Can Intuitions Be Used as a Priori Evidence in Philosophy?

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that intuitions can be used as a priori evidence in analytic philosophy. This evidence, however, is of a different type than direct observation in the natural sciences. I examine the role intuition plays in a number of philosophical thought experiments. I also discuss the implications of the literature in cognitive science finding that intuition plays a stronger role in cognition than explicit reasoning, and the WEIRDness of these intuitions. The literature on expert intuition is also discussed. Finally, I argue that intuitions are necessary for reason, broadly construed.

1. Introduction

Although there is some disagreement about how the term should be used, I will take an intuition to mean the seeming that something is true, without the explicit use of inference or observation. The appropriate role of intuition in philosophy has generated recent controversy. Philosophers disagree about whether intuitions themselves can be used as evidence – analogous to how observation is used in the natural sciences – or if they should simply be used to steer us toward interesting problems to work on. (Cappelen, 2012) argues that philosophers do not, in fact, need to use intuitions as evidence and that the appropriate evidence in philosophy is the extent to which an argument is logically compelling. Even if this is correct, philosophers still sometimes do use intuitions as prima facie support for statements being true, and so some clarification needs to be done as to what role intuition does (and should) play in philosophy.

2. Intuitions as evidence

2.1 Twin Earth

One notable example of an intuition apparently leading us to a philosophical conclusion is Putnam’s Twin Earth (Putnam, 1973). Suppose that there is a planet exactly like Earth in all but one respect: namely, that on this Twin Earth, the chemical formula for water is not $H_2O$ but some more complicated formula we abbreviate as XYZ. This thought experiment is set several centuries ago, before chemistry could tell these apart. Consider a man, Oscar, and his Twin Earth doppelgänger Toscar. Oscar and Toscar will use the word ‘water’ in exactly the same way, and if Oscar visited Twin Earth, or vice versa, he would conclude that their water was exactly the same as his own. Putnam argues that, intuitively, Oscar and Toscar mean different things when they say ‘water’: Oscar means $H_2O$ and Toscar means XYZ. Yet, this difference is not understood by the speakers. Hence, there must be something external on which meaning relies; this is the view called semantic externalism. However, it is not obvious that Putnam needs

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1 It is not obvious what precisely counts as an intuition. A definition making reference to a disposition toward belief or an implicit belief, for instance, runs into problems with visual illusions. After these illusions are pointed out to us, we continue to hold an intuition that we know to be false, such as that one line is longer than another in the Müller-Lyer illusion.
intuition here. He is claiming that it is the case that the physical embodiment and history of an object is relevant in determining its meaning. The soundness of his case rests on whether the premises are relevant, and the coherence of the jump to the conclusion. The data that would make this more or less plausible exist in the external world, and while our intuitions may bring attention to them, they do not suffice as data themselves.

2.2 The utility monster

Sometimes intuitions are superfluous, like in the Twin Earth case, but there are other instances where an intuition itself is more clearly invoked as evidence. Take Nozick’s utility monster (Nozick, 1974). This is a creature that is somehow more capable of experiencing pleasure (positive utility) than all others combined. The utilitarian conclusion — that our suffering and annihilation would be justified to appease the utility monster — is intuitively repugnant. However, the value of an intuition surely varies in inverse proportion to its detachment from daily life. Why should we expect to have useful intuitions about mythical monsters? So far, no-one has come up with a moral theory that does not have some wildly counter-intuitive conclusions. If anything, we should hope that these conclusions are the ones raised in exactly these contrived and abstract thought experiments.

2.3 What kind of evidence are intuitions?

Intuitions are evidence, at least sometimes. However, it is not clear whether intuitions are the same kind of evidence as observation is in science. Popper famously defended the view that what demarcated science from non-science is that scientific claims can be falsified with observation (Popper, 1959).2 Regardless of whether we accept Popper’s falsificationism per se, there is widespread agreement that observations can falsify scientific hypotheses. In constant, since anyone can theoretically have an intuition about anything, it stands to reason that intuition cannot completely disconfirm philosophical hypotheses. Rather than falsifying, intuition whittles down the plausibility of bad ideas.

3. Reason as secondary to intuition

Decades of research in cognitive science have put into question the extent to which reason is in control of our beliefs and behaviours at all. Some contemporary thinkers identify reason as having more of a justificatory or argumentative role (Sperber & Mercier, 2017). People frequently hold strong views about the morality of many issues, particularly those concerning purity, but are incapable of articulating a coherent reason for their judgements (Haidt, Björklund, & Murphy, 2000). This phenomenon has been dubbed ‘moral dumbfounding’. There are two possibilities here: either we are conducting moral reasoning subconsciously, or not conducting it (in the dispassionate philosophical sense) at all. In a follow-up to the initial dumbfounding result, Haidt tested whether people’s moral judgements change when they are experiencing a strong cognitive load – e.g. while trying to remember a series of numbers. If this slows down judgement, it would indicate that people tend to deliberate and reason before making moral decisions. Haidt could not find any evidence that it does (Haidt, 2012). On the face of it, this is bad news for philosophy.

So, reason is less powerful, and intuitions are more powerful in human psychology than was originally thought. There are many problems that arise from relying on intuitions. For one thing, they’re especially prone to cultural biases. ‘Self-evident’ truths are self-evident primarily in the eyes of philosophy professors and their students in WEIRD3 nations, a group that’s

2 There are serious objections to the Popperian falsification model – among them that falsificationism itself is unfalsifiable. Lemoine offers a useful overview of these problems on his blog (Lemoine, 2019).

3 Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic.
psychologically peculiar by global standards (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Intuitions that pose serious philosophical problems to this group may pose no such problems to another. Take a Frankfurt case, in which someone is responsible for that which they have no control over. Suppose Patel will probably vote for the Stripy Party in an election; however, someone has placed a chip in her brain that will activate and give her the sudden urge to vote for the Spotty Party if she changes her mind and tries to vote for the Spotty Party. If the device doesn’t activate, she has chosen the Stripy Party, and therefore seems responsible for her actions despite the fact that she could not have done otherwise. A Frankfurt case opposes an intuition that someone is not morally responsible for something they have no control over. However, this intuition simply isn’t present in many of what anthropologists call honour cultures, common in the Middle East and Central Asia, which see responsibility as more tied to family and reputation (Sommers, 2018). Truth, presumably, does not vary cross-culturally, putting us at risk of slowing down progress when we extrapolate from our WEIRD intuitions.

It is also true that it’s hard to correct your intuitions for known cognitive biases. Consider Nozick’s experience machine (Nozick, 1974). This is a hypothetical device which can simulate any desired experience in the user’s brain. You can plan out a life for yourself much better than your own and simulate it in the experience machine. Nozick asks us to consider what problems, if any, there would be with plugging into the machine. Most people have the intuition that you should not plug in, because any simulated experiences you have are “fake”. Nozick uses this intuition to reject hedonism, the view that states of mind are all that is morally valuable. However, even if the intuition described above were universal, it would not account for status quo bias. Suppose that you found out that you are already in the experience machine, and none of your family, friends, or achievements are real. Would you choose to return to your real life in the outside world if (a) you were given no information about your real life, (b) in real life you are in a maximum-security prison, or (c) you are really a multi-millionaire living in Monaco? When asked in surveys, close to half of people would rather stay hooked up to the experience machine in cases (a) and (c), and almost 90% would prefer to stay in the experience machine in case (b) (Brigard, 2010). So, our attachment to the authenticity of experiences is not so clear after all.

4. Philosophical intuitions as expert judgement
An objection you might have is that the intuitions I have been discussing are of average people, and philosophers may have a kind of expert intuition for philosophical problems. Then we would not need intuitions to be prima facie evidence, as the honed intuitions of philosophers would (more often than not) point to the truth. There are reasons to doubt this. Psychologists have identified criteria for the formation of reliable expert intuition, namely predictable conditions and rapid feedback (Kahneman, 2011). Philosophy, meanwhile, is characterised by a total irregularity in its conditions and long spans of time before views become accepted (if ever). So, while we can expect expert intuition to develop in surgeons, we cannot expect the same of philosophers.

The elephant in the room here is that philosophers are in widespread agreement about almost no major philosophical issues. But this disagreement may not indicate anything meaningful one way or the other. It could be that the problems traditionally associated with philosophy are so hard that the proposed solutions fall significantly short of solving them, but that a difference in how much ones’ intuitions are honed produces vast differences in how much these solutions fall short.

5. On the necessity of intuitions
Given all the shortcomings of intuitions, you might be tempted to get rid of them entirely, instead taking something like logical coherence as the tool in philosophy which is analogous to
scientific observation. Indeed, some have argued that intuition has derailed the conversation in fields like epistemology. Nonetheless, intuitions are essential in moral philosophy. Logic is powerful in exposing inconsistencies in a moral theory, but no amount of facts and logic could, by themselves, give us a normative claim. But even if this is because philosophers lack a sufficient imagination, and one day someone will dream up a suitable bridge between facts and values, the celebrated impossibility results of population ethics show that every moral theory will have at least one implication that most people find implausible (Parfit, 1984). (Arrow, 1951) also laid out his impossibility theorem, stating that, given a complete list of the preferences of agents, there is no process which could provide a singular ordering for how best to maximise those preferences. So, given a set of axioms that we wish a moral theory to fulfil, it is not only hard but impossible to construct one canonical version of that theory. Deciding between theories thus becomes somewhat of an exercise in which intuition you are least unwilling to give up. You might then admit defeat, but failure to think clearly about these issues is of serious moral consequence. Many practical questions – abortion, for example – hinge upon one’s view of population ethics.

Does this mean that a perfectly rational agent would need intuition to come to conclusions? I think so. Once basic conditions like transitivity and self-consistency are met, it is hard (impossible?) to say that an agent with radically undesirable conclusions, like “misery is good”, is irrational for thinking so. At some stage, we must take a leap of faith to value well-being – or some other qualities – to begin with. This amounts to the problem of how you could convince someone of the veracity of logic, since any justification itself requires logic. We must pull ourselves up by the bootstraps at some point, and I propose that that which pulls us up is intuition.

6. Conclusion
When you began drawing circles, you had no idea what a circle was. It was probably many years before you learned that a circle is the set of points in 2D space equidistant from a given point – and yet this captured precisely the necessary and sufficient conditions of your circle-drawing. Mathematics is the formalisation of basic intuitions we share about numbers. The very fact that these intuitions diverge wildly is not evidence that mathematics is a doomed project. We take confident intuitions (like 2 + 2 = 4), or propositions derived from confident intuitions, to be true, then ‘fill in the blanks’ in formalising the system. Perhaps philosophy ought to utilise intuition in much the same way. If this is true, we can get around the problem of how intuitions are so scattered, biased, and messy.

Intuition is not quite to philosophy what observation is to science, though it has some features in common. Intuition, when considered from many perspectives, hints at the plausibility of ideas. Intuition is also crucial to get some areas of philosophy off the ground to begin with, whether we like it or not.
Bibliography
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