an item that makes it the case that *p*. The idea is that “[p]resentational phenomenology just is this correlation between two kinds of phenomenal property: a[n intuitional] experience possesses presentational phenomenology when in it you both seem to fact-[intuit] that *p* and seem to be [intellectually] item-aware of an item that makes it the case that *p*” (2013, p. 320). Such a view promises to capture the idea of a proposition's being presented as true.¹² Roughly, a presentational state is a complex consisting of two phenomenal states whose contents are related by the truth-maker relation.

However, notice that I can think about (and so be aware of) the truth-maker for the proposition that *p* and think about the proposition that *p* without thereby being in a state that presents *p* as true. Thus, in order to make Chudnoff's proposal work, we need to suppose that what he calls intellectual item-awareness requires that the item be or appear existent in some relevant way.¹³ But if so, intellectual (and perceptual) item-awareness, as Chudnoff understands it, looks like a presentational state with nonpropositional content.¹⁴ What is the analysis of this presentational state? Unfortunately, the previous theory is not applicable here. (I will discuss presentational states of objects in the next subsection.) Nevertheless, given a suitable account of object presentation, the combined theories provide a highly articulated theory of intuitions that plausibly accounts for their epistemic import.

2.3. *Immanence*. Despite the admitted power of the presentational approach outlined above, the fully articulated theory seems unnecessarily baroque. Let us take stock. What was needed was a theory of intuitions that could underwrite the epistemic schema:

PC: If it seems to *x* that *p*, then absent any defeaters *x* has a prima facie justification for believing that *p* (or the variant, PC*)

¹² Chudnoff's terminology is unfortunate. Propositions and facts are categorically distinct and there are good reasons to deny that facts are true propositions (Vendler 1967). Calling an intuition with propositional content “fact-intuition” threatens to obscure this distinction. Nevertheless, Chudnoff's view requires that “fact-intuition” have propositional content (since facts don't have truth-makers), so I will proceed as if this state has propositional content. This is somewhat problematic because it is unclear what is distinctive about fact-intuition as a propositional attitude since it cannot itself be presentational on pain of regress.

¹³ It will also be necessary to require that I recognize the object of my item-awareness to be the truth-maker for the object of my fact-intuition.

¹⁴ If this is correct, then propositionalism will inherit whatever potential concerns one might have with the non-propositional approach.

The theory provided plausibly does this. But once we have been forced to accept a nonpropositional presentational state whose content is the truth-maker for the proposition p , it is unclear what further need there is for the posited propositional state. Epistemically, it looks to be little more than a third wheel since the nonpropositional state can plausibly underwrite the schema PC* from the previous section:

PC*: If S intuits a state-of-affairs, s , (where s as the truth-maker for some proposition p), then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some justification for believing that p .

Simplicity, therefore, favors the nonpropositionalist. We can simply take intuitions (and perceptions) to be presentational states whose contents are states of affairs. But how are we to account for presentational states of states of affairs? In concluding this section, I will sketch one way of developing this idea as a form of intellectual direct realism.

Let us call any object with which we are in direct (non-mediated) cognitive contact “immanent”. Then an object p is presented as existing to S iff p is immanent to S . The intuitive idea is that any object with which we are in direct cognitive contact will give us the impression of existing *in the sense relevant to objects of its kind* (see McDaniel 2017 for discussion). On this view, all and only sources of basic evidence – including intuition – will be relations whose contents are appropriate states of affairs that are immanent to the subject.¹⁵

One radical (some might think disqualifying) consequence of this position is that, in order to preserve the possibility of intuitional error (fallibilism), it may require us to accept the possibility of direct contact with states of affairs that do not in the relevant way exist. For example, if it wrongly seems to me that every predicate defines a set, I may need to be in direct intellectual contact with the impossible state of affairs of every predicate’s defining a set. The view may, therefore, be committed to a strong, Meinongian form of ontological pluralism.¹⁶ Whether or not such a view is philosophically defensible is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the philosophical merits of the view cannot be assessed independently of its potential role in giving a general theory of evidence as articulated here.

In the final section, I discuss a few complexities involved with the use of intuitions in philosophy and defend the view that expert intuition is *prima facie* more reliable than the intuitions of nonphilosophers. In doing so, I also address some of the growing literature in experimental philosophy on the topic

¹⁵ Sources of basic evidence are domain restricted. One cannot intuit this apple’s being red nor can one perceptually experience the sum of 2 and 2’s being 4.

¹⁶ A weaker version of this view has recently been defended for perception by Johnson (2004). One interesting feature of the proposal is that it preserves a very simple epistemic position (naïve direct realism) by adopted a revisionary metaphysics. Representationalism makes the opposite trade-off.

The considerations in section III concerning impure intuitions suggest that there may be a way to resist the strong form of ontological pluralism.

III. Error, Expertise and Experimental Philosophy

A salutary feature of the presentational approach is that it accounts for the evidential status of intuition while attenuating the connection between evidence and truth: intuition (like perception and introspection) counts as evidence whether or not it is reliably connected to the truth. If, as Descartes imagined, there is an Evil Demon systematically undercutting our intuitions, then we are epistemically unlucky. But, according to presentationalists, those intuitions are evidence, nonetheless.

Such metaphysical possibilities, however, are not the only source of possible intuitional error. Here, I will focus on one source of particular relevance to philosophy. To see the issue, consider that in philosophy the use of intuitions will be in an important sense impure. Consider, for example, a standard thought experiment like the existence of philosophical zombies. Philosophical zombies are exact physical duplicates of us but lack some or all of the mental states we actually have. Call the state of affairs of there being zombies, *Z*. Arguably, *Z* is not a plausible candidate for being the object of an intuition; we cannot settle the existence or non-existence of zombies intuitively, if we can settle it at all.¹⁷ Thus, *Z* will not be an immanent state of affairs. The relevant state of affairs in the physicalism debate is not *Z*, but rather *Z*'s being metaphysically possible. Philosophers who claim to have “zombie intuitions” are claiming that they intuit that zombies are metaphysically possible. Call this state of affairs *ModalZ*. On the present view, it is *ModalZ* that is intuitively immanent to those who have “zombie intuitions”. If so, then a state of affairs (*ModalZ*) can be immanent or partially immanent to a subject *S* even though a proper part of that state of affairs (*Z*) is not. The embedded state of affairs is given to us representationally. Making this fully explicit, we can say that the zombie intuition is of *Z*'s (so-represented) being possible.

It is useful to make this point in the context of what Chalmers' (2002) calls positive conceivability:

[T]o positively conceive of a situation is to imagine (in some sense) a specific configuration of objects and properties. When one imagines a situation and reasons about it, the object of one's imagination is often *revealed* as a situation in which *S* is the case, for some *S*. When this is so, we can say that the imagined situation *verifies* *S*, and that one has imagined that *S*. Overall, we can say that *S* is positively conceivable when one can imagine that *S*: that is, when one can imagine a situation that *verifies* *S*. p. 150) [emphasis mine].

In such cases we must (1) First imagine a certain situation, and (2), determine that the situation verifies (or fails to verify) a given target proposition. This two-step process is characteristic of many of the most philosophically important thought experiments (e.g., the Gettier examples). On the present view, the first

¹⁷ Presumably the actual existence or nonexistence of zombies would need to be settled by more general principles of theory construction.

step, that of imagining a situation, involves representational (not presentational) states. However, the second step, in which the target proposition *S* is “revealed” as being true in the imagined situation, involves us in an impure presentational state.

One upshot of this result is that philosophical reliance on non-immanent (representational) states of affairs in thought experiments introduces a novel source of intuitional error. Specifically, our grasp of the concepts deployed in representing the embedded state of affairs will be susceptible to various kinds of local misunderstanding (Bealer 1998).¹⁸ The reliability of our intuitions in these cases will, therefore, be subject to our degree of mastery of those concepts.¹⁹ If we misunderstand those concepts in ways relevant to the intuition being invoked, our intuitions will be compromised. For example, in the case of the zombie intuitions, the extent to which we (mis)understand the concepts of physical and mental properties may have bearing on the reliability of those intuitions.²⁰

This observation about concept mastery provides some insight into the basis for the “expertise defense” of the reliability of intuitions. Given that philosophical experts are more likely than nonexperts to have adequate mastery over the philosophical concepts relevant to a certain case, we would expect that expert intuition is more reliable than intuitions generated by novices (Ludwig 2007 and others). A huge number of philosophical intuitions, such as the one with which this paper began, require little expertise to adequately grasp. In such cases, we would predict little variance in the intuitive judgments of experts and novices. For better or worse, however, many thought experiments require significant philosophical training to adequately grasp. A simple example is Gettier’s first counterexample to the traditional analysis of knowledge. The case involves a nontrivial understanding of the logical behavior of definite descriptions and is frequently lost on nonphilosophers.

In recent years, something of a cottage industry has arisen within the community of experimental philosophy that purports to empirically test the expertise defense.²¹ While some have claimed that this research casts doubt on the defense (e.g., Nado 2014, Horvath & Koch 2020), it is arguable that the overall project has flaws that are difficult, perhaps impossible, to overcome. While a complete discussion of the literature is out of place here, I will close by considering some of the issues, using a paper by Tobia, Buckwalter, & Stich (2012) as a stalking horse.

¹⁸ Though I won’t press the analogy, it is possible that a similar type of error could arise in both perception and introspection via cognitive penetration.

¹⁹ A second source of error concerns our mastery of the relevant truth theory. If my grasp of the concepts involved in the proposition believed involve a misunderstanding, I may think that a given state of affairs is a truth-maker for that proposition even though it is not.

²⁰ A similar, and equally important, complication arises when *reporting* an objectual intuition. Such reports involve *inter alia* choices about the best way to characterize (that is, represent) those objectual contents.

²¹ It is a “defense” because some experimental philosophers have claimed that experiments testing the intuitions of nonphilosophers (typically, university undergraduates) has called into question the reliability of the intuitions of that population. For my part, I do not see that the results establish anything of the sort. For a general critical discussion of experimental work on intuition see Bengson 2013.

Before turning to specifics, however, I want to be sure the goal is clearly set. In a recent article, Horvath & Koch make the following claim:

[T]he fact that philosophers are experts in one way or another is neither in question, nor is it enough for the expertise defense to succeed. Rather, philosophers must have a specific intuitive expertise for judging hypothetical cases in their respective areas of specialization, of a kind that would make them more resistant to the influence of irrelevant factors (2020, p. 3).

If this second claim is understood to mean that philosophers need to be more resistant to influence *from any* irrelevant factors, then it is patently false. Many cognitive biases may be hardwired into our cognitive architecture and no amount of expertise will significantly help to overcome them. And even if our biases are not so strongly engrained, it is no part of the expertise defense that experts lack significant cognitive biases. The claim is somewhat more plausible when understood to mean that philosophers need to be more resistant to influence *from some (or some significant range)* of irrelevant factors. But even this weaker thesis is too strong. *Even if it were shown that philosophers are as susceptible to all cognitive biases as any other group, this would not show that the expertise defense is wrong.* All that is entailed by the expertise defense is that (a) intuitions are not known to be generally unreliable for philosophical experts and (b) that expertise decreases the unreliability of intuitions compared to novices. Any stronger standard is simply targeting a strawman.

Unfortunately, much of the experimental literature seems to either explicitly or implicitly target precisely this straw man (e.g., Schulz, Cokely, & Feltz 2011; Schwitzgebel & Cushman 2012; Wiegmann, Horvath, & Meyer 2020). Consider the paper by Tobia, Buckwalter, & Stich, which is frequently cited as part of the growing body of literature which purports to call the expertise defense into question. In it, they argue that philosophers are as susceptible to framing biases as novices. Specifically, they develop two experiments involving the “actor-observer bias”. This purported bias arises because people will frequently make different intuitive judgments when a scenario is considered in the first-person (i.e., presented in the second-person voice) than the judgment they make when it is considered/presented in the third person. But, it is claimed, this variance in judgment is based on irrelevant factors. They write:

This effect is important in assessing the use of intuitions as evidence in philosophy, since a difference in responses between actor and observer conditions is *prima facie* problematic. ... [W]hether an action in a moral scenario is framed in first [*sic*: second] or third person terms is almost always irrelevant to a moral judgment about the action (p. 631).

The vignettes used in the experiments are versions of philosophically familiar thought experiments: the first is Williams' (Smart & Williams 1973) "Jim and the Indians" [*sic*] thought experiment and the second, a version of Foot's (1967) Trolley Problem, both stated in either the third-person or second-person voice.²²

In both experiments, Tobia et. al. found what they report to be significant framing effects in both philosophical novices and philosophers (individuals holding a Ph.D. in philosophy). In the first experiment, they report their results as follows:

Among the undergraduates, 19% rated the agent's proposed action as morally obligatory for themselves in the Actor condition while 53% in the Observer condition rated the action as morally obligatory for 'Jim' (Fisher's exact test, $p=0.05$, all tests two-tailed). Among the professional philosophers, a significant difference between conditions was also found, but it was in the opposite direction! In the Actor condition, 36% rated the action as morally obligatory while only 9% rated it obligatory for 'Jim' in the Observer condition (p. 632)

And in the second experiment:

What Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2008)²³ found was [that i]n the Actor condition, 65% of the undergraduates answered "yes" while in the Observer condition, 90% answered "yes" [to the question of whether it was morally permissible to kill one person by throwing a switch in order to save five]. [Professional philosophers] displayed a significant Actor-Observer bias opposite to that of the undergraduates surveyed by Nadelhoffer and Feltz: 89% of philosophers in the Actor condition responded that the action was permissible, while 64% in the Observer condition answered that the action was permissible (Fisher's exact test, $p=0.05$) (p. 633).

For now, let us assume that Tobia et. al. have shown that philosophers exhibit an actor-observer bias on a par with that found in novices (I will return to question this below). As noted above, this result is not sufficient to cast doubt on the expertise defense. In order to do that, we must show that the philosophers' intuitions are either unreliable or, if reliable, not more reliable than those of novices. Have either of these conditions been met?

We are now faced with the first of a series of problems for the Tobia et. al. study, and most others in this vein. To establish anything about the reliability or unreliability of intuitions in these cases, we must

²² I will assume familiarity with both vignettes.

²³ The second experiment made use of Nadelhoffer and Feltz's original experiment, which was only run on undergraduates.

know what the correct answer is. Needless to say, this is contentious. What we can say is that the majority of philosophers in both experiments agreed on the same answer irrespective of the voice of the vignette. If we assume that the majority answer is the correct answer in each case, the Tobia et. al. results seem to establish that philosophers' intuitions are, in fact, reliable even if they are bias prone. Are the philosophers' intuitions more reliable than those of novices? This is nearly impossible to sort out on the basis of this experiment. In both experiments, we can say that the majority of philosophers came to the same conclusion regardless of the control group, while this is not true of the novices in the first experiment. It isn't clear that the study says anything interesting about the issue beyond that. In short, just looking at the overall results, the Tobia et. al. study does not seem to have any significant bearing on the expertise defense.

The most interesting result of the study is their finding that the actor-observer bias pushed philosophers and novices in different directions. This is a striking result and it is worth more discussion than the authors give it. In effect, philosophers (statistically speaking) are less willing to place moral obligations on and allow moral permissions to arbitrary third person subjects than they are to themselves; by contrast, novices are more willing to do these things. What accounts for this less permissive moral stance on the part of experts?

This is not the place to try to answer that question. Nevertheless, there are features of the experimental design that have bearing on the issue. As we saw, Tobia et. al. maintain that the actor/observer distinction is morally irrelevant. Notice, however, that the distinction is not irrelevant from the point of view of the vignettes themselves. A vignette that stipulates that the agent is you contains massively more detail about the psychological, educational, and evaluative states of the agent (among many, many others) than one that merely stipulates that the agent is some person or other. This fact significantly confounds the experiment and undercuts the authors' claim that the control is morally irrelevant. For while ethics is arguably universal in the sense that it applies equally to all persons in the same circumstances, features such as an individual's level of education, level of expertise, and psychological states are morally nontrivial components of many circumstances. While its true that such features can be glossed over when considering the moral permissibility of, say, shooting a random person on 5th Avenue, they cannot be ignored when considering situations that are morally more nuanced. Take the first vignette, as an example. A main point Williams was trying to establish was that a simple utilitarian calculus can be put at odds with morally important questions concerning personal integrity. Given the sheer moral complexity of Williams' situation, even a philosopher who thinks *she* is morally obligated to act in that situation (having considered views on such matters), may reasonably feel that someone without such views is in a relevantly different circumstance and may not be so obligated. Given that Jim is a generic stand-in for all individuals of widely divergent experiences, aptitudes, and other

capacities, this hardly seems like an irrelevant difference between the cases.

This brings me to a final point. The Tobia et. al. study (and most others) relies on familiar philosophical thought experiments. In doing so, the responses they get from experts are in many cases likely to be considered judgments and not intuitions at all. Ironically, both of the vignettes in this pair of experiments involve thought experiments that were designed to give us a sense of moral tension rather than moral clarity. For my part, my own intuitive response to both vignettes is that I have none. And yet, here is the response prompt for the first case (the second is similar):

Do you think that in these circumstances you are [alternatively: Jim is] morally obligated to shoot and kill the one native in order to save the others? (p. 632)

This prompt asks for my judgment about the case, not my intuition; and in answering it, it is plausible I would have given my considered judgment. This suggests that we have little or no reason to think the experiment even touches on the question of the reliability of expert intuitions in philosophy. Put generally, most of the literature in experimental philosophy on “intuitions” is less misleadingly understood as research concerning “questionnaire responses of whatever basis”. For this reason, it is unclear what, if any, relevance this body of work has for philosophers interested in the epistemology of intuition as discussed in this chapter.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined arguments for two theses: (1) That the absence of intuitions undermines much of what we pre-theoretically take ourselves to know (including basic perceptual knowledge) and additionally undermines our capacity as epistemic agents; and (2) that the best way of understanding the epistemic role of intuition is in terms of its presentational features and their capacity to rationalize doxastic actions. Taken together, these two claims provide a robust contemporary defense of rationalism.

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