

Philosophy 2²3³: Intuitions and Philosophy
Fall 2009
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1pm - 2:15pm
Library 209

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Class 22 - Reflective Equilibrium and the Scientific Method
Robert Cummins, "Reflections on Reflective Equilibrium"

I. Sources of intuition

A notational note: Cummins uses 'RE' to stand for both 'reflective equilibrium', as when a theory is in RE, and 'the method of seeking reflective equilibrium', which I abbreviate as SRE, to keep them distinct. So SRE has RE as its goal.

Gopnik and Schwitzgebel presented an (intrasubjective) instability thesis which made it seem likely that our individual intuitions will shift over time.

Cummins makes a similar conclusion from the (intersubjective) variation in intuitions among people.

And just as Gopnik and Schwitzgebel are fairly explicit about characterizing intuition, Cummins attempts to account for the sources of our philosophical intuitions.

He present five sources, which he alleges are exhaustive:

1. Explicit theory
2. Ordinary beliefs
3. Language
4. Concepts
5. Tacit theory

Beliefs based on an explicit theory, the first possible source, like my intuitions which follow from my understanding of physical laws, play no epistemological role beyond that of the physical theory itself.

If I interpret the theory correctly, then all justificatory force derives from the theory.

If I interpret the theory incorrectly, then my intuition should have no justificatory force at all.

In that case, my intuition, like intuitions based on what Cummins calls ordinary beliefs, the second possible source, is a mere opinion, and should play no role in constructing a philosophical theory.

In these cases, there is too much room for chauvinism.

The third possible source, competence with language, does not entail a correct understanding of the uses of language.

That I can use 'quark' grammatically does not entail that I understand the nature of quarks.

That I understand the meaning of the term, at some level, does not entail that I have a full understanding of physics.

Appeals to our semantic intuitions are only as good as our grasp of the world.

Similarly, appeals to our concepts, the fourth possible source, are only as good as our theories of those concepts.

The most interesting case, then, is the fifth possible source, that of tacit theories.

If we are appealing to intuitions based on tacit theories in the construction of an explicit philosophical theory, we engaged in a kind of midwifery: making the implicit theory explicit.

As Cummins points out, though, there is a difference between having an innate theory and believing that the innate theory is guaranteed to track truth.

Cummins alludes to innate theories of physics, grammar, and even moral reasoning.

The innate theory is limited by our physiology, and may be an artifact of evolutionary constraints that do not track truth.

Our innate physics could be Aristotelian; our innate geometry could be Euclidean.

When you come to think of what these theories are for, there is no more reason to think that innate philosophy is a good basis for philosophy than that innate physics is a good basis for physics. We have cultural institutions like science and philosophy largely to *overcome* the limitations of our innate endowment (123).

Furthermore, even if we are born with certain innate inclinations, environmental factors will modify them.

Chauvinism will become a factor in our implicit theories.

Again, we see a normative/descriptive difficulty.

Whatever our tacit theory is, it will be the result of either (more likely both) innate principles and learned beliefs.

In both of those cases, the tacit theory fails to play a justificatory role.

So the viability of RE reduces to the question of the reliability of tacit theories generally, and, in particular, to the question of the reliability of tacit theories of the properties targeted by philosophical intuition. Since the prospects for such theories are very poor, I think we must conclude that RE is not a viable methodology (122).

II. Reflective equilibrium and the scientific method

The standard claim concerning intuition in philosophy, specifically in SRE, which we have been examining, is that intuition can play the role in philosophy that observation plays in science.

Given the above concerns about the sources of intuition, Cummins wonders this picture of SRE is defensible.

He rightly notes that the key goal of both SRE and the scientific method is to be able to generate predictions for novel cases.

In science, the novel case is often in the future.

For SRE, the novel case is the one in which our intuitions are, or have been, silent.

He considers two cases of distribution of new-found wealth among four children: pennies and jewels.

We do not know how to distribute the discovered objects, so it can act as a novel case.

But, Cummins notes, since intuition is silent, it is difficult to know whether SRE gets the right answers.

Even if our theory is in RE, we can question the result.

The intersubjective stability of observation is a distinct advantage when constructing scientific theories.

Everyone in relevantly similar circumstances should have the same observation.

Strictly speaking, of course, this claim is an idealization.

Even observations made with our unassisted perceptual apparatus are liable to error, as Descartes pointed out in the First Meditation.

When we rely on measuring instruments like microscopes, such errors are even more likely.

But, we can calibrate such machines, and explain discrepancies in our perceptions.

Intuition notoriously lacks stability.

Some people think that twater is water; others do not.

Some people think that cats are animals; some think that they are not.

III. An aside on robot cats

I should explain that last comment.

We've talked about Putnam's Twin Earth example, already.

In a different case, Putnam wonders about robot cats from Mars.

The question at hand was whether the sentence 'cats are animals' is analytic.

Presumably, if it were analytic, it could be known a priori; and, any sentence known a priori must be true.

These latter two claims, that all analytic sentences are known a priori and any true apriori sentence is necessarily true are controversial.

I believe that they are false.

The question of analyticity is a semantic question.

The question of apriority is epistemological.

The question of necessity is metaphysical.

All three layers of questions are separable; results at one level may not constrain results on any other.

But Putnam was working on the assumption that the only way for a sentence to be necessary is for it to be known apriori, and the only way for a sentence to be known a priori is for it to be analytic.

Putnam asks about a case in which all cats turn out to have been craftily constructed robots placed on Earth as spies by the Martians.

Putnam's claim is that cats, in his thought experiment, are not animals; they are robots.

Thus 'cats are animals' is false, so it could not be known a priori, and thus it can not be analytic.

Putnam used the example to support the (holistic) claim that all sentences are revisable on the basis of empirical evidence.

Another possibility is to claim that cats are animals, and it turns out that there are no cats.

This latter, anti-Putnamian intuition is that the meaning of 'cat' entails that one is an animal.

So, we should stop calling these things cats.

IV. Intersubjective instability

Putnam's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction is based largely on examples like the robot cats from Mars.

The claim of semantic externalism (that the content of our thoughts is in part determined by factors outside of our thoughts) depends on intuitions about Twin Earth thought experiments.

But those examples draw on intuitions that are not universally shared, that are not, like data points in science, intersubjectively valid.

The Putnamian...take on these cases is widely enough shared to allow for a range of thriving intramural sports among believers. Those who do not share the intuition are simply not invited to the games. This kind of selection allows things to move forward, but it has its price. Since most nonphilosophers do not share the intuition, the resulting theories of content have little weight with them... (116).

In addition to the lack of stability of intuitions among subjects, we lack the ability, which we have in the case of observational data, to calibrate.

When we try to develop a test for calibration, we are presented with two missing variables: which items belong on the intuition-calibrating test, and what the subjects' responses are.

Recall Quine's claim about confirmation holism: one can always retain an anomalous data point by adjusting one's theory.

Similarly, when a subject's response to a test question is contrary to other responses, we can eliminate the question.

And, in cases in which philosophical intuitions are aligned, we aren't working on philosophical theories anymore.

Once a philosophical theory achieves the kind of intersubjective agreement that we are looking for, it is no longer philosophy.

Recall that Newton's master work is *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1729).

Even if philosophical intuition *can* be calibrated, it never *is* calibrated, because philosophers could have no possible use for intuition in a context in which the relevant theory was well enough settled to form the basis of a credible calibration test. Philosophical theory in such good shape is ready to bid the Socratic midwife farewell and strike out on its own in some other department. Philosophical intuition, therefore, is epistemologically useless, since it can be calibrated only when it is not needed (118).

Cummins conclusion, then, is that we should stop treating philosophical intuitions as if they were data, and just look at the same kind of data that scientists use.

I have given up on Twin Earth in the theory of content. Maybe moral philosophers should give up on Trolleys (126).

Still, we are left with a puzzle.

What could replace intuitions in moral philosophy and mathematical philosophy?

Cummins argues that our inability to find a replacement for intuitions doesn't make intuitions any more reliable.

The remaining option is to give up on ethics and philosophy of mathematics altogether.

This option seems Draconian.