

# Dialecticism about Philosophical Appeals to Intuition

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## 1 Introduction

Traditional analytic philosophy, which relies heavily on appeals to intuition, is notoriously under attack from a movement called *experimental philosophy*. Its practitioners, call them *experimentalists*, argue that their social psychological research on intuitive responses to thought experiments give us good reason to doubt the truth of philosophers' claims that certain judgments are intuitive. The upshot is supposed to be that a radical overhaul or even abandonment of the traditional project is in order.

This is too quick. I argue that the move from experimental results to overhaul/abandonment relies on a particular understanding of the evidential role of intuitions. I present an alternative, which I call *dialecticism*, on which appeals to intuition are appeals to the intuitions of individual interlocutors in an attempt to show them that the philosophical positions in question are subjectively ir/rational for them. This alternative is developed both as a possibility and as the best interpretation of some features of philosophical practice. Subjective rationality will seem too weak a goal to some, so I conclude by sketching a role for the dialecticist interpretation in a broader, more robust philosophical methodology.

## 2 Experiments and Intuitions

When setting out to defend armchair philosophy from experimental critiques, philosophers tend to focus on objecting to what Joshua Alexander and Jonathan M. Weinberg (A&W hereafter) call the *restrictionist view*. This is the view that "the results of experimental philosophy should figure into a radical restriction of the deployment of

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intuitions as evidence.”<sup>2</sup> But interestingly A&W also consider an alternative, which they call the *proper foundation view*. This is the view that, “it is the results of experimental philosophy that should be used to provide a proper evidentiary foundation for certain philosophical claims and projects.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, philosophers ought not to employ their own intuitions as evidence for and against philosophical theories, but ought to employ the results of empirical research into what people generally find to be intuitive.

More on restrictionism anon. For now consider the proper foundation view. Why would anyone think that philosophers ought to abandon their own intuitions for those of the folk? The primary answer seems to be that not a few philosophers, proper foundationalists among them, take philosophical appeals to intuition to just *be* appeals to the intuition of the folk.<sup>4</sup> Thus proper foundationalists Thomas Nadelhoffer and Eddy Nahmias state that experimentalists distrust, “philosophers’ (common) claims of the general form ‘X is intuitive,’ ‘Ordinarily, we believe X,’ ‘The ordinary use of “X” is Y,’ ‘It is natural for people to believe X,’ and the like.”<sup>5, 6</sup>

A&W make a similar linguistic argument in attempting to establish the philosophical relevance of experiments. But they give a further one as well. In one sense, at least if their arguments are not based on experimental work,<sup>7</sup> philosophers will almost certainly be employing their own

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<sup>2</sup> (Alexander & Weinberg, 2007, p. 61)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Some philosophers take such appeals to be appeals to the intuitions of philosophers as opposed to the folk generally, though this is not the case for most (if any) proper foundationalists. A little more will be said about this view below, but the important point for the moment is that appeals to intuition are taken to be appeals to the intuitions of groups.

<sup>5</sup> (Nadelhoffer & Nahmias, 2007, p. 125)

<sup>6</sup> Of the phrases listed, “X is intuitive,” is the only one which is not an explicit statement of appeal to the intuitions of the folk. But it is consistent with such an appeal, as are the common turns, “It is intuitive that X” and “Intuitively, X”.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible, especially on the interpretation of philosophical practice endorsed by experimentalists, that one might appeal to group intuitions while admitting that one does not share those intuitions. This happens rarely, if ever. A fact that itself might arouse some suspicions about that interpretation.

intuitions when they appeal to intuitional evidence in support of their theories. But A&W provide three different interpretations of why, or in what manner they do so: *intuition solipsism*, *intuition elitism*, and *intuition populism*. On the solipsistic approach, philosophers appeal to their own intuitions because they take those intuitions to be evidence. On elitism and populism philosophers appeal to their own intuitions because they take them to be representative of the intuitions of, respectively, professional philosophers and the folk in general.

A&W argue that the dialectical nature of philosophy renders personal intuitions as too paltry of evidence to provide significant theoretical support. If philosophers' appeals to their own intuitions play an evidential role in their argumentation then those appeals must have some authority. In the authors' terms, the evidentiary status of intuition reports requires a foundation. There seems only to be two such foundations available within a dialectic. Either the intuition is shared by the interlocutor, or the author may have some special status that renders his or her intuitions authoritative. A&W assume, rightly I think, that the latter is unappealing, and they claim that to the extent that philosophers do the former, they should be understood as participating in intuition elitism, not solipsism.<sup>8</sup> The upshot is that experimental philosophy is eminently relevant to analytic epistemology (and presumably the armchair project in general). For, if intuitions have their evidential status in virtue of being the intuitions of a group, then surely we ought to investigate what the intuitions of the group are.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Weinberg has said in conversation that this is not quite how he understood the argument that he and Alexander were making. Reexamining the paper, however, I believe this to be an accurate reconstruction, and also to be an important elucidation of an often elided motivation for experimental philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> The authors do not discuss what the appropriate relationship between group intuitions and appeals to intuitions might be. For instance, they do not say whether all members of a group must have the same intuition in order for that intuition to be legitimately appealed to. They appear to believe that any reasonable standard goes routinely unmet. We will not be concerned with either what the standard ought to be, nor with whether it is ever met.

Let us grant the accuracy of experimental results that seem to show widespread intuitional disagreement.<sup>10</sup> If philosophers really are appealing to the intuitions of groups (or must do so), then such results provide a tidy, direct falsification of some significant intuitional claims, and they cast thereby cast serious doubt on others not yet investigated. However, the following section presents an alternative.

### 3 Dialecticism

We will return to the linguistic argument later, but for now let us note that A&W's argument for the significance of experimental philosophy only goes through if intuition solipsism is the only reasonable way in which individual intuitions might provide evidence for philosophical theories. But that is not the case. Call *intuition dialecticism* (or simply *dialecticism*) the view on which philosophers (often/primarily<sup>11</sup>) appeal to their own intuitions because they expect that some significant set of their interlocutors will share those intuitions, each interlocutor's intuition providing evidence for (only) that interlocutor. At first blush, this may seem an odd account of philosophical appeals to intuition, but this section provides a second blush. We begin by reconsidering the nature of the evidential role of intuitions.

The primary reason that A&W dismiss intuition solipsism is that the intuitions of authors (individually) do not seem to provide any good reason for their audience to accept or reject a philosophical theory. That framing reveals an assumption: that intuitional evidence is *objective* evidence, in the sense of being *publicly available*. But then it couldn't be the case that the audience's evidence would be the authors' intuitions themselves—an intuition token is accessible only to the agent who tokens it. The audience's evidence would be the fact that the author intuits that

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<sup>10</sup> Though there is some question about this given several recent failures of replication. E.g., (Kim & Yuan, Unpublished Draft), (Nagel, San Juan, & Mar, 2013), and (Seyedsayamdost, Unpublished Draft).

<sup>11</sup> Philosophers are, of course, welcome to make appeals to the intuitions of whomever they wish, hence the qualification, I take it that more careful statements of intuition solipsism, elitism, and populism would include such a qualification as well.

p.<sup>12</sup> Clearly we should say something similar on elitism and populism as well. To this point I have made free use of the phrase “group intuition,” but there is no *thing* that is a group intuition to which agents have direct access in the way that they have access to individual intuitions. On these views, then, the evidence would seem to be the fact that members of the group share the intuition that p.

Presumably the primary reason for this approach is that *subjective* evidence, in the sense of *privately available*, is only accessible to the individual subject, and therefore seems to be unable to do the evidential work necessary for the public debate that is part and parcel of professional philosophy. But we can begin to put the lie to this inference by considering an analogy to another source of subjective evidence: perception. When you and I come to believe that there is a yellow bird outside from looking out a window it is because we both seem to see a yellow bird.<sup>13</sup> My perceptual seeming is subjective evidence for my belief, and your perceptual seeming is subjective evidence for your belief. We may discover that we share the same perceptual belief, but note that in that case the fact that we share a perceptual seeming adds little further evidence—it does not significantly raise our confidence that there is a yellow bird. Nor will it significantly decrease your confidence that there is a yellow bird if I report to you that I see a black bat. You will be more likely to think that I am either joking or suffering from a serious visual or neurological disorder than that there is not the yellow bird that you seem clearly to see. Even if we are at a big party and the vast majority of revelers report seeing a black bat, you are unlikely to form the belief that there is a black bat (so long as we are not well into the party and you well in your cups). Your perceptual seeming remains a significant source of evidence for you, and there is a significant sense in which it would be irrational for you to form bat-beliefs in light of that evidence.

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<sup>12</sup> Or testimony that the author believes that p, or the belief of each member of the audience the author intuits that p. Readers may insert their preferred account of evidence here without affecting the present argument.

<sup>13</sup> Again, readers may translate to their preferred account of perceptual evidence without doing damage to the argument.

This type of rationality—often called *subjective rationality*, or sometimes *structural*, *egocentric*, or *agent-relative* rationality<sup>14</sup>— which focuses on coherence of an agent’s beliefs is of supreme dialectical importance. Suppose that for some reason we got into a debate to which the flying thing outside was relevant. My arguments would lack dialectical force if they depended on black-bat-premises. If, however, I employed yellow-bird-premises in an argument that you recognized as valid, then you would be rationally required to accept the conclusion (or to give up your bird-belief).

The analogy here is straightforward. Like most philosophers, I have the intuition that Smith does not know in the original Gettier cases.<sup>15</sup> My intuition (token) provides subjective evidence for me that Smith does not know in those cases. Gettier’s argument that it is not sufficient to know p that one have a justified true belief that p thereby has dialectical force for me. Moreover, if you attempt to give an argument meant to convince me of some further proposition or position, you will stumble, dialectically speaking, if that argument states, entails, or implies the JTB account of knowledge. It would be subjectively irrational for me to accept the conclusion of such an argument while accepting the denial of the JTB account—which I do, in part because of the private evidence provided by my tokening the Gettier intuition.

Dialecticism has it that this is a fundamental (though not necessarily the only) role for intuitional evidence in philosophy. When I make an argument that appeals to intuition, I am trying to show you that you have private evidence that supports one of the premises of my argument (an analog to pointing out the bird to you). If that evidence is sufficient for you to believe its content and I have provided a valid argument, then subjective rationality commits you to endorsing the conclusion. In other words, I am saying, “Don’t you have the intuition that p? If you have the intuition that p, then you ought to endorse this premise, and if you endorse this premise then you ought to endorse the conclusion.” So when philosophers appeal to intuitions, they are appealing to personal

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<sup>14</sup> Sometimes distinctions are made between these, but they are not important to the current point.

<sup>15</sup> (Gettier, 1963)

intuitions, *contra* elitism and populism. But they are not appealing to their own intuitions, *contra* solipsism.

Intuition dialecticism takes seriously the fundamentally dialectical nature of professional philosophy. Philosophers write papers and give talks, all of which are centered on arguments, and these are not autobiographical accounts demonstrating that some position is subjectively rational for the author. When we provide arguments we do so in an attempt to convince our interlocutors. To be successful then, philosophers must employ premises that their interlocutors believe to be true. There are two types of evidence available to these interlocutors: objective evidence and the interlocutor's own subjective evidence. The dialecticist position is that philosophical appeals to intuition are (often and appropriately) attempts to provide interlocutors with the latter.

Authors do, of course, usually share the intuitions that they attempt to elicit from their audience, and under normal circumstances that they have a particular intuition is what leads them to expect others to have it.<sup>16</sup> This allows us to make sense of the locutions cited in §2 in support of the relevance of experimental philosophy. These are used in the standard cases in which the author expects the majority of the audience (or folk in general) to share the intuition in question, and thus to have the subjective evidence necessary to support the argument in question.

There are non-standard cases as well, however, and these provide particularly strong support for dialecticism as capturing an important feature of philosophical practice. Occasionally authors expect some or many of their interlocutors (especially those who hold contrary positions) to have a different intuitions. Authors then appeal to that (unshared) intuition in an attempt to convince interlocutors that their opposing position on one issue still makes the conclusion at hand subjectively rational for them. For instance, Judith Jarvis Thomson, in her, "Turning the Trolley," considers a case in which one volunteers to be killed so that one's organs may save the lives of others. She reports her intuition that such an act would not be morally praiseworthy, then says, "Perhaps you disagree,

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<sup>16</sup> This certainly seems to have been the case when Getter thought it so clear that Smith does not know.

I therefore do not rely on that idea.”<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon itself at odds with all of A&W’s positions, and it helps to illustrate the distinction between dialecticism and elitism and populism. On these, the intuitional evidence is the fact that philosophers or the folk generally share the intuition in question. But were either the case, then appeals to intuition would not vary when authors expect some, but not other, interlocutors to share the intuition, as that would not change the fact that the majority of philosophers or folk do so.

To close this section, let us consider one further, quite famous example on which a philosopher’s approach is consonant with dialecticism and at odds with A&W’s positions: John Rawls’ discussion of reflective equilibrium in the methodological section of his *A Theory of Justice*. Here Rawls considers the importance of weighing intuitive judgments against general theoretical commitments. Whose intuitions? One could hardly ask for a better endorsement of the dialectical approach presented here than, “So, for the purposes of this book, the views of the reader and the author are the only ones that count.”<sup>18, 19</sup>

#### 4 Upshot and Broader Methodology

The phenomena discussed and examples in the last section show that dialecticism often makes better sense of the data than solipsism, elitism, or populism. In addition, the majority of philosophical discourse is consistent with a dialecticist reading.<sup>20</sup> It looks, therefore, as though dialecticism

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<sup>17</sup> (Thomson, 2008, p. 367)

<sup>18</sup> (Rawls, 1971, p. 50)

<sup>19</sup> “[T]he reader and the author” should not be taken to be in opposition to the dialectical position that it is the intuitions of the reader that are appealed to as evidence. *A Theory of Justice* is a normal case – one in which the author shares the intuitions that he wishes to elicit from his reader, and thus both are mentioned.

<sup>20</sup> Though there is not space here to argue this point, I believe also that many of the appeals to intuition that are explicitly in elitist or populist veins may be reinterpreted along dialecticist lines without doing too much violence to the original arguments. And this is a good thing for authors who have made such appeals if the direst predictions of experimentalists, vis-à-vis the accuracy of philosophers’ claims of intuitiveness, turn out to be correct. (But see 9n. above.)

might well play an important role in our understanding of philosophical methodology. But what is the upshot?

The immediate relevance of dialecticism to the intuition/experiment debate is that it undermines an important motivation for experimental philosophy, and one strand of critique therefrom. If it's not the case that philosophers are best read as appealing to the intuitions of groups, then proper foundationalists are not just arguing that philosophers put their investigative money where their assertive mouth is. They are proposing a radical overhaul of the analytic project.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, restrictionists can no longer argue that experimental results directly falsify philosophical claims of intuitiveness.

But of course that direct objection is not the only one leveled by experimentalists. More sophisticated critiques (such as Weinberg's "hopelessness argument"<sup>22</sup>) have it that the results of philosophical experiments give us reason to think that intuitions are unreliable in such a way as to be of (almost) no epistemic use to philosophers. If that is the case, then dialecticism and avoidance of the direct objection would be of minor importance at best. The remainder of this section (only!) begins a response to such criticisms by sketching the place of a dialecticist interpretation of philosophical appeals to intuition in a broader methodology.

An important upshot of dialecticism is that it widens our epistemological focus. Restrictionist critiques and armchair defenses are often cast in terms of the reliability of intuitions.<sup>23</sup> But on dialecticism, a large part of the epistemic value of intuitions is their role in making certain positions subjectively ir/rational for individual agents in the sense of being in/coherent with their further beliefs, and this role is independent of the reliability of intuitions.<sup>24</sup> Intuitions become a tool for the development of

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<sup>21</sup> And presumably one which would require reason to believe that the "group intuitions" of the folk are reliable.

<sup>22</sup> (Weinberg, 2007)

<sup>23</sup> For instance, (Goldman & Pust, 1998), (Boyd & Nagel, 2014), and (Alexander & Weinberg, The "Unreliability" of Epistemic Intuitions, 2014)

<sup>24</sup> One important consequence here is that what intuitions *are* is not a significant concern on the dialecticist picture. So it does not matter if [who?] turns out to be right that there is no particular cognitive faculty or function to which *intuition* refers. Nor does it matter whether or not the judgments normally called

coherent theoretical systems rather than independent tests of the truths of those systems.<sup>25</sup>

A focus on coherence will sound to some a significant retreat with regards to the value of philosophy. It seems to license development of isolated theoretical structures of little interest to anyone else. But this focus on coherence is commensurate with the way in which many philosophers have understood method and progress in their discipline. Jessica Wilson provides one recent example. In her (2013) Wilson emphasizes two “dimensions” of theoretical development--vertical and horizontal. Vertical development is the working out of a particular theoretical paradigm, while horizontal development is the production of new paradigms. One dialectical role of intuitions is that they help to determine where a particular researcher falls along the horizontal axis. If one has strong new evil demon intuitions, then one is unlikely to work within the externalist paradigm.<sup>26</sup>

We can now restate the worry about dependence on coherence as follows. All are pretty much agreed that at most one paradigm may be correct, so the development of novel, coherent paradigms will not be of epistemic value unless there is some way to choose between them. One prominent view here is that of David Lewis. Lewis’ methodology depended heavily on a sort of cost/benefit analysis for theories.<sup>27</sup> On this view, the primary reason to adopt one (fully developed) philosophical paradigm over another is because the theoretical benefits of that paradigm render it a better explanation than its competitors. But a true comparison of the costs and benefits of philosophical theories or paradigms<sup>28</sup> requires that these be fleshed out – i.e. that there be a significant degree of “vertical”

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“intuitions” are pre or post-theoretic. Anything that plays the appropriate role will do.

<sup>25</sup> Independent testing is perhaps the primary role of objective evidence in science. It might well be the case that the experiment/intuition debate has been stymied by an implicit restriction of the evidence/theory relationship to that sort.

<sup>26</sup> But see (Moon, 2012) for an argument that the new evil demon scenario causes problems for most internalist theories of justification as well.

<sup>27</sup> This is most clearly demonstrated in the first chapter of his *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Lewis, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> I do not mean to equate theories and paradigms, but both are relevant, though their relationship is beyond the scope of this paper.

development for each. It is important then that philosophers attempt to flesh out the implications of particular theories or paradigms so that we may have the cost/benefit knowledge necessary for comparisons. The process of developing an individual paradigm will concern argumentation that itself will rely on the intuitions of those working in the paradigm as part of developing a coherent view of the area under investigation.<sup>29</sup>

I don't wish to commit myself to the exact methodology described above. However, I think that it does show that a sophisticated and plausible philosophical methodology can incorporate the dialecticist interpretation of philosophical appeals to intuition. I take that benefit and the others described here to count strongly in favor of dialecticism.

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<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the relationship between intuition and theory needn't be one-way. Dialecticism is commensurate with, even helps make good sense of, Brian Weatherson's discussion of counterexamples in his (2003).

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