

Class 27 - Intuitions and Experimental Philosophy
Ernest Sosa, "Minimal Intuition" and "Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Intuition"

We started the term by exploring the method of reflective equilibrium.
That study led us to think about both the reliability and stability of intuition.
We saw some specific work aimed at burning armchairs, and undermining our intuitions.
We also raised worries about whether the proponents of x-phi and other empirical philosophy failed to establish normative, philosophical results.

Sosa examines two ways in which x-phi can relate to traditional philosophy.

1. It questions assumptions about what people actually believe.
2. It challenges the truth of beliefs that are generally held.

As 1, x-phi is unobjectionable.
It's just "mining the sciences."
We can find out what people think about space-time and split brains.

Regarding 2, consider the dream example.
Descartes motivates skepticism with the claim that we do not know that we are not dreaming.
A presupposition of the claim is that waking experience and dreaming experience are intrinsically alike.
But, experimental evidence could bear on the claim.

Perhaps to dream is much more like imagining than like hallucinating. If so, how might this bear on the traditional skeptical problematic? (NK 231).

Sosa declines to elaborate and we need not pursue this particular question.
Experimental results might be useful in prescribing some limits to our philosophical theories.
But let's remember that, as Bealer pointed out, we can and do modalize empirical evidence.
What's important, often, in the empirical research is just the possibility of a phenomenon, not whether it actual holds.

Sosa maintains Bealer's modal interpretation of intuition and his embrace of fallibilism, but he gives up Bealer's emphasis on conceptual analysis as the central task of philosophy.

At t, it is intuitive to S that p iff (a) if at t S were merely to understand fully enough the proposition that p (absent relevant perception, introspection, and reasoning), then S would believe that p; (b) at t, S does understand the proposition that p; and © the proposition that p is abstract (DR 259).

Sosa worries in part about the subject matter of philosophy not being natural kinds.
If knowledge and the good and reference are natural kinds, then the claim that a modal-reliable intuition can pick them out is more plausible.
Human beings of all kinds can apprehend mathematical facts, for example.
Similarly, we might be able to apprehend philosophical facts independent of particular experiences, independent of any empirical research.

In contrast, if philosophical concepts are artifacts or social constructions, then the claim that intuition can track them reliably is less plausible.

They would be subject to variations and ambiguities that could only be tracked empirically.

In addition to his concern about whether philosophical concepts are natural kinds, Sosa wants to leave open the option to endorse intuition without endorsing concepts or other abstracta (DR 260).

Bealer's account invokes abstract concepts as the core elements of philosophical theories.

If we take philosophy to be mainly concerned with conceptual analysis, using intuition and other rationalist tools, then we restrict its domain contentiously.

Further, many topics of interest to philosophers, especially in particular areas like philosophy of mind and ethics, seem to benefit from empirical research, on brains and emotions for example.

Sosa thus grounds intuitive knowledge in the reliability of our competence with intuitions.

The intuition is *rational* if and only if it derives from a *competence* and the content is explicitly or implicitly modal (i.e. attributes necessity or possibility) (NK 233).

Epistemic reliabilism is often paired with an externalism which entails that we may not have access to why our intuitions are justified.

According to an externalist reliabilism, our beliefs are justified if they are the result of a reliable process and we need not know whether the process is reliable.

We need not know that we know in order to know.

That's the point of the Truetemp cases we saw earlier in the semester.

Sometimes, we have justified beliefs only because some external circumstance beyond our control holds, like that we are on Earth on which there is water and not twater.

Sometimes we lack justified beliefs because of some external circumstance beyond our control, like that we are the subject of deception by an evil demon.

We must depend on favorable circumstances in all sorts of ways, and these are often relevantly beyond our control (NK 233).

As Sosa notes, the only other option to externalism is skepticism, since there appears to be no way to fully eliminate skeptical hypotheses like those presented by Descartes.

Many of the foes of intuition rely on intersubjective instability, or dissent, to argue against the claim that intuitions can be used as evidence in philosophical arguments.

But intersubjective instability is not necessarily evidence that intuitions shouldn't be used in philosophy. Consider the case of color vision.

There is plenty of dissent among human beings regarding colors, as people like me well know.

We don't abandon the legitimacy of appeals to colors in science and philosophy.

Instead, we explain the errors.

Nichols and Knobe explain differences in moral responsibility attribution by performance errors.

In the end, they find it most plausible to think that some performance error is responsible. Affect, they suggest, degrades intellectual performance in general, whether the relevant competence be memory, perception, inference, etc. Of course, that explanation will leave intuition affected as lightly as are perception memory, and inference, unless some further relevant difference can be specified" (NK 236).

The problems raised by x-phi for intuition seem parallel to problems we can raise about perception and memory, and other sorts of evidence that we accept.

Sosa presents a general schema to apply to various sorts of processes that yield beliefs.

S ϕ 's that p *only if* S believes that p in virtue partly of these facts: (a) that S understands the proposition that p, and (b) that the proposition that p is true and of a certain sort s, one appropriate for ϕ ing (DR 263).

We can apply this schema to perception, introspection, and intuition.

We perceive that the stop sign is red only if we believe that it is red because we understand the proposition that the stop sign is red, and the stop sign is red, and the proposition that the stop sign is red is a kind that we affirm by perception.

We intuit that water is H₂O (and thus that my Twin-Earth doppelganger does not have beliefs about water) only if we understand that water is H₂O, water is H₂O, and the proposition that water is H₂O is of the kind that we affirm by intuition.

Remember, no possible empirical evidence can show us that water is essentially H₂O; we can only find out that some or other sample of water is in fact H₂O by experience.

Intuition thus can be integrated into a broader account of belief-generating processes.

Sosa argues that the distorting effects that the foes of intuition discuss may not call the reliability of intuition into question.

The effects of priming, framing, and other such contextual factors will affect the epistemic status of intuition in general, only in the sort of way that they affect the epistemic status of perceptual observation in general... The upshot is that we have to be *careful* in how we use intuition, not that intuition is useless (237).

If there were a lot of dissent over color, we might give up relying on color vision.

Similarly, if there is a lot of dissent over a particular philosophical case, say the ascriptions of intentionality that Knobe discovered, we should be wary of invoking such intuitions as evidence. But when intuitions are widely shared, as Kornblith conceded often happens, there should be no objection, in principle, to invoking those intuitions as evidence.