

Philosophy 2²3³: Intuitions and Philosophy
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Library 209

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Class 25 - Naturalizing Intuition
Hilary Kornblith

“The Role of Intuition in Philosophical Inquiry: An Account with No Unnatural Ingredients”

I. The naturalist and the anti-naturalist

Bealer defended appeals to rational, or a priori, intuition in philosophy, understanding intuition as guiding our application of concepts.

He argued that rational intuition tells us how the world must be, and that the modal character of intuition shows that it is an a priori, or non-empirical process.

Kornblith, in contrast, defends a naturalist position, rejecting a priori knowledge and conceptual analysis. In part, he argues that appeals to intuition are naturalistically defensible.

The practice of appealing to intuition has no nonnatural ingredients (137).

He also argues that the more a priori appeals to intuition are not defensible, and should be replaced by empirical research.

Still, Kornblith denies that all philosophers should transfer to science departments.

Bealer and Kornblith agree that philosophers' appeals to intuition are often useful.

The method of appeal to intuitions not only plays an important role in actual philosophical practice, but...the method has been used to achieve some substantial insights in a wide range of fields (131).

Furthermore, Kornblith seems to agree with Bealer that philosophical intuitions are not susceptible to the kinds of criticisms we saw earlier in the course, that they suffer from inter- and intra-subjective instability.

The intuitions to which philosophers appeal... are not idiosyncratic; they are widely shared, and - to a first approximation - must be so, if they are to do any philosophical work (132).

Kornblith and Bealer differ concerning what appeals to intuition really consist in, and how broadly they should be relied on.

Bealer had suggested that we can modalize our appeals to empirical science, since philosophers only tend to care about the possibilities of particular results, like blindsight.

Kornblith argues, in the opposite direction, that appeals to empirical results are often essential, and that appeals to intuition are limited and irrelevant to philosophical conclusions.

II. Empiricism and naturalism

Bealer claimed that the empiricist's appeals to intuition are illegitimate, given their commitments to all evidence being sense evidence.

Since we must appeal to non-sensory evidence sometimes, say for mathematical arguments, the empiricist's position is self-defeating.

We have seen such criticism of the positivist's empiricism, before.

Concerns about atomism, from Sellars and Quine, led philosophers to abandon such strict empiricism.

In the place of strict empiricism, many philosophers adopted naturalism.

Naturalism differs from empiricism in that it can allow for evidence or ontology that are ruled out by the empiricist.

For example, many physical theories appeal to fields, like gravitational fields, electromagnetic fields.

One way to understand a field is as a distribution of values (the strength of the field) across space-time.

If space-time were empty, then there would be nothing to which we can ascribe such properties.

Thus, some scientists reify space-time, ascribing the field values to substantial space-time points.

Space-time points aren't real things, for the empiricist: they can, in principle, not be experienced.

A naturalist can accept the existence of substantial space-time points or regions, in order to make the best theories of physics work.

The naturalist thus can reject the empiricist's principle that everything real must be available to the senses.

Instead, the naturalist can just require that our best theories be supported by sense evidence, no matter what their commitments.

More relevantly to the Kornblith article, the naturalist may look to empirical science, rather than an a priori standard, to determine what exists.

If our best scientific theories say that there are electrons, then there are electrons.

If our best theories appeal to intuition, the naturalist may countenance intuition as a source of evidence.

Bealer's criticisms of naturalism seem most appropriate to a more rigid empiricism.

He argues that the terms of our best science, including 'explain' and 'evidence' are not terms available to the empiricist.

Thus, the naturalist who appeals to intuitions seems to contradict the empiricist who rejects such appeals as a priori or rationalist.

To be fair, some naturalists do not carefully distinguish their position from that of the empiricist.

Kornblith, in rejecting a priori knowledge and conceptual analysis, seems to be in this position, and thus open to Bealer's criticism:

Naturalistic theory is belied by naturalistic practice... The very terms in which naturalistic theory is formulated...are disallowed as illegitimate by that very theory. Naturalism is...found to be self-defeating twice-over (131-2).

Kornblith's challenge, then, is to show that appeals to intuition are consistent with naturalist principles.

III. Conceptions of philosophy

We saw that Bealer took 'philosophy' to refer to an a priori pursuit of a wide range of problems which are mainly conceptual.

Kornblith takes 'philosophy' to refer to an empirical pursuit of concrete problems.

He takes knowledge, like other philosophical quarry, to be a natural, external phenomenon.

Epistemologists ought to be concerned with the nature of knowledge, not the concept of knowledge; the proper subject matter of ethics is the right and the good, not the concepts of the right and the good; and so on (133).

Beware of an equivocation in 'natural phenomenon'.

Bealer argues that philosophical terms refer to natural kinds, and that intuition itself is a natural kind.

Those claims merely entail that they are real phenomena, not that they are available to the naturalist, or that they are physical phenomena, available to the empiricist.

Kornblith's claim is that they are subject to natural science, as opposed to rational philosophizing.

IV. Is intuition a priori?

The differences between Bealer and Kornblith on 'philosophy' entail differences in their use of 'intuition'.

Kornblith describes the uses of intuition on analogy with a more concrete endeavor.

What we are doing, as I see it, is much like the rock collector who gathers samples of some interesting kind of stone for the purpose of figuring out what it is that the samples have in common. We begin, often enough, with obvious cases, even if we do not yet understand what it is that provides the theoretical unity to the kind we wish to examine. Understanding what that theoretical unity is is the object of our study, and it is to be found by careful examination of the phenomenon, that is, something outside of us, not our concept of the phenomenon, something inside of us (133-4).

Kornblith urges that we look outward at the phenomena, rather than inward at our intuitions.

Bealer's point is that the phenomena, being universal and thus being about concepts, are only available to intuition.

Indeed, Bealer urges that we can modalize all appeals to empirical research.

So, we have two distinct kinds of approaches, depending on our analysis of the proper object of philosophical knowledge.

If we are looking at concepts, we have to appeal to intuitions.

If we are looking at phenomena in the world, then we are better off with a method closer to that of empirical science.

Appeals to intuition, then, are not a priori; they're just data.

We're just looking for a good theory, and we start with whatever data we have on hand.

Once we regard epistemology as the investigation of a certain natural phenomenon, we clear the way for distinctively epistemic terminology (139).

Philosophical terminology will be distinctively philosophical.

It may not look like empirical science.

But, since the data are really empirical, Kornblith argues, the methods need not be seen as rational.

V. Giving up some uses of intuition

In the above arguments, Kornblith defends uses of intuition, the status quo.

He also proposes that naturalism has alternative, and better, methods.

We have seen these methods used recently by the experimental philosophers, who appeal to results from cognitive psychology and their own research, to examine philosophical problems like that of free will or intentionality.

Naturalistic methodology is now importantly different from that of other philosophers, even if not very long ago it would have been difficult to separate the naturalists from the nonnaturalists by looking at their methods... The approach of examining our intuitions clearly robs us of the best available source of correctives for current mistake. Moreover, the appeal to imaginable cases and what we are inclined to say about them is both overly narrow and overly broad in its focus. It is overly narrow because serious empirical investigation of a phenomenon will often reveal possibilities that we would not, and sometimes could not, have imagined before. It is overly broad because many imaginable cases are not genuine possibilities and need not be accounted for by our theories (136).

We can easily imagine a Bealer-esque reply to both complaints.

First, the apriorist need not give up empirical research as a heuristic device to stimulate our intuitions.

The defender of intuition need not demand that the armchair philosopher seclude herself from all empirical data.

Such data might well be useful to trigger our imaginations.

But, the theory we construct needs only the modalized version of the data.

Second, Kornblith's complaint about possibilities that are not genuine seems indefensible.

It is highly unlikely that we ever find ourselves in fake barn country.

Still, we don't want to say that our best theories of knowledge shouldn't be wary of the causal theory of knowledge.

Similarly, we are highly unlikely to find ourselves traveling near the speed of light, but we do not want to claim that Newtonian mechanics is true.

We can use Newtonian mechanics, and we can use JTB, or JTB+CTK, for practical purposes.

But, when we want the truth, we have to consider even the most abstruse possibilities.

VI. Observations

Bealer claims that the naturalist's methods are self-defeating, since they can not account for uses of standard philosophical terms, like 'explain' and 'evidence'.

Kornblith replies that such terms, being natural kinds, are available to the naturalist.

Further, where Bealer argues that inferences within philosophy are made a priori, Kornblith responds that the naturalist need not cede inference to the apriorist.

The legitimacy of an inference, on the naturalist view, is dependent upon its reliability: reliable inferential practices are epistemically legitimate; those that are unreliable are not (137).

Reliabilism, being a deflationary epistemology, can be used in various ways.

Bealer emphasized the ubiquity of rational intuition.

Kornblith responds that the reliability of such processes makes them legitimate for the naturalist.

It seems to me that the dispute between Bealer and Kornblith really traces back to the differing conceptions of 'philosophy'.

If we take philosophy to be mainly concerned with concepts and their application, then we need rational intuition to proceed.

If we take philosophy to be mainly concerned with natural phenomena, then we might avoid appeals to apriorist epistemology.

So, the question between Bealer and Kornblith is profound.

Here is one brief point against Kornblith's conception of philosophy that might help break the tie.

If the point of a philosophical theory is to provide an account of the natural kind, it has to be universal.

It is difficult to see how knowledge or the good (or whatever) can be a natural kind and not be a concept.

It can't be a thought or a belief; those are particulars.

Kornblith seems to be confusing concepts with thoughts.

Consider again the following passage:

Understanding what that theoretical unity is is the object of our study, and it is to be found by careful examination of the phenomenon, that is, something outside of us, not our concept of the phenomenon, something inside of us (133-4).