

Review of *Philosophy Without Intuitions*

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October 9, 2012

Philosophy Without Intuitions

By Herman Cappelen

Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 242. ISBN 978-0-19-964486-5. Hbk. £25.00 (US \$45.00).

Many words have been written in recent decades about whether contemporary analytic philosophy's ubiquitous reliance on intuition is or is not problematic. Fewer have been directed at the evaluation of the underwriting assumption: that philosophers *do* rely on intuitions. Herman Cappelen thinks this a significant omission; this book makes the case. *Philosophy Without Intuitions* is an extended, tenacious polemic against 'Centrality', characterized as the thesis that

Contemporary analytic philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence (or as a source of evidence) for philosophical theories.

This is an engaging and exciting book; it is for professional philosophers and advanced students – not because those less experienced in philosophy will have difficulty with jargon or baroque argumentative style, but because this is a book about philosophy, assuming familiarity with the contemporary canon. The style is conversational and undemanding; graduate students and advanced undergraduates should be able to process it relatively easily, even unsupervised. Its 242 pages read quickly; assigning half of this book for a weekly Ph.D. seminar would not be unreasonable.

According to Cappelen, an extraordinary preponderance of contemporary philosophers assume without basis that Centrality is true. The central project of the book is to argue that Centrality is false. More precisely, with recognition of the vagueness and ambiguity that characterize the statement of Centrality, Cappelen's rather strong thesis is that

on no sensible construal of 'intuition', 'rely on', 'philosophy', 'evidence', and 'philosopher' is it true that philosophers in general rely on intuitions as evidence when they do philosophy. (3)

This is a bold and provocative thesis; the book is bold and provocative to match. Cappelen is well aware that he is denying a widespread orthodoxy. This is an orthodoxy, however, for which Cappelen sees no grounds. The book is devoted to consideration of two arguments that he suspects to motivate Centrality. The first, the ‘argument from “intuition” talk’, purports to establish Centrality on the basis of the widespread philosophical use of terms like ‘intuition’. The second, the ‘argument from philosophical practice’, alleges that an examination of how philosophers go about their research will reveal reliance on intuition.

Part I of the book, comprising chapters 2–5, is devoted to the argument from ‘intuition’ talk. According to this argument, all you need to do to establish Centrality is to listen to the way philosophers write about what they’re doing: they’re constantly using language like “intuitively, so-and-so” and “I have the intuition that such-and-such” or “our intuition is that thus-and-so”. This language, according to the argument in question, is an explicit signal that a philosopher is relying on intuitions as evidence. In response, Cappelen says that ‘intuition’ and its cognates are used in a variety of senses, many of which lend no support to Centrality. For example, Cappelen argues that many instances of “intuitively, so-and-so” are best interpreted as *hedged assertions* that so-and-so; the communicative function of the “intuitively” is exhausted by its role in weakening the speaker’s commitment to so-and-so; it does *not*, according to Cappelen, signal that the judgment that so-and-so derives from any particular evidential source. The remainder of Part I is devoted to extending strategies of this sort of other kinds of roles that ‘intuition’-language can play – none, according to Cappelen, Centrality-supporting. Given the diversity of strategies available, Cappelen’s case – that the data do not establish Centrality – is reasonably compelling.

Part II, comprising chapters 6–11, considers the argument from philosophical practice. According to this argument, examination of the methods philosophers actually invoke, irrespective of whether intuition language is used to describe them, will reveal widespread philosophical reliance on intuition. Cappelen’s strategy here is indirect; he sets out (pp. 111–12) three criteria which he says are widely associated with intuition. These are meant to correspond to diagnostic tests for the presence or intuitions playing evidential roles. For example, one of Cappelen’s criteria concerns the distinctive phenomenology that some theorists have attributed to intuition; Cappelen’s suggestion is that we can test for the presence of reliance on intuition by checking to see whether paradigmatic philosophical arguments invoke and rely upon any such phenomenology. The other criteria, for which he proposes similar tests, involve intuitions’ allegedly enjoying a ‘rock’ status according to which they themselves require no justification, and the suggestion that intuitions derive solely from conceptual competence. While admitting that, absent a particular theory of intuition, a defender of Centrality isn’t strictly committed to the success of particular tests, Cappelen asserts that proponents of Centrality “agree that if all of [the criteria] are absent, that is evidence of an absence of the intuitive.” (114)

In chapter 8, the longest chapter in the book, Cappelen applies his criteria to a wide

variety of case studies, considering whether examination of the texts in which various putative appeals to intuition appear actually reveal any such reliance on the intuitive. In each case, Cappelen's answer is negative. The discussion in this part of the book can be a bit slow, but it is very helpful. Often, for instance, Cappelen finds that the alleged intuition is carefully argued for, rather than merely stated as obvious. (One example here is his discussion of Keith Lehrer's "Mr. Truetemp" case on pp. 168–6.) These features of the original dialect are often forgotten in contemporary discussion of these cases, and Cappelen's discussion does provide a timely and useful reminder. (That these verdicts are conclusions of philosophical arguments is also important with respect to the significance of experimental philosophy, which Cappelen discusses in chapter 11.) Even if one isn't convinced by the applicability of Cappelen's criteria, or by the general negative argument of the book, Cappelen's sensitive discussion of case studies define an important challenge for the defender of Centrality: for each case, just what exactly is the appeal to intuition? Cappelen has articulated that challenge in the clearest form yet to appear in the metaphilosophical literature.

Recall that Cappelen's official thesis is that Centrality is not true – “on no sensible construal . . . is it true that philosophers in general rely on intuitions as evidence when they do philosophy”. There are, I think, two respects in which I think that this thesis may overstate the project of the book. First, Cappelen clarifies that he intends to consider only versions of Centrality that suggest that reliance on intuition is distinctive to philosophy, as opposed to other disciplines:

Since Centrality is a claim about what is characteristic of philosophers, it should not be construed as an instantiation of a universal claim about all intellectual activity or even a very wide domain of intellectual activity. Suppose that *all human cognition* (or a very wide domain of intellectual life) appeals to intuitions as evidence, from which we can derive as a special instance that philosophers appeal to intuitions as evidence. Such a view would not vindicate Centrality, since according to Centrality the appeal to intuitions as evidence is meant to differentiate philosophy – and, perhaps, a few other kindred disciplines – from inquires into the migration patterns of salmon or inflation in Argentina, say. If it turns out that the alleged reliance on intuitions is universal or extends far beyond philosophy and other allegedly a priori disciplines, that would *undermine* Centrality as it is construed in this work. (16)

Here are two initial observations about this restriction. First, a semantic quibble: I think it represents a substantive weakening of the official stated thesis, that no sensible understanding of Centrality is true. For there is a sensible understanding of Centrality that is entailed by the thesis that everybody, including philosophers, relies on intuitions. Second, a more substantive point: I think that some of the targets that Cappelen has in mind, who think that intuitions play important roles in philosophy, may very well hold

that this is so because intuitions play important roles in general. The following view, which Cappelen excludes by stipulation, seems coherent and worthy of consideration: evidential reliance on intuition is ubiquitous, and not distinctive of philosophy. However, philosophy is unusual in that (a) a higher proportion of the interesting action involves the contribution of intuition than it tends to in other fields, and (b) in some canonical instances of philosophy, intuition provides *all* the relevant evidence. If this were true, I think it would vindicate an interesting version of Centrality, and one that makes a reckoning with the epistemic significance of intuition a pressing issue for philosophers, even though it did not claim that intuition is not a source of evidence in other realms. I'm inclined to interpret at least many of those philosophers who do emphasize the role of intuitions in philosophy as thinking in something like this way. (See, for example, p. 105 of George Bealer's "The Incoherence of Empiricism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 66, 1992, for his commitment to the claim that intuitions are necessary to determine which scientific hypotheses are justified.) Note that the restriction in question does play important roles in Cappelen's later argument (e.g. on p. 86).

The second respect in which Cappelen's official thesis statement may be too broad concerns the over-arching dialectical strategy of the book. As indicated above, the project is negative: Cappelen considers two arguments for Centrality, and argues forcefully against each. A more cautious statement of the conclusion, given this methodology, might have been that Cappelen has found no compelling *argument* for Centrality, rather than the stronger official line that Centrality is not true. There is not, so far as I can see, an argument offered that these two are the *only* arguments that could be given in support of Centrality – Cappelen complains that those who assume Centrality do not provide an argument for it (p. 4), saying only that "I take it two kinds of arguments are tacitly assumed", and spending the rest of the book refuting them. The dialectical strategy, therefore, affords a defender of Centrality with two significant avenues of response, short of taking on Cappelen's arguments head-on:

1. One could maintain that Centrality carries enough *prima facie* plausibility that it does not require argument; in the absence of compelling arguments against Centrality, it is reasonable to accept it.
2. One could offer an argument for Centrality other than the two that Cappelen considers.

With respect to (1), it may be helpful to consider an analogy. Contemporary archaeology widely assumes the existence of a mind-independent external world. Practically all archaeologists assume that the kind of idealism espoused by the late British Empiricists is false; they treat as perfectly coherent the idea, for example, that there might be a skull underground that no one will ever see or learn about. But although the assumption that there is a mind-independent external world is extremely widespread among archaeologists,

one rarely sees arguments for this conclusion offered. And as philosophers well know, providing a cogent argument for this conclusion is not at all straightforward. But it's hard to take seriously the idea that this omission constitutes any serious error *qua* archaeologist – we think that (a) our colleagues in the archaeology department are proceeding perfectly reasonably, and (b) their assumption is probably true, even if we're not sure how to provide an argument for it.

Can the defender of Centrality respond to Cappelen's book in a parallel fashion? To be sure, there are some differences here – Centrality is a claim about how philosophy works, and the archaeologists' assumption is a claim about the broader world. But it's not clear why such a subject matter claim should make any important difference here. We have two claims: philosophers use intuitions as evidence, and there is an external world; both are widely assumed, and neither is given much argument. So if one antecedently just considers it *obvious* that philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence, I am not at all sure that one will feel compelled by anything in this book to change one's mind. Cappelen's primary target seems to be those philosophers who think that Centrality does require argument.

With respect to (2), I think that some philosophers have been convinced that intuitions must be playing important evidential roles, not because it is obvious from watching how philosophers work, but because of epistemological concerns. The philosopher I have in mind takes her cue from the apparent epistemological difference between certain philosophical judgments – say, the judgment that Mr. Truetemp doesn't have knowledge – and paradigmatic empirical judgments – say, the judgment that it was sunny in Vancouver today. There is a straightforward perceptual story to tell about my epistemic access in the latter case; it is one that affords a central role to certain of my perceptual experiences. But it doesn't look very much like my knowledge about Mr. Truetemp works in the same kind of way. There just aren't any sensory experiences that I've had that seem relevantly akin to the visual experiences that established my perceptual knowledge. It's all very well to say that it needn't be an intuition that's doing the justifying here, but, unless one is offered an alternate story, one is bound to remain less than fully satisfied. Cappelen is quick to emphasise that there are *arguments* underwriting my judgment about Mr. Truetemp – but arguments proceed on the basis of premises, and what story are we to tell about my epistemic access to the relevant premises? (Maybe Cappelen is right that I'm not relying on an intuition with the content that Mr. Truetemp doesn't know – that wasn't the intuition after all. But the line of reasoning I'm sketching will conclude that there must be an intuition underwriting it at a more basic level.) Insofar as it doesn't seem very plausible that perceptual experience can ultimately be establishing the premises from which I can conclude that Mr. Truetemp doesn't know, one might be tempted to think that it must be some *other* kind of experience, which plays a similar role to that of perceptual experience.

Call this line of thought the 'What Else??' Argument (WEA):

1. People sometimes come to justified philosophical beliefs via armchair methods.
2. In many of these cases, no sensory experience is playing justificatory roles.

3. All justified beliefs must be mediated by something like sensory experience.
4. Intuitions are the best candidates for such experiences in the cases in question. Therefore,
5. In some cases, people come to justified philosophical beliefs with intuitions playing justificatory roles.

I do not endorse the WEA; however, I do think it plausible that it or something like it does motivate the thesis that intuitions are playing important evidential roles in philosophy. This is an epistemological argument, not a methodological one; it does not proceed, as the ones Cappelen considers do, on the basis of empirical claims about how philosophers go about constructing arguments (except for the uncontroversial premise (1)). The WEA-endorsing proponent of Centrality, it seems to me, escapes Cappelen's critique unscathed.

Whether one is convinced by its conclusion or not, *Philosophy Without Intuitions* represents a clear jolt to contemporary metaphilosophical orthodoxy. It is a vivid and powerful call for philosophers to examine their assumptions about philosophy. Anyone interested in the role of intuitions in philosophy or the proper description of contemporary philosophical practice will benefit from studying it.

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