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Federico Mathías Pailos
University of Buenos Aires

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Intuition as Philosophical Evidence

Federico Mathías Pailos, University of Buenos Aires

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Abstract

Earlenbaugh and Molyneux's argument against considering intuitions as evidence has an uncharitable consequence — a substantial part of philosophical practice is not justified. A possible solution to this problem is to defend that philosophy must be descriptive metaphysics. But if this statement is rejected, one can only argue (a) that experts' intuition does constitute evidence, and (b) that philosophical practice is justified by the overall growth of philosophical knowledge it generates.

Intuition as Philosophical Evidence

Analytic philosophy uses intuitions all the time. Philosophers usually say that such and such a thesis is intuitive, or intuitively plausible. Or that such and such a position is counterintuitive, or has very little intuitive support. All these uses seem to suggest that to intuit that p is, at least, a reason to accept it. (Or that it purports *prima facie* a justification for the intuited proposition.) Similarly, if a certain proposition, or theory, or proposal is judged as counterintuitive, or as having little intuitive support, this would seem to be a reason, if not for rejecting it, at least for not being forced to accept it.

But the supposed evidential weight of intuition can be challenged. One of those challenges has been raised by Earlenbaugh and Molyneux. In Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009, they defend that it is not necessary to postulate that intuition counts as evidence in order to explain the role it plays in analytic philosophy.

It is not clear what an intuition is.¹ Nevertheless, Earlenbaugh and Molyneux treat it as a kind of inclination to believe. In what follows, I will assume this thesis. I will be particularly interested in those intuitions which seem to resist review, and which do not obtain evident support from something more basic — some belief, for example — than the inclination the agent has to believe it. Moreover, I will not be interested in all intuitions, but only in those intuitions that p characterized by the following: the agent also believes that p .²

In the rest of this article, I will explore the possibilities of justifying philosophical practice as increasing knowledge over time. In order to do so, I will present an image of intuition as a kind of theory-laden inclination to believe that plays the role of evidence.

1. Earlenbaugh and Molyneux's argument against the idea of intuitions as evidence

In Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009 (pp. 40-1), the authors present the following argument against intuitions as evidence of the truth, justification or correctness of philosophical theses:

- 1- If philosophical inquiry is typically, or at least often, concerned with troublingly extra-mental facts and entities, then intuition cannot play its supposed evidential role in philosophical inquiry.
- 2- Philosophical inquiry is typically, or at least often, concerned with troublingly extra-mental facts and entities.
- 3- Hence, intuition cannot play its supposed evidential role in philosophical inquiry.

Earlenbaugh and Molyneux believe that, since each premise is true, and the argument has a modus ponens form, then the conclusion is also true. As they recognize that most philosophers make use of intuitions, they must either accept that a substantial portion of analytical philosophy is unjustified, or they must defend that the role of intuition has been mistaken. They adopt the latter approach. They claim that intuition is a kind of inclination to believe. The arguments that make use of intuition as a reason to accept some specific thesis are successful—in case they are—because the audience shares that specific intuition with the philosopher. Or, in other words, they all share the same type of inclination to believe. This explains why some arguments are persuasive. But that does not turn them into a good justification for their conclusions.

Nevertheless, Earlenbaugh and Molyneux argue that this does not imply that intuitions should not count as evidence. According to them, what should be concluded from their argument is just that it is not necessary to claim that intuitions are a kind of evidence, in order to explain their role in philosophical argumentation. But the conclusion to their argument is precisely the same: intuitions cannot be evidence.

In any case, it can be accepted that intuition has some evidential weight. For example, if one accepts that the stronger an inclination to believe, the more likely to be true is its content, then firmly held intuitions are more likely to be true than mere hunches or guesses. So if one intuits that p , then one has a reason—no matter how weak this reason

may be— to believe that p is true. Something analogous can be said about shared inclinations to believe (as opposed to those held only by an individual). But if one seeks to defend that actual philosophical practice is a fruitful epistemic activity, then one should reject at least one of the premises in Earlenbaugh and Molyneux's argument. Before exploring this topic, let us describe in greater detail the reasons Earlenbaugh and Molyneux present for their premises.

2. Philosophy and extra-mental reality

The reasons Earlenbaugh and Molyneux present to support (1) are precisely those suggested by Goldman in Goldman 1992. He makes a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive metaphysics. The former attempts to describe, in a systematic way, our conceptual scheme, our metaphysical intuitions. The latter seeks to find what there really is “out there,” i.e., what the really existing things are. It is clear that intuitions play a central role in the descriptive metaphysics approach, because when we do descriptive metaphysics we are trying to describe and systematize them. We have, so to speak, privileged access to our mental states, and intuitions are a kind of mental state. But it is not clear which role intuitions play in the prescriptive approach. One might think that, if they are in a position to play a role at all, it is because they are a reliable guide to truth. That means that, if one intuits that p , then p is more likely to be true than if one did not intuit that p .

However, intuitions change over time and across philosophers. Furthermore, many of the philosophical intuitions held in the past are now considered false. Thus, it seems highly unlikely that intuition may be a reliable guide to truth.

Goldman's conclusion is that, since intuitions count as philosophical evidence, but the only things they can be evidence of are the elements in our conceptual scheme, the main goal of philosophy is to systematize our conceptual scheme. Nevertheless, this “mentalist” position is not widely accepted. Philosophers seem to think themselves as trying to get things right about morality, validity, time, change, or necessity, and not about what we think about those issues. But if this is correct, then those who think that intuition plays a key part as a kind of philosophical evidence should explain how it is — reliably— connected with those issues. Some of those terms refer to purely abstract objects, with no causal connection at all. In Earlenbaugh and Molyneux's words:

But if we conclude [...] that the objects of philosophical inquiry *can* be mind-independent matters that extend beyond the limits of concept application then we must explain how armchair inquiry, using intuitions, can possibly provide evidence for them; in particular, how it can provide evidence concerning objects (like pure possibilia) that play no causal role

in this universe, or objects (like abstract objects) that play no causal role period, or facts (like normative facts) that do not obviously involve causally potent truth-makers. Let all such things—that are not only extra-mental but which also, as far as we can gather, bear no reliable epistemic connection to the mental—be dubbed “*troublingly extra-mental facts and entities*.” (Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009, p. 39.)

Since we have no satisfying explanation of this connection, philosophical intuitions become suspicious. This makes a difference between intuitions and other types of inclinations to believe, such as inclinations to believe perceptual propositions in a specific situation. Perception is a reliable source of true beliefs. Moreover, we have a scientific explanation of the way perception functions, and how perceptions connect reliably with the world. Until we have something similar with intuitions, all normative philosophy based on intuition seems unjustified.

But even if there is a connection between some intuitions and those “*troublingly extra-mental facts and entities*,” one still needs to prove the connection between the remaining intuitions and philosophical phenomena. Intuitions may be *psychologically homogeneous*, but are probably *epistemically heterogeneous*, as Earlenbaugh and Molyneux have claimed.

... it is *prima facie* unlikely that our metaphysical, modal, moral, epistemic and semantic inclinations to believe are all connected to the truth via a single consistently reliable mechanism, given that the abstract and concrete, actual and non-actual targets of those intuitions are so diverse. But if our intuitions connect to their truth-makers via different mechanisms (or, as a special case, if they do not connect at all) then they are therefore reliable (or not) to radically different extents. (Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009, p. 39.)

So why is it that arguments that take intuitions as evidence are successful? Well—they are not. But—this much is true—they are persuasive, at least if the intuitions they use are shared with the audience. This does not make it a “good” argument. It may be one, if the intuition taken as evidence is legitimate. But we still need some proof that there is this kind of intuitions.

Let’s examine now some ways to resist Earlenbaugh and Molyneux’s argument.

3-(No matter) What Philosophy talks about

Rationality, Validity, Moral Good, Truth, Possibility, and Meaning are some of the philosophical topics. What philosophers want are theories that allow them to get a better understanding of each and every one of them. In this article, I intend to be as neutral as possible about the issue of what Philosophy is—or “talks”—about. Philosophy might or might not be about topics that are not “things” or “objects.”³ It might also deal with things that can be reduced to sociological, psychological or biological entities. The central point that I want to make remains the same.

Now, as Earlenbaugh and Molyneux remember, most philosophers seem to reject the idea that what Philosophy is about—and what philosophers talk about—is, or supervenes in, mental entities. In order to deny this thesis—i.e., that Philosophy is not about mental entities—an independent argument is required. But if it were true, premise (ii) in Earlenbaugh and Molyneux’s argument is false, because then we do have privileged access to what Philosophy talks about—i.e., some kind of mental phenomena. So intuition could count as evidence in this scenario.⁴

Indeed, most philosophers are inclined to believe that they are doing something different when they develop philosophical proposals. More precisely, they believe that something like the second premise is true. What they do is present positive theories—or sketches of them—about philosophical topics. They put forward formal models of vague notions, what logical theories do with the notion of validity or truth preservation (in case these are two different notions), what rational decision theories do with the idea of a rational attitude in particular, and rationality in general, what metaphysical theories try to do with the idea of possibility, and what moral theories do with the notions of right and duty. It is not necessary for the formal notion to be coextensive with the intuitive or pre-theoretical notion, and sometimes it is better if not. Moreover, one would hope that the formal notion of “set” is not coextensive with the intuitive one, because the latter leads to contradictions. A similar point can be made about other philosophical concepts and fields. What right now is important to us is (a) whether the philosophical practice that takes intuition as *prima facie* evidence is epistemically justified, and (b) whether intuition is evidence, more or less understood as something that raises the probability of truth of the proposition intuited. I will explore the reasons that make the philosophical practice—understood as something more than a way to clarify our conceptual scheme or our concepts—that takes intuitions as evidence a reliable mechanism for discovering philosophical truths.

4. In what sense intuition is a reliable mechanism

There is no one and only accepted conception about what makes a certain procedure or faculty reliable. Nevertheless, I will adopt the following version: an epistemic procedure or faculty is reliable if and only if the conditional probability of a proposition, given the

fact that it was the result of an application of that procedure or faculty, is generally higher than the absolute probability of the proposition. If intuition is a reliable way to discover philosophical truths, then intuition provides evidence to the truth of the proposition intuited. What needs to be proved, then, is that to intuit that p makes p more probably true.

A way to defend this is to claim that not all intuitions are reliable. Only experts' intuitions are. The reason is that we are only interested in intuitions of propositions that are also believed. If we are talking about this kind of experts' intuitions, then, if an expert intuits that p , then p is more probably true (than if no expert had that intuition), because experts' beliefs (about the particular field they are experts at) are a reliable source of truths.⁵

A similar defense of experts' intuition is made by James McBain, in McBain 2008. McBain claims that all intuitions are theory-laden. When someone claims that a certain case of justified true belief is also a case of knowledge—in a Gettier's case—, her judgment is influenced (i.e., informed) at least by her informal or “folk” theories about knowledge, belief, justification, and truth. Every theory—related to the point—that an individual accepts will influence the way she will attribute notions to particular situations, and the way she thinks that notion is related to others. The expert will have better theories, so her judgments will be better. But it is also the case that she would have thought more and better about the point. Then, her judgments and inclinations to judge (including her intuitions) will be more reliable than those of ordinary people.

Let's take an example. Most people without philosophical training are inclined to think that a sentence like “The King of France is bold” is clearly false. Nevertheless, most experts will reject that judgment. Some will think that it is not the case that the sentence is false because it does not have any truth value. Some others, although they might think that the sentence is false, would reject that it is clearly false, because they find it plausible to defend the idea that such sentence has no truth value.

A common objection to this position is that the wide disagreement in all areas of Philosophy proves that the expert's intuitions are not so good as one may think. The existence of these disagreements seems to reveal that intuition cannot be evidence in philosophy.

A possible answer is to claim that the fact that intuitions are philosophical evidence is the best way to explain a certain reasonable reaction to those disagreements. Some philosophers defend that, when one faces a situation where at least two different philosophers disagree about a certain point, after examining all the relevant evidence, it is rational not to pronounce on that issue. Richard Feldman, David Christensen and Adam Elga⁶ believe something similar to this. Some disagreements of this kind also represent a

collision of intuitions. Why is it rational to suspend judgment about the point of disagreement? This is because the judgment by each expert provides *prima facie* evidence, which is canceled in the face of evidence to the contrary. In particular, that evidence might be the opposite judgment by another expert—in this case, another philosopher. This is a charitable picture of what is going on, because it assumes that we are mostly rational when we act this way. But it implies that intuition does count as evidence.

When I say that intuition counts as evidence, I mean that it raises the probability of what is being intuited.⁷ But this does not mean that intuition provides *conclusive evidence* for the proposition intuited. One cannot prove anything just because one has the right intuition. The inquiry about it remains open. That is what conclusive evidence does. For example, that is what logical proofs do. This—conclusive evidence—is what we want, but what we rarely find. Thus, we avoid a significant risk that this position faces: statism.

By “statism” I mean the attitude of those who think that there is no good reason to keep on searching for a good explanation to a certain phenomenon. The position defended here avoids statism, precisely because it claims that it is not enough to intuit that p to give up inquiry about p . For this to be rational, the intuition has to provide conclusive evidence. And the position defended does not imply that intuition does—actually, I think it does not.

This constitutes a first reason for the use of intuition as evidence in Philosophy. It claims that, if the experts’ beliefs are *prima facie* justified, then some particular intuitions are also *prima facie* justified. This might be judged as a weak support of the use of intuitions, because the experts’ beliefs reliability might also be challenged. Besides, at this point, one might ask the following: if intuition does not provide conclusive evidence, why is it important to have intuitions? And, more importantly: how is it that a (philosophical) practice based on intuitions is epistemically justified? The answer to these last questions will provide a second reason for the use of intuition as philosophical evidence.

5. The justification of philosophical practice

A good part of Analytic Philosophy is based on intuitions. If that practice is not an epistemically reliable mechanism, then it should be left behind as a way to increase our knowledge. It may be a useful tool in order to get a better understanding of our conceptual scheme, and the concepts we—individually or collectively—have, but it is useless as a way to help us understand what validity (or rationality, or good) is.⁸

Another —though related— problem faced by this conception of Philosophy is expressed in the request Katie Couric made to David Christensen. This is how Christensen reconstructs the situation:

If you'd like to make a professional philosopher uncomfortable, try asking for clear examples of our discipline's achievements in settling the questions we study:

Katie Couric: I'm just going to ask you one more time –not to belabor the point. Specific examples, in the last 2600 years, of important philosophical questions settled...

Philosopher (visibly straining to look upbeat): I'll... try to find ya some, and I'll bring 'em to ya! (Christensen 2009, p. 1.)

I have no satisfying reply to Couric, either. There might be some, and probably more than one would initially think. What is sure is that we do not really make focus on them. But, if Philosophy is an epistemically justified practice, there should be. We have a lot of philosophical theses. We have more than a lot of arguments for or against them. Those arguments help to clarify the plausibility of the theses. What we get from them are some conditional truths. I claim that those conditional truths are at least part of the philosophical knowledge gained through the History of Philosophy. They justify the idea that knowledge in Philosophy is possible, and actual. They also help explain in what sense it can be claimed that there is progress in Philosophy.

I will give just two examples, which may help clarify what I have in mind. The first one is about the semantics of evaluative terms. At least part of the merit of Relativism about (the meaning of) evaluative terms is that it contributes to explain how it is that faultless disagreements are possible. If someone says "Ice creams are tasty," and someone else says "Ice creams are not tasty," then they seem to disagree. But, at the same time, it also seems that neither of them is doing anything wrong, that no one is violating a rule of assertion. Thus, Relativism gives an explanation of faultless disagreements. It claims that the truth value of these kinds of assertions is relative to an evaluative standard fixed by the context of assessment. But not everyone accepts that there really are faultless disagreements. Contextualists, for example, reject this.⁹ So it is not at all clear that it should be something good about Relativism that it helps explain cases of faultless disagreement. Nevertheless, if faultless disagreements about evaluative terms are real, then, as relativist theories claim, the truth value of assertions with evaluative terms is relative to a standard fixed by the context of assessment.

A second example: Modus ponens seems to be a valid form of inference. Nevertheless, in McGee 1985, Van McGee presents some examples of modus ponens with indicative conditional, which seem to have true premises and a false conclusion. McGee argues that in relation to the indicative conditional, it is not possible to have both modus ponens and

the Importation/Exportation Principle, which claims that for any propositions A, B, and C ($A \rightarrow (B \rightarrow C)$) if and only if $((A \& B) \rightarrow C)$. McGee claims that the Importation/Exportation Principle is obviously true. So modus ponens cannot be valid. In fact, both McGee and his critics accept that, in relation to the indicative conditional, it is not possible to have both modus ponens and the Importation/Exportation Principle, and if one is valid, then the other is not.¹⁰

A possible objection to this position is the following: any supposed philosophical conditional can be doubted, and is, strictly speaking, false. That is because the inferential relation between the antecedent and the consequent depends on a series of non-explicit presuppositions. For example, about evaluative terms, Relativism explains faultless disagreements *only if non-standard parameters can be included in the circumstances of evaluation*. On the other hand, the Importation/Exportation Principle about the indicative conditional is valid if and only if modus ponens about indicative conditional is not, *only if the indicative conditional is different from the material or the counterfactual conditional*.

This objection seems unfair. Any scientific truth presupposes that some *ceteris paribus* conditions are met. Under a similar argument, any scientific truth can be questioned. This consequence is untenable in the case of scientific truths. So one plausible solution to this problem is to apply a similar strategy in the case of philosophical truths as the favorite solution to the scientific case. For example, it can be accepted that scientific “truths” are not, strictly speaking, true. But they are once they become the consequent of some conditional that has a conjunction of the *ceteris paribus* conditions as antecedent. The same approach could be taken with philosophical “truths.”

Nothing I have defended presupposes that non-conditional philosophical truths are impossible, or non-actual. Nevertheless, this substantive knowledge, if any, is certainly not that “exciting.” Maybe the non-contradiction principle is the traditional candidate. But even this common-sense principle has been rejected by paraconsistent philosophers, who accept that there are some situations in which a certain proposition and its negation can both be true.¹¹

But even if we accept the point that we are in a better epistemic position because we have a large amount of conditional knowledge that we did not have in the past, why is it that this fact justifies a philosophical practice based on intuitions? Well, it does. That is because it motivates and encourages the production of more and better arguments for and against philosophical theses. And those arguments help find the conditional truths that justify the idea of philosophical progress.

This does not mean that philosophical practice is the only kind of practice that produces arguments, or that it is the only one capable of producing them. Neither does it mean that current practice is the best possible philosophical practice. But it is not necessary to

conclude any of these theses to justify the philosophical practice based on intuitions. What is necessary is to encourage the idea that such practice is a reliable mechanism. And it is, provided that its outputs are the kind of conditional truths I have mentioned.

It can be objected that Philosophy has other goals. It aims at producing the best theories about a number of philosophical topics, not at producing those conditional assertions. But there seems to be no philosophical substantive (and relevant) theory whose truth is sufficiently well-established.

There is some truth in the previous paragraph. If we already have those theories, then Philosophy is as epistemically justified as Science. It is not, because we do not have those theories. But that does not imply that it is not justified at all. It is, because it increases our knowledge. This may seem an external justification, because we are interested in substantive theories, not in the kind of conditional assertions which seems to be the only ones available. But the justification is not that external. A substantive part of philosophical activity consists in providing and evaluating reasons. And the kind of knowledge we have achieved is closely related to those reasons for and against theories. What justifies philosophical practice is not something external to it, but something that characterizes it.

6. Conclusion

A substantive part of Analytic Philosophy is based on intuitions as reasons to accept or reject propositions. Such procedure has been widely questioned. One objection is the one made by Earlenbaugh and Molyneux. Their argument concludes that intuition cannot count as evidence. I have shown how it can, even if Philosophy is not restricted to describing our conceptual scheme, if we distinguish between evidence and conclusive evidence. The expert's intuitions that produce a parallel belief justify what is intuited, because the expert's beliefs provide *prima facie* justification. This explains why it seems reasonable to suspend judgment when faced with a disagreement on intuitions between experts. Nevertheless, this does not prove that philosophical practice based on intuitions is justified. But it is, because it increases our philosophical knowledge. Or at least some part of it: what we reach after evaluating the reasons for and against philosophical theses.

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¹ Nor whether it is a particularly useful concept. Williamson, for example (in Williamson 2010), rejects the very notion of "intuition."

² But this does not mean that an intuition is a kind of belief. This thesis is—in my opinion, appropriately—rejected in Bealer 1998 and McBain 2008.

³ A very reasonable position in the Philosophy of Logic is that an inference is valid if and only if it preserves truth through every possible interpretation of the non-logical constants. But Williamson, in Williamson 2007, presents an argument against the idea that interpretations are "objects," because it is not possible to quantify them.

⁴ In fact, this is Goldman's position.

⁵ This kind of justification of intuitions, relative to the expert's beliefs, is similar "in spirit" to the defense Williamson made of the expert's judgments, in particular, in Williamson 2004, 2010. But Williamson rejects the very idea of intuition, and I find it, at least, plausible.

⁶ In Feldman, R., 2006a, "Epistemological puzzles about disagreement" (in *Epistemology Futures*, Hetherington, S. [ed.]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 216-236), Christensen, D., 2007, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News" (in *Philosophical Review* 119, pp. 187-217), and Elga, A., 2007, "Reflection and Disagreement" (in *Nous* 41, pp. 478-502).

⁷ Or that it would raise it in the absence of other evidence for or against it.

⁸ I am not denying that Philosophy should reduce itself to what Goldman calls "Descriptive Metaphysics." But if that is the case, then it is easier to justify the claim that intuition provides evidence and, probably, conclusive evidence.

⁹ The debate is explained in Kolbel 2007 and MacFarlane 2005a. A defense of a contextualist position can be found in Cohen 1999, Cohen 2000, DeRose 1992, DeRose 1995, DeRose 1996, DeRose 2004, García Carpintero 2007, López de Sá 2007a, and López de Sá 2007b. For a defense of relativism, see Kolbel 2007, Kolbel 2008, MacFarlane 2005a, MacFarlane 2005b, and Richard 2004.

¹⁰ A more detailed presentation of this point can be found in McGee 1985, McGee 1989, and Kolodny and MacFarlane (unpublished). Some objections to McGee are presented in Piller 1994, Katz 1999, and Lowe 1987.

¹¹ For more about the non-contradiction principle, see Mares 2004, Priest 2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b, and Priest & Beall & Armour-Garb 2004.