



Epistemic Status of Intuition

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Abstract

Philosophers appeal to intuitions while constructing, shaping, and redefining their philosophical theories or concepts. Of the various roles that intuition plays like its role in the acquisition of mathematical and logical knowledge, one is philosophical theorizing. Philosophers don't question their intuitions, at least intuitions of singular classificational propositions as they consider their intuitions to be a Basic Evidential Source as other sources like perception, testimony etc. However, intuition's role as prima facie evidence in philosophy has been challenged by a number of philosophers. Thus, this paper attempts to expound on the reliability of intuition in philosophical theorising as prima facie evidence and also calls attention to the debate between naturalists and antinaturalists with regard to the epistemic character of intuition.

Keywords: Intuition, Naturalists, Antinaturalists, Philosophical analysis, Prima facie evidence, Apriori intuition, A posteriori intuition, Mentalism, Extramentalism

Introduction

Of the many roles assigned to intuitions by philosophers, like its role in the acquisition of mathematical and logical knowledge, one is philosophical analysis. The paper will restrict itself to the role of intuitions in philosophical analysis. Most philosophers appeal to intuitions while constructing, shaping, and redefining their philosophical theories or concepts. However, intuition's role as prima facie evidence in philosophy has been challenged by a number of philosophers (Williamson, 2007; Cappelen, 2012; Deutsch, 2015). These philosophers deny that intuition plays any role as prima facie evidence in philosophical analysis either because they deny that intuitions, at least as a sui generis state, exist or because they deny that such states can serve as prima facie evidence for their contents. The reason for these attacks is probably that explicit knowledge obtained through well-defined, if possible, standardized methodology is considered to be reliable and hence intuitive knowledge obtained through ad hoc or, at least, less-defined practices is considered to be unreliable. However, such an argument is not sufficient to deny intuition completely as a source of knowledge. More researchers now recognize that deliberative conscious reasoning is not the only way of arriving at valid knowledge. For instance, Chalmers (Chalmers, 1998, 111) contends that intuition is 'the very raison d'être' of the problem of cognition. Denying it would mean denying the problem and the phenomenon of consciousness itself.

I. Intuition as a Basic Evidential Source (BES)

Bealer introduces the 'standard justificatory procedure' in his paper 'The Incoherence of Empiricism' which states, 'we standardly use various items- for example, experiences, observations, testimony- as prima facie evidence for things, such as beliefs, and theories' (Bealer, 1992, 100). In epistemology, there is literature on the analysis of knowledge and justification. Hypothetical cases like Tom Grabit and his kleptomaniacal proclivities at the library, gypsy lawyers, Norman the clairvoyant, barn facades in the countryside and the like generate intuitive judgements, agreed upon by a good deal of epistemologists, about whether, under the described conditions, a subject knows or is justified in believing, something to be the case. Intuitions about these cases are then used as evidence to judge if a certain epistemic notion

rightly applies. Such method of using hypothetical cases to elicit intuitions is not exclusive to epistemology. In the philosophy of language, there is literature on the Gricean account of meaning, which uses cases of subjects and their self inferential intentions. The literature on personal identity has cases of brain transplantation, memory loss and duplication. Not to mention various such cases are also prevalent in moral philosophy. A theory is usually judged to be narrow or insufficient when it fails to accommodate our intuition and judged comprehensive insofar as it captures more of our intuitions. This shows that according to the standard justificatory procedure, intuitions are used as evidence. Bealer states that intuition as well counts as *prima facie* evidence and describes it as an intellectual seeming which should be distinguished from belief, judgments, guesses, hunches and common sense and he further states that 'when we speak of intuition, we mean a *prima facie* intuition' (Bealer, 1992, 102). Hence, we can say mental states like visual seemings, auditory seemings, memory seemings, and intellectual seeming (intuition) count as basic evidential source (BES)¹ for Bealer. A class M of mental states is *prima facie* evidence or basic evidential source for the truth of its content, when the state occurs in favorable circumstances. Thus, when a person experiences a state of seeming to see that p and is in favorable visual circumstances, this is *prima facie* evidence for the truth of p; or the state of seeming to see that p is a basic evidential source for the truth of p.

Then what qualifies a class of M mental states as a BES?

Alvin Goldman and Joel Pust have laid down the following necessary but not sufficient condition called the reliable indicatorship (RI) (Goldman & Pust, 1998, 180):

(RI) Mental states of type M constitute a basic evidential source only if M- states are reliable indicators of the truth of their contents (or the truth of closely related contents), at least when the M-states occur in M-favorable circumstances.

The reliable indicatorship (RI) simply means that when M-states occur in M-favorable circumstances their contents are generally true. When one seems to see that there is a book on the desk under favorable circumstances of sufficient light, sufficient proximity, and no obstruction, then it is usually true that there is a book on the desk.

The traditional philosophical view of intuition is that intuitions count as a basic evidential source and because of this reason many traditional philosophers hold that when someone has an intuition with the content p, this is *prima facie* evidence for the truth of p. In other words, I(p) is *prima facie* evidence for p. That is to say, if intuition is a basic evidential source, I(p) is *prima facie* evidence for the truth of p. As formula (RI) indicates, however, intuition only qualifies as a basic evidential source if intuitional states (intuitings) are reliable indicators of the truth of their contents when they occur in favorable circumstances. It is yet to be seen whether intuition indeed satisfies (RI).

According to standard philosophical methodology (SPM), the content of a typical intuition is a proposition about whether a case or example is an instance for or against a certain kind, concept, or predicate. In other words, the contents of intuitions are usually singular classificational propositions that indicate whether such-and-such an example is or is not an instance of knowledge, of justice, of personal identity, and so forth. Thus, intuited propositions are standardly of the form, 'Example e is (is not) an instance of F' and intuitions are spontaneous mental assentings to such classificational propositions. For instance, the propositional content of a singular intuition might have the form, 'Example e is an instance of G (e.g., justified true

¹ A phrase coined by Goldman and Pust for sources that are *prima facie* evident.

belief) but not an instance of F (e.g., knowledge).' Thus, defending or refuting some general theory is the main aim of philosophical activity at least when it comes to philosophical analysis.

Philosophers don't question their intuitions, at least intuitions of singular classificational propositions as they consider their intuitions to be a BES. The point that was raised above was that intuition only qualifies as a BES if intuitional states (intuitings) are reliable indicators of the truth of their contents when they occur in favorable circumstances. Alvin Goldman and Joel Pust raise the question whether intuition really is a BES, does it satisfy the condition RI? If we notice the phrase 'favorable circumstances', our answer to the question lies in there. So what would constitute favorable and unfavorable circumstances for intuition? Misinformation and confusion have been postulated as two plausible candidates of unfavorable circumstances for the exercise of intuition. Another possible reason for erroneous intuition is theory contamination. If the person experiencing an intuition has a strong allegiance to an explicit theory about the nature of F, this may interfere with their intuitions about the specific case at hand. Therefore, a prior theoretical commitment might be an unfavorable circumstance for the reliable exercise of intuition. Further, psychological research has established that the availability of various alternatives or considerations influences an evaluator's judgements. If an evaluator has never thought of a Cartesian demon alternative or a brain in a vat alternative or does not access such an alternative at the time of judgement they will attribute knowledge of p to someone in favourable circumstances. But if one of these alternatives is accessed, the intuitive feeling that the same person does not know p will be fairly strong. Thus what is mentally available or accessible can play a large role in determining an attributor's intuitions. Thus, we see several theories on knowledge are contextualist. All these factors need to be taken into consideration and this shows why philosophical practitioners exercise caution in philosophical analysis.

Bealer's argument on the reliability of intuition as prima facie evidence is worth mentioning here. He starts by questioning the empiricist's belief in experience and observation as prima facie evidence and their exclusion of other sources, e.g., intuition, testimony and inference as prima facie evidence for their practice. Empiricists rely on intuitions when it comes to their formulation of theories, otherwise how else would they know what does or doesn't count as an observation, an experience, a theory, a law of nature, a logical truth and so on. Therefore, if intuitions regarding these matters are considered to be reliable, then intuitions about what does and does not count as prima facie evidence should also be deemed to be reliable. In general terms, if our pre-theoretical intuitions are unreliable, the resulting comprehensive theory would also be unreliable. On the other hand, if our pre-theoretical intuitions are reliable, then our pre-theoretical intuitions about what is and is not prima facie evidence would also be reliable. And we have intuition to the effect that intuitions are prima facie evidence. Also, there is a wealth of concrete-case intuitions in the literature that proves that intuitions are prima facie evidence.

Intuition like other BESs is not infallible. Like sense perception, intuition too can be mistaken. For example, our intuition that the naive comprehensive axiom of set theory is true, despite our belief that it is not true. It is similar to sense perception in this regard. In Muller-Lyer's illusion, it appears to us that one of the two arrows is longer than the other, despite our belief that both are of equal length. A person's concrete case intuition may appear to be inconsistent with one another, or different people may have conflicting intuitions from time to time, or there may be a conflict between certain theories and certain intuitions. Such situations also arise in the case of sense experience and observation. If such conflicts are not deemed to be enough to discard observation and sense experience as prima facie evidence why should it be so for intuition?

II. The Objects of Philosophical Analysis

What kind of entities does intuition provide evidence for? There are two positions— mentalism and extra-mentalism when it comes to the targets of philosophical analysis. The mentalists take the targets of philosophical analysis to be psychological entities and the extra-mentalists take them to be non-psychological entities. In the case of mentalism the mental entities in question are not conscious mental entities, they are non-conscious entities or structures to which introspective access is lacking. The differences in opinion result from the differences in perspective on the same entities.

There are three forms of extra-mentalism: 1. The universals approach, 2. The modal equivalence approach 3. The natural kinds approach. The first approach holds that philosophical analysis aims to apprehend the contents of certain abstract, Platonic entities, certain universals. As a prime proponent of this account we need to think of no one else but Plato himself. Plato's Forms are classic examples of external entities that are instantiated by particulars. They are also portrayed as objects of intellectual vision. Within this model it can be said that when a person has an intuition that *e* is an instance of *F*, what they mean is that they have an intellectual apprehension that a certain universal, *F*, is instantiated by *e*. Modern philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Jerrold Katz view intuition as a rational apprehension or grasping of extra-mental entities or state of affairs. The universals approach is analogous to perception in that it assumes intuition to be a BES to universals and their relation is roughly the same way as perception gives us access to physical objects and events. Another way of looking at this for example may be how Matthias Steup has described the position: 'when we engage in a philosophical examination of such things as knowledge and justification... What we are interested in is not what ideas of knowledge and justification people carry in their heads, but rather what people have in common when they know something, when they are justified in believing something' (Steup, 1996, 21).

The next is the modal equivalence approach. The vital point here is that the correctness of a philosophical theory depends on the contours of modal space, understood in a fully extra- mentalist, mind-independent fashion. When Edmund Gettier published his two counterexamples in 1963, to the justified true belief analysis of knowledge, and almost all epistemologists shared the same intuitions about them, the modal equivalence approach interprets these intuitions to show that there are two possible cases in modal space to which the predicate 'justified true belief' applies but the predicate 'knowledge' does not apply. That these cases in modal space have these properties is evidentially supported by the indicated intuitions on the supposition that intuition is a basic evidential source. An associated philosophical gloss of the intuitions' contents would take the form, 'e is a case in the space of possibilities' i.e., in some possible world that is an instance of *G* but not *F*. By getting evidence for such truths, it is demonstrated that 'knowledge' and 'justified true belief' are not modally equivalent.

The third kind, natural kinds extra-mentalism advocated by Hillary Kornblith holds that philosophical inquiry aims to provide a theory about the nature of certain natural kinds². Kornblith argues that 'I see the investigation of knowledge, and philosophical investigation generally on the model of investigations of natural kinds' (Kornblith, 1998, 134). The proper

² Some structure of truth or reality that exists independent of human cognition. A natural kind is determined by the presence of a presumed underlying common nature which may be unknown to us. For example, water has the underlying chemical structure H₂O. Hence, it is held by the natural kinds theorists that natural kinds have a structure of their own independent of us. And knowledge, meaning, good being natural kinds have their own independent structures.

targets of philosophy are knowledge, meaning, and the good themselves, rather than the folk concepts of knowledge, meaning, or the good. On this view, intuition of experts on a particular phenomenon is elicited and then an empirical investigation of the concrete tokens picked out by the singular intuitions is conducted to reveal the underlying structure of the phenomenon.

Mentalism regards the targets of philosophical analysis to be concepts, where the term concept refers to a psychological structure or state that underpins a cognizer's deployment of a natural language predicate. For example, Sara's concept of knowledge is the psychological structure that underlies her deployment of the predicate knows. The structure in question is presupposed to include some sort of mental representation, as well as some sort of processing routines. The mental representations are assumed to have semantic contents. On this view, having gathered intuitions about a target predicate from informants a philosopher aims to determine the psychological structure viz., the concept that generates these intuitions. Mentalism thus views an intuition as the manifestation of a psychological structure viz., a concept that can be identified by its relation to a predicate of a natural language. The concepts of which mentalism speaks are contents embedded in, or borne by, psychological structures, which are neural or neurally realized states. Interactions between psychological states of these kinds and intuitional events, which are also neural or neurally realized events are not fundamentally mysterious or problematic in the way that some sort of apprehension or detection of universal is problematic. Thus, it has been argued that philosophical analysis is primarily concerned with elucidating our folk concepts, but philosophy can also prescribe revisions in those concepts. In metaphysics, for instance, conceptual analysis tries to unearth our folk-ontological categories. But there is also room for prescriptive metaphysics, which would seek to improve upon folk ontology through a combination of scientific discovery and broad philosophical reflection (Goldman & Pust, 1998, 191). The traditional view sharply opposes the conceptual and empirical however the mentalist's psychological sense of concept affords them to benefit from the research by psychologists and other cognitive scientists in the subject of concepts and their mental deployment. Therefore, the mentalist's version of philosophical analysis is at least in part an empirical investigation.

III. Are Intuitions a priori or a posteriori?

With regard to the epistemic status of intuition, for some philosophers intuitions are a priori justified, in other words, justified rationally or without appeal to experience. This is a view held by traditional philosophers or antinaturalists. Naturalists reject the idea of a priori intuitions and the way conceptual analysis is traditionally conceived. This is not to say that naturalists don't appeal to intuitions in the course of their philosophical practice. However, the way they understand the term is differs greatly from their antinatural counterparts. George Bealer says that naturalists' allegiance to naturalism leaves no room for intuition or for any epistemic term in their naturalistic epistemology as the naturalist looks at this phenomenon of intuition from a naturalistic perspective (Bealer, 1987, 300-301; 1992, 105-108).

Traditionalists and naturalists have divergent views about philosophical practice owing to their disagreement on an ontological level. Both the traditionalists and the naturalists appeal to intuition in their philosophical practice, however, the concept of intuition that they endorse is contrary to one another. The dispute between the a priori and a posteriori status of intuition stems from the opposite mental and extra-mental positions that have been taken with regard to the objects of philosophical analysis, as we saw earlier. Getting into the debate of what 'kind' of entities, mental or extra-mental, intuition provides evidence for, doesn't dismiss the claim that intuition is used as a prima facie evidence for beliefs and theories. The traditional philosopher speaks of intuition as a priori. When we have an intuition, then it presents itself as necessary. For example, when we have an intuition, say, that if P then not not-P then this presents itself as necessary. It doesn't seem to us that things could be otherwise, it must be that if P then not not-P. The naturalist holds that the intuitive judgements are a posteriori, and appeals to intuitions do not require some special non-natural faculty or a priori judgement of any sort.

Here, we have to understand that the naturalist's treatment of intuition as a posteriori is a direct consequence of their 'natural kinds' approach to phenomenon. A naturalist, Hilary Kornblith, says that the subject of epistemology is not the concept of knowledge but the nature of knowledge. A naturalist in order to understand what knowledge is appeals to their intuitions about knowledge and collects certain instances that are obvious instances of knowledge. Understanding what gives these instances a theoretical unity is the object of epistemology and it is to be found by a careful examination of the phenomenon which is something

outside of us and not our concept of the phenomenon, it's an object outside in the world. Therefore, as intuition is evidence for a phenomenon that lies outside of us, it is a posteriori and not a priori. This is how the naturalist defends their method of appealing to intuitions within a naturalistic framework. Intuitive judgements are not considered to be a priori and are regarded to be similar to a rock collector's judgement who collects samples of a given kind if it meets certain conditions. Judgements however obvious are a posteriori.

The first criticism that can be raised is that naturalism is found to be self-defeating, that the naturalist's appeal to intuition is at odds with their theory. Bealer says naturalism subscribes to a principle of empiricism: 'A person's experiences and/ or observations comprise the person's prima facie evidence' (Bealer, 1992, 99). Hence, their allegiance to empiricism rules out intuition as a legitimate source of evidence. The second criticism that can be levelled against the naturalist is how do targets of philosophical analysis qualify as natural kinds? Something qualifies as a natural kind only if it has a prior nature, essence, or character independent of anybody's thought or conception of it. But it is highly doubtful that knowledge, justification, meaning etc have essences or natures independent of our conception of them. The rationale that naturalists provide for holding intuition to be a posteriori doesn't seem to be tenable. Even if we assume knowledge to be a phenomenon outside of us what about the intuitions about concepts like theory, observation, experience, etc that are used in the formulation of their theories. Do they belong to the world outside as well?

IV. Autonomy of Philosophy

Bealer argues that naturalism threatens the autonomy of philosophy by appealing to scientific essentialism, that naturalism raises the possibility that science will somehow eclipse philosophy (Bealer, 1987, 289-294). He goes on to state that it is only by rejecting naturalism that we may be able to secure a distinctively philosophical enterprise. Questions about knowledge and justification, theory and evidence, etc. that philosophy asks are different from the questions addressed by historians, sociologists, psychologists about these topics. If the autonomy of a discipline consists in its dealing with a distinctive set of questions or in approaching certain topics with a distinctive set of concerns then philosophy is surely an autonomous discipline. However, when Bealer raises the issue of autonomy this is not what he means. The autonomy of philosophy would mean that it is an a priori discipline with nothing to do with the work in the empirical sciences. It should be entirely independent of anything the empirical sciences have to offer.

On the naturalist's view, when we are investigating phenomenon an empirical investigation of the phenomenon is necessary, just consulting our beliefs or intuitions isn't enough. When an investigation is at a stage where there is no available explicitly articulated theory then the method of using examples and counterexamples to gain important insights becomes essential which couldn't have been gained by any other means. Therefore, the use of intuitive judgment in theorizing does not disappear at any stage. As Hilary Kornblith writes, 'old intuitions give way to well-integrated theoretical judgments and, in addition, to new intuition about matters not yet fully captured in explicit theory' (Kornblith, 1998, 137). But with progress in theory, investigation should open itself up to other methods. The empirical findings related to any particular topic cannot be ignored. Therefore, now we see more and more philosophers not just appealing to raw intuitions but also drawing on from other fields like cognitive science and anthropology.

Conclusion

The crux of all that has been said can be encapsulated in concluding that though intuition with regard to its epistemic character is a matter open to speculation, its function and status in philosophical theorizing are clear and well established. It would however be partial to not say that in recognising that empirical findings are relevant to philosophy it won't lose its autonomy as a discipline. Work in the empirical sciences is deeply relevant to philosophical questions and philosophical theories are constrained and guided by results in other disciplines. The sciences aren't wholly independent of work in other disciplines. Work in biology isn't wholly independent of chemistry, sociology is not wholly independent of psychology. But this dependency doesn't rob these disciplines of their autonomy or legitimacy, not does it threaten the sciences with the loss of their distinctive subject matter. . Philosophy as a discipline with its distinctive set of questions and concerns is not any more or less autonomous than physics or chemistry or biology.

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