Intuitions in Metaphysics

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In everyday life, many of the decisions and actions we take happen unconsciously. Many of our judgements rely on what we call intuitions. This term is used in a variety of different contexts: We might find the handling of a new mobile device intuitive. A brilliant chess player might have great intuition for finding the best move. Or we might intuitively connect better with people who are similar in character.¹

In philosophy, there exists an extensive literature on the significance of intuitions in (philosophical) arguments. When formulating arguments in our daily lives as well as in academic practice, intuitions are often employed as preliminary assumptions. On the dialectical level, when somebody makes an intuitive claim, she is typically not required to provide any further reasons for the claim made. While intuitive claims might have some inferential justification, they appear not to require any further justification since they simply seem to be true. Intuitive claims have thus been characterised as non-inferential dialectical justifications and have, in this sense, been said to serve as the premises of arguments.²

The use of intuitions is adequate and even necessary in any domain of research. For instance, the assumption that memory is generally reliable is needed whenever the outcome of an experiment or an argument is evaluated with regard to the initial setup or assumptions. However, an excessive use of intuitions appears worrisome in any research domain for several reasons: Propositions that appear intuitive might still be false, they might stand in conflict to other people’s intuitions and they often lack further justification.

Although many authors have argued that intuitions are a successful tool for philosophical theorising, several have criticised the use of intuitions in metaphysical practice.³ This paper analyses the use

¹ For a detailed analysis of our everyday use of »intuition« and a contrast to the use in philosophical literature, see Herman Cappelen, Philosophy Without Intuitions, Oxford 2012.
³ For a recent overview on how intuitions in philosophy can be defended, see Nevin Climenhaga, Intuitions Are Used as Evidence in Philosophy, in: Mind 127:505 (2018), 69–104. For the probably most influential critique against the use of intuitions in metaphysics, see James Ladyman/Don Ross, Every Thing Must Go. Metaphysics Naturalized, Oxford 2007.
and epistemic value of intuitions in contemporary metaphysics and compares these intuitions with those in other philosophical domains. It is argued that, in contrast to many other domains of philosophy, metaphysics relies most heavily on perceptual, rather than conceptual, intuitions. These perceptual intuitions only motivate rather than provide evidence for theories, and, consequently, metaphysical theories are often counterintuitive. Nonetheless, as long as metaphysicians are not better scientifically informed, the reliance on concepts that intuitively appear to be relevant in a theory of the world is problematic.

1. Intuitions in Philosophy

In contrast to what we might expect from a discipline that boasts an unprecedented aspiration to precision, many philosophers would even agree that the appeal to intuitions in the analytic tradition is omnipresent and that its significance can hardly be overstated:4

George Bealer does it. Roderick Chisholm does it a lot. Most philosophers do it openly and unapologetically, and the rest arguably do it too, although some of them would deny it. What they all do is appeal to intuitions in constructing, shaping, and refining their philosophical views.5

We can turn to any domain in analytical philosophy and find assumptions in arguments that are made without providing further explanation or reference since they appear to be self-evident. Such statements might be, »If P then not not P«, »Torturing children for fun is wrong«, »There are no five-sided squares«. The reliance on using or forming intuitions becomes even more apparent when looking closely at the thought experiments philosophers develop that carry their force by appealing to certain intuitions rather than providing rigorous arguments.

4 Some philosophers are an exception to this and believe that the role of intuition is limited or insignificant to the discipline. See, e.g., Timothy Williamson, The Philosophy of Philosophy, London 2007; and see Max Deutsch, Intuitions, Counter-Examples, and Experimental Philosophy, in: Review of Philosophy and Psychology 1 (2010), 447–460.

A straightforward example is the classical Gettier cases which show in the form of thought experiments that there is more to knowledge than having a justified, true belief. One of the thought experiments of this sort runs as follows: Imagine you walk past a clock at 9:00 and read off the time. The clock says that it is 9:00 and therefore you believe that it is 9:00. You are clearly justified in your belief because you are reading the time from a clock that is generally reliable. By coincidence, however, the clock is not functioning that day. In fact, it stopped functioning the day before, precisely at 9:00. It is thus only coincidental that you are right in your belief of the time being 9:00, because that is the time at which you passed the clock and decided to read off the time from it. According to most people’s intuition, it would be wrong to say that you are knowledgeable about the time despite having a justified, true belief. Therefore, knowledge must amount to more than having justified, true belief. The argument can be summarised as follows:

P1. You have a justified, true belief that it is 9:00.
P2. You do not know that it is 9:00. [intuitive premise]
C. Knowledge is not justified, true belief.

The strength of P2 is based solely on intuitive grounds whereby our intuition that P2 is true is typically very strong, even when we have no concrete further explanation for why this is the case. Other similarly straightforward examples of thought experiments might be the intuition of saving the child in Singer’s shallow pond analogy, the intuition of attributing new knowledge to Mary the colour scientist when she leaves her room, or the intuition of refusing to attribute intelligence to Searle’s Chinese room.

Note that this is the stopped-clock thought experiment from Bertrand Russell, Human Knowledge. Its Scope and Limits, Crows Nest 1948, 170f. It is not part of the famous article by Edmund Gettier, Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?, in: Analysis 23 (1963), 121–123. The stopped-clock thought experiment is, however, simpler to understand and of the same kind as Gettier’s original cases.

Notice that studies have been performed which seem to suggest that the intuitions of P2 being veridical is not universally shared. While a majority of undergraduate students at Rutgers University with Western ethnicity judged P2 as true, a majority of East Asian students at the same university drew an opposite verdict. See Jonathan Weinberg/Shaun Nichols/Stephen Stich, Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions, in: Philosophical Topics 29:1/2 (2001), 429–460. Whether these experiments actually show that different people differ in their understanding of the concept of knowledge, as suggested by the experimentalists, can be disputed. It might well be that they simply do not properly understand the described situation during the experiment. However, the experiment might also show that there simply are cross-cultural discrepancies in how certain concepts are used.
2. Discoveries by Intuitions

Given that philosophical theorising heavily relies on our intuitions, many philosophers have questioned the extent to which they can be taken as a source of evidence. What is at stake appears to be the legitimacy of a key ingredient in much of philosophical theorising and, if it were to turn out that intuitions cannot be trusted, then large parts of the philosophical enterprise would turn out to be a mistake.

At least for Alvin Goldman, it was clearly a »landmark discovery« in the history of philosophy when Gettier showed that knowledge is not equivalent to justified, true belief. The discovery not only took place by the formulation of several thought experiments, but it was largely a consequence of almost all readers of Gettier's thought experiments having the same intuitions. Had it been different such that people's intuitions had not converged, then there would have been no discovery. Thus, given that philosophical intuitions are occasionally reliable indicators of facts about our concepts, they can be treated as a source of evidence.

This discovery is not a scientific discovery but a discovery coming from philosophical analysis. But what is such a discovery about? In antiquity, it might have been fashionable to think that the target concern of philosophical inquiry was mind-independent facts about a non-physical world. For instance, a Platonist might have imagined that Gettier's discovery was one about forms, existing in some non-material realm. However, since Plato's heaven does not exist in space and time, such a proposal seems doubtful, as it is unclear how we could have epistemic access to such entities. It is also unclear how Gettier managed to make a discovery about knowledge understood as an abstract entity that exists independently of the human mind in some other sense of objectivity. While Gettier might not agree with this interpretation, I form an alliance with Goldman that Gettier offers us insights into our concept of knowledge instead of providing insights into knowledge itself. Intuitions in philosophical analysis can thus help us investigate concepts understood as things possessed by

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individuals of the speaker-community that are inseparable from the human mind.\textsuperscript{11} This does not imply that these concepts are purely subjective entities. They clearly have a dimension that transcends the individual subject due to their normative force – their application can be correct or incorrect. Nevertheless, they must be anchored by some individuals’ brain states. Even if a concept is defined by a speaker-community, its meaning is determined by the subjects of this community interacting with each other, thereby reinforcing a concept’s meaning by their usage and possession. Gettier’s intuitions have therefore led to a discovery about a concept in a psychological sense.

3. Intuitive and Counterintuitive Views in Metaphysics

While intuitions are successfully employed in domains like epistemology, I now turn to the significance of intuitions in metaphysics. For this, let us consider some of the arguments made in this field.

Consider first the debate about compositionality concerning the following question. When do two material objects compose to some further object? According to the ontological eliminativist, composition never occurs – objects of ordinary kind, such as tables and chairs, do not exist – whereas the universalist holds that composition always occurs – my nose and the Eiffel Tower compose an object of strange kind.\textsuperscript{12} While both views clearly differ from our ordinary intuitions, part of the argument favouring one position over the other does contain an intuitive assumption. As characterised by Higgins, eliminativism is often defended by relying on the intuitive, evidence-based argument that objects of strange kind do not exist:\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{align*}
P_1: & \text{Objects of ordinary kind exist if and only if objects of strange kind exist.} \\
P_2: & \text{Objects of strange kind do not exist. [intuitive premise]} \\
C: & \text{Therefore, eliminativism is true.}
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{11} Many would argue that what I am saying applies to all concepts. However, for the present purposes, I do not want to be over-committed about what concepts are in general.

\textsuperscript{12} Only very few believe that composition occurs in accordance with our experiences. See, e.g., Ned Markosian, Brutal Composition, in: Philosophical Studies 92:3 (1998), 211–249.

Similarly, universalists would argue that our perception provides evidence for the existence of ordinary objects and thus, given that compositionality does not occur arbitrarily, universalism must be true. We see that both sides of the debate occasionally turn to our intuitions in order to argue for their position. However, despite some reliance on intuitions, both sides of the debate ultimately come to conclusions that radically contradict our intuitions by suggesting that we remove or add a huge number of objects from or to our common-sense ontology. Intuitions thus garner less evidential power than other domains of philosophy, such as epistemology, where Gettier’s intuition-driven cases have, by almost universal acceptance of their great evidential significance, radically reshaped the field.

As surveyed in detail by Benovsky, we also find intuitions being used in metaphysical debates about time.\textsuperscript{14} This includes the debate about whether time is a dimension like space in which objects can be located (B-Theory), or whether time passes leading to an ontological distinction between present, past and future times (A-Theory). Some philosophers claim that the strongest force in support of the A-Theory ultimately arises from our intuitions formed by our experiences. As Skow says: »I cannot survey all the motivations philosophers have had for the moving spotlight theory. But the motivation that I like best appeals to the nature of our conscious experience.«\textsuperscript{15} We again see that intuitions do play a role in the debate, but they do not create a knockdown argument comparable to those in other philosophical domains. Instead, many philosophers do support the B-Theory despite its conflicting with our ordinary intuitions.

So why do intuitions in metaphysics play a different evidential role compared to other domains of philosophy? To answer this question, we must acknowledge that metaphysics differs in its aspirations from many other domains of philosophy. As we have seen, one can well interpret Gettier’s discovery as not about knowledge itself but about the concept of knowledge. It was about how the concept of knowledge is correctly applied or not applied to a certain situation based on how our culture uses the concept. However, not all philosophy can be interpreted to only be concerned with the analysis and refinement of concepts. In particular, most metaphysics is not only directed towards concepts but also towards reality. Some of the champions of the discipline, such as Ted Sider and Jonathan Schaffer,


would claim that they are concerned with investigating the most fundamental structures of reality and are committed to the task of finding the categories that correctly describe the world rather than engaging in conceptual analysis of ordinary terms. Other metaphysicians are more cautious in their ambitions and think of the field being concerned with the conceptual analysis of the concepts that are needed for a description of reality, such as the concept of an object. However, even the philosophers of the latter group assume that the concepts they use pick out or signify something in the world.

If the philosophical subject matter concerns (to some extent) facts about the world, we are always justified in having certain doubts about our epistemic access to these facts. Our experiences about compositionality might, for instance, be shaped by our biological constitution, and there might be good reasons to doubt that perceptual evidence provides us trustworthy insights concerning the conditions for when objects compose. On the other hand, if the philosophical subject matter concerns abstract concepts that are purely determined by their usage, then there is no reason to doubt that a competent speaker has full epistemic access to the subject matter at hand. Thus, in contrast to the perceptual intuitions employed in metaphysics, the speaker is in this case justified in following her intuitions.

4. Reliance on Intuitive Concepts

As I explain above, intuitions in metaphysical arguments are for good reasons not ascribed the same epistemic value as intuitions in other domains, and most metaphysical theories abruptly depart from our intuitive judgements. However, numerous philosophers have criticised metaphysics precisely for depending too much on intuitions. What then do the critics of metaphysics exactly have in mind?

The main critique is not about metaphysicians dismissing propositions for being nonintuitive. The main concern, as I understand it, is that the initial concepts employed are typically drawn from everyday language and folk psychology rather than from the sciences. For instance, metaphysicians rely on concepts such as compositionality, simples, causation, and objects. These concepts are not different from the ones employed by fundamental physics; rather they are largely even incompatible with fundamental physics. While metaphysicians talk about objects being composed of simples or particles, modern

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physics teaches us that such an intuitive form of conceptualising material objects must be dismissed. As Ladyman and Ross say, contemporary metaphysics seeks to account for the world as «made of» myriad «little things» in roughly the way that (some) walls are made of bricks. […] However, according to contemporary physics it is no longer helpful to conceive of either the world, or particular systems of the world that we study in partial isolation, as «made of» anything at all.17

If metaphysicians want to grasp the fundamental structure of reality, they must employ concepts that are not merely compatible with our ordinary intuitions.

While I largely agree with this criticism, one must be careful about what it means to draw concepts from everyday language and ordinary thought. Some, including myself, have argued that the concepts metaphysicians use are often concepts that are directly related to human’s innate, biological contingencies.18 For instance, the intuition that the world consists of individual objects that persist over time and space is something one can already observe in infants and can be traced back to how our cognitive system functions.

However, many of the ordinary intuitions used by metaphysicians must be more than a result of human’s innate biological constitution. Instead, many intuitions are shaped during school education when one is exposed to physics classes that teach about Newtonian mechanics and about protons, neutrons and electrons. Metaphysicians want to believe that their discipline is prior to the sciences and therefore neither depends on the specific results of physics nor what we learn in school. This point seems to be easily refuted by the absurdity of a hypothetical practitioner in metaphysics building a metaphysical theory based on pre-Newtonian physics: »If it really doesn’t matter that classical physics is false then we might as well do our metaphysical theorizing on the basis of Aristotelian or Cartesian physics. But then the absurdity would be patent.« 19 Consider, for instance, Descartes’s following remark: »The virtue or power in a body to move itself can well pass wholly or partially to another body and thus no longer be in the first; but it cannot no longer exist in

17 Ladyman/Ross, Every Thing Must Go, 17.
19 Ladyman/Ross, Every Thing Must Go, 26.
the world.«20 One can then easily imagine a metaphysician informed by Cartesian physics ending up developing a thorough account of bodily virtues. However, no modern metaphysician would get involved in such an endeavour, and this is clearly not because Newtonian mechanics is more closely linked to our pre-theoretical judgements than Cartesian physics. Quite to the contrary. Newtonian mechanics is at first extremely counterintuitive, and it is only due to a thorough education that one eventually gets used to Newtonian concepts and develops certain intuitions about how they can be used. Just as anybody else in our society, metaphysicians have merely gotten so acquainted with this very specific mode of thinking that their own intuitive presuppositions have become unnoticed. It must thus be concluded that the concepts metaphysicians employ appear intuitive both because they are most naturally given by our biological contingencies and because society has simply become well acquainted with them by the education system.

David Lewis’s theory of Humean supervenience is just one of many examples where a philosopher is well aware that his theory makes certain empirical assumptions but appears to only rely on what he has learned during school education. Lewis’ theory is said to stand in flat contradiction to results of modern physics, as he ultimately relies on an ontology only of points that are localised in space-time with local properties instantiated at those points. This contradicts the ideas of non-locality and quantum entanglement which any physics student already knew well at the time Lewis formulated his theory.21 Since Lewis understood that his theory was »a contingent, therefore an empirical, issue«,22 it seems that he simply lacked the scientific education to take into account or at least mention the potential concerns one could have from a modern physics perspective.

While metaphysics can develop its own concepts, these concepts must be scientifically well informed if the discipline wants to achieve what it strives to do. If metaphysics has anything to do with reality, then it must give scientific concepts priority, since it is only by the scientific method that we have access to concepts which are adequate for describing the world. Due to the interaction between the scientist and the world by the use of experimental devices, concepts can be developed that could never have been imagined by

22 David Lewis, Philosophical Papers, Oxford 1986, xi.
pure a priori reflection. For instance, when a physicist performs a double-slit experiment, one can observe that particles have a dual nature: They behave both like particles and waves, depending on the current state of the experimental setup. It is hard to imagine anybody coming up with the concept of wave–particle duality by mere armchair reflection. Accordingly, it is the sciences that must guide metaphysics in choosing the initial concepts from which metaphysicians can depart in their theorising.

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