The Use of Intuitions in Philosophy

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Jogging through the countryside, Smith sees in a nearby field an animal that looks just like a sheep. On this basis, he forms the belief that there is a sheep in the field. What Smith saw, however, was no sheep; it was a wolf dressed to look like a sheep. Still, his belief that there is a sheep in the field is true, for in the field is a bush, and behind that bush is a sheep, perfectly hidden from Smith’s field of vision. Does Smith know that there is a sheep in the field? Most people, at least in philosophy classes in the English-speaking world, answer “No.”

In his 1963 paper, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”, Edmund Gettier used cases like this one to overturn the traditional definition of knowledge—the traditional definition being justified true belief. The case above is meant to demonstrate that Smith has a justified true belief that there is a sheep in the field, but does not know that there is a sheep in the field. And if one can have a justified true belief without knowledge, then knowledge and justified true belief are not one and the same. Notice, however, that Gettier overturned the traditional definition of knowledge not by pointing out in it any contradiction or incoherency. He did it simply by showing that the traditional definition does not accord with our intuitions, as elicited by cases like the one above.

Much philosophy proceeds in this fashion, by way of making intuitive judgments about hypothetical cases. These judgments are taken as prima facie evidence for philosophical hypotheses and are used to construct philosophical theories in much the same way that observations are used as evidence in the construction of scientific theories. Scientific theories have, of course, met with greater success.

This summer I looked at how intuitions might be reliable indicators of the truth of their contents. That is, I looked at how we might be justified in taking an intuition that $p$ as evidence for the truth of $p$, where $p$ is some proposition. The contents of intuitions elicited in philosophy are usually classificational propositions to the effect that some case is an instance of some kind, concept, or predicate. For instance, when someone has the intuition that “$e$ is an instance of F,” philosophers usually interpret this as “$e$ satisfies my concept that I express through the predicate F.” So, when philosophy students judge that Smith’s belief that there is a sheep in the field is not an instance of knowledge, philosophers might interpret this as: The predicate ‘Knowledge’ expresses a concept that is not properly applicable to Smith’s belief that there is a sheep in the field.

While most philosophers agree that intuitions get at our subjective concepts, most would like to think they get at something more. Most would like to think that our intuitions about knowledge, for instance, tell us not just about our concept of knowledge, but about knowledge itself, as it is in the world. Philosophers largely do not care about what someone’s personal, psychological concept of knowledge, or the good, is; they care about what our concepts of such things should be, and absent an account of how intuitions might help us find this out, the deliverances of intuition appear to be philosophically uninteresting. Considering how widespread the use of intuitions is in philosophy, this appears to be, in Timothy Williamson’s words, a methodological scandal.

While no good positive account of how intuitions might be reliable guides to the truth of their contents has been given, this does not mean that we should reject the use of intuition just yet, for there are good defenses of the methodology. For one thing, many arguments that attempt to undermine the reliability of intuitions rely on intuitions in at least one premise, making the arguments self-defeating. This makes it quite difficult for any argument against the methodology to get off the ground. If it is impossible to get away from intuition, then it has good company with deduction. It is very difficult, for instance, to give a non-circular, positive account of deduction, but it is also impossible to argue against its use without employing it in one’s argument. Furthermore, it is a mistake to think that only philosophers face this methodological difficulty, for it is a philosophical question whether some bit of empirical evidence counts in favor of a scientific theory; any judgment to the effect that observation $x$ counts in favor of scientific theory $y$ will have to rely at least somewhere on an intuition, or on some sort of relevantly similar judgment. So long as such defenses are at intuition’s disposal, it has a secure place in philosophical methodology.

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