

A Virtue-Based Account of Intuitions

I. The Perceptual Model of Intuition

According to the *classical foundationalist* picture of perceptual knowledge, a visual experience mediates between the fact perceived and the perceptual belief through which it is known:

- The fact that a table is before me.
- Visual experience as of a table before me.
- Belief that a table is before me.

My belief that a table is before me is justified because it is based on my experience as of a table before me, which lies “beyond justification and unjustification.”

According to the *perceptual model of rational intuition*, rational intuition is a state of awareness that plays a mediating role analogous to that of visual experience in visual perception:

- The fact that it is permissible to divert the trolley in such-and-such a scenario.
- Intellectual seeming that it is permissible to divert the trolley in such-and-such a scenario.
- Belief that it is permissible to divert the trolley in such-and-such a scenario.

My belief is justified because it is based on my intellectual seeming, which is a conscious mental state that lies “beyond justification and unjustification.”

II. Against the Perceptual Model

move #1: Even in the perceptual case, there is an intellectual seeming (= a “pull” to believe).

reason #1: “The visual experience can have its own highly specific character *even* when it *attracts* no corresponding belief” (“Intuitions,” p. 48).

reason #2: When one first sees a Müller-Lyer illusion, one is pulled toward believing that the two lines are incongruent. However, after we draw congruent parallel lines between the two lines, that pull dissipates, even though the length of the two lines *in one’s visual field* has not changed. Thus, “the misleading ‘appearance’ of incongruence may amount to a misled and misleading *intellectual seeming* rather than a sensory appearance” (*ibid.*, p. 48, n. 3).

So in the perceptual case we really have:

- The fact that a table is before me.
- Visual experience as of a table before me.
- Intellectual seeming that a table is before me.
- Belief that a table is before me.

Moreover, though the *visual experience* is not epistemically evaluable, the *intellectual seeming* is: a thing “can be assigned the wrong weight, as it attracts one’s assent too much, or too little” (*ibid.*, p. 49).

move #2: As intellectual seemings are epistemically evaluable, they cannot serve as a basis for foundational justification (in the basis-dependent sense).

Intellectual seemings are not *factors that attracts us to assent*; rather, they are *the attractions themselves*.

Therefore, we need another candidate for the state of awareness that lies “beyond justification and unjustification.”

response: The act of *understanding the proposition involved* (of *consciously entertaining it*) is the state of awareness that gives rise to an intuitive attraction.

move #3: Still, that act of understanding might give rise to an inappropriate attraction if, for example, it derives from *enculturation* into an unfortunate bias or superstition (in a way that bypasses the normal cognitive mechanisms of inference, testimony, and perception).

response: Enculturation doesn't necessarily work that way: it might be that social influence instills the bias through the usual cognitive mechanisms, but then memory preserves the attraction long after one forgets how one first acquired it.

move #4: Such enculturation results in a *reason-based attraction*, but there is another sort of silent enculturation that results in a *non-reason-based attraction*, and that is all that is needed for the objection to stand.

move #5: Moreover, it is not plausible that consciously entertaining any given proposition with understanding thereby justifies attraction to it. Thus we need to restrict the set of propositions which properly attract assent upon consideration, but no clue has been provided for how to do so.

[Sosa also insists that intellectual seemings can be seen to be a dubious source of foundational justification once we distinguish between *one-thing-considered/prima facie seemings* and *all-things-considered/resultant seemings*. The point seems to be that intuitive seemings are usually *prima facie*, but it is all-things-considered seemings that "most directly justify corresponding intuitive beliefs" ("Intuitions," p. 49). However, there is a parallel distinction between *prima facie* (or better: *pro tanto*) justification and all-things-considered justification, so it is difficult to see what Sosa's point is here.]

III. The Cartesian Model of Intuition

Supposedly the model for Descartes' account of rational intuition was *introspection*, not *perception*. In a typical case of introspection, we have the following:

- The fact that I'm in pain.
- Intellectual seeming that I'm in pain.
- Belief that I'm in pain.

On the account of introspection that Sosa is attributing to Descartes, a propositional content about a present state of consciousness can attract assent through its sheer truth (provided it is simple enough).

According to the *Cartesian/introspective/factive model of rational intuition*, certain truths attract assent through their sheer truth, and when one believes them on this basis, one's belief is foundationally justified.

- The fact that $1 + 1 = 2$.
- Intellectual seeming that $1 + 1 = 2$.
- Belief that $1 + 1 = 2$.

What distinguishes this from the perceptual model is that, on this account, one is attracted to assent to the proposition intuited partially in virtue of the truth of that proposition (rather than just in virtue of one's understanding it). Thus we have:

the Cartesian model: S rationally intuits that p iff S has a conscious attraction to assent to $\langle p \rangle$ that is explained by two things in combination:

- a. S understands $\langle p \rangle$ well enough, and
- b. $\langle p \rangle$ is true.

IV. Against the Cartesian Model

Two objections to the Cartesian model ("Intuitions," p. 57):

- i. It surely can't be the case the *any* true proposition can provide intuitive justification for a belief in it. Thus we need to restrict the set of propositions to which this account applies, but as in the case of the perceptual model, no clue has been provided for how to do so.
- ii. We can be intuitively justified in believing false propositions, as paradoxes like the sorites show.

Sosa imagines a reply to objection (ii) that proceeds by considering *the epistemology of fallacious reasoning*:

Suppose I have drawn some conclusion through a piece of grossly fallacious reasoning, so that I am not justified in believing that conclusion. Suppose, also, that we trace the fault in my reasoning to an instance in which I commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent. When I did so, it must have seemed intuitive to me to think something of the form: *that, necessarily, if q , and $p \rightarrow q$, then p* . But if we hold that I was intuitively justified in thinking that, then we must concede that I was justified, after all, in believing the conclusion of my piece of reasoning.

The Cartesian model can easily explain this case: on this view, what is not a fact is not there to be intuited, so I did not really intuit the truth of the conditional *that, necessarily, if q , and $p \rightarrow q$, then p* . Fallibilist accounts of intuition, on other hand, have a more difficult time explaining the case.

However, Sosa thinks that an alternative, non-Cartesian explanation of this case is available:

Let us distinguish between *faults attributable to a subject* and *faults not attributable to a subject*.

attributable faults (perceptual case): disregard of poor light; disregard of an object's small size; disregard of how far away an object is.

non-attributable faults (perceptual case): ignorance of bad lighting conditions when the subject could not plausibly have suspected they are bad; perceptual illusions.

We can make a similar distinction in the case of intuition:

attributable faults (intuitive case): inattentiveness; carelessness; blundering haste.

non-attributable faults (intuitive case): faults that derive "from our basic make-up, shared among humans generally, a make-up that serves us well in an environment such as ours on the surface of our planet" ("Intuitions: Their Nature...", p. 54).

(Sometimes Sosa cashes out this distinction in terms of how easily the subject can avoid the fault.)

Sosa's claim seems to be that when one is attracted to assent to a false proposition because of an attributable fault, one is not thereby justified in believing it. Thus he can deny that I am justified in believing the conditional *that, necessarily, if q , and $p \rightarrow q$, then p* in our case above, while still allowing that one can be intuitively justified in believing falsehoods (when the fault is non-attributable).

V. A Virtue-Based Model of Intuition

Sosa's own account of rational intuition deviates from the Cartesian account in three crucial ways:

1. He restricts the propositions intuited to the *modally strong* (propositions that are either necessarily true or necessarily false).
2. He requires that the intuitive attraction to assent be grounded in an *epistemic/intellectual/cognitive competence/ability/virtue* attributable to the subject.
3. In order for a disposition to count as an epistemic competence, all Sosa requires is *reliability*, not *infallibility*.

Some vocabulary:

- An intellectual seeming is *intuitive* when it is a conscious attraction to assent triggered simply by considering a proposition consciously with understanding.
- Subject S's disposition to discriminate in way W the true from the false among a set of propositions F is an *epistemic competence* iff:
 - a. that disposition has a basis which resides in S, and
 - b. manifestations of that disposition in appropriately normal conditions are mostly accurate.

- Subject S discriminates the truth or falsity of proposition $\langle p \rangle$ *on the basis of understanding alone* iff S's verdict about the truth or falsity of $\langle p \rangle$ rests merely on S's understanding of $\langle p \rangle$, with no reliance on introspection, perception, memory, testimony, or inference (or no further reliance, anyhow, than S needed to understand $\langle p \rangle$).

Putting all the pieces together, Sosa's own account of intuition runs as follows:

Sosa's virtue-based model: S rationally intuits that p iff, for some appropriate set F of sufficiently similar modally strong propositions such that $\langle p \rangle \in F$, the following are true:

- S has an *intuitive attraction* to assent to $\langle p \rangle$,
- S has an *epistemic competence* to discriminate *on the basis of understanding alone* the true from the false in F, and
- (a) is explained by (b).

VI. Some Objections and Replies

Objection #1: On this view, rational intuition and blind prejudice do not feel any different from the inside.

Reply #1: So? Don't perception, memory, and introspection all have misleading counterparts? Surely it is too much to require an introspectively accessible mark that discriminates in all possible cases between a real source of justification and its merely ostensible counterpart.

Objection #2: Still, there seems to be a phenomenological difference between prejudice and rational intuition that makes an epistemological difference.

Reply #2: Rational intuition does have a phenomenologically distinguishable feature on my account, tied to the modally strong character of what one intuits. (For example, it might be that whenever one is intuitively attracted to $\langle p \rangle$, one is also intuitively attracted to $\langle \text{Necessarily}, p \rangle$.)

Objection #3: Why restrict things to the modally strong?

Reply #3: No deep reason. We can have intuitions about contingent propositions, but it seems that we only have *rational* intuitions about modally strong propositions.

Objection #4: When we clear away the window dressing, isn't this just reliabilism in sheep's clothing? And just as reliabilism seems to provide too easy an answer to skepticism about the external world, doesn't this account provide too easy an answer to skepticism about rational intuition?

Reply #4: No, it doesn't—it provides just the right sort of answer.

Objection #5: But on your view, we only have intuitive justification for our beliefs if the deliverances of (ostensible) intuition are preponderantly true. However, this still leaves us with the question: *are* the deliverances of (ostensible) intuition preponderantly true for us? That is: *do* we have the relevant intellectual competences? And how could we possibly go about answering this question?

Reply #5: The first-order question of whether our cognitive faculties are virtuous needs to be disentangled from the second-order question how we discover that our cognitive faculties are virtuous. But maybe what's really bothering you is a worry that any way of answering the second-order question will suffer from epistemic circularity. For more on that topic, see my forthcoming book, *Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume II*.

Objection #6: How do we fix the set F of modally strong propositions? That is, don't you face a version of the dreaded generality problem for reliabilism?

Reply #6: [Insert failed attempt at a solution here.]