

Review of “Rethinking Intuition”

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Abstract: Review of Michael DePaul and William Ramsey, eds. “Rethinking Intuition: The Psychology of Intuition and Its Role in Philosophical Inquiry.” Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

THIS COLLECTION arose out of a conference on intuitions at the University of Notre Dame in April 1996. The papers in it mainly address two related questions: (a) How much evidential weight should be assigned to intuitions? and (b) Are concepts governed by necessary and sufficient conditions, or are they governed by ‘family resemblance’ conditions, as Wittgenstein suggested? The book includes four papers by psychologists relating and analyzing some empirical findings concerning intuitions and eleven papers by philosophers endorsing various answers to these questions.

The first section consists of the papers by psychologists. In these papers, the main target is the traditional philosopher who holds, *inter alia*, that the answer to a is “quite a lot” and the answer to b is the former, that there are necessary and sufficient conditions for most philosophically interesting concepts. If you like these answers, then you might spend your time Chisholming away at concepts like ‘justice,’ ‘knowledge,’ and ‘causation’—proposing snappy analyses and testing them against intuitions about possible cases. But if you don’t like these answers, you might prefer to make pointed criticisms of the presuppositions of such a methodology and suggest some more empirically defensible ways of coming to understand concepts. Indeed, this is just what the psychologists writing here do.

The papers by the philosophers are, very roughly, divided up according to their answers to these questions. The second section, titled “Rethinking Intuition and Philosophical Method,” consists of papers disagreeing with traditional philosophy about *a* or *b*. (This section includes papers by Stephen Stich, Robert Cummins, Hilary Kornblith, Tamara Horowitz, William Ramsey, and Alvin Goldman and Joel Pust.) The really radical position, expressed most clearly by Stich, is that traditional philosophy is wrong on both counts. We need to bring much more empirical research to bear on explicating crucial concepts in ethics, epistemology, and so forth, and the explications we will end up with will not be short lists of necessary and sufficient conditions. The third section, titled “Defending the Philosophical Tradition,” contains, mostly, defenses of one of the traditional views. (This section includes papers by George Bealer,

Richard Foley, Ernest Sosa, George Graham and Terry Horgan, and Michael DePaul.) The main aim here is to defend the value of intuitions as evidence; there is no explicit defense of the traditional view of concepts. Despite this neat rationale, the editors' classification breaks down in a few cases. For example, in Kornblith's paper he indicates substantial agreement with the paper by Graham and Horgan. So it is a little unclear why these papers are in these opposing sections. There is one other philosophical paper: Gary Gutting's historical introduction is printed in a special 'Introduction' section.

Three of the papers have the phrase "Reflective Equilibrium" in their title, so it might be expected that there would be some cutting-edge discussions about how to balance competing desiderata in achieving equilibrium. We don't get such a discussion, and perhaps with good reason. With a nod in the direction of Goodman, Rawls, and Daniels, the writers mostly agree that if the aim of ethical or epistemological theory is, primarily, to systematize our intuitions, then reflective equilibrium (RE) is the way to do it. The papers here are, quite self-consciously, interested in the more basic question of whether that is what we want ethics or epistemology to do. I'll conclude by saying a bit more about the papers which most clearly address this question. For the radicals, Cummins argues that "philosophical intuition is epistemologically useless" (p. 125). For the traditionals, on the other hand, Michael DePaul argues that RE provides "close to a correct answer" to the question, "How should we conduct philosophical inquiry?" (p. 294).

Cummins compares evidence from intuitions to evidence from other sources, like telescopes. He notes two related features of telescopes which, he thinks, makes them more trustworthy sources of evidence than intuitions. First, telescopes can be calibrated. We can apply telescopes to cases about which we have reliable independent evidence and see whether they deliver appropriate answers. For example, we can point a telescope at a distant mountain and see whether it looks the same through the telescope as it does up close and personal. If so, we can trust what it shows about places we have never before seen, such as heavenly bodies. If not, we not only learn that the telescope is untrustworthy but also may learn a little about the way in which it fails. Unlike telescopes, intuitions cannot be independently checked. They can only be checked against other intuitions. Hence, argues Cummins, they are untrustworthy. As Sosa notes, the comparison here may be unfair. Even though we can calibrate telescopes, we cannot calibrate observation as a whole. We can only calibrate particular kinds of observations against other kinds of observations and particular kinds of intuitions against other kinds of intuitions. Intuition, in this respect, is just like observation, and since we trust observations, we should trust intuitions.

Cummins's other critique is that what evidence we do have about intuitions suggests that they are artifacts of the process by which they are produced rather than reli-

able guides to their subject matters. The idea is that the presence of a certain intuition concerning fairness tells us more about the source of the intuition (usually the person who has the intuition) than about fairness. If this is right, then intuitions are obviously not evidential. Cummins’s argument is that there are only five possible sources of intuitions, and examination of each suggests that intuitions are artifacts of the process by which they are produced. To prove this, Cummins works through each of the five possible sources and argues for each that an intuition derived from that source has no evidential value. Argument by cases in this way, when there are five possible cases to cover, is never going to be satisfactory. For example, one of the cases Cummins considers is that intuitions are evidential because they arise from possession of concepts. Something like this view is endorsed in the papers by Bealer and by Goldman and Pust. Cummins thinks this does not work because our concepts are just sets of beliefs. One’s concept of an elevator is just everything one believes about elevators. If anything like this is right, then the fact that we intuit that p just means that we believe p and that could not be evidence that p . But the theory of concepts he has in mind cannot be right. As Fodor has pointed out, it seems people can share concepts while having different beliefs involving those concepts. Indeed, something like this must be right if genuine disagreement is possible. If possessing a concept just meant having certain beliefs, then it would be impossible for people with radically different beliefs about a subject to share concepts relating to that subject. Since such sharing is possible, concept possession does not reduce to having certain beliefs. The main point is not that there is an insurmountable problem for Cummins here—maybe a more detailed discussion could show that his account of concepts is right and Fodor’s is wrong—but rather that with such a wide terrain to cover, a short argument is not going to win many converts.

Michael DePaul is much more content with intuitions playing a central role in philosophy. Indeed, he seems happy to let them do all the work. His paper imagines a dialogue between himself and a friendly barfly who wants to be told all about how philosophy works. At some point in the conversation, DePaul’s character decides to present the new friend with an extended summary of how RE works. The friend is bemused that philosophers seem to only sit around and compare intuitive judgments. It does seem, notes the friend, a trifle self-indulgent. DePaul’s response attempts to defend RE by an argument that any alternative method would be irrational. Any alternative, argues DePaul, would have to (a) abandon reflection, (b) reflect incompletely, by leaving out certain beliefs, principles, or whatever enters into reflection, or (c) not allow results of reflection to influence final theory. As DePaul notes, it would be irrational to accept any of these options. DePaul acknowledges two possible criticisms here, criticisms which he admits he is not sure how to answer. The first is that it is not clear what is wrong with being irrational, at least in the sense DePaul has in mind. The

second is that even if we have a reason not to be irrational, it is not clear how strong a reason this is and, hence, whether irrationality might be justifiable on occasion because it fulfills some greater purpose.

There is a third criticism that more closely reflects the problem raised by DePaul's interlocutor. When someone says that philosophy should be about more than systematizing intuitions, they are not advocating alternatives to RE but, rather, supplements to it. The point of the criticism was that there must be other sources of evidence for moral or conceptual claims, other than just intuition. (This, apparently, is intuitively obvious!) DePaul provides a good response to someone who wants to say that intuitions have no evidential value at all. But he does not answer the critic who denies that intuitions provide the only evidence that might bear on philosophical problems.

This is a very useful collection to have published. A study of the role of intuition should be at the heart of any investigation into philosophical methodology. And such an investigation will have to take into account both the empirical findings about how intuition works and the philosophical considerations about how much importance should be attached to intuitions. The papers here do not look like the last word on any of these questions, but they are a helpful, and perhaps overdue, first word.

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