

Herman Cappelen, *Philosophy Without
Intuitions*

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For several years now, the main debate in metaphilosophy has been over the use of intuitions in philosophical practice. On the one side, experimental philosophers (notably, Jonathan Weinberg and Joshua Alexander) and other empirical philosophers (notably Hilary Kornblith) have argued for the elimination or the severe restriction of such uses on the motive that philosopher's intuitions were not truth-tracking. On the other side, armchair philosophers (notably Georges Bealer, Alvin Goldman, Ernest Sosa and Timothy Williamson) have argued for the opposite claim. The assumption shared by the two camps is that philosophers use intuitions as evidence. This is this assumption that Herman Cappelen challenges in his last book, *Philosophy Without Intuitions*. He provides a detailed and clear discussion of it that makes for a very pleasant and stimulating book. However, despite the fact that he does more than occupying a position in the logical space that until now wasn't occupied by anyone, he fails to be convincing. I will begin by presenting Cappelen's arguments. Then I will raise an objection against one of them. Finally, I will argue that, even if he is right, it doesn't show that Experimental Philosophy is, in his own words, a "Big Mistake".

In the first chapter, the assumption shared both by restrictionists or eliminativists and their opponents is called the Centrality claim:

Centrality (of Intuitions in Contemporary Philosophy): Contemporary analytic philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence (or as a source of evidence) for philosophical theories. (3)

Centrality, the reader is told from the start, is a generic descriptive claim that singles out philosophy among other disciplines. One way to refute it would be to show that the claim is false for a significant part of

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the literature. This would require a significant amount of interpretative work. This is what Cappelen is up to in the rest of the book and, as a talented philosopher of language, that task suits him well. Moreover, he wants to show that Centrality is false on all of its possible construals. Whatever one means by “intuitions”, Centrality will turn out to be false, he argues. The discussion of the two main arguments that one can find in the literature in favor of Centrality structures the book. The first part is devoted to the examination of the Argument from “Intuition”-Talk and the second part of the book to the examination of the Argument from Philosophical Practice.

The argument from “Intuition”-Talk leads from the actual use of the word “intuitions” by analytic philosophers to the truth of Centrality. Briefly, the argument goes as follows: philosophers use the word “intuition” and by this word they mean that the state designated has an evidential value. Cappelen’s strategy is to argue that such use, even when it is not defective, cannot help sustaining Centrality, as the state designated by the word in these cases does not serve as evidence or source of evidence. He does this in two steps. First, he shows that in ordinary English, the meanings of “intuitive” and “intuitively” (the meaning of the name, “intuition” is given by bridging principles that relates it to the meaning of the adjective and the adverb) do not support Centrality because these words are highly context sensitive and moreover, are not typically modifiers of propositions. Second, he shows that they do not either in “philosopher’s English”. Here the argument is two folded. He begins by arguing that, contrary to the use of theoretical terms in other disciplines (e.g. “indirect utility function” and “The Pigou effect”) the use of the term “intuition” in philosopher’s practice is not constructive but defective on the ground that there is general disagreement on its definition, the cases that constitute its paradigmatic extension, its theoretical role and even its very use. He then moves on to argue that, even if the use of the term could be seen as constructive in restricted sub-communities, its unreflective use is defective. This defectiveness follows from the fact that the speakers distance themselves from English, have unclear intentions, don’t defer to any unified community of experts, are simultaneously the members of several subcommunities that use the term differently; and, the fact that, as we saw, there is no definition and paradigmatic members of the extension that are agreed upon. For Cappelen, the conclusion to draw from these observations is not that philosophers “Intuition”-Talk is meaningless. The proposals that the content of intuitions is based on conceptual competence, or that they are associated with a specific phe-

nomenology or else that they have a “default justificatory status” are controversial. So, to these glosses, he holds that we must charitably prefer either the elimination of the term or its interpretation as an hedge-term (a term whose function is to weaken the commitment of the speaker to the truth of the embedded sentence), or its gloss as an equivalent of “snap judgment” or “pre-theoretic judgment”. But, and it is the conclusion of the first part of the book, these glosses do not support Centrality, because none of these state have by definition an evidential value.

At this point, one might object that even if the special justificatory status of intuitions is not contained in the meaning of the term as it is used by philosophers (whatever this meaning might be), it remains to be shown that intuitions are not used as evidence. The second part of the book is devoted to the refutation of the argument that is implicit in this objection and which Cappelen calls the argument from Philosophical Practice. If one wants to investigate if intuitions are used as evidence in philosophical practice, one will need some criteria in order to detect such uses. Here is his proposal:

- F1 [Feature n° 1]: Seem True/special phenomenology. According to most intuition-theorists, an intuitive judgment has a characteristic phenomenology. [...]
- F2: Rock. [...] Intuitive judgments justify, but they need no justification.
- F3: Based solely on conceptual competence. (112-113)

Rock is not that helpful in this form, but it can be decomposed in two further criteria: first, the justification of an intuition does not rest on experience and/or inference and second, the intuition shows “evidence recalcitrance”. As made clear by the author, the claim is that these criteria are sufficient for intuitions. Hence, an absence of these features “is a strong evidence that there is no reliance on the intuitive in the argument.” (114).

With these criteria in hand, Cappelen goes on to examine nine classical thought experiments (Perry’s trail of sugar, Burge’s arthritis, Thomson’s violinist, Foot and Thomson’s trolleys, Stewart’s lottery, Lehrer’s Truetemp, Goldman’s fake barns, Williams’ body-swap and Chalmers’ zombies) and one from his and Hawthorne’s book on semantic relativism (Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009). His very careful examination of these cases fills a void in the literature. As he suggests it, defenders of Centrality should have done this work before, especially those who, like experimental philosophers, draw on empirical research. This part could have been a bit dull, but the author did his best to avoid repetitions and to keep the discussion lively and succeeded in doing so. He addresses the

original texts, putting them in perspective in the broader theory of their authors and in the larger debate. For each paper, not just one of the Thought-Experiments put forward by its author, but several of them, are examined, as the method of cases rests in the contrast made between different cases. I am not going to discuss in detail his analyses. Cappelen's conclusion is that there is no trace of intuitions in these thought experiments. Roughly summarized, we don't have intuitions, what we have are empirical observations that are considered as common-ground. Here are some quotations to illustrate this summary:

- on Burge's arthritis: "Burge first makes an initial set of Observations about Usage (...) that is an *empirical fact about speech behavior*." (143)
- on Thomson's violinist: "These are empirical claims about typical human reactions." (153)
- on Foot and Thomson's trolleys: "Note that so far what we have are two questions and consensus among Thomson's interlocutors about their answers." (159)
- on Cappelen and Hawthorne's: "These claims are empirical conjectures [...] There are obviously subject to further investigation." (177-178)
- on Williams' body-swap "the claim is a prediction about an emotional response under extremely strange circumstances." (181)

The authors of some of these texts do use the "Intuition"-Talk. Drawing from what he said previously in the book, Cappelen argues that this talk is not to be taken at face value. Moreover, even if the metaphilosophical views of some of these authors, for example Goldman, do contain Centrality or a claim close to it, he rightly insists that their metaphilosophical views have to be clearly separated from their first-order views, the flaws of the former being innocuous to the latter:

Suppose you don't agree with Goldman's views about metaphilosophy [...] Even so, there are important lessons to be learned from what he has to say about knowledge. (183-184)

It is time to assess Cappelen's views. One could try to come up with a new argument in support of Centrality, but it isn't necessary. Leaving Cappelen's discussion of the Argument from Intuition talk aside, I will show that this objection to the Argument from Philosophical Practice is mistaken. I will argue that when we take into account not only the texts that Cappelen examines, that is, the seminal texts, but also the texts that followed them, the Argument from Philosophical Practice is true, and, as

a consequence, Centrality is. Then I will show that, even if Centrality were false, it wouldn't follow, as he claims, that Experimental Philosophy is a Big Mistake.

At this point, I would like to follow Cappelen in being charitable to the authors whose papers he examined. Are we to say that they wrote papers in which they made empirical claims, without thinking that something entitled them to think that they were justified in generalizing from their own observations? It seems to me to be an uncharitable way to interpret them. If we restrain ourselves from saying this, we might say that they thought that they were justified to do it. This justification arguably didn't come from experience (perception, memory...) nor from inference, that is, these papers satisfy the Rock criterion by satisfying the first sub-criterion. One could object that the papers examined by Cappelen were seminal papers and that it is not that uncharitable to interpret them as making empirical claims that they weren't properly justified to make. These were preliminary claims that were to be subject to further investigation and they didn't say the contrary. So the Rock criterion is not satisfied by these texts. Fair enough, but isn't the criterion more than satisfied by all the authors that used these very same experiments in their work without trying to test the empirical claims initially made by their inventors? On the one hand, Cappelen's focus on seminal papers is courageous because they are thought to be the quintessence of analytical philosophy. On the other hand, it distorts his vision. At one point, Cappelen examines the second sub-criterion of Rock, Evidence Recalcitrance, and dismisses it. It is very instructive to consider his reasons for doing so. His first reason is that in practice, it is almost impossible to evaluate the Evidence Recalcitrance of a claim. Because most of the time philosophers don't write on the same topic over and over again. I would say that it suffices to look at the replies that the results produced by experimental philosophers generated to evaluate the Evidence Recalcitrance of some claims. The defense of intuitions by some philosophers is not to be seen as a misdescription of their own practice but as an accurate description of such a practice. His second reason is that the empirical evidence that could be seen as a sign of Evidence Recalcitrance could be seen as a sign of stubbornness or dishonesty. Here, I would say that among all those that are opposed to Experimental Philosophy, some of them do think that they are justified in holding to their claims because they sincerely believe that their intuitions are reliable. Rock is a criterion that helps us diagnose the use of intuitions by their special justificatory status therefore, from its satisfaction it follows that philosophers do use intuitions as evidence. Moreover

the claim holds as a generic claim. As the last part of Centrality, that this use singles out philosophy among other disciplines I cannot see any defender of intuitions who would say this and would not be ready to retract himself. Cappelen claims the contrary but he seems to me to be as uncharitable in his interpretation as one can be.

Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that Cappelen is right in thinking that Centrality is false. The result of the author's inquiry is that first order philosophy remains untouched by the criticisms leveled against the use of intuitions as evidence because there is no such use. In the last chapter of the book, Experimental Philosophy is presented as a big mistake. Experimental Philosophy we are told, rests on a conditional insight:

The Conditional Insight of Experimental Philosophy: If Centrality is true, we should find out whether the intuitions the philosophers appeal to are representative and reliable. (220)

For Cappelen, the problem comes from the fact that the antecedent is not true and, therefore, the consequent doesn't follow. He considers the objection that experimental philosophers could make their claim without Centrality but, very surprisingly, the only alternatives that he can come up with are that they challenge "philosopher's practice of making judgments about far fetched cases" or about "very difficult cases." (226-227). Now, I would like to ask the following question: why couldn't Cappelen try to do for experimental philosophers what he did for other defenders of Centrality, namely, disentangle their first-order claims from their second-order claims? The point he made in studying cases of thought-experiments is that in such experiments philosophers rely on empirical claims considered as common grounds. And he clearly says, commenting on his own work: "They [These claims] are obviously subject to further investigation." But one might wonder: isn't it exactly what experimental philosophers are doing? One cannot help but be puzzled, to say the least, in front of Cappelen's incapacity to see such a fact. After having said that philosophers rely on "empirical facts", "empirical conjectures", "prediction", how can he say that Experimental Philosophy is a "Big Mistake"? At this point, even a charitable reader cannot restrain himself from thinking that the author is deeply prejudiced against Experimental Philosophy and that his prejudices bias his reasoning when it comes to Experimental Philosophy. So my claim is that from the falsity of Centrality, it doesn't follow that Experimental Philosophy is a Big Mistake.

To conclude, analytic philosophers have used and still use intuitions as evidence. Cappelen's book is interesting and challenging but it contains two flaws: first, when we take into account not only the seminal texts, but also all the texts that followed them, Centrality is true. Second, even if Centrality were false, it wouldn't follow that Experimental Philosophy is a Big Mistake. Hence, some analytical philosophers have good reasons to worry about their methods.

Reference

Cappelen, Herman, John Hawthorne, 2009, *Relativism and Monadic Truth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

