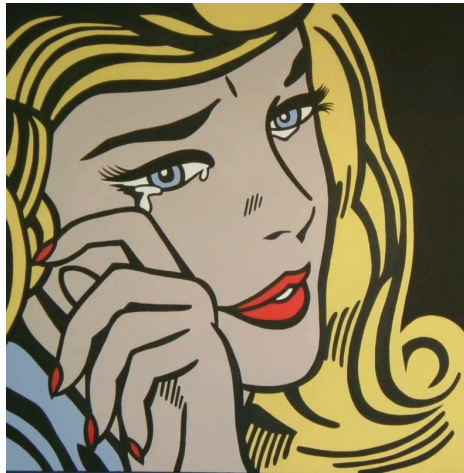


Philosophy 427

Intuitions and Philosophy

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Hamilton College
Fall 2011

Class 28 - Wither Reflective Equilibrium
(and Intuition)?



Reflective Equilibrium

- 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 evidence of the limitations of human reasoning capacities and work aimed at burning armchairs.
- Together, such work may undermine our confidence in our philosophical intuitions.
- On the other hand, we worried whether the critics of rationality and the proponents of x-phi could establish normative, philosophical results.

Sosa and X-Phi

- 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, but mainly uninteresting.
- As 2, Sosa observes that experimental results can challenge traditional philosophical assumptions.
 - ▶ 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, empirical 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).
- This example does not appeal to the survey-based experiments of the x-phi-ers.
- It’s just the kind of empirical evidence philosophers have always seen as constraints on their theories.

Intuition

- The claim which the x-phi-ers most want to undermine is the allegation that beliefs based on intuition can be used as evidence in philosophical arguments.
- Sosa and Bealer both appeal to fallibilistic, modal interpretations of intuition.
- Philosophical (rational) intuitions are of necessity and possibility, though they may get things wrong.
 - Logic, Mathematics, Philosophy
 - Experience is silent about modal claims.
- Kornblith attempts to deflate these appeals.
 - “What we are doing, as I see it, is much like the rock collector who gathers samples of some interesting kind of stone for the purpose of figuring out what it is that the samples have in common. We begin, often enough, with obvious cases, even if we do not yet understand what it is that provides the theoretical unity to the kind we wish to examine. Understanding what that theoretical unity is is the object of our study, and it is to be found by careful examination of the phenomenon, that is, something outside of us, not our concept of the phenomenon, something inside of us” (133-4).
 - If we are looking at phenomena in the world, then we are better off with a method closer to that of empirical science.
 - Appeals to intuition are not *a priori*; they’re just data.
 - We’re just looking for a good theory, and we start with whatever data we have on hand.

Intuition as Immaturity

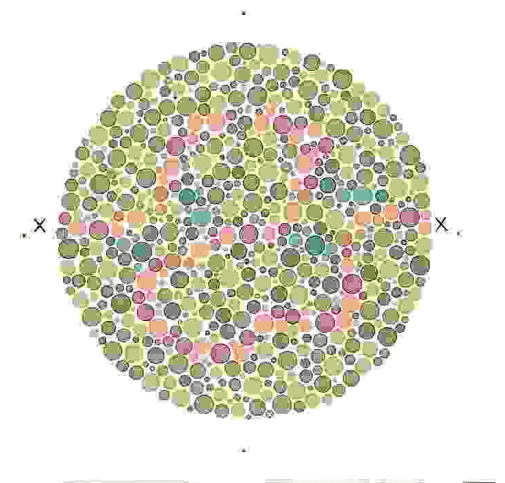
- Kornblith argues that philosophers rely on intuition mainly when their sub-discipline is in its nascence.
 - ▶ In the early days of philosophy of mind, philosophers focused on conceptual questions.
- Now, philosophers spend more time on actual empirical research, especially neuroscience..
- Other sub-disciplines see, increasingly, appeals to data replacing intuitive evidence.
- “Appeal to intuition early on in philosophical investigation should give way to more straightforwardly empirical investigations of external phenomena” (Kornblith).
- “Naturalistic methodology is now importantly different from that of other philosophers, even if not very long ago it would have been difficult to separate the naturalists from the nonnaturalists by looking at their methods... The approach of examining our intuitions clearly robs us of the best available source of correctives for current mistake. Moreover, the appeal to imaginable cases and what we are inclined to say about them is both overly narrow and overly broad in its focus. It is overly narrow because serious empirical investigation of a phenomenon will often reveal possibilities that we would not, and sometimes could not, have imagined before. It is overly broad because many imaginable cases are not genuine possibilities and need not be accounted for by our theories” (Kornblith).

Bealer's Defense of Intuition

- Intuition is not too narrow.
 - ▶ Empirical research is useful as a heuristic device to stimulate our intuitions.
 - ▶ But the theory we construct needs only the modalized version of the data.
- Intuition is not too broad.
 - ▶ It is highly unlikely that we ever find ourselves in fake barn country.
 - ▶ Still, we don't want to say that our best theories of knowledge shouldn't be wary of the causal theory of knowledge.
 - ▶ We are highly unlikely to find ourselves traveling near the speed of light, but we do not want to claim that Newtonian mechanics is true.
 - ▶ When we want the truth, we have to consider even the most abstruse possibilities.

Reliability and Dissent

- The Sosa/Bealer arguments require only that our intuitions are reliable.
- We saw lots of instability evidence.
- But all our evidence-gathering capacities are fallible.
 - ▶ color vision
 - ▶ memory
 - ▶ “Even granting that intuition is systematically unreliable with respect to specifiable sorts of questions... introspection and perception are also in that way and to that extent unreliable” (Sosa)
- We explain the errors instead of giving up.
 - ▶ 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” (Sosa).



Intuition, Perception, Introspection

- The problems raised by x -phi for intuition are parallel to problems we can raise about perception, and memory, and other sources of evidence that we accept.
- “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 general schema to perception, introspection, and intuition.
- Similarly, the effects of framing, anchoring, priming, etc., may not call 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” (Sosa).

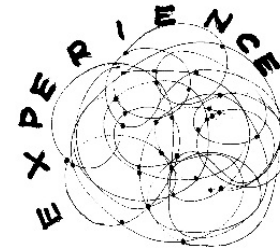
DePaul

The method of seeking reflective equilibrium is a requirement of rationality.

“The method directs the inquirer to do two things as she attempts to construct a philosophical theory:

(I) Reflect upon the logical and evidential relations that hold between her initial intuitive judgments and the other beliefs and theories she accepts, between these judgments and the emerging theory she is constructing to account for them, between this emerging theory and any relevant background beliefs or theories she accepts, and so on.

(II) Whenever these reflections uncover some sort of conflict or incoherence among beliefs, resolve the conflict by revising beliefs in the way that comes to seem most likely to be correct upon thorough reflection, that is, after taking into account everything she believes that might be relevant” (301).



An Equivocation in 'Reflective Equilibrium'

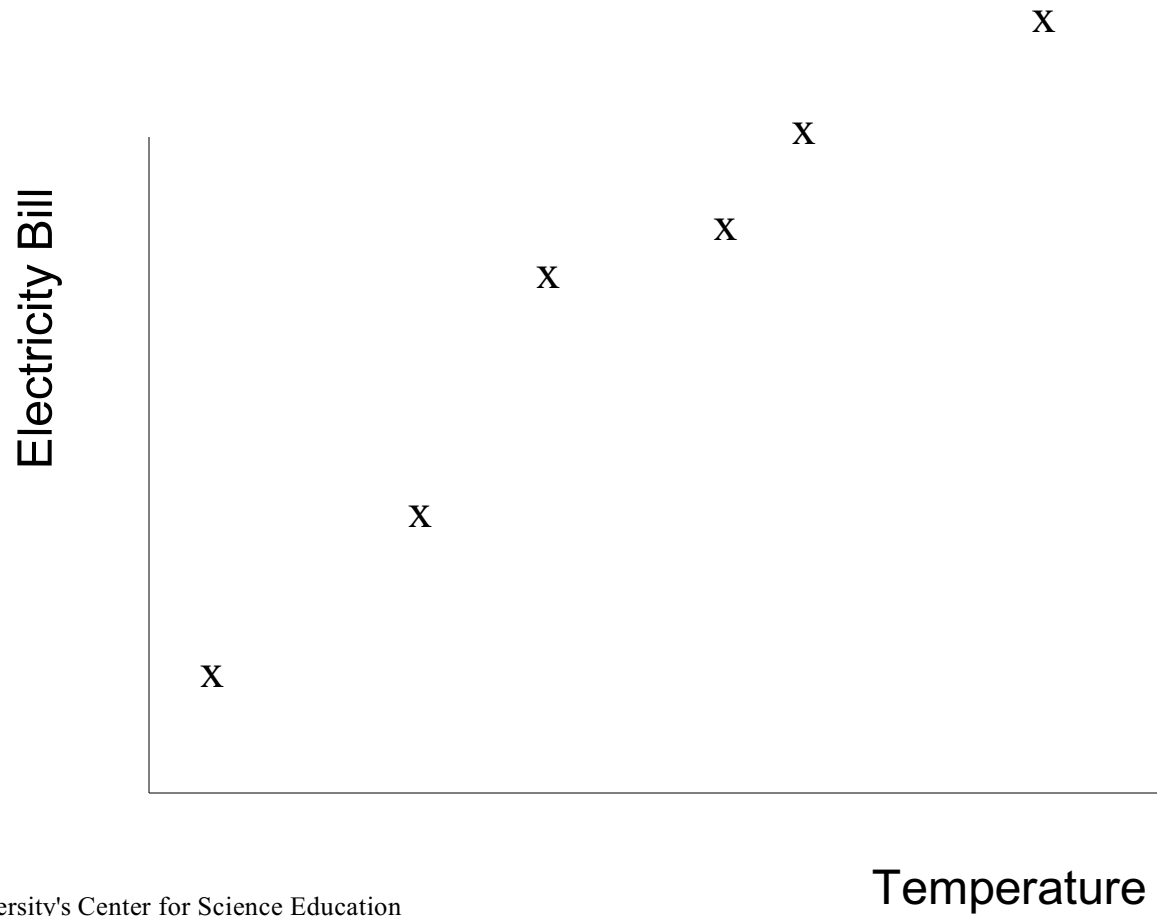
- Is it a methodology, or an epistemological theory of justification?
- I'll call reflective equilibrium, when taken as an epistemology, RE_e .
- I'll call reflective equilibrium, when taken as an methodology, RE_m .



Justification

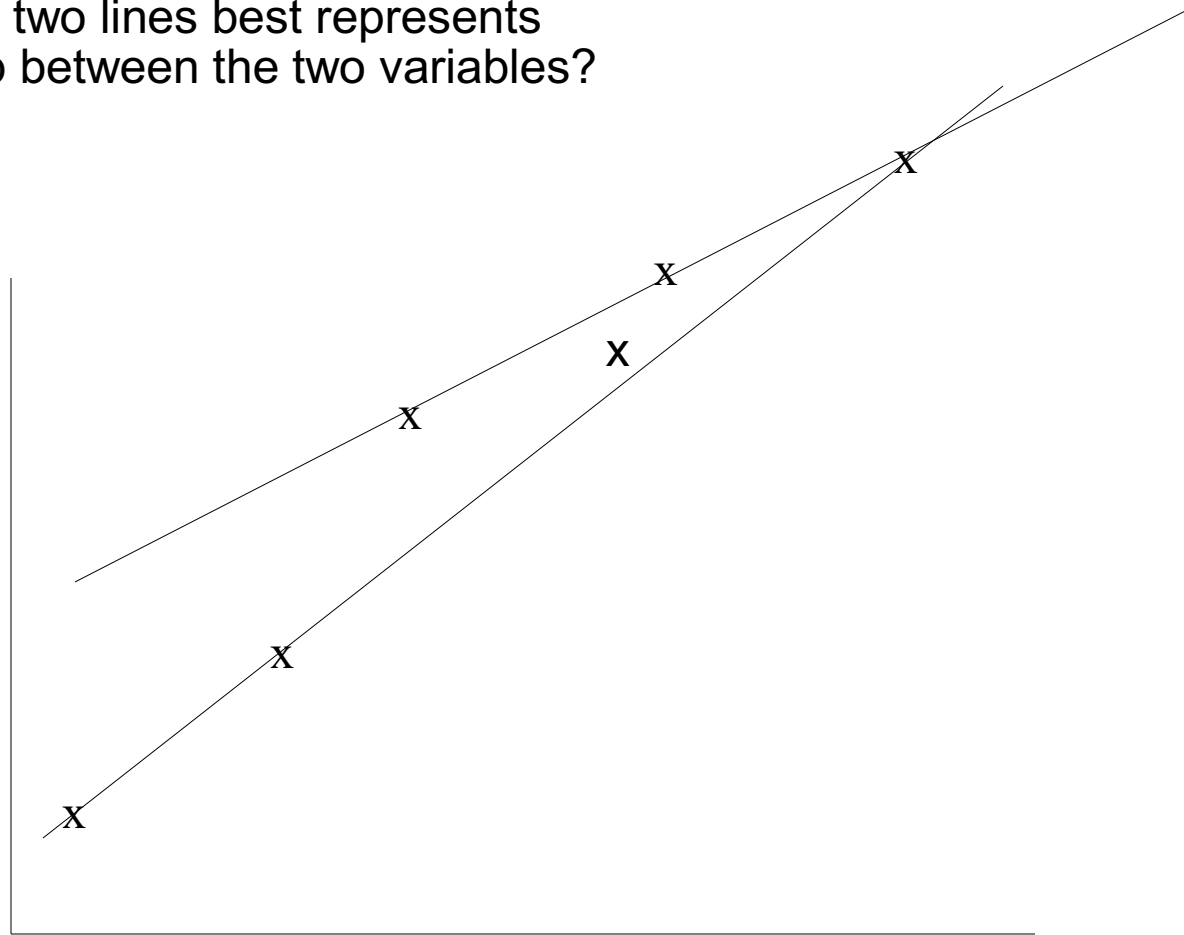
- As we have seen, there are two main types of justification: foundationalist and coherentist.
- The foundationalist seeks to justify all beliefs on the basis of some immediately given, privileged set of beliefs
 - Sense data (empiricism, generally, and positivism, specifically)
 - Intuitions (rationalism, generally, and Descartes in particular)
 - But: the myth of the given
- The coherentist seeks to justify all beliefs by appealing to their consistency.
 - But: the coherentist seems unable to provide assurance that her belief set is true, grounded in the world.
- RE_e is a type of coherentism.
 - Our beliefs are justified when we bring our various beliefs into a coherent whole.
 - We are looking for a line of best fit through all the data:
 - intuitions, experiences, theories, background beliefs

Scatter Plot of an Electricity Bill as a function of temperature

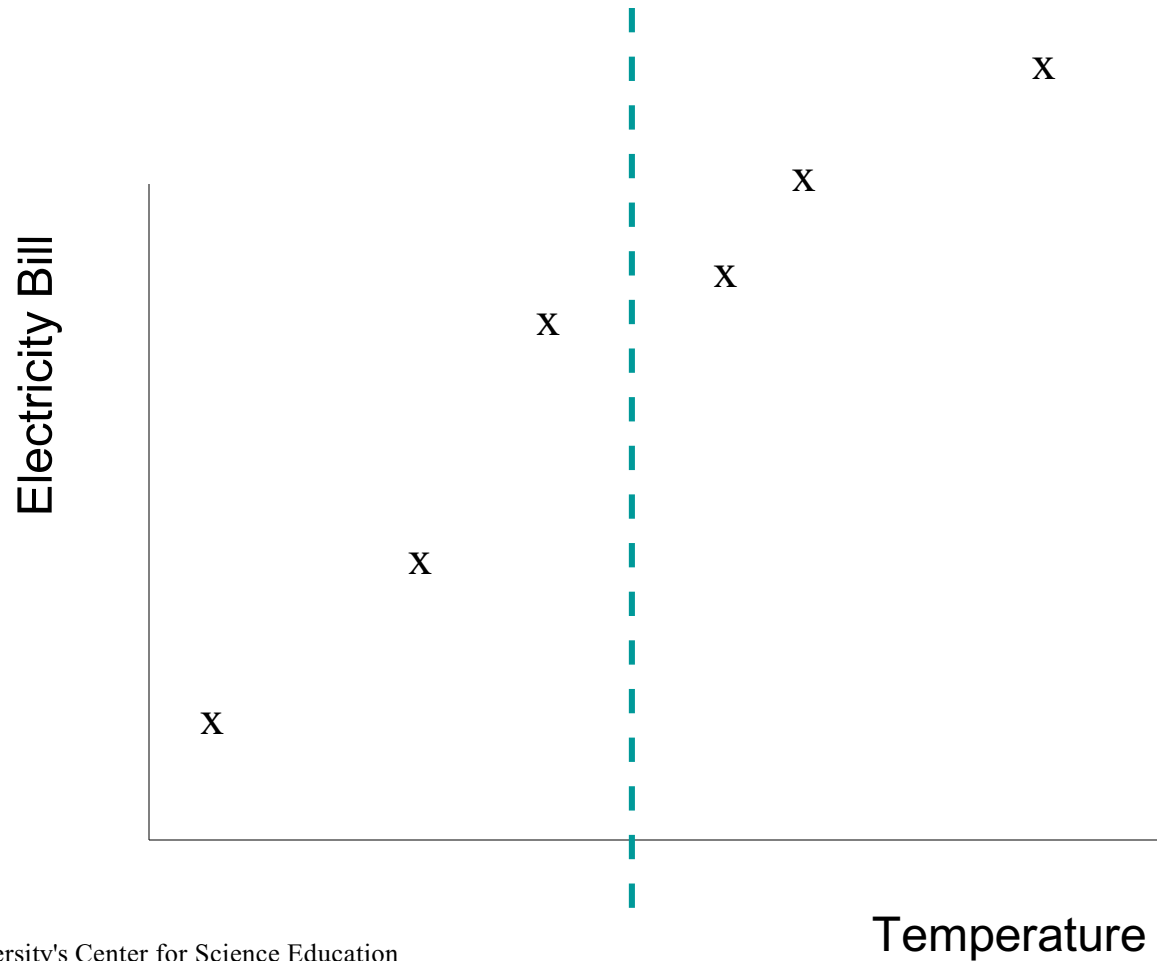


Scatter Plot

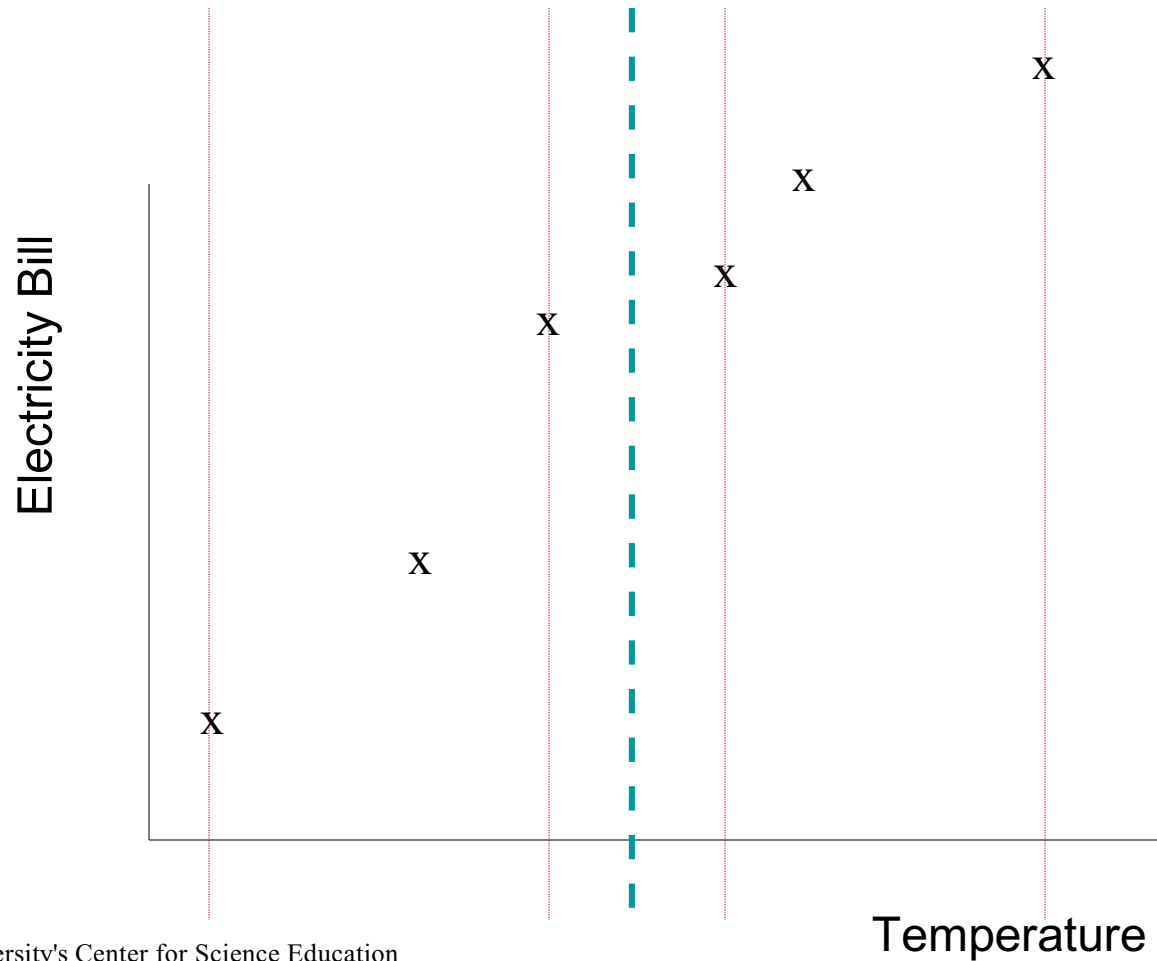
Which of these two lines best represents the relationship between the two variables?



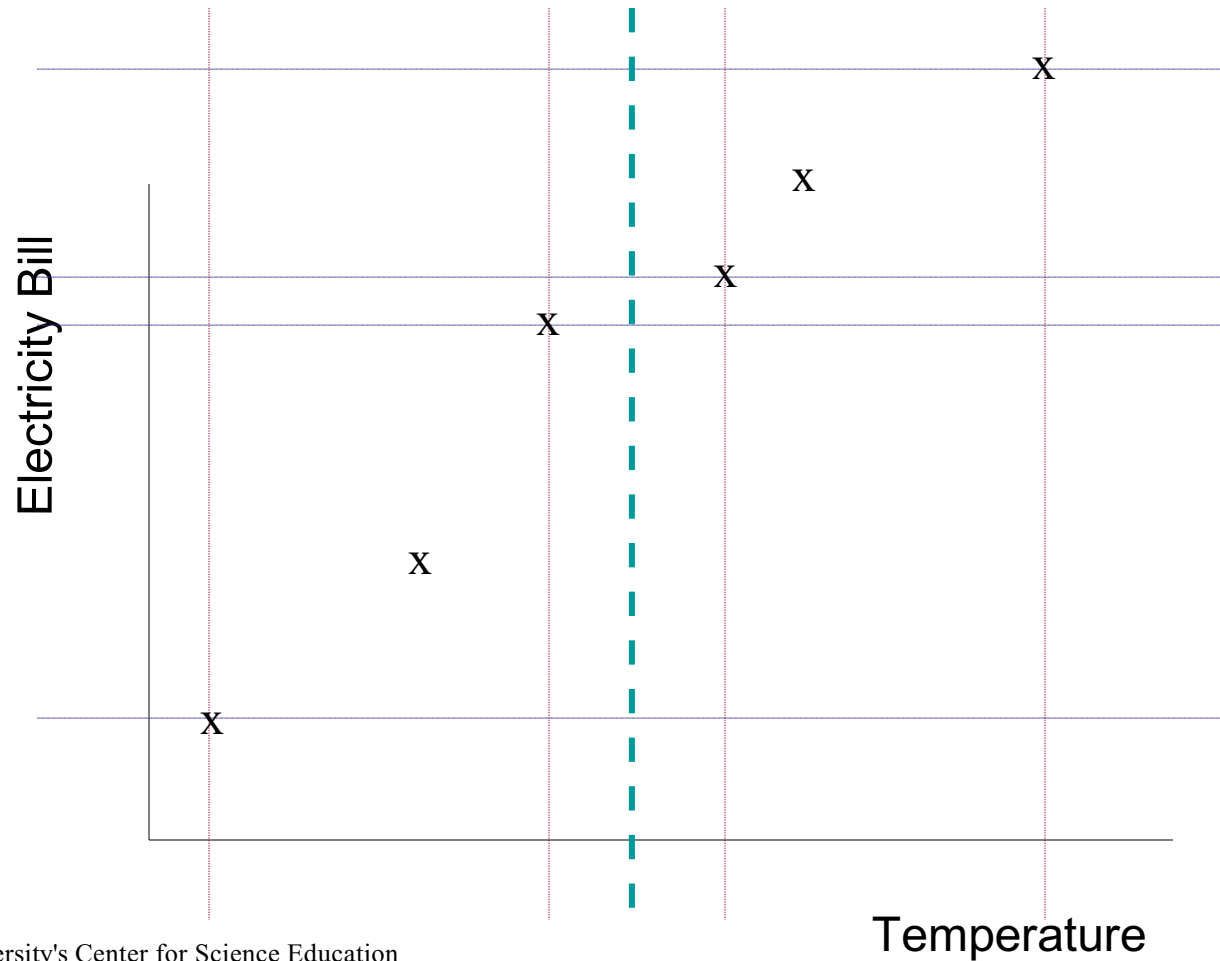
Approximate trend line of the electric bill as a function of temperature



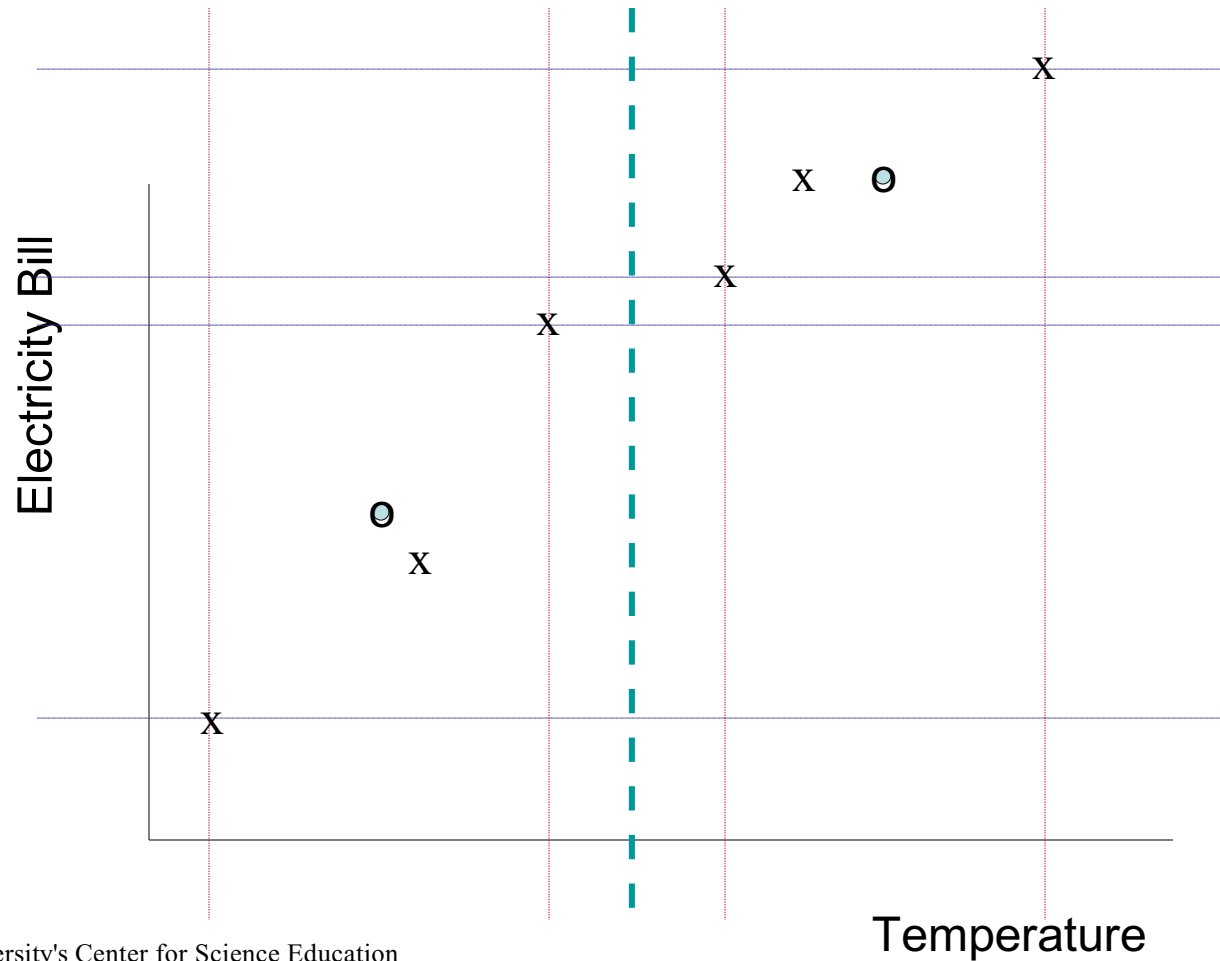
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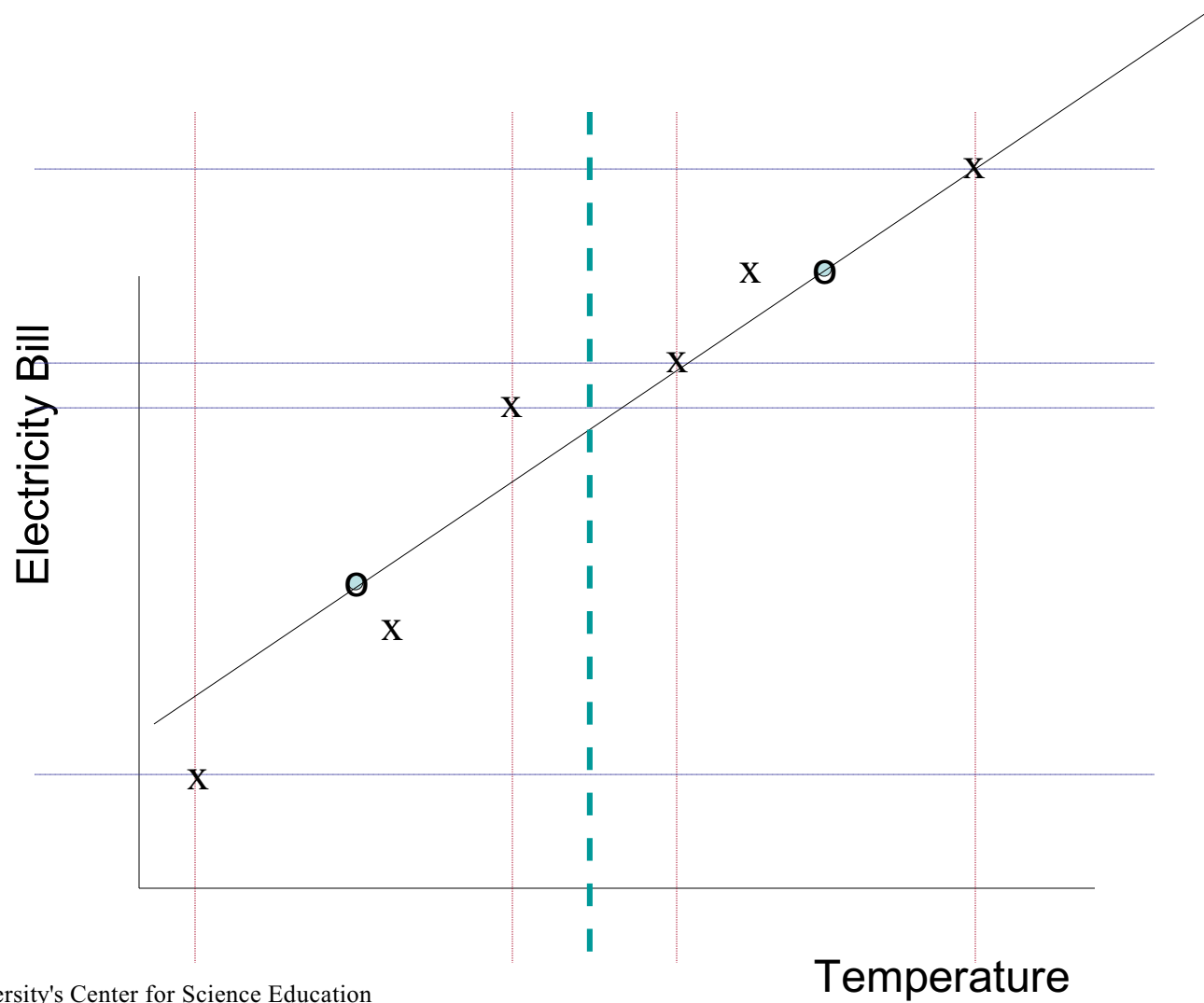
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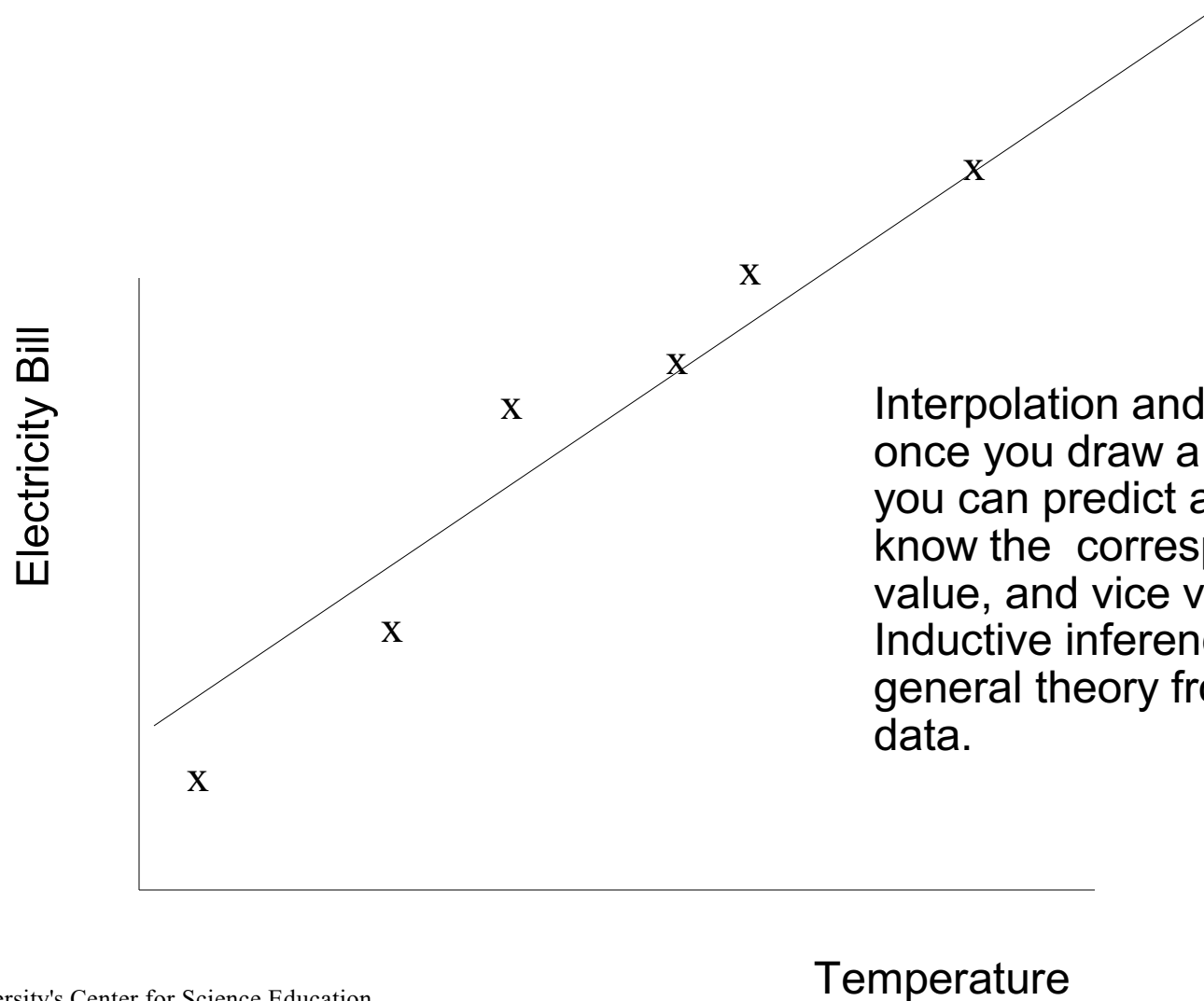
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Interpolation and Extrapolation: once you draw a best-fit line, you can predict a y value if you know the corresponding x value, and vice versa. Inductive inference leads to a general theory from specific data.

RE_e and Coherentism

- RE_e is liable to the same criticism that befalls all coherence theories of epistemology.
- “It is no news that since...the entire process is guided by nothing more than the inquirer’s own beliefs, judgments, and what seems to the inquirer to be correct upon reflection, given enough screwy initial beliefs and unusual judgments about how to resolve conflicts, an inquirer could end up accepting just about anything in reflective equilibrium” (297).
- It would be natural to take the work of Stich and Nisbett and Kahneman and Tversky and other critics of reflective equilibrium as attacking RE_e on just this basis.
- But, if all theories of epistemology have to be either coherentist or foundationalist, then we seem to be led inexorably to skepticism.

Recall this slide from our first class.

An Epistemological Paradox

1. Beliefs must be justified either foundationally or coherently.
 2. No beliefs can be justified foundationally.
 3. No beliefs can be justified coherently.
 4. Some of our beliefs are justified.
- Uh-oh.



Let's Reflect.

- We started with a general presupposition, call it a theory, that epistemology must be foundationalist or coherentist.
- We appealed to some intuitions and background beliefs concerning foundationalist theories, including analogies about givens, circularity, and possible belief sets.
- We found that taking all of these beliefs together led us to a contradiction, which we believe to be impossible.
 1. Beliefs must be justified either foundationally or coherently.
 2. No beliefs can be justified foundationally.
 3. No beliefs can be justified coherently.
 4. Some of our beliefs are justified.
- So, we have to cede some belief in order to restore consistency.
 - ▶ We can give up some of the criticisms of foundationalism, and deny claim 2.
Perhaps a fallibilist theory of the given will avoid Descartes's problems.
 - ▶ We can give up the worries about screwy belief sets, and deny claim 3.
Perhaps we can denigrate our possibility intuitions, and hold on to coherentism.
 - ▶ We can give up the more general theory, claim #1, that all epistemology must be either foundationalist or coherentist.
 - ▶ Or, we can give up claim #4, and become skeptics.

Restoring Consistency to Our Belief Set

- In deciding how to respond to the epistemological paradox, we are guided by scientific (or nearly so) principles
 - ▶ Conservatism
 - ▶ Modesty
 - ▶ Simplicity
 - ▶ Generality
 - ▶ Refutability
- These are guidelines for drawing the line of best fit.
 - ▶ interpolation
 - ▶ extrapolation



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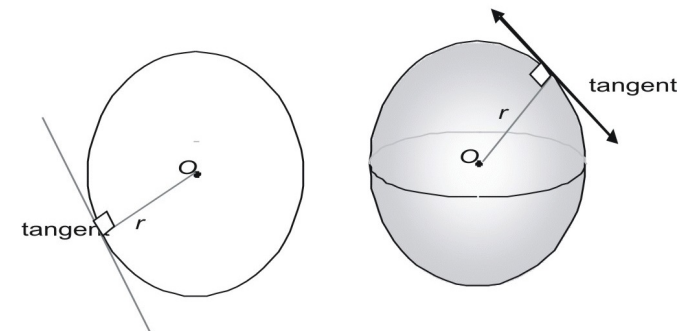


Now Look at What We Have Done!

- We are using RE_m to determine whether RE_e is an acceptable epistemic theory.
- RE_m is thus quite a different claim from RE_e .
- It is a tool we use to proceed in philosophy, and not a method of justifying any particular beliefs.

More Analogies

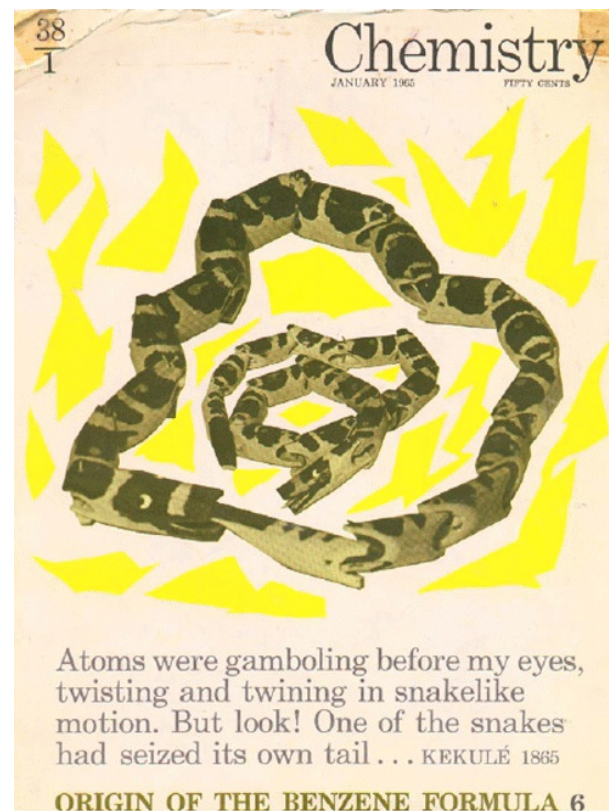
- The context of discovery and the context of justification
- Description and prescription
- Consider mathematical beliefs.
 - ▶ We are often first exposed to a mathematical belief by testimony.
 - ▶ Maybe some time later we see a proof of the theorem.
 - ▶ How we came to discover the claim is independent of how we came to justify the claim.
 - ▶ How we learned about something might explain why we believe that claim, but it will not explain how we know about the claim.
 - ▶ To justify a mathematical belief, we have to provide a proof.
- Confusing the context of discovery with the context of justification is an instance of the genetic fallacy.





The Genetic Fallacy

- Kekulé's dream
 - ▶ Kekulé wrote that he discovered the ring shape of the benzene molecule (1865) after dreaming of a snake seizing its own tail.
 - ▶ This dream came to him after years of studying the nature of carbon-carbon bonds.
 - ▶ Kekulé's understanding of the tetravalent nature of carbon bonding depended on the previous research of Archibald Scott Couper (1831-1892).
 - ▶ The German Chemist Josef Loschmidt (1821-1895) had posited a cyclic structure for benzene as early as 1862.
- How Kekulé discovered the ring shape is independent of its justification.
- RE_m guides discovery.
- RE_e , guides justification.



RE_m is Benign

- It is a counsel of prudence, a suggestion for how to work.
- It lacks any normative, justificatory role.
- Is this course an epistemology course or a methods course?
 - ▶ The right answer: it is an epistemology course!

DePaul's Defense of Reflective Equilibrium

- Depaul defends reflective equilibrium as an inevitable component of rationality.
Is he defending RE_e or RE_m ?
- “When one really focuses upon [(I) and (II)], it becomes...difficult to conceive of an alternative to reflective equilibrium, or more specifically, to conceive of a *rational* alternative to this method. In order to constitute a real alternative to reflective equilibrium... a method must either
 - (A) abandon reflection altogether, or
 - (B) direct the inquirer to reflect, but to do so incompletely, that is, to leave certain beliefs, principles, theories, or what have you out of account, or
 - (C) not allow the results of the inquirer's reflections to determine what the inquirer goes on to believe.
- I maintain that a method of philosophical inquiry having feature (A), (B), or (C) would be irrational” (301).

The Irrationality of Abandoning RE

- Option A (abandon reflection altogether) entails subordinating one's own beliefs to those of authorities.
 - ▶ Blind submission to external authority in order to give one's intuitions precisely no weight
 - ▶ Unless one's own beliefs are completely consistent with those of the authorities, one will be forced to accept (because emitted from authority) something that one does not accept.
 - ▶ That seems irrational.
- Option B (direct the inquirer to reflect, but to do so incompletely) entails some blind submission, which would lead to the irrationality mentioned in the argument against A.
 - ▶ It also includes cases in which reflection is acceptable.
 - ▶ In those latter cases, we don't have an alternative to reflective equilibrium.
- Option C (not allow the results of the inquirer's reflections to determine what the inquirer goes on to believe) violates the principles of doxastic involuntarism.
 - ▶ C entails reflecting, but not believing what one learns.
 - ▶ DePaul calls this the most obviously irrational option.

Abandoning Intuition

- DePaul's argument that it is irrational to abandon reflective equilibrium transfers to the intuitions invoked in the process.
- Gettier cases: Am I supposed to ignore my intuition that something's missing?
- Twin Earth: Am I supposed to ignore the intuition that XYZ is not water?
- Is there no distinction between contingent and necessary truths?
- How do we do mathematics and logic?

Disagreement about Philosophy

- The disagreement about the role of intuitions in philosophy may come down to a disagreement about the nature of philosophy itself.
- Is it an *a priori* discipline, studying applications of concepts?
- Is it an empirical discipline, studying the world?
- “Typically, the central questions of philosophy - and their answers -are phrased in quite general terms without mention of particular individuals, species, and so forth. These questions are necessary in the sense that they call for answers that hold necessarily. In being interested in such things as the nature of mind, intelligence, the virtues, and life, philosophers do not want to know what those things just happen to be, but rather what those things *must* be, what they *are*, in a strong sense. It is not enough that the virtue of piety happened to be what Euthyphro exhibited: a philosopher wants to know what piety must be” (Bealer).
- “Epistemologists ought to be concerned with the nature of knowledge, not the concept of knowledge; the proper subject matter of ethics is the right and the good, not the concepts of the right and the good; and so on” (Kornblith).

Limited Agreement

- “The typical philosophical counterexample requires a possibility intuition (that such and such condition is possible) as well as an ordinary concept-applicability intuition (that in such and such situation a relevant item would, or would not, count as an F). Without such possibility intuitions, philosophy would be fatally crippled” (Bealer).
- “The method of appeal to intuitions not only plays an important role in actual philosophical practice, but...the method has been used to achieve some substantial insights in a wide range of fields” (Kornblith).
- “The intuitions to which philosophers appeal... are not idiosyncratic; they are widely shared, and - to a first approximation - must be so, if they are to do any philosophical work” (Kornblith).

How to Proceed

- DePaul's interlocutor raises worries about what to do with people whose intuitions, or prior beliefs, are wrong.
- DePaul dismisses the question.
 - Fats Waller on rhythm: "Lady, if you got to ask, you ain't got it."
- The question is what to do in cases in which I believe or intuit in contradiction to empirical results.
 - Do I humbly subordinate my beliefs?
 - Do I stubbornly maintain rationality?
- These look like squarely methodological questions.

