

Knowing Our Own Concepts: The Role of Intuitions in Philosophy

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Abstract: Empirical examinations about cross-cultural variability of intuitions, the well-known publication of Stich and his colleagues criticizing thought-experiments and intuitions in philosophical debates, is still a challenge that faces analytical philosophers, as any systematic investigation of the methodology of philosophy must give answers to these basic questions: What is intuition? What role should intuitions play in philosophy? I present and examine the sceptical argument of experimental philosophers, and claim that experimental philosophers misunderstand the role of evidence in philosophy. My argument will utilize Goldman's view, according to which intuitions give reliable (though not infallible) evidence about a person's concepts, and this knowledge is valuable for further philosophical research as well. I will argue that the sceptical conclusions of experimental philosophers are harmless against this conception of philosophy, because even from a naturalist perspective certain kind of intuitive judgments about our concepts can be warranted, and this grants the specific epistemic status of intuitions. Of course, the reliability of introspection can be challenged. However, denying self-knowledge about my internal mental states is disputable – as I will show – both from a philosophical and a scientific point of view.

Keywords: concepts, experimental philosophy, intuition, methodology of philosophy, reliabilism, scepticism, thought-experiments.

1 Introduction

There are several well known philosophical arguments which appeal to so called “intuitions” and build on thought-experiments. Intuitions are usually considered as evidences in favour of various philosophical doctrines. We encounter intuitions in the most influential papers of analytical philosophy. For example, Kripke claimed that his

argument for the rigidity of proper names is built on linguistic intuitions¹, and argued that our intuitions are the ultimate evidences in favour of philosophical theories about meaning.²

Intuitions are claimed to be essential for the entire enterprise of analytical philosophy, nevertheless their role and evidential status are far from obvious. Since Steven Stich and his colleagues had published their empirical examinations³ and criticized appealing to thought-experiments and intuitions in philosophical discussions, the debate about the role of intuitions in analytical philosophy has become one of the most exciting issues about the methodology of and the role of evidence for philosophy.

In the past years experimental philosophers⁴ (Steven Stich, Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, Joshua Knobe, and others) challenged the view that the project of analytical philosophy is a meaningful and sensible way of doing philosophy. Many prominent analytical philosophers have faced these challenges, and attempted to give viable answers to the sceptical considerations, as well as presented alternatives to the proper methodology of philosophy.

This is a subtle and complex debate, and I'll focus mostly on the sceptical challenge of reliability of intuitions. I would like present the sceptical arguments of the experimental philosophers, and outline some possible responses to them. We have good reasons to think that experimental philosophers misunderstand the role of evidence in philosophy; therefore their sceptical conclusions are unsupported. I will

¹ Kripke (1972; 2001, 11-12).

² "If someone thinks that the notion of a necessary or contingent property (forget whether there are any nontrivial necessary properties [and consider] just the *meaningfulness* of the notion) is a philosopher's notion with no intuitive content, he is wrong. Of course, some philosophers think that something's having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it. I think it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don't know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking" (Kripke 1972; 2001, 41-42).

³ Weinberg - Nichols - Stich (2008).

⁴ Experimental philosophy is an emerging field of inquiry that makes use of empirical data of the intuitions of ordinary people in order to inform research on philosophical questions. This use of empirical data is widely considered as opposed to a philosophical methodology that relies mainly on a priori justification. Webpage: <http://pantheon.yale.edu/~jk762/ExperimentalPhilosophy.html> (2011.03.24.)

build on Goldman's account for a different status of intuitions and argue that the sceptical conclusions of experimental philosophers are harmless against this conception of philosophy.

2 Conceptual analysis and intuitions

One of the main methods of analytical philosophy is conceptual analysis.⁵ Philosophers attempt to give a proper and consistent definition of a concept (knowledge, freedom, rationality, morality, beauty, etc.). Before I present the sceptical arguments against intuitions, I would like to summarize briefly the general structure of arguments used in conceptual analysis.

The arguments have a general form like this: We have a naive concept, for instance about knowledge. We would like to understand what knowledge is. In order to have an exact and adequate definition, we imagine a hypothetical situation *S*, and then ask whether we can apply concept *C* to the situation *S*. And our intuition gives the answer: If intuition shows that concept *C* cannot be applied to situation *S*, then we ought to redefine our concept. Philosophical theories which match with our intuitions are generally considered better (i.e. more plausible). According to this conception about methodology of philosophy, intuitions are certain kind of judgments, or the inclination of belief, by which we can test philosophical theories and argue for and against an interpretation of a concept.

Gettier's argument against the traditional conception of knowledge is an influential example from epistemology. Gettier's article introduced a certain type of philosophical thinking, namely we examine our concepts by means of imagining possible situations and somehow our intuition justify or falsify our philosophical interpretations of a concept. Several further thought-experiments are formulated in epistemology.⁶ They have the same logical structure: we assume a definition about knowledge, and we have counterexamples which show us that we ought to correct our definition. According to supporters of this kind of conceptual analysis, appealing to our intuitions is a reliable method in order to test various naive and philosophical theories.

⁵ For examples of standard analysis of epistemological concepts see Sosa (1994).

⁶ For instance, Lehrer's Truetemp case, or Dretske's zebra example: Lehrer (2000), Dretske (1970).

In moral and political philosophy we usually use a very similar method, namely *reflective equilibrium*. This strategy in which a normative rule is dismissed if it yields an inference we are intuitively unwilling to accept and an inference is rejected if it violates a normative rule we are intuitively unwilling to dismiss.⁷

Intuitions are usually characterized as spontaneous judgments about specific cases. But the main question is that, how could intuitions support philosophical claims? Why should we trust our intuitions? How can we know that our intuitions (whatever they could be) provide evidences for philosophical claims? As we will see, the answers to these questions are crucial in order to judge the weight of the pro and contra arguments about reliability of intuitions in philosophy.

3 The sceptical argument against reliability of intuition

The sceptical argument against appealing to intuitions has the same form of one of the ancient sceptical *tropes*, namely the argument from criterion (or disagreement).⁸ But this modern version of the argument is built on a systematic investigation of the empirical data. Stephen Stich and his colleagues have done an empirical research about ordinary people's intuitions. They used a method familiar to the social-psychologists: they asked groups of East-Asian and American students about famous philosophical thought-experiments (for instance, the Gettier case). The subjects read the description of a contrafactual situation, and they had to decide between two options (for instance, in the Gettier case, whether Smith has knowledge, or he has just justified belief).

These investigations showed that intuitions are not universally the same, they vary from culture to culture, from one socioeconomic group to another.⁹ Other philosophical doctrines were examined, for instance

⁷ Here I follow Goodman's formulation. Goodman (1965, 66).

⁸ For an interpretation of the ancient sceptical argument see Barnes (1990, 1-36).

⁹ Here are some examples. 60 % of Asian students answered that in Gettier case the subject has knowledge. 70 % of American students answered the subject has just a (justified) belief. Several other philosophical arguments were examined, for instance, Keith Lehrer's Truetemp case. In this case only 65 % of Western (American) students said that Mr. Truetemp only has a true belief, but he lacks knowledge. On the other hand, 85 % of Asian students answered that Mr. Truetemp has justified belief, and 15 % said that he has real knowledge. See Weinberg - Nichols - Stich (2008, 25-34).

about linguistic, moral intuitions, intuitions about determinism and moral responsibility, and other issues.¹⁰

The sceptical argument against the reliability of philosophical intuitions can be reconstructed like this. There are contradictions among the intuitions of individuals. Two intuitions which contradict each other cannot be equally true. We don't have an independent criterion in order to determine whose intuitions are 'true', or 'reliable'. If we don't have criterion, we cannot know which intuition can be used as evidence for philosophical claims. Therefore, philosophical arguments which are built on intuitions are unsupported.

The argument can be formulated as a dilemma: There are contradictions between people's intuitions about the same topic. We have two options. First, we accept all intuitions as equally good, valid, or reliable. Therefore, we ought to accept inconsistent claims and norms which are based on inconsistent intuitions. This would be irrational, of course. The second option is that intuitions are not universally valid. Therefore, philosophical arguments are persuasive only among the philosophers who adopt the same (or at least very similar) intuitions.

Experimental philosophers don't hesitate to draw this conclusion, and based on this they argued for an entirely different conception of philosophy. According to the strongest form of this kind of naturalist approach, analytical philosophy as an evaluative and normative project is not a sensible or productive way of philosophical thinking at all, therefore we need to replace the traditional methodology of conceptual analysis with an empirically based, so called "ethnographic" research of the variability of people's intuitions. Instead of appealing to our philosophical intuitions which seem evident and unproblematic only for a narrow circle of population, philosophy should be a purely empirical and descriptive investigation of the folk's "intuitions" (i.e. beliefs, judgments).¹¹

4 Responses to the sceptical argument

The first problem is that the sceptical argument seems to be question-begging. If we accept the view that the philosopher's normative claims are not reliable, for the reason that they are not universal, but

¹⁰ Machery – Mallon – Nichols – Stich (2004); Nichols – Knobe (2007).

¹¹ Knobe – Nichols (2008).

just local and relative to her own cultural and socioeconomic group, we already exclude the possibility that the philosopher might have some kind of expert's knowledge which naturally differs from the layman's beliefs.

Here the experimental philosopher's objection might be the following: the problem is that philosopher's "intuitive" claims are not justified because the intuitions are not "calibrated". An instrument is reliable, even if we make mistakes, but we have independent factors and methods by means of which we are able to recognize the mistakes and correct them.¹² However, in philosophy we appeal only to intuitions, the only available evidence are the intuitions which arise in hypothetical cases, therefore there cannot be any independent justification of the reliability of philosopher's intuitions.

But this objection is harmful only if we presuppose that the ultimate and fundamental pieces of evidence in favour of philosophical (normative) claims are only intuitions, that's all we have.¹³ Actually, experimental philosophers assume that according to analytical philosophers intuitions are the fundamental, ultimate evidences in philosophy.¹⁴ This assumption is not entirely unsupported. Indeed we can find several passages in the writings of analytical philosophers, in which they dignify intuitions (let them be whatever) with this specific epistemic status,¹⁵ nevertheless this presumption seems to me very unreasonable. It is important to recognize that experimental philosophers have a certain conception about philosophical thinking. But this picture is a simplified one, and this simplification is so grave that in the end giving up the sceptical considerations appears justified.

In philosophical debates we can and should appeal to our background knowledge about the world, our experience, our memory, our inference-mechanism used in everyday reasoning and science (including inductive reasoning and analogical reasoning), just as much as we

¹² Weinberg (2007).

¹³ Experimental philosophers accept this presumption about analytical philosophy. See Weinberg (2007).

¹⁴ For example, Knobe – Nichols (2008, 8).

¹⁵ For a strong rationalist view see Bealer (1996) and (2002). One of the classical examples of conceptual analysis of our epistemic terms is Chisholm's book, Chisholm (1989).

use transcendental arguments, *reductio ad absurdum* arguments,¹⁶ and build on testimonial knowledge.¹⁷

I think evidence in philosophy can be in a sense empirical as well. Consider again the conceptual analysis of knowledge. We don't think that guessing or wishful thinking is knowledge. But why? If we would adopt a pure rationalist view, we will have an answer like this: because guessing or wishful thinking are necessarily not instances of knowledge, and by means of our "rational seemings" somehow we intuitively know that. We image hypothetical situations of guessing, and we wouldn't say that in these cases the subject has knowledge, and so on. But doesn't this account seem incomplete and simplified, as the question still remains: why we have an "intuition" that by guessing we cannot acquire knowledge? Nothing excludes *a priori* that guessing or wishful thinking can lead us to reliable knowledge about the world. If in our world there were some people who are (for some reason) extremely talented in guessing of the exact number of the people in a mass, then in this case guessing (or at least the guesses of these people) could lead us to justified true beliefs, or even knowledge. And if a benevolent fairy, who would accomplish all our desires, existed in this world, wishful thinking wouldn't necessarily lead to false, illusory beliefs.¹⁸

We exclude that guessing or wishful thinking are forms of knowledge which are not built on *a priori* ideas, but rather on experiences and inferences which support this everyday belief. We live in a world in which we have observed that by guessing we cannot frequently acquire true beliefs. I have these "intuitions", partly because I have grown up in a certain society, and I learned this conception about knowledge from others.

However from this we shouldn't necessarily conclude to a cultural relativism. If we don't accept a global sceptical view about reliability of

¹⁶ Ryle gives a systematic account of the *reductio ad absurdum* arguments in philosophy. See Ryle (2009).

¹⁷ Already in "meta-level" of philosophical inquiry we appeal to testimonial knowledge: we believe that the author of a cited philosophical article really exists or existed, etc. And of course in several philosophical thought-experiments we appeal to scientific knowledge. (For instance, Putnam's Twin-Earth thought-experiment presumes that we know that water is H₂O; in philosophy of mind we have a textbook example of the identity of mental and physical: pain is firing of the C-fibers, etc.)

¹⁸ I follow Goldman's considerations here. See Goldman (1979, 16-17).

our cognitive skills, we have reasons to think that there can be a very simple empirical justification or corroboration of these folk beliefs (“intuitions”), therefore at least some of our intuitions can provide reasons to distinguish adequate and inadequate philosophical theories.

5 Knowing our own concepts

In the previous part, I gave a short summary about the method of conceptual analysis, the sceptical argument against intuitions, and outlined some possible responses. Now, I would like to present an alternative view about the role of intuitions. Based on Alvin Goldman’s theory I will argue for a different kind of philosophical methodology.¹⁹ Goldman states that the philosophical analysis targets concepts, not in a Fregean (or Platonist) sense, but rather in an individualized and psychological sense. A concept is a mental representation of a subject. Intuitions give reliable, though not infallible evidence about a person’s own concepts, and relations to her other concepts and beliefs. This knowledge is a real knowledge valuable for further philosophical research as well. Philosophy is not just about meditating on my own concepts, though this is an important starting point for further investigations.

A definition of intuitions would be the following: intuitions are cognitive processes which produce introspective beliefs about my own concepts (what I think about knowledge, freedom, etc.), and by intuition I can determine whether a concept *C* can be applied to a situation *S*. Goldman builds on discoveries of cognitive science and argues that there is a causal process between my concept and the intuitive (introspective) understanding of the concept. Therefore, intuition is reliable (in terms of his reliabilist account), though unlike Cartesian introspection, these intuitions are not infallible.²⁰

The sceptical conclusion of experimental philosophers based on variability of intuitions is irrelevant because the variability of subject’s intuitions is taken for granted. **A** has an intuition that concept *C* can be applied to situation *S*, **B** has an intuition that concept *C*’ can be applied

¹⁹ Goldman (2007).

²⁰ Goldman (2007, 9-16).

to situation S, but of course they have different, individual and subjective concepts.²¹

Even from the strongest naturalist point of view a certain kind of intuitive judgments about our concepts can be warranted. It is important to note that empirical investigations of people's intuitions appeal to this kind of "introspective" knowledge as well. When experimental philosophers asked the subjects about various, hypothetical cases, the assumption that the individual is able to access her "intuitions" and give an adequate description of them must be taken for granted, otherwise the whole project of empirical investigation of intuitions runs aground.

Now we can outline a possible answer to the question: what are the thought-experiments (and intuitions) good for? My answer is the following: by imagining hypothetical cases I'm able to make transparent and clear my concepts, beliefs and formerly unreflected presuppositions for myself. Philosophical thought-experiments are examples of reflective methods by means of which we can acquire deeper and lucid understanding of the logical connections of our concepts and beliefs, as well as we are able to recognize logical inconsistencies between them.

There isn't and shouldn't be a universal acceptance of intuitions, of course. But the task of philosophy is not simply to describe how the people (the "folk") think about a certain question. If this would be the task of philosophy, of course empirical case studies (similar to social-psychological investigations) can give us relevant information about the "folk's" concepts.²² But philosophy is a reflective and evaluative enterprise. It deals with logical connections between beliefs and interpretations of one concept to another, and of course philosophy can make normative claims as well. For example, if you think that responsibility requires alternate possibilities, Frankfurt's cases give you reasons to

²¹ Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich have considered Goldman's theory about intuitions, but they didn't have any satisfactory responses to it. Weinberg - Nichols - Stich (2008, 43-44).

²² Knobe and Nichols argue that the experimental philosophy returns to the "traditional" vision of philosophy, i.e. describing how the human beings actually think. "(...) we think that many of the deepest questions of philosophy can only be properly addressed by immersing oneself in the messy, contingent, highly variable truths about how human beings really are." (Knobe - Nichols 2008, 3).

doubt this.²³ Or if you maintain that responsibility really does require alternate possibilities, you ought to formulate another, more defensible theory about it.

Conceptual analysis based on hypothetical situations presents us with alternative ways of thinking about certain philosophical issues. Thought-experiments and intuitions are not mystic seemings which show us the ultimate truth, but they are *heuristic devices* by which we can explore the connections between our own beliefs, concepts, and commitments and show possible difficulties and inconsistencies in our conceptual framework.

Here are some abstract examples of the structure of conceptual analysis: if you believe A, and reflecting on your intuitions can show you that B is a consequence of A, then you must also believe B. If you have a belief C and an another belief D, and by means of intuitive (introspective) knowledge you recognize that D logically presupposes E, but E and C contradict with each other, therefore you should rule out either C or D, etc.

I don't see why this kind of knowledge cannot be real and useful for our theoretical purposes. Of course, a more radical sceptical position can be formulated about the reliability of knowledge about our own concepts, but denying this kind of fallible knowledge pays too high a price, since it entails a global, self-refuting scepticism about rationality itself.

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²³ Frankfurt (1969).

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