

1-2004

## Review of “Intuitions as Evidence”

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### Recommended Citation

Almeida, Michael J. (2004) "Review of “Intuitions as Evidence”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 3.

# Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 5 No. 1, January 2004

## Book Review

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*Intuitions as Evidence*, by Joel Pust. New York, Garland Publishing 2000, xi + 135 pp. Index, bibliography.

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The central thesis in *Intuitions as Evidence* is that philosophical intuitions are rational or *a priori* intuitions that constitute defeasible evidence that some proposition is (necessarily) true. Pust's preferred analysis of *a priori* (or rational) intuitions is a modified version of an analysis offered by George Bealer.

### A1

*S* has a rational intuition that *p* if and only if (a) *S* has a purely intellectual experience when considering the question of whether *p*, that *p*, and (b) at *t*, if *S* were to consider whether *p* were necessarily true, then *S* would have a purely intellectual experience that necessarily *p*.

The emphasis on *a priori* or rational intuitions is made to contrast them with what Bealer calls "physical intuitions". Physical intuitions are similar to rational intuitions in being intuitions that a proposition *p* is true. But as a class physical intuitions are distinctive in failing to be intuitions that a proposition is *necessarily* true. So, for instance, (Bealer's example) we might have an intuition that a house will fall when undermined, but that proposition does not present itself to us as necessary. The purely intellectual experiences referred to (A1) are *intellectual seemings* that are familiar enough to anyone who has had some experience with the Analysis-Counterexample approach to philosophical discussion. The set of conditions offered in the countless analyses of knowledge, for instance, (intellectually) *seem* to be both necessary and sufficient for *S*'s knowing that *p*. But provided with the inevitable counterexample we find that all or some of the conditions *seem* either insufficient or unnecessary for knowledge—or of course both. It is perfectly possible that (A1) is the correct analysis of philosophical intuitions and that philosophical intuitions have no evidential value at all. The claim that they do have evidential value is defended in the succeeding chapters.

The first chapter is primarily descriptive and shows that much of contemporary philosophy appeals to intuitions as evidence for/against various positions. And it is no doubt correct that standard attempts at philosophical analyses—the analysis of knowledge, rationality, justification, moral rightness, etc.—appeal to particular case intuitions. These particular cases are designed to provide exceptions to various general analyses. And though this approach remains pervasive there is also considerable skepticism over its usefulness. Some of this Pust notes. There is for instance almost no one who believes that the long history of "S knows P epistemology" was an especially fruitful endeavor. And of course there is the endless debate between the Two-boxers and the One-boxers on the Newcomb Problem, between the causal theorists and evidential theorists on rational choice, between plastic and non-plastic theories of rationality, between compatibilists, incompatibilists, and semi-compatibilists on free will, between

consequentialists and deontologists on *everything* in moral theory, and so on and on. But then should the thesis that philosophical intuitions are evidential lead us to expect—especially given the terrific energy expended on some rather narrow questions—greater convergence on the answers to these questions? Perhaps that is expecting too much. Still it would be nice to have some explanation why this approach has ushered in so little progress.

There are in chapter (1) useful distinctions made among particularist, generalist, and global intuitions. As might be expected particularists maintain that only those intuitions concerning particular cases have epistemic value. Generalists maintain that only those broader theoretical intuitions are evidential. And globalists are prepared to accept both sorts (and presumably intuitions at every level of generality) as evidential. It is not especially clear—at least not to me—how one would defend either of the extreme positions on intuitions and it is good that Pust seems to find the global position congenial. (p. 12).

Of course, intuitions can be radically misleading. Here it is useful to compare the common intuitions about probability distributions that lead directly to Bertrand's paradox and the typical intuitions in confirmation theory that are so often mistaken. To offer just one example, if evidence E disconfirms A and also disconfirms B most are prepared to conclude—and it certainly seems intuitive—that E disconfirms their conjunction. But of course that's badly mistaken. E might even confirm their conjunction. Pust advances the position that intuitions are not *infallible* and that they constitute at most *prima facie* evidence. But that seriously understates the matter. It is a crucial feature of our intuitions that they are sometimes *radically* misleading and constitute no evidence at all. It would have been good to have more discussion of the tentative nature of this evidence, of the important distinction between tutored and untutored intuitions, and especially the sense in which philosophical intuitions constitute *prima facie* evidence.

There is a discussion of an alternative philosophical method: the method of reflective equilibrium (cf. p. 13 ff.). It is Pust's conclusion that this method is really no alternative at all. The various versions of reflective equilibrium are all treated as versions of particularist or global intuitionism on which justification comes to a stop with intuitions. The discussion is interesting, but it surprisingly ignores the later views John Rawls expressed in *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Rawls notes,

Thus it is only by affirming a constructivist conception—one which is political and not metaphysical—that citizens generally can expect to find principles that all can accept (p. 97 ff).

The method of reflective equilibrium does not on Rawls' view come to a stop with intuitions that evince the correct metaphysical principles of justice. The principles of justice have rather a free-floating political basis. And Rawls is not alone in viewing the basic principles of justice as something less than the metaphysical truth about justice. David Gauthier assumes in 'The Social Contract as Ideology' that principles of justice express a particular contractual *ideology* about justice (cf. *Moral Dealing*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). So it is difficult to see the method of reflective equilibrium—certainly as Rawls understood the method—as being one on which particular or general intuitions function to provide evidence for or against competing principles of justice. It seems closer to the truth to say that intuitions in this context serve to guide the articulation of our received Western European sense of justice. This is not to deny of course that the method of reflective equilibrium might be used in other ways. It *might*. But not much is said about the possibility that the method of reflective equilibrium does

not in general yield metaphysical conclusions.

Chapter (2) develops the view discussed above concerning the nature of philosophical intuitions and culminates in principle (A1). Chapters (3) and (4) provide respectively empiricist (explanationist) skepticism about the evidential nature of intuitions and the problems with that skepticism. These are particularly interesting chapters. The questions here concern whether intuitions *should* be the primary source of evidence in philosophical inquiry and whether intuitions have any evidential worth at all. Among those taking the skeptical position we find arguments from Gilbert Harmon (moral skepticism), Stephen Stich (semantic skepticism) and Alvin Goldman (metaphysical skepticism). But there is a general structure, argues Pust, that each of these skeptical arguments share. The general form of the skeptical arguments is the following.

### General Skeptical Argument

1. Other than propositions about an observation or an intuition, S is justified in accepting a proposition p only if the truth of p plays a necessary role in the best explanation of the occurrence of one or more of S's observations or intuitions.
2. Propositions of type X do not play any role in the best complete explanations of S's "observings" or "intuitings."
3. Therefore S is not justified in accepting propositions of type X.

The general skeptical argument contends that the best explanation for our intuitions—e.g., the moral intuition that we should not inflict gratuitous harm or the metaphysical intuition that free will is incompatible with causal determinism—does not include the *truth* of (the contents of) those intuitions. Since the truth of that moral proposition and that metaphysical proposition does not play a role in explaining why we have that moral intuition and that metaphysical intuition it follows that we are not justified in accepting those propositions as true.

It should be emphasized that this conclusion is compatible with the view that *many* of our intuitions do have evidential value. It depends entirely on the results of what will have to be some lengthy empirical investigations. We have countless intuitions. Perhaps we will discover after all that the truth of many of our moral intuitions do play a necessary role in explaining why we have those intuitions. For instance, if moral properties supervene on natural properties—as almost every moral theorist believes—then a causal explanation of our moral intuitions is certainly not out of the question. If that is so then a moral intuition that *p* is true does confirm that *p* is true.

Pust contends that the general skeptical argument is unsound. Specifically Pust contends that we are not justified in believing premise (1) of the *General Skeptical Argument*. But it is difficult to see how our philosophical intuitions—say, again, our moral intuitions—might be evidential unless something like premise (1) is true. Suppose the truth of the content of our intuitions plays no necessary role in explaining why we have those intuitions. Suppose for instance that the fact that promise-keeping is a good institution does not play a causal role in explaining why anyone has the intuition that promise-keeping is a good institution. That leaves open the possibility (for instance) that a deficiency in vitamin B<sub>12</sub> causes (through some strange etiology) the belief that promise-keeping is a good institution. Of course the fact that the belief has the given etiology does not *entail* that the belief is false. Similarly the belief that there is a komodo dragon in your living room might be caused by an hallucinogenic drug, but that does not *entail* that your belief is false. But if as chance would have it those beliefs are true it is

difficult to see how they are justified. In general, rejecting premise (1) in the *General Skeptical Argument* leaves open the possibility that our intuitions have fully unreliable causal histories.

The argument against premise (1) asserts that there are two (and only two) ways to argue for (1). Either (1) is simply intuitive or (1) is inductively supported by our intuitions regarding particular cases of justified belief (p. 85). Pust finds no justification for (1) on either score. But what about the possibility that the truth of (1) plays a necessary role in explaining why we have the intuition—or at least *some* of us have the intuition—that (1) is true? It is perfectly possible that the truth of some intuitions plays a necessary role in explaining those intuitions while the truth of other intuitions do not. The justification of a theory of justification must (presumably) involve some bootstrapping. Should a theory of justification be justified by its own lights or by the lights of some other theory of justification? Pust does not (or does not directly) consider this possibility in his discussion of the justification of (1). But it seems to be exactly the sort of justification—if there is one—that one should expect for premise (1).

In the chapter (5) Pust argues for the reliability of philosophical intuition as a truth-producing method of acquiring beliefs. Pust argues that if sense perception is a reliable source of belief-formation then so is intuition. Just as the deliverances of sense perception cannot offer a basis for the reliability of sense perception, so the deliverances of philosophical intuition cannot offer a basis for the reliability of intuition. The argument Pust advances depends (in part) on the assumption that “we have no good (i.e. non-epistemically circular) reasons for thinking intuitions are reliable”(104). We can do no more than rely on intuition to “justify” our intuitions. But of course there needn’t be any epistemic circularity here. Distinctions among intuitions need not be invidious. For instance we have all sorts of intuitions in mathematics, confirmation theory, and logic. Why isn’t it an independent test of intuition that it seems wildly counterintuitive that two infinite sets can differ in size or cardinality? We can test the intuition against a reliable *mechanical proof* procedure. Why isn’t it an independent test of intuitions that it seems wildly unintuitive that if A entails B then E might *confirm* A and *disconfirm* B despite the fact that it *must* be true that  $\Pr(A/E) \leq \Pr(B/E)$ ? Again we have what appears to be an independent and non-circular test of our intuitions against a reliable mechanical proof procedure. Now perhaps these proof procedures are themselves justified by certain philosophical intuitions. In that case we might find that most of our *interesting* intuitions in confirmation theory, mathematics and logic are fully unreliable. And we might find some basis for the position that interesting intuitions in most areas are unreliable.

But could the faculty of intuition be reliable after all? The faculty of intuition is reliable only if it is possible *both* that the causal explanation of our intuitions is completely unreliable—compare the  $B_{12}$  example above—and our intuitions are nonetheless evidential. And obviously it is difficult to see how an intuition could have an unreliable cause and remain evidential. There is no discussion of this point, but it would be good to see whether this is indeed possible.

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