

A Rationalist Account of Intuitions (Pt. 1)

1. Bealer on the Nature of Philosophical Intuition

Sellars's "notorious '-ing'/'-ed' ambiguity": "sensation" sometimes refers to "the sensing" (i.e., the *act* of awareness) and sometimes refers to "the sensed" (i.e., the *object* of awareness: what it is that one is aware of).

- There is a similar ambiguity with "judgment," "assertion," "explanation," "commitment," etc.

With "intuition," the ambiguity is actually three-way.

- In the case of belief, we can distinguish the following:
 1. the *state* of believing that p ,
 2. the *act* of judging that p ,
 3. the *content* of what is judged/believed (presumably, the proposition that p).
- In the case of intuition, we can make a similar tri-partite distinction:
 1. the *state* of having an intuition that p ,
 2. the *act* of having an intuition (i.e., an *intuiting*) that p ,
 3. the *content* of what is intuited (i.e., the intuited: presumably, the proposition that p).

Bealer is providing an account of the second of these: the *act* (or *episode*) of intuiting that p .

According to Bealer, philosophical intuitions (in the second sense) are *a sui generis, natural, and irreducible kind of conscious episode in which it intellectually seems to one that something is the case.*

Other features that Bealer insists philosophical intuitions to have:

- They are *intellectual*, not *sensory* or *introspective*, seemings.
- They involve one "just seeing" that something is the case. (Ex.: de Morgan's laws.)
- They can always occur without the aid of any *imaginary*, *sensory*, or *introspective* experiences.
- They present themselves as *necessary*.
- They are *fallible*. (Ex.'s: *the naïve comprehension axiom* and *the classical logical/semantic paradoxes*.)
- They are distinct from *physical intuitions*. (Ex.: *that when a house is undermined, it will fall*.)
- They are distinct from *beliefs*. (Ex.'s: *mathematical theorems* and *the naïve comprehension axiom*.)
- They are distinct from *judgments*, *guesses*, and *hunches*.
- They are distinct from *common sense*. (Ex.'s: *infinite divisibility of space/time* and *that items priced substantially below market price are likely to be defective*.)
- They do not involve *memory*. (Ex.: *that $5^3 = 125$* .)
- They are comparatively *non-plastic*.
- They are *not readily overridden* by countervailing beliefs.
- They are not reducible to *spontaneous inclinations to believe* (or even *spontaneously arrived at judgments*).
- They have a *distinctive phenomenology*. (Cf. "Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy," p. 210: "Phenomenologically, this kind of episode is quite distinct from a mere hunch.")

Thus Bealer also calls philosophical intuitions "rational intuitions" and "*a priori* intuitions."

2. Bealer on the Incoherence of Not Counting Intuitions as Evidence

Bealer's formulation of *Quinean empiricism*:

- i. *the principle of empiricism*: A person's experiences and/or observations comprise the person's *prima facie* evidence.
- ii. *the principle of holism*: A theory is justified for a person iff it is, or belongs to, the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all, or most, of the person's *prima facie* evidence.
- iii. *the principle of naturalism*: The natural sciences (plus the logic and mathematics needed by them) constitute the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all, or most, of a person's experiences and/or observations.

Bealer provides three arguments in "The Incoherence of Empiricism" that the conjunction of these theses is "at bottom incoherent" (p. 163). The upshot is that the Quinean must embrace the following instead of (i):

- i'. *moderate rationalism*: A person's experiences and intuitions comprise the person's (basic) *prima facie* evidence.

By "Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy," the official conclusion of his three arguments has changed: now it is not just the Quinean but *everyone* who must embrace (i') on pains of epistemic self-defeat (cf. p. 214).

The three arguments run as follows:

1. *The Starting Points Argument*

Empiricists seem to treat as *prima facie* evidence their intuitions about what does and does not count as *experience, observation, theory, justification, explanation, simplicity*, etc. (= *their intuitions about starting points*).

Empiricists can reply that though they appeal to intuition when formulating their theories *during the context of discovery*, they do not appeal to intuition when justifying those theories *during the context of justification*.

But this leads to a fatal dilemma:

- If our intuitions regarding starting points *are not* reliable, then this source of error will surely infect the comprehensive theory we formulate in terms of those starting points.
- If our intuitions regarding starting points *are* reliable, then whatever makes those intuitions reliable presumably also makes our intuitions about what does or does not count as *prima facie* evidence reliable. But we have a wealth of intuitions to the effect that our intuitions count as *prima facie* evidence. Since intuitions in that first set are largely reliable, it follows that intuitions in general count as *prima facie* evidence (or do so most of the time).

2. *The Argument from Epistemic Norms*

According to "our standard justificatory procedure," intuitions as well as experiences are admitted as *prima facie* evidence.

Empiricists would have us restrict our *prima facie* evidence by excluding intuition. But how is this exclusionary view relevantly different from the following clearly unacceptable exclusionary view?

visualism: Only a person's *visual* experiences count as *prima facie* evidence.

It is not enough to say that the comprehensive theory that results from the empiricist procedure is *self-approving*, because the following clearly unacceptable view is also self-approving:

Bob: Only a person's visual experiences count as *prima facie* evidence, and Bob is justified.

The only option is to start *from within* the standard justificatory procedure and use its *mechanism of self-criticism* to argue that a component of that procedure is defective.

A candidate source of *prima facie* evidence can justifiably be thrown out if it fails the “three c’s”:

- *consistency*: A single person’s use of that source yields results that are inconsistent with one another.
- *corroboration*: The verdicts obtained by one person when using that source conflict with those obtained by other people.
- *confirmation*: The source yields claims which are not confirmed—or worse, which are disconfirmed—by other sources of *prima facie* evidence.

However, intuition passes these three tests:

- *consistency*: A single person’s intuitions are largely consistent with one another, and when they appear to conflict, these apparent conflicts can usually be reconciled by *more completely description* and/or *redescription* of the scenario in question.
- *corroboration*: Although different people do occasionally have conflicting intuitions, there is “an impressive corroboration by others of one’s elementary logical, mathematical, conceptual, and modal intuitions,” especially once more-complete-description and redescription strategies have been employed (p. 172). (However, it might be that moral and aesthetic intuitions fail this test: cf. pp. 189–190, n. 16.)
- *confirmation*: The verdicts of intuition are seldom, if ever, disconfirmed by experience or observation (mostly because intuition and experience/observation make claims that are by-and-large independent of one another).

Another way in which a candidate source of *prima facie* evidence can justifiably be excluded:

- Formulate the best comprehensive theory one can on the basis of the standard sources of *prima facie* evidence that one is not challenging.
- If the resulting theory deems the source that one is challenging not to be reliable, then it is legitimate to discount it as a genuine source of *prima facie* evidence.

This method is appropriate if and only if the source being challenged is *intuitively* less basic than the sources of *prima facie* evidence being used to challenge it.

Otherwise the visualist could use this method to eliminate non-visual modes of experience as sources of *prima facie* evidence.

But, intuitively, intuition is just as basic a source of *prima facie* evidence as experience/observation.

3. *The Argument from Terms of Epistemic Appraisal*

Problem: The simplest regimented formulation of the natural sciences (the Quinean empiricist’s candidate for the theory adverted to in the principle of naturalism) does not contain the terms “justified,” “simplest,” “theory,” “explain,” and “*prima facie* evidence.”

It follows that the Quinean empiricist’s principles (i)–(iii) do not count as justified according to principles (i)–(iii).

Most promising response: Claim that N (= the simplest regimented formulation of the natural sciences) contains scientifically acceptable “counterparts” of these terms, that “counterparts” of principles (i)–(iii) can be formulated in this terminology, and that these “counterpart” principles are consequences of N.

“E(α , β)” = the counterpart of “ α are β ’s experiences”

“P(α , β)” = the counterpart of “ α is all of β ’s *prima facie* evidence”

“J(α , β)” = the counterpart of “ α is justified for β ”

“S(α , β)” = the counterpart of “ α is the simplest comprehensive theory that explains β ”

- i*. $E(z, y)$ iff $P(z, y)$. [counterpart of the principle of empiricism]
- ii*. $J(x, y)$ iff $(\exists w)(\exists z)[(x \in w) \ \& \ S(w, z) \ \& \ P(z, y)]$. [counterpart of the principle of holism]
- iii*. If $E(z, y)$, then $S(N, z)$. [counterpart of the principle of naturalism]

Problem: Empiricists must show that this new idiom is relevantly like the standard idiom, for otherwise there would be no reason to think that principles (i*)–(iii*) have any bearing on epistemic appraisal. Moreover, if Quine’s arguments are correct, N does not contain any propositions to the effect that such-and-such is a definition/analytic truth/etc. So it can’t be a consequence of N that the new and standard idioms are roughly synonymous.

Most promising response: Claim that N contains a scientifically acceptable “counterpart” of the definition relation, that “counterparts” of the definitions at the bottom of the previous page can be formulated using this relation, and that these “counterpart” definitions are consequences of N.

Problem: This just pushes the question back: now we need a reason to think that the “counterpart” definition relation is relevantly like the standard definition relation. Moreover, if we add to N a “definition of definition” stated in the standard idiom, the theory that results is not justified on empiricist grounds, since according to principle (iii) it is N, not this enriched theory, which is simplest overall theory that explains all or most of our experiences.

[Major worry for this argument: it does not appear to be applicable to those empiricists who do not share Quine’s general skepticism about meaning, relations of synonymy, etc.]