

A Rationalist Account of Intuitions (Pt. 2)

1. Bealer on What It Takes to Count as a Source of Evidence

In “Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy,” Bealer first argues for a certain criterion in virtue of which something qualifies as a basic source of *prima facie* evidence (pp. 214–221), and then argues that if we accept the correct account of concept possession we can see that intuition does satisfy that criterion (pp. 221–230).

Bealer takes himself to have already refuted (elsewhere) non-truth-based approaches to explaining why something qualifies as a source of evidence. This leaves us with the following:

(R) Something is a *basic source of evidence* iff it has an appropriate kind of *reliable tie to the truth*.

Why the “basic” qualifier? Bealer (for some reason) thinks that a *derived* source of evidence such as testimony can be a genuine source of evidence even if it lacks any kind of reliable tie to the truth.

One way of filling in (R) Bealer calls *contingent reliabilism*, which runs as follows:

(CR) Something is a *basic source of evidence* iff it is nomologically necessary (but metaphysically contingent) that most of the deliverances of that source are accurate.

Bealer mentions two sorts of (intuitive) counterexamples to the sufficiency of this criterion:

- “a creature who has a capacity for making reliable telepathically generated guesses” (p. 215);
- “a creature who is hardwired to make guesses about the truth or falsity of certain noncontingent propositions of some extremely high degree of difficulty” (ibid.).

Instead of *contingent reliabilism*, Bealer advocates *modal reliabilism*, according to which we should fill in (R) so that what is required is a “strong modal tie to the truth.” What sort of strong modal tie? “[T]he weakest [strong] modal tie that does the job—that is, the weakest [strong] modal tie that lets in the right sources and excludes the wrong ones” (p. 218).

One proposal very close to the one Bealer eventually settles on:

(MR₁) Something is a *basic source of evidence* iff, for cognitive conditions of a suitably high quality, it is necessary that the deliverances of that source in those cognitive conditions are mostly accurate.

Why this is a bad criterion: if *cognitive conditions* refer only to *internal conditions* (attentiveness, clarity of mind, etc.), then perception does not appear to count as a basic source of evidence; however, if *cognitive conditions* include *external conditions* (good light, no obstructions, operative laws of optics, etc.), then nomologically reliable telepathy is in danger of counting as a basic source of evidence.

Bealer’s actual proposal posits a weaker modal tie to the truth than that in (MR₁):

(MR₂) Something is a *basic source of evidence* iff, for cognitive conditions of a suitably high quality, it is necessary that if someone in those cognitive conditions were to process theoretically the deliverances of the candidate source, the resulting theory would provide a correct assessment as to the truth or falsity of most of those deliverances.

Worry: what does it mean to “process theoretically” the deliverances of a candidate source? If it means “develop any old theory on the basis of those deliverances,” then the proposal yields clearly unacceptable consequences. On the other hand, if it means “develop the right theory of those deliverances” or “develop the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all, or most, of those deliverances,” then whatever faculties we use during the proper development of a theory (such as reasoning and intuition) seem unacceptably built-in to our definition from the get-go as legitimate sources of evidence.

2. Bealer on Why Intuition Counts as a Source of Evidence

Bealer's idea: the correct analysis of concept possession reveals that, when we possess a given concept, intuitions about propositions featuring that concept have the required strong modal tie to the truth.

A subject *possesses a concept in the nominal sense* iff the subject has propositional attitudes toward propositions in whose logical analysis the concept appears.

Why this is too weak: (i) cases of *misunderstanding*; (ii) cases of *incomplete understanding*; (iii) cases in which the subject has propositional attitudes merely in virtue of attributions by third-person interpreters.

A subject *possesses a concept in the full sense* (i.e. *possesses the concept determinately*, i.e. *understands the concept*) iff (i) the subject has propositional attitudes toward propositions in whose logical analysis the concept appears, and (ii) the subject does not do this with misunderstanding or incomplete understanding or just by virtue of satisfying out attribution practices or in any other weak way.

However, this *negative characterization* of determinate concept possession is not very revealing; in order to motivate his attempt at a fully general *positive characterization*, Bealer provides two examples:

- *the multigon example*: A woman in normal cognitive conditions introduces *through use* (not *stipulation*) a new term "multigon." She applies the term to all closed plane figures having five or more straight sides. Her term expresses some definite concept, and she determinately possesses this concept. However, by chance she has neither applied her term "multigon" to triangles and rectangles nor withheld it from them. When that question comes up, the following holds true:

[The woman has an intuition *that triangles and rectangles are multigons*] iff [the property *being a multigon* = the property *being a closed straight-sided plane figure*].

[The woman has an intuition *that triangles and rectangles are not multigons*] iff [the property *being a multigon* = the property *being a closed straight-sided plane figure with five or more sides*].

- *the chromic example*: A woman in normal cognitive conditions introduces *through use* a new term "chromic." She applies the term to phenomenal qualia, specifically, to shades of phenomenal color, but withholds it from phenomenal black and phenomenal white. Her term "chromic" expresses some definite concept, and she determinately possesses this concept. However, for some reason she has never experienced any shades of phenomenal grey. When she experiences phenomenal grey for the first time and considers the question of whether it is chromic, the following holds true:

[The woman has an intuition *that phenomenal grey is chromic*] iff [the property *being chromic* = the property *being a non-black non-white phenomenal color*].

[The woman has an intuition *that phenomenal grey is not chromic*] iff [the property *being chromic* = the property *being a non-black non-white non-grey phenomenal color*].

[Do these examples really show what Bealer wants them to show? Does the fact that these terms are introduced *through use* help Bealer make his point, or does it only serve to obfuscate the main issue?]

In light of these examples, Bealer proposes the following account of concept possession:

Subject S *determinately possesses a given concept* iff, for all associated test property-identities T:

S would have intuitions which imply that T is true iff T is true.

Three questions:

- Why intuitions rather than beliefs?
- Do we really have intuitions (in Bealer's robust sense) about ordinary concepts like *fireman* or *tractor*?
- How do we specify the relevant subjective conditional without falling prey to counterexamples?

Motivated by this third worry, Bealer proposes the following modification to his analysis:

Subject S *determinately possesses a given concept* iff, for all associated test property-identities T:

it is possible for S (or an epistemic counterpart of S) to settle with *a priori* stability that T is true iff T is true.

Subject S *settles with a priori stability* a given property-identity T iff:

- i. S attempts to elicit intuitions bearing on T, and S seeks a theoretical systemization based on those intuitions, and that systemization affirms that T is true [and all the while S determinately understands T], and
- ii. necessarily, for any improvement of S's cognitive conditions and any extension of S's conceptual repertory, if S has those cognitive conditions and that conceptual repertory and S attempts to elicit intuitions bearing on T and seeks a theoretical systemization based on those intuitions [and all the while S determinately understands T], then that systematization affirms that T is true.

Thus determinate possession of our concepts entails the existence of a strong modal tie between our intuitions and the truth.

Three worries:

- This only succeeds as a vindication of *the actual intuitions that we have right now* if Bealer can show that we *now* determinately possess the relevant philosophical concepts.

Bealer's argument is worryingly close to the following not-entirely-helpful chain of reasoning: our intuitions about moral permissibility serve as evidence iff they are reliable, and our intuitions about moral permissibility are reliable iff we fully understand moral permissibility.

- Even if Bealer is holding out hope that *someday* we will determinately possess all the relevant philosophical concepts, his arguments for what is involved in concept possession and what it would take for intuitions to serve as evidence depend on our (or at least his) *current intuitions*, so he needs us (or him) to *now* determinately possess the relevant concepts in order for his arguments to be cogent.
- It is not clear that the strong modal tie that pops out of the *analysis of determinate concept possession* is the same as the strong modal tie that was posited during the *analysis of being a basic evidential source*.