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Intuition and Inquiry

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Abstract

Recent work in philosophical methodology by experimental philosophers has brought to light a certain kind of skepticism about the role of intuitions in a priori philosophical inquiry. In this paper I turn attention away from a priori philosophical inquiry and on to the role of intuition in experimental design. I argue that even if we have reason to be skeptical about the role of intuition in a priori philosophical inquiry, we cannot remove intuition from inquiry altogether, because appeals to intuition are essential for experimental design.

1. Introduction

Within epistemology, and in the particular area of philosophical methodology, there is a debate over the proper scope and role of intuitions in philosophical inquiry. The central question concerns the evidential status of appeals by philosophers to intuitions in defending or arguing against various philosophical theses. In this debate there are two camps. *Evidentialists* maintain that intuitions, of a certain kind and under certain conditions, serve as evidence in philosophical inquiry.¹ *Skeptics*, on the other hand, maintain that intuitions fail to serve as evidence in philosophical inquiry.² While some skeptics appeal to theoretical considerations to argue for skepticism about intuitions as evidence, others engage in experimental study of folk intuitions to argue for skepticism about intuitions.³ The later camp is a subgroup of the new movement known as *experimental philosophy*, which is now about a decade old. The subgroup of researchers skeptical about intuitions are called experimental restrictionists, and they aim to police, if not out right undermine the viability of the appeal to intuitions as evidence in philosophy.

In the restrictionist camp there are two important studies that have been used as a partial basis for pushing experimentally based skepticism about intuition. Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (2001), (WNS), argue that intuitions about Gettier cases vary across cultures. While Westerners typically have the intuition that Gettier cases are not cases of

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knowledge, East Asians fail to have the intuition that Gettier cases are not cases of knowledge. And Swain, Alexander, and Weinberg (2008), (SAW), argue that intuitions about Truetemp suffer from order embedding effects. The intuition that Truetemp is a case of reliable belief without knowledge depends on the order in which the Truetemp case is presented relative to other cases of knowledge and non-knowledge. Using these two studies and various argumentative techniques, experimental restrictionists have challenged the traditional intuition based mode of philosophical inquiry.⁴ While the (WNS) study raises the problem of cultural variation, the (SAW) study raises the problem of reliability. Jointly the restrictionists challenge traditionalists to show how philosophical appeals to intuition can serve as evidence for philosophical theses in light of the problems of cultural variation and reliability.

In what follows I will neither argue for evidentialism nor skepticism. A great deal of recent literature has been devoted to that issue.⁵ Rather, I bring out the twin positions of evidentialism and skepticism in the philosophical methodology debate in order to contrast them against a distinct thesis about the role of intuitions in experimental inquiry: *The Dependency Thesis*, (DT).

(DT) Experimental inquiry that aims at the discovery of variation in intuitions about the application of philosophical concepts essentially depends on non-experimental intuitions about the application of philosophical concepts. And non-experimental intuitions are indispensable for experimental inquiry into the reliability of intuitions about the application of philosophical concepts.

Let me begin by noting four points about (DT), so as to avoid confusion over the goal of articulating and defending it. First, (DT) is a metaphysical, as opposed to an epistemic thesis, about the relation between intuitions and inquiry. Second, and as a consequence of the first point, a defense of (DT) is not a response to the skepticism that experimental restrictionists' have argued for. Third, (DT) is not a claim that aims to challenge any of the work that goes under the label of experimental philosophy. That is a defense of (DT) is not intended to show that experimental philosophy, and the work of experimental restrictionists, is misguided in its methods or that skepticism about traditional methods is unfounded. Fourth, it is not a thesis that, if true, automatically lends support to those that want to defend traditional a priori methods of philosophical inquiry that involve intuitions about thought experiments.⁶ Rather, (DT) is a thesis that, to my mind, has not been highlighted sufficiently in the literature on the role of intuitions in philosophical inquiry.⁷ My hope here is that articulation of (DT) and a defense of it will bring to light a metaphysical relationship that obtains between intuitions about concept application and experimental inquiry concerning variation and reliability.

The defense of (DT) I will offer comes from two sources. First, I will offer a definition of the technical term 'non-experimental intuition', and a hypothetical example to illustrate

its function and role in experimental design. Second, I will argue for (DT) by building off of a response to the problem of cultural variation, which I call the disagreement dilemma.

2. Non-experimental intuitions

A central method of research within the experimental restrictionist camp is the survey methodology of psychology. In the survey methodology subjects are exposed to vignettes that are used for the purposes of eliciting a response. The responses are taken by experimental restrictionists to reveal the intuitions of the subjects being tested. Now, in contrast to the intuitions generated from subjects' responses to the vignettes in an experiment, I will define a non-experimental intuition as follows.

Where C is a concept, E a specific experiment consisting of a number of cases / vignettes designed to test whether intuitions about C vary between two or more populations, $V^1 \dots V^n$ specific cases / vignettes in E that are used to generate intuitions about C 's application, $P^1 \dots P^n$ populations, whose intuitions about C 's application in $V^1 \dots V^n$ are being tested, a *non-experimental intuition* I concerning E is an intuition about C 's boundary conditions that is not generated from E but is necessary for $V^1 \dots V^n$ to be used as specific cases in E for inquiring into whether the intuition's of $P^1 \dots P^n$ are genuinely about C rather than some distinct concept C^* . Informally, a non-experimental intuition is an intuition that is not generated from a specific experiment E that is being used to test whether intuitions about C 's application vary between two or more populations. Rather, a non-experimental intuition is an intuition that either the designer of the experiment directly appeals to or which must eventually be appealed to on in order to establish a criterion for determining whether two populations share a common concept.

In order to illustrate the difference between experimental and non-experimental intuitions, consider the following hypothetical example. Suppose that like the (WNS) inquiry into whether Westerners and East Asians share the Gettier intuition, one wants to inquire experimentally into whether Westerners and East Asians share the intuition that knowledge entails belief.

$$(a) Kp \rightarrow Bp$$

In constructing an experiment to test whether knowledge entails belief, the experimenters would produce various vignettes involving cases of knowledge and belief. In addition, they might also ask the population a question concerning knowledge that is distinct from the question about knowledge probed in (a). For example, they might ask both populations whether knowledge entails truth.

$$(b) Kp \rightarrow p$$

The point of asking subjects whether they believe (b) in the experimental design is to settle the issue of whether the two populations share a common concept. That is agreement on (b) serves as criterion for determining whether Westerners and East Asians share the same concept of knowledge. For it appears to be the case that only if both populations share a common concept, can they possibly disagree about whether certain cases fall under it, for when two individuals do not have the same concepts we don't generally take their apparent verbal disagreements to be indicative of genuine disagreement (more on this in **3**). Thus, in our hypothetical investigation, agreement on (b) will be necessary for any two subjects to count as having a disagreement or agreement over (a). Any subject that answers that (b) is false, does not count, from the perspective of the experiment, as possessing the concept of KNOWLEDGE for which the question over (a) tests for variation. Agreement over (b) serves as a fixed point for a shared concept between the two populations that allows for the possibility of variation over (a). It is also important to note that although agreement over (b) is necessary for investigation into variation over (a); agreement over (b) might not be sufficient. For there may be other conditions that in conjunction with agreement over (b) are jointly sufficient for the possibility of variation over (a).⁸ The central point of this case is to illustrate that there must be some way for the designer of the experiment to identify whether two populations share a single concept for the purposes of investigating whether the two populations have intuitions about the application of the concept that differ.

However, one might register this point and immediately object that the requirement for a criterion rests on a specific theory of concepts, and thus the requirement can be avoided by adopting a distinct theory of concepts. In particular, one might hold that the requirement for a criterion for identifying a common concept between two populations rests on the classical conception of concepts, and is not a requirement on the prototype conception of concepts.⁹

According to the classical conception (CL), concepts have strict necessary and sufficient conditions for application.

(CL) x is C if and only if x satisfies $c_1 \wedge c_2 \dots \wedge c_n$.

For example, x is EVEN if and only if x satisfies DIVISIBLE by 2.

According to the prototype model (PC), x can fall under a concept to the degree that x satisfies some exemplar or to the degree that x satisfies some weighted measure of properties.

(PC₁) x is C if and only if x is similar to E to degree D.

(PC₂) x is C if and only if x satisfies either $c_1 \vee c_2 \vee c_3 \dots \vee c_n$ or some combination of c_i to degree D.

For example, x falls under SOFA if and only if x is similar to F to degree D, where F is some particular SOFA exemplar. Or, for example, x satisfies FURNITURE if and only if, x has some or all of the following characteristics: can be used to eat on, can be used to sit on, is designed for resting one's legs on, is designed for resting plates on.

Given that philosophical concepts, such as knowledge, can be argued to be best modeled on either the classical model or some version of the prototype model, one might object to the need for a criterion for determining whether two populations share the same concept by arguing that the requirement makes sense only if one thinks of philosophical concepts on the classical model. On my understanding of the nature of experimental inquiry this objection seems to be irrelevant to the issue raised by the example above. No matter how concepts are modeled it appears that in order for one to determine whether two populations have distinct intuitions about the application of a concept one has to determine that they share the same concept. And in order to determine whether two populations share the same concept one needs a criterion, which itself needs a justification. Whether philosophical concepts are modeled best under the classical or prototype model is irrelevant to the fact that it only makes sense to say that subjects A and B differ in their intuitions about the application of concept C in case V, when A and B both possess C, read V in the same way, and operate with C when responding to the question concerning C after reading V. Let me now turn to a further elaboration of the relation between disagreement in intuitions and experimental inquiry into variation in intuitions.

3. The Disagreement Dilemma

Looking carefully at the work of WNS (2001), one could argue picking up on the work of Sosa (2007b) and (2010), that experimental work of this kind faces, what I will here call: *The disagreement dilemma*.¹⁰ Consider the following claims:¹¹

1. Two subjects, A and B, can disagree over whether concept C applies in case V only if A and B both possess C.
2. If A and B both possess C, and testing conditions are ideal, then A and B cannot disagree over whether C applies in V.

(1) simply specifies that disagreement over whether a concept applies in a case requires that the subjects possess the concept. (2) states that when two subjects possess the same concept it cannot be the case that their intuitions about the application of C in V are

different. In effect (2) maintains that the best explanation for why two subjects have different intuitions when they both possess the same concept is that testing conditions are not ideal, and one or both subjects have committed a performance error. The performance error could be due to a failure of attention on, or understanding of, either the vignette or the questions posed in the experiment.

Jointly (1) and (2) suggest that the discovery of variation in intuition about a concept's application is impossible. Were the dilemma sound, it would appear that the whole program of experimental research designed to discover which intuitions about various philosophical concepts vary cross culturally would be empty. *Of course this result is too extreme.* How might an experimentalist interested in defending research of the kind exemplified in WNS (2001) respond? At least one way to respond is to simply deny (1) and (2). In denying (1) and (2), an experimentalist adopts a view of concepts on which it is possible for two subjects to possess the same concept, and yet disagree over its application in a given case. Thus, for example Westerners and East Asians can be said to both possess the same concept of knowledge, while simply disagreeing over whether Gettier cases are cases of justified true belief without knowledge. One way to cash out this response to the dilemma is by contrasting, in modal terms, two views of concepts with respect to disagreement.¹²

On the one hand, the disagreement dilemma appears to depend on an impossibility claim, (IMP).

(IMP) It is impossible for two subjects to possess the same concept C, yet under ideal cognitive conditions disagree as to whether C applies in a given case.

However, what the experimentalist needs in order to diffuse the disagreement dilemma, and for research on variation in intuition to be theoretically sound is a possibility claim, (P).

(P) It is possible for two subjects to possess the same concept C, and under ideal cognitive conditions disagree as to whether C applies in a given case.

Now one could offer the following defense of why experimentalists interested in discovering variation in intuitions about concept application ought to accept (P).

1. The discovery of variation in intuition about concept application is possible only if it is possible for subjects to have different intuitions about whether a concept applies in a given case while still possessing the same concept.

2. Thus, variation in intuition about concept application is possible, only if (P) is true.
3. So, given that discovery of variation requires (P), experimentalist ought to endorse (P).

4. A New Problem

With (P) in place as a component of a model of concepts that enables empirical inquiry into variation in intuitions, a new problem can be generated for experimental inquiry by looking at a problem that an experimental designer faces.

Suppose that a theorist sets out to explore whether two subjects disagree over whether C applies in a given case. In order for that theorist to develop an experiment that can genuinely test for variation under C, the theorist must distinguish between two scenarios:

- (i) Two subjects, A and B, both possess C and disagree about its application in case V.
- (ii) Two subjects, A and B, do not both possess C, and their disagreement about the application of C in V is actually an expression of applying two distinct concepts.

By endorsing (P) one makes possible the discovery of variation in intuitions over the same concept and escapes the disagreement dilemma. However, in designing an experiment to test whether variation in intuitions over C exists, one is still required to distinguish genuine variation under C from non-variation under C, where the apparent disagreement in intuitions is actually due to the application of distinct concepts C* and C**.

5. A Defense of the Dependency Thesis

With (P) in place, and the new problem presented above, a defense of (DT) can now be constructed.

In order to do this, let me return to the example of knowledge and its relation to belief described earlier. The point of the experiment over knowledge was to determine whether two distinct populations, Westerners and East Asians, have intuitions that vary with respect to the question of whether knowledge entails belief. Moreover one could

hypothesize that Westerners for the most part will have the intuition that a subject cannot have knowledge of P without belief in P, and East Asians for the most part will have the intuition that a subject can have knowledge of P without belief in P. Now in designing an experiment to determine whether the variation in intuition is present, one needs to distinguish between apparent variation and genuine variation. Thus, the experiment must include some question about knowledge that determines that Westerners and East Asians share a common concept under which there is genuine variation with respect to the question of whether knowledge entails belief. How does one, in designing the experiment, choose a condition on knowledge to include in the experiment; a condition that will serve as the criterion for determining whether the two populations share a common concept? There are three possible answers.

- (i) The experimenter looks at the results of a distinct experiment concerning knowledge, to generate the appropriate condition on knowledge.
- (ii) The experimenter looks at a theory of cognition concerning knowledge to generate a condition on knowledge.
- (iii) An experimenter does not consult a distinct experiment or theory, but rather appeals to a non-experimental intuition about knowledge.

I will argue that cases (i) and (ii) ultimately lead to case (iii). First, case (i) leads to (iii), since although a condition on knowledge in one experiment can come from another experiment, ultimately there must be an initial experiment that did not depend on a prior experiment. Every experiment has a non-experimental starting point. Second, case (ii) leads to case (iii), since although a theory can provide a condition on knowledge for an experimenter to use in determining whether two populations share a concept, the theory itself cannot be wholly independent of intuitions itself. Theories themselves are believed, in general, on the basis of experiments that confirm these experiments, as already shown in case (i), they require non-experimental intuitions. Thus, case (ii), indirectly via dependence on type (i) cases, leads to case (iii). Given the discussion of the knowledge example and cases (i) – (iii), one can argue as follows for (DT):

- 1.) In a given experiment E in which one is attempting to test whether intuitions over C vary between two populations one must set a criterion that determines whether or not the two populations share C.
- 2.) In order to set a criterion to determine whether the two populations share C one can either appeal to a distinct experiment E*, a theory T, or appeal to a non-experimental intuition about the boundary conditions of C.

- 3.) If one appeals to a distinct E^* , then ultimately one will end up appealing to a non-experimental intuition.
- 4.) If one appeals to a theory T , then ultimately one will end up appealing to some non-experimental intuitions, since theories depend on experiments for confirming evidence.
- 5.) So, in order to test for variation of intuitions under C , one must ultimately appeal to a non-experimental intuition.
- 6.) Thus, non-experimental intuitions are essentially involved in the attempt to discover variation in intuitions between populations.

(6) is a partial restatement of (DT). As a point of final clarification it should be noted that (DT) does not aim to establish either of the following two claims that participants in the debate over philosophical methodology have been interested in defending or attacking.

- (i) The non-experimental intuitions that experimental inquiry depends on are wholly a priori in character.
- (ii) The non-experimental intuitions that experimental inquiry depends on are reliable intuitions about a concept's boundary conditions.

It is possible that (DT) is true and (i) is false. For example, if Williamson (2007) is correct in questioning the distinction between the wholly a priori and wholly a posteriori components of concept possession, one could maintain that the non-experimental intuitions at play in (DT) are simply armchair intuitions.¹³ Where 'armchair intuitions' are simply non-experimental intuitions, which are neither wholly a priori nor wholly a posteriori.

It is possible that (DT) is true and (ii) is false. For example, if there are no Platonic concepts, and instead there are only concepts generated by cultures from which we learn them, one could argue as follows. Our intuitions about the application of the concept of knowledge are not about any objective concept of knowledge. As a consequence, our intuitions are not reliable with respect to what the objective concept of knowledge really requires. Our intuitions might be reliable about what as individuals we believe falls under the concept of knowledge, but those intuitions are not tracking an objective mind independent fact about the concept of knowledge.

The point of drawing out the dependency thesis is to reveal a metaphysical relationship that obtains between non-experimental intuitions and experimental inquiry into variation in intuitions. The thesis ultimately aims to make clear the idea that experimental inquiry

into variation in intuitions between cultures is connected to a non-experimental activity that involves consulting intuitions. It is not brute luck that we would investigate whether knowledge entails belief cross culturally and at the same time ask whether knowledge entails truth as a way of determining whether both populations share the same concept. Our choice to ask whether knowledge entails truth, rather than whether knowledge entails, for example, that swans exist, reflects something about our understanding of, and intuitions about, what it is possible to discover about knowledge through experimental inquiry. If the (WNS) study is sound, it appears that it is possible to discover that two populations disagree over whether Gettier cases are cases of non-knowledge. However, if the dependency thesis is true, as I have argued, then there is some fact about knowledge for which the discovery of variation in intuitions would mean that the East Asians and Westerners did not share a common concept of knowledge. And more importantly, this fact about knowledge is likely something which we hold ultimately on the basis of a non-experimental intuition.

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¹ See Bealer (1996) & (2000), Sosa (2007a), Ludwig (2007), and Williamson (2007) for differing evidentialist accounts.

² See Alexander & Weinberg (2007) for a review of experimental critiques of the methods of traditional *a priori* analytic philosophy.

³ See Cummins (1998) and Hintikka (1999) for examples of skepticism about the use of intuitions in philosophy that is not based on experimental research.

⁴ See Weinberg (2007) for an excellent discussion of how to challenge the use of intuitions in philosophy.

⁵ For recent discussion of the debate over experimental philosophy see Horvath & Grundmann (2010).

⁶ Weinberg & Crowley (2009) explore a view called 'loose constitutivity' as a response to the experimental restrictionist's challenge. Neither the articulation nor the defense of (DT) in this work is based on their

work. While (DT) maybe loosely related to the loose constitutivity view of the relation between intuitions and concepts, (DT) is not to be associated with a defense of armchair methods in philosophy.

⁷ There appears to be only two brief discussions of a point similar to that of (DT). One occurs in Weinberg (2007), and the other in Williamson (2004).

⁸ As an actual example of the kind of case I am raising see Swain, Alexander, and Weinberg (2008). In that particular study, at footnote 7, they say the following, “228 students completed the survey; 8 were excluded due to responses to the screening question that suggested that they were working with a different conception of ‘knows’ than the one of interest to philosophers....”

⁹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for *Essays in Philosophy* for bringing this objection to my attention.

¹⁰ See Sosa’s discussion of *merely verbal disagreement* in (2007b). The disagreement dilemma presented here is much stronger than the response that Sosa’ discusses in both (2007b) and (2010).

¹¹ In both (1) and (2) ‘concept’ and ‘concept possession’ are both being used in a way that is consistent with the idea that two subjects can possess the same concept at different levels of comprehension and grasp. I leave out the complication in order to simplify discussion of the main issue concerning disagreement.

¹² Weinberg and Crowley’s (2009) discussion of loose constitutivity vs. strict constitutivity comes closest to the discussion here concerning the disagreement dilemma, see pgs. 180-181. Strict constitutivity appears to be tied to the idea presented in (IMP) that disagreement in intuitions is sufficient for the possession of distinct concepts. Strict constitutivity holds that a subject’s intuitions strictly constitute the concept they possess. Loose constitutivity appears to be related the idea presented in (P) that subjects can possess the same concept, yet have different intuitions about the concepts application.

¹³ See section 5 of Ch. 5 and Ch. 6.