

# Précis of *Intuition*

Doctoral Dissertation  
The Australian National University, 2011

This thesis seeks to advance our understanding of what intuitions are. I argue that there is a class of mental states deserving of the label ‘intuition’, and which is a good candidate for a psychological kind, a kind which cuts the mind at its natural joints. These mental states are *experiences* of a certain kind. In particular, they are experiences with representational content, and with a certain phenomenal character.

I begin by identifying the target of the investigation. Intuitions are mental states, but which ones? Giving examples helps: a person has an intuition when it seems to her that torturing the innocent is wrong, or that if something is red it is coloured. We can also provide an initial characterisation of the state by saying that it has representational content, often causes belief, and appears to justify belief. In addition, there is something it is like to have an intuition: intuition has a certain phenomenal character.

I reject two common constraints on intuition, namely that to count as an intuition a mental state must involve the modally strong, and it must have a certain etiology. A mental state can involve the modally strong by being about necessity or possibility, but such a restriction is unmotivated and implausible when what we are seeking is a mental kind. Moreover, no other attempt at restricting intuition to the modally strong fares any better.

Similarly, I argue that we have no good reason to accept an etiological constraint on intuition: that it must arise, or fail to arise, in certain ways. Some have argued, for example, that intuitions cannot result from conscious reasoning, on the grounds that they could not then provide foundational justification. This argument is shown to rely on a conflation.

Some believe that intuition does not explain anything which cannot be explained by other mental states. One version of this view takes intuition to reduce to belief. I argue that this entails that agents are rationally criticisable in situations where we know they are not, and that such views are therefore untenable. It does not matter whether a view seeks to reduce intuition to an all-out or to a partial belief, nor whether it instead seeks to reduce it to the *acquisition* of an all-out, or a partial, belief. And it does not matter whether it seeks to reduce it to a belief or a partial belief in the content of the intuition itself, or to belief or partial belief in a different con-

tent (or the acquisition thereof). The same argument is effective against all these views. It is also effective against attempts to reduce *perception* in one of these ways. Furthermore, the argument suggests a similarity in nature between the two states: intuition and perception are experiences.

Some take intuition to instead be reducible to a *disposition* to have a belief. I consider a line of argument against such views due to Frank Jackson, find it wanting, and present two new arguments. The first claims that these reductive views are incapable of explaining certain features of the phenomenal character of intuition. The argument is likely to be dialectically ineffective, however: the disposition theorist is not likely to acknowledge that there is something here to account for. But a second argument from rational criticisability shows that dispositional views also entail that subjects are rationally criticisable in situations where we know they are not. They must therefore be rejected. The argument, also effective in the case of perception, indicates that intuition and perception are states that carry no inherent rational risk. This points to the same conclusion as before: intuition and perception are experiences.

In the remainder of the thesis I develop a positive account of intuition as an experience. I introduce a distinction between content-specific and attitude-specific phenomenology. Perception has content-specific phenomenology: what it is like to see something green is different from what it is like to see something red. Does intuition too?

Intuition, I assume, has content-specific phenomenology just in case thought does. I argue, however, that thought does not have content-specific phenomenology, and that intuition therefore also does not. Even those who claim that thought does have content-specific phenomenology agree that this is an elusive property of it: cognitive phenomenology is hard to see, if it is there. This establishes a presumption against it: those who do not recognise content-specific phenomenology in their own experience, and who cannot be convinced by argument that thought has such phenomenology, should not accept that it does.

One argument for content-specific phenomenology of thought claims that thought having such phenomenology is necessary for us to know what we think in the way that we do. But this argument fails: we can simply *think with understanding*, and thereby know what we think. Likewise, minimal pair arguments also fail to rationally persuade us of their

conclusions. Such arguments attempt to infer that the best explanation of differences in overall phenomenology are that thought has content-specific phenomenology. But because many different things contribute to our overall phenomenology, and because these contributors appear and disappear often, many other explanations account for such data equally well. Both main lines of argument for content-specific cognitive phenomenology therefore fail, and the presumption against it stands. Given the link between content-specific phenomenology of thought and of intuition we conclude that, unlike perception, intuition does not have content-specific phenomenology.

In what sense, then, can intuition be an experience? Intuition is an experience because it has what I call *attitude-specific* phenomenology. In particular, it has phenomenology of pushiness, objectivity, and valence. An experience has phenomenology of objectivity when its purporting to be about the way things are, objectively speaking, is itself an aspect of its character. It has phenomenology of pushiness when its pushing its subject to accept its content is itself an aspect of its character. I argue that perception and intuition share these two aspects of attitude-specific phenomenology. In addition, intuition has phenomenology of valence: something can both seem true and seem false in intuition, and this is reflected in the phenomenology of the experience. It may be that perception does not have valence, or it may be that it does, but that it only comes in the positive variety.

The case for the claim that intuition and perception has such phenomenology is partly made by careful description, allowing recognition of the relevant character in the reader's own experience. It is also partly made through abductive argument. That intuition and perception have phenomenology of objectivity can explain facts about it that are independently plausible: objectivity is part of the content of these states. In the case of perception it can also explain the widely noted point that perceptual experience is transparent. Likewise, that perception and intuition have phenomenology of pushiness explains facts that are independently plausible. Perceptual and intuitional experience do not offer up the possibility for consideration that things might be a certain way. Perceptual and intuitional experiences *push* the subject to believe that things actually *are* that way. It is in virtue of doing this that the experiences appear to *inform* the subject that things are the way they represent them as being. This

is well explained by perceptual and intuitional experience having phenomenology of pushiness.

On the proposed account, then, intuition is an experience with representational content, without content-specific phenomenology, but with attitude-specific phenomenology of pushiness, objectivity, and valence. In the final part of the thesis this conception of intuition is put to use. I argue that Liberalism should be accepted for intuition just in case it is accepted for perception. Liberalism is the view that, when certain conditions are met, a subject's *having* an experience can *make* her justified in believing the content of that experience.

Liberalism can be understood as a claim about the epistemic powers of certain experiences. Some experiences can make a subject justified in believing what they represent, without 'requiring assistance' from her being justified in believing some other proposition. Consider the analogy: it is no part of what makes me justified in believing that there are three pens on my desk that I am not distracted by a deafening noise: having a certain visual perceptual experience is what makes me justified. But it is plausible that my not being distracted by a deafening noise is a necessary condition for the justification to accrue. This simply reflects a general distinction between necessary conditions in a wide sense, and the things involved in making certain things so.

In the case of a subject's acquiring justification from having perceptual or intuitional experiences, this conclusion is especially interesting. That is because, even if it turns out that a necessary condition for receiving justification from having an experience, is having justification (or being 'entitled') to believe that one is not isolated from the way things are, for example by being a brain in a vat, this may still be no part of what *makes* the subject justified.

I argue that what explains that perceiving that  $p$  can make a subject justified in believing that  $p$  is that the experience has phenomenology of pushiness and objectivity. These features are shared with intuitional experience. Moreover, none of the major disanalogies between intuition and perception—that perception has, but intuition lacks, content-specific phenomenology, and that perception is, but intuition is not, underpinned by a causal mechanism we understand—stand in the way of adopting Liberalism. We should therefore accept Liberalism for intuition just in case we

accept it for perception. I argue, moreover, that we *should* accept Liberalism for both states. For being pushed to believe that things are a certain way, objectively speaking, simply by how things appear to one to be, this constitutes a genuine reason to believe that they actually are that way, objectively speaking.

If the view of intuition I defend is accepted there are some consequences for philosophical methodology. Intuition cannot be charged with being mysterious; it is an experience the nature of which has been clarified. We can also see why having an intuition provides justification for belief: having an intuition that  $p$  is a reason to believe that  $p$ . Appeal to intuition is therefore unlikely to be illegitimate across the board. But much is also left open by the view: in particular how thick on the ground defeaters are. If defeaters are omnipresent, we will not usually be left with all things considered justification from having an intuition. If defeaters are scarce, that may often be the result.

A consequence of the account of intuition I have presented is that intuition may be more common than one might have been lead to believe. What it takes to have an intuition that  $p$  is to have a mental state which represents that  $p$ , which lacks content-specific phenomenology, but which has attitude-specific phenomenology of pushiness, objectivity and valence. Modality need not be involved, and nor are mental states ruled out on account of not having the right etiology. Presumably, then, we can have such mental states with a variety of contents.

This opens up the intriguing possibility that, whatever its role in philosophy, intuition may play a rather important role in our everyday lives. We often have intuitions, in the sense developed here. When we do, the mere having of the intuitional experience has the capacity to make the person justified in believing that things are that way, objectively speaking. Whether it actually does make the intuiter justified will depend on a number of things. It will depend, of course, on what the preconditions are for an experience to provide justification, on whether a person must be justified in believing that she is not isolated from the way things are by being a brain in a vat, for example. And it will depend on how widely available defeaters for the justification acquired are. Perhaps it will depend on further things besides. But it is not unlikely that intuition, as this psychological kind has been conceived of here, plays a pervasive and important role in our mental and rational lives.