

Intuitions and their Role in Defining Knowledge

Introduction

- Recall that one of the (three) central projects in Epistemology is to define knowledge.
- We examined various such attempts, e.g. the no false lemmas, the no true defeater, reliabilist and causal accounts.
- The evaluation of these accounts was almost entirely based on our intuitions about the concept of knowledge.
- Intuition, after all, seems a good starting point in trying to define a concept in philosophy.
- Question: Are intuitions a good guide to the concept of knowledge? Are they a good guide to knowledge itself?

Intuitions in Philosophy

- Intuitions have traditionally played a central role in philosophy. They have been particularly vital in conceptual analysis.
- Representative Quotes:
 - Bertrand Russell: ‘Philosophy should show us the hierarchy of our instinctive beliefs, beginning with those we hold most strongly, and presenting each as much isolated and as free from irrelevant additions as possible’ (1912: 25).
 - David Lewis: ‘A metaphysician’s analysis of mind is an attempt at systematizing our opinions about mind. It succeeds to the extent that (1) it is systematic, and (2) it respects those of our pre-philosophical opinions to which we are firmly attached... So it is throughout metaphysics’ (1973: 88).

Intuitions in Philosophy (2)

- Quotes:
 - Laurence Bonjour: ‘...our commonsense intuitions about cases of knowledge... are... our main and indispensable basis for deciding what the concept of knowledge really amounts to’ (2002: 48).
 - George Bealer (1993) calls this reliance on intuitions ‘the standard justificatory procedure [in philosophy]’
- What do we mean by ‘intuitions’?
 - Kant’s influential view takes them to be *a-priori* judgments.
 - No consensus. Intuitions are thought of as common sense beliefs (not necessarily a-priori), instinctive beliefs (not necessarily inborn), pre-theoretical opinions, tied to imagination, etc.

Conceptual Analysis

- To find out about X (e.g. explanation, beauty, good, knowledge) all we need to do is examine the concept of X.

Question: How do we best proceed to examine these concepts?

Standard Answer: Through our intuitions about our folk psychological concepts. We need to make explicit our implicit understanding of these concepts.

- Thus:
According to conceptual analysis, the study of epistemology should concern itself with our intuitions about the folk-psychological concepts of knowledge, belief, justification, etc.

Counterexamples and Intuitions

- The legitimacy of Gettier-counterexamples depends on the intuitions one holds.
- Fake-barn land example: Smith drives through fake-barn land, looks out the window just once and sees the only real-barn.

Question: Does Smith know that p (i.e. that it is a real barn)?

Reliabilist Answer: Smith knows that p because (1) Smith believes that p, (2) p is true, and (3) Smith employed a reliable process to acquire p.

Intuitive Answer:

- If YES, then the reliabilist account passes this test.
- If NO, then the reliabilist account fails this test, as its conditions are not sufficient for knowledge.

The Revolt

- Philosophers, in particular those of naturalist inclinations, have been rebelling against the primacy of intuitions and conceptual analysis.
- Granted, they say, intuitions have...
 - played a central role in philosophical investigation thus far.
 - sometimes been widely shared – justifiably so.
 - helped give insights in a variety of fields.
- But, for all their accomplishments, their power is limited.
- The role of intuitions should be radically restricted.

Prominent Advocates: S. Stich, R. Cummins and H. Kornblith.

The Revolt (2)

- Hilary Kornblith attacks both intuitions and conceptual analysis:
 - “ ...our intuitions, or our inclinations to say various things, should [not] carry a great deal of weight in philosophical matters” (2002: 2).
 - “[T]he subject matter of epistemology is knowledge itself, not our concept of knowledge” (2002: 1).
- Problems with intuitions:
 - (1) vague and unreliable
 - (2) they change; are (at least partly) a product of history.
 - (3) sometimes conflict with empirical evidence or even other intuitions.
- Problems with conceptual analysis:
 - (1) indirect, compare: (concept of knowledge vs. knowledge)
 - (2) too narrow (empirical study sometimes outruns imagination)
 - (3) too broad (imagined possibilities sometimes are not genuine)

The Naturalistic Alternative

- Knowledge is a natural phenomenon that needs to be empirically investigated. The study of knowledge, and philosophy more generally, gradually and to a large extent becomes a study of natural kinds.
- Having said that, Kornblith wants to accommodate intuitions within a naturalistic framework.

Pre-theoretical intuitions have some evidential value but once things get theoretically-grounded their epistemic weight wanes.

Inverse relation: The more theoretical understanding the less evidential weight assigned to intuitions.

Intuitions are most useful when they are guided by theoretical or empirical information, i.e. when they become naturalised. Even then, they are fallible.

The Naturalistic Alternative (2)

- In sum:

“[A]ppeal to intuition early on in philosophical investigation should give way to more straightforwardly empirical investigations of external phenomena” (2002: 15).

“The use of intuitive judgment does not disappear at any stage of theorising. Instead, old intuitions give way to well-integrated theoretical judgments, and, in addition, to new intuitions about matters not yet fully captured in explicit theory” (2002: 20).

Objections

- Bealer: Naturalism threatens the autonomy of philosophy because philosophy is a purely a-priori pursuit and naturalism rejects the a-priori.
Kornblith's reply: Philosophy is, and should be, less autonomous. This is true of other disciplines and does not threaten their legitimacy.
- Goldman: We should study the *concept* of knowledge, otherwise we are changing the subject matter.
Kornblith's reply: The subject matter hasn't really changed. It's knowledge, the natural kind. Only our conceptions of knowledge have changed.

Food for Thought

- Should we restrict the role of intuitions to mere heuristics?

Reading

- H. Kornblith (2002) Knowledge and its Place in Nature, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 1. (from www.oxfordscholarship.com)