

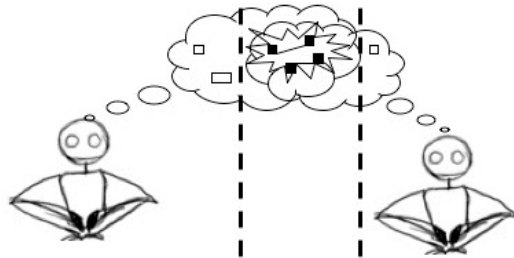
**Philosophy 427**  
***Intuitions and Philosophy***

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**Fall 2011**

Class 23  
Robert Cummins  
“Reflections on Reflective Equilibrium”

# Two Instability Theses

- Gopnik and Schwitzgebel support an intrasubjective instability thesis.
  - Our individual intuitions shift over time.
- Cummins presents an intersubjective instability thesis.
- All evidence, to be legitimate, must be admit of calibration.
  - Observational evidence, because of its public nature, can be calibrated.
  - Intuitive evidence, due to its privacy, cannot.
- “Philosophical intuition is epistemically useless, since it can be calibrated only when it is not needed.”

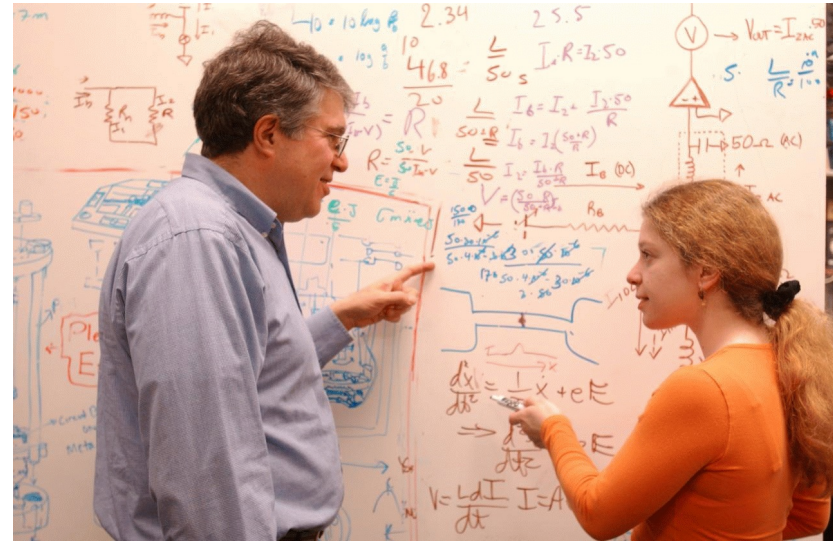


# Five Sources

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

# Explicit Theory

- Physics
- First-order logic
- Euclidean geometry
- Linguistics
- My intuitions about physical phenomena often follow from my understanding of physical laws.
- These intuitions can and do 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.
    - Mere opinion



# Ordinary Beliefs

- Again, mere opinion.
- My intuitions might be correct.
- They might not be.
- But if my intuition is based on an errant interpretation of an explicit theory or on ordinary beliefs, then there is no reason to believe it.
- “It would take a really mad kind of chauvinist, however, to suppose that these have the sort of special epistemological status required to ground a philosophical theory...”



# Language

- That I can use ‘quark’ grammatically does not entail that I understand the nature of quarks.
- Appeals to our semantic intuitions are only as good as our grasp of the world.
- Cohen appealed to our rational competence to deny claims of human irrationality.
  - But Cohen admitted a competence/performance distinction to account for particular cases of error.
  - Chomsky relies on people’s intuitions about grammatical structure as evidence for UG.
  - He also integrates room for performance error.
  - Look to trends and general patterns of usage.
- No account of performance error:
  - “My dear Psyche, as I have so often pointed out to you before, your confusion is due to a category mistake. You are treating the truth of beliefs as an empirical matter. Actually, it is simply a conceptual fact about beliefs that they are always true. Indeed, we might say that it is criterial for belief to be a belief that it be true” (Gopnik and Schwitzgebel 76).

# Concepts

- Cummins takes concepts to be psychological rather than abstract.
- Appeals to our concepts are only as good as our theories of those concepts.
- Someone defending a proper theory of (abstract) concepts will take this source as Cummins' weakness.
- Let's grant it; we'll return to concepts on Thursday with Bealer's (difficult) article.

Bored Now.

# Tacit Theories

- The most interesting case
- If we appeal to intuitions based on tacit theories in the construction of an explicit philosophical theory, we engage in a kind of midwifery: making the implicit theory explicit.
- But there is a difference between having an innate theory and believing that the innate theory is guaranteed to track truth.
  - innate theories of physics, grammar, moral reasoning
- The innate theory is limited by our physiology, and may be an artifact of evolutionary constraints that do not track truth.
  - “You would have to be extremely cynical about morals, or extremely naive about social interactions among primates and other social species, to suppose that adaptive moral concepts are accurate. More generally, adaptive theories are *effective* theories, and the effectiveness of a theory is not a simple function of its accuracy. It is also a function of its tractability, and of the kinds of problems it is typically called upon to solve.”
- “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.”
- Chauvinism again

# Goodbye Reflective Equilibrium

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.

# Reflective Equilibrium and the Scientific Method

## Counterargument: But SRE is just scientific method

- Cummins: nope!
- 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.
- The pennies and jewels cases
  - ▶ 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.







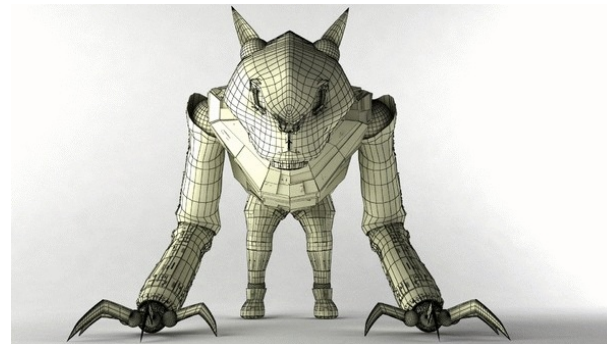
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# Calibration

- The intersubjective stability of observation is a distinct advantage when constructing scientific theories.
  - ▶ Everyone in relevantly similar circumstances should have the same observation.
- This claim is an idealization.
  - ▶ Even observations made with our unassisted perceptual apparatus are liable to error.
  - ▶ Descartes's First Meditation.
  - ▶ When we rely on measuring instruments like microscopes, such errors are even more likely.
- We can calibrate such machines, and explain discrepancies in our perceptions.
- In the case of intuitions, such calibration is elusive.
  - ▶ If everyone agrees in their intuitions, then no calibration is necessary.
  - ▶ If some people dissent, then we don't know whether to take the differences in intuitions as evidence against some theory or as evidence that calibration is necessary.

# Cummins on Calibration

- “Unlike genuine observational techniques, no one ever attempts to calibrate philosophical intuition. To see why, consider again the fairness example. Suppose we want to calibrate someone’s fairness intuitor. What we need is a list of representative distributions, together with a test key, that is, something that tells us which distributions on the list are fair and which unfair, or, perhaps, a ranking. We then let our subject take the test and see how well he does. Trouble is, where do we get the key?”
- Intuitions notoriously lack intersubjective stability.
  - ▶ Some people think that twater is water; others do not.
  - ▶ Some people think that robot cats are animals; some think that they are not.
- How could one calibrate and reconcile such conflicting intuitions?



# Robot Cats

- Putnam: cats are not animals; they are robots.
  - ▶ Thus 'cats are animals' is false.
  - ▶ So it could not be known a priori.
  - ▶ So it is not analytic.
- Another possibility: hold on to the claim that cats are animals.
  - ▶ It turns out that there are no cats.
  - ▶ The meaning of 'cat' entails that one is an animal.
  - ▶ So, we should stop calling the robots cats.



# Intersubjective Instability

- Philosophical intuitions are not universally shared.
- They 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... Making a Putnamian conscience an entrance requirement for the theory of content threatens to make it irrelevant. We must take care that such agreement about the intuitions as there is is not merely a selection effect.”
- Buckwalter and Stich: philosophical discourse can reach consensus by systematically excluding people with deviant intuitions.
- We lack the ability, which we have in the case of observational data, to calibrate.
  - ▶ “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.”

# Philosophy Without Intuitions

- Cummins' conclusion 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."
- Still, we are left with a puzzle.
- What could replace intuitions in moral philosophy and mathematical philosophy?
  - Cummins: 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.
- Boo.