

Two Cheers for Armchair Philosophy: A Limited Defense Against Empirical Attacks

1. Anti-Armchair: Empirical Arguments Against Armchair Philosophy's Use of Intuitions

Arguments that the use of intuitions in philosophy “ought to be abandoned” (to take one of the milder characterizations of what this movement argues for from the bottom of Weinberg’s first page (318)), or “ought not be trusted” (323.4), based on empirical results.

Intuitions here are immediate judgments (some explanation needed here*), or “impressions” (as B&N sometimes put it) that are not arrived at through sense perception or observation (though that all can be in the background). See B&N, p. 2, the very start of W’s paper, and W 319.9-320.0. We’re especially interested in such impressions that concern whether particular cases are or are not cases of knowledge, but the more general category would be something like (using W’s description) judgments that “a particular hypothetical case does or does not fall under some target concept” (B, p. 318).

*Intuitions (KDR attempt at a good characterization): Judgments that are not arrived at through sense perception, observation, or memory, and that are psychologically immediate in the sense that they are not based on explicit reasoning that the subject can securely identify, though they can be, and typically are, based on other beliefs the subject holds in a way the subject cannot make fully explicit. In philosophy and other areas of inquiry, intuitions are also dialectically immediate (i.e., serve as argumentative starting points) in the sense that they are not themselves supported by proper arguments (via steps from premises that strictly imply them), though they are often supported by looser reasoning, basing the intuitions on claims that do not imply the intuitions in question, but that the arguer hopes will make the intuition seem more plausible when the intuition is considered in light of those claims and loose reasoning associated with those claims.

Philosophers are often especially interested in a special class of intuitions, which concern the application of a philosophically important concept to a particular (usually imagined) situation (so, for example, a judgment that a character in a described example does, or does not, know something to be the case), and will sometimes use “intuition” to indicate this special class.

Im/mediacy: Psychological: Does the subject base this belief on other of their beliefs? Evaluative: Does the subject have to successfully base this belief on other of their beliefs in order for this belief to be justified? Dialectical: Does the arguer base this claim on other claims they make in this argument?

Application: How philosophical arguments go. Claim: The starting premises for almost any philosophical argument for a substantial and controversial conclusion will always contain at least one premise that is quite uncertain and deniable and for which the kind of loose support described above is the best support available.

As B&N point out/argue, we should expect epistemic intuitions (intuitions about whether someone knows something or not) to be generally reliable (for reasons given in their sect. 3), and, as they point out, skeptical experimentalists often grant that there could be a “core” of shared and reliable intuitions: B&N 5.8. The target is something like *philosophical* epistemic intuitions, which may “concern subtle cases” (B&N 6.4). *W* would seem to agree.

The case has been made largely by those working in experimental philosophy (x-phi), accompanied by the likes of anthems with videos of burning armchairs:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tt5Kxv8eCTA>

But see Josh Knobe’s account of how little of x-phi is really engaged in this “negative” project, at the top of p. 3 of this paper:

<https://campuspress.yale.edu/joshuaknobe/files/2016/02/xphi-is-cogsci-1dcwn1w.pdf>

Much of the negative case, especially in epistemology, has focused on alleged disparities in epistemic intuitions between genders and between racial groups; see sect. 5 (pp. 9-15) of B&N. I think it has turned out (largely through lots of failures to replicate findings) that there just is nothing to this particular type of empirical case – to the point that Knobe, echoing a couple of young Yale experimentalists (whose work came after our B&N paper), thinks it’s time we pivot toward trying to explain the remarkable cross-cultural *similarities* that we find in epistemic intuitions: Knobe, “Epistemic Intuitions are ~~Shockingly Robust~~ Surprising Stable Across Cultural Differences”:

<https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/3/1454/files/2021/03/Stability.pdf>

The “unstoppable team of Minsun Kim and Yuan Yuan” (??) whose work Josh is citing are (in reverse order) a graduate student in Yale’s philosophy program, and a Yale undergraduate philosophy major (now graduated), the latter of whom was in Phil. 270 – and I think developed her interest in the topic there. They first wrote a paper on intuitions about Gettier cases, “No Cross-Cultural Differences in Gettier Car Case Intuition: A Replication Study of Weinberg et al. 2001,” which was published in *Episteme* 2015 [<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/episteme/article/div-classtitleno-cross-cultural-differences-in-the-gettier-car-case-intuition-a-replication-study-of-weinberg-span-classitalicet-alspan-2001div/F53AD8D3CE03F738A9228320DA386039>], and then they wrote the more recent piece Knobe describes, and then links to (a draft of): “Cross-Cultural Universality of Knowledge Attributions.”

But....

- a. It’s still worth asking what we should have been done had there been the reported discrepancies (and what should be done if some such discrepancies do show up)
- b. There are still some trouble spots: order effects; I worry especially about group think (see <http://certaindoubts.com/modifying-the-barn-case/>)

Suspect intuitions (W seems especially worried about intuitions concerning “far-fetched” and “outlandish” (321.5) cases).

W is looking for a premise of the form “Any putative source of evidence with property X ought not to be trusted” (323.5), and appeals to his notion of “hopelessness” in specifying X. Are philosophical intuitions in that way “hopeless”?

2. Two Dangers to negative cases: Too-General-Skepticism and Self-Undermining

Reflected (respectively) in W’s conditions (iii) and (iv) at 323.6.

My attack on the attack (“counter-attack,” then, I suppose) will stress both dangers.

3. Being Careful in the Use of Intuitions

One of W’s main suggestions: “For example, we could, as a profession, decide to be particularly cautious about using intuitions under circumstances far removed from ordinary conditions—such as cases involving wildly unusual or even nomologically impossible situations, or that can be described only using fairly highfalutin lingo” (326.2).

I think I at least often display the kind of care W is suggestion. And others, too.

a: The “Modifying the Barn Case” tale perhaps shows both groupthink, but then correction:
<http://certaindoubts.com/modifying-the-barn-case/>

b. at pp. 179.7 – 181.7 of this paper, I defensively (so to my own advantage), urged caution in the use of an example involving creatures who don’t believe things to varying degrees [ah, these are Williamson’s all-or-nothing creatures, whom we’ve talked about, and the paper has been incorporated into Chapter 7 of *The Appearance of Ignorance*]:
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2010.00189.x/abstract>

c: I not-so-defensively urge caution about intuitions concerning different strange creatures in, for example, “Direct Warrant Realism” (syllabus reading #21), p. 161 (I’ll put that page at the back of this handout). But I still kinda-use the intuition. This illustrates what I think our situation often is in philosophy: We use suspect intuitions because that’s all we’ve got to use.

4. The Nature of Philosophy and the Role of Intuitions

Philosophy concerns inquiry into questions we haven’t figured out knowledge-producing ways to answer (my “Knowledge Deserts” appendix). In a desert, you don’t turn down water because it isn’t quite as cold as you’d like it

So, in the background here are thoughts about the shakiness of philosophical beliefs and the conclusions of philosophical arguments, which I express in that “Knowledge Deserts” appendix (Appendix C) in *The Appearance of Ignorance*.

Also in the background are ideas about what makes for good starting points for philosophical arguments in such a desert. I try to explain these a bit in the book I’m now writing on the problem of evil, *Horrific Suffering, Divine Hiddenness, and Hell: The Place of Freedom in a*

World Governed by God, at pp. 17 (start at the top of the page, so the end of sect. 4) – 32 (just to the end of sect. 8) of the partial draft of that book that I have posted here:

<https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/c/1227/files/2021/07/3H-draft-of-7-30-21.pdf>

Interested students might want to check out this Philosophy TV video with Jennifer Nagel and Joshua Alexander (a collaborator with Weinberg) discussing/debating the use of intuitions in philosophy and especially epistemology: <https://vimeo.com/91851671>

Does common sense demand anything more? Do any commonsense intuitions tell against DWR? I think the relevant test of intuitions for deciding between Direct Realism and DWR concern our reactions to situations in which our perceptual beliefs do not form a very coherent picture of the physical world – where the positive coherence we are so accustomed to is lacking, but there also is no real incoherence among our perceptual beliefs. So suppose that, for all our lives, we only had sense experiences very sporadically, maybe only a couple of times a day for about two seconds at a time (the rest of the time, we fill the time by thinking about pure mathematics, and wondering what our next sensory experience will be like). And suppose that these sense experiences produced in us (perhaps through innate dispositions) perceptual beliefs to the effect that we were perceiving material objects in various ways. Would these beliefs be rationally acceptable? My own inclination is to say no, and this may explain why I am a Direct Warrent Realist rather than a Direct Realist. But this “intuition” I have about this bizarre little thought experiment amounts to little more than my sense that relations of positive coherence among our perceptual beliefs are essential to their rational acceptability, and we are imagining a situation too far removed from our actual experience for our intuitions about the situation to be worth very much. And any imagined situation in which our beliefs about the physical world form neither a very positively coherent, nor a positively incoherent, view of the world will be too far removed from usual experience for us to be able to trust our intuitions about it. Certainly, there aren’t any commonsense intuitions about such cases. Thus, I don’t think that DWR goes against common sense – though I also think it isn’t demanded by common sense. But we still have to see whether any of the other arguments for Direct Realism can give us a good reason for accepting Direct Realism over DWR.