

compos mentis

The Liberation of Philosophy: The Principle of Sufficient Reason as an Anti-Racist Principle

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ABSTRACT

The method of intuition, the view that the best philosophical perspective will maintain as many of our intuitions as possible, is one of the pillars of analytic philosophy. Unfortunately, the reliance on intuition by analytic philosophers has created conditions such that the biases of those who do philosophy, predominantly those of hegemonic identities, are accepted as a basis for philosophical knowledge. This problem can be solved by rejecting intuition as a basis for philosophical knowledge and instead relying on a methodology derived from the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

KEYWORDS

Meta-philosophy, Intuition, Rationalism, Hegemony

In Chapter 7 of the *Parmenidean Ascent*, Michael Della Rocca discusses how the “Method of Intuition,” or “the MI” (2020, 184), has become one of the “pillars of analytic philosophy” (2020, 183). The MI relies upon the idea that the best philosophical picture will maintain as many of our intuitions as possible. However, as Della Rocca points out, this is an intellectually conservative philosophical methodology, as it fails to ask whose intuitions we are counting. In the United States and the rest of the English-speaking world—in other words, the domain of analytic philosophy—academic philosophy is largely done by members of hegemonic identities, specifically those who are wealthy, white, heterosexual, and/or cisgender male. Worse still, those who lack hegemonic identities are often unable to challenge hegemonic assumptions without putting themselves at risk of ostracization. Within such a context, philosophy that relies on the MI is an anti-intellectual pursuit serving only to reinforce hegemony rather than to challenge it. So what’s a wanna-be philosopher who wishes to advance liberatory politics, i.e., anti-hegemonic politics, to do? To my mind, there are two seemingly contradictory ways in which philosophy must be liberated, one relating to the material circumstances of philosophy and the other relating to the methodology of philosophy. In the context of philosophical work, we must seek out those with anti-hegemonic intuitions and identities to take part in our philosophical project. This will free philosophical work to be done in opposition to hegemony and, hopefully, allow the direct support of ideological ends that can be justified. In terms of methodology, we must reject the MI and, in doing so, free philosophy from an overreliance on intuition. After all, if intuitions cannot be trusted to provide reliable answers about the nature of reality, then why would we involve them in our philosophy? In rejecting the MI as a philosophical pillar, I will defend replacing it with the Principle of Sufficient Reason (henceforth referred to as “the PSR”). For the purposes of this essay, I will assume that we are generally in agreement that diversifying the field of philosophy is a worthwhile endeavor, and, accordingly, I will focus on my more controversial claim: that the PSR should replace the MI as a central philosophical pillar.

Reliance on intuition has always existed within philosophy, insofar as all forms of thought rely on intuition to some degree or another. What individuals choose to study, what ideas they choose to entertain, and what ideas they reject before fully considering them can generally be traced back to intuitions. However, just because intuition is at the root of what we choose to think about does not mean

that we ought to adopt it as a formal philosophical principle. Intuitions are often wrong. If you ask a person who lacks knowledge of physics what will happen if you drop two objects of identical shape but of different weights, they will likely respond that the heavier object will fall faster. Yet study of the physical world has shown us that this intuition, like so many others, is blatantly false. This should be of great concern to a defender of the MI. Analytic philosophers seem to want intuitions to be at the base of philosophy—to guide philosophy and perhaps even to constitute the subject matter of philosophy. Kit Fine, for example, is

of the opinion that real progress in philosophy can only come from taking common sense seriously. A departure from common sense is usually an indication that a mistake has been made. If you like, common sense is the data of philosophy and a philosopher should no more ignore common sense than a scientist should ignore the results of observation. (2012)

Yet common sense or intuition tells us that the heavier object falls faster. If our intuitions are consistently wrong, and philosophy is merely based on our intuition, why are we doing philosophy at all? It seems that philosophy grounded in intuitions must commit itself to attacking physics, and ultimately empirical knowledge in general, in order to ensure that the heavier object falls more quickly.

The analytic philosopher is likely to concede that intuition is often imperfect. Della Rocca notes that, “as is agreed on all sides nowadays, appeals to common sense or intuitions are fallible” (2020, 186). However, “[d]espite this apparent fallibility, such appeals to intuition or common sense are, as it were, the gold standard in analytical philosophy” (Della Rocca 2020, 186). This position seems profoundly unpalatable if not, in fact, unsustainable. If we all agree that intuitions are fallible, perhaps we should stop making arguments from intuition. At the very least, we should refrain from making intuitions fundamental to our philosophical practice. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes says, “All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived” (1989, 74). Similarly, since we have often been deceived by our intuitions, it is unwise to trust them entirely.

Yet while intuitions are potentially untrustworthy in any context, in the specific context of analytic philosophy they may actively undermine our search for truth. Philosophy is not a field done by a representative sample of the population. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities received 17.0% of all bachelor’s degrees in philosophy” in 2014, while, “[a]t the master’s level, traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities earned 10.2% of philosophy degrees awarded” and “completions of philosophy doctorates by traditionally underrepresented minorities” stood at only “7.9%” (2021). This data illustrates a trend that also holds true for marginalized identities outside of the context of race. In this context, when we talk about philosophical intuitions, we are talking about the intuitions of a specific subset of society that holds the biases of hegemonic identity markers. A defender of the MI will likely argue that the intuitions relied upon by analytic philosophers have little to do with the category of race. For example, the Mary’s room thought experiment (first introduced in Frank Jackson’s article “Epiphenomenal Qualia”) posits a color scientist, Mary, who has perfect scientific knowledge of color but has never seen colors other than black and white. The experiment then asks us if Mary would learn something new if she were to see red for the first time. This is used to draw out the intuition that, in such a circumstance, Mary would learn something new. This intuition, my opponents will insist, has nothing to do with race, nor any other hegemonic identity. In reply, I happily concede that there may well be particular cases in which appeals to intuitions are not linked to race or affected by philosophers’ racial identities, and the Mary’s room thought experiment may constitute such a case. My claim is not that intuitions always and everywhere lead us astray because of underlying biases, but that reliance on intuition is sometimes biased and, thus, does not constitute a sound foundation for doing philosophy in general. Perhaps the MI does give the right result in the Mary’s room case, but it may provide very distorted and biased results in other instances.

Ethical intuitionism is an ethical theory that posits that the ethical choice in any given circumstance is not based on any a priori circumstances (be they deontological rules, consequentialist calculus, or a form of personal virtue ethics), but rather can be derived from one’s intuitions about the circumstances at play. Ethical intuitionists often use a variety of trolley problem thought experiments and judge people’s emotional responses to various courses of action to determine how ethical these courses of action are. One example of a rather troubling thought

experiment is the “fat man” version of the trolley problem, a variant which was proposed by Judith Jarvis Thomson, one of the most outspoken defenders of the MI. Thomson makes her acceptance of the MI clear when she insists that

the main, central problems [of philosophy] consist in efforts to explain what makes certain pre-philosophical, or nonphilosophical, beliefs true. Which beliefs? Philosophers differ in their interests, but the ones that have interested philosophers, generally... are those that we rely on in ordinary life.... I still think that way of understanding what philosophy is roughly right. (2013, 54)

In accordance with the MI, Thomson’s “fat man” variant asks us if we would be willing to push a fat man in front of a trolley to save five other people. She emphasizes the man’s weight, describing him as “fat, so fat that his body will by itself stop the trolley, and the trolley will therefore not reach the five” (1985, 1403). While most people are unwilling to push the fat man in front of the trolley (most people will pull a lever), the inclusion of his weight, and his maleness for that matter, is highly troubling. After all, overweight people constitute a non-hegemonic identity that our culture is biased against, and, if we used the same thought experiment but with different identity markers, would people’s answers change? Would we feel comfortable changing our ethical model to incorporate social intuitions positing that it was more ethical to push a Black man in front of a trolley than a white woman? Thought experiments of this kind remain troubling if we remove identity markers altogether, as people project identities onto hypothetical individuals who lack them, normally prescribing them identity markers that match their own, or hegemonic, identity markers. In this manner, an intuitionist moral framework, and ultimately any ethical framework that relies on intuition, only upholds identities already believed to be of higher worth by those utilizing it.

As concerning as ethical intuitionism is when practiced by individuals, it becomes even more troubling when expanded to the political sphere. After all, it is in this arena that the vast majority of its consequences will play out. To ask those in a favorable position within a social structure to intuitively judge the moral worth of such a structure is clearly preposterous. For instance, it would be hard to deny that the intuitions of a person who holds other people as property will be biased with respect to the subject of slavery. Yet such will always be the intuitions most trusted by philosophy done under hegemony. To see a contemporary example

of political intuitionism, we must examine the philosophy of the infamous Dr. Jordan Peterson. Peterson came to prominence in 2017 and gained great support through spreading misinformation regarding the legal consequences of Bill C-16, an expansion of the Canadian Human Rights Act. While this law merely expands the Canadian Human Rights Act to include gender identity and expression to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Act (Department of Justice 2018), Peterson claimed, "These laws are the first laws that I've seen that require people under the threat of legal punishment to employ certain words, to speak a certain way, instead of merely limiting what they're allowed to say." This is of course absurd, as Bill C-16 is a standard amendment and directly paralleled protections that already existed for other marginalized identities. How could Peterson, a professional academic, make such a mistake? As it turns out, holding views directly out of line with empirical reality is perfectly in line with Peterson's epistemological beliefs. In one of his lectures, Peterson says:

You already know everything in some sense, you've got a map that covers the whole world. Which is sort of why you can function, and, so as long as everything's going fine, you don't really have to adjust your map and you don't have to think. But then, if you come across something that makes you think, then what [that] means is that part of the way you were thinking was wrong, and so when you think something—when you're forced to—then some little part of what you were, your map, the way you represent the world, it has to die because it was wrong.

In the context of his overall discussion, Peterson is suggesting that reconsidering the ways in which we engage with the world is negative, a form of death. For Peterson, we already know how the world works; we have knowledge in the form of reliable intuitions. To reconsider how the world works, and our place in it, is, for Peterson, not worth risking our very being. When viewed through this lens, Peterson's ability to deny reality regarding the legal consequences of Bill C-16 makes quite a bit of sense. For him to challenge his intuitions about what it would mean to give trans people human rights would be, in his eyes, the equivalent of a little part of himself dying. As demonstrated by Peterson's political advocacy, the consequence of such a view is the continued persecution of trans people or any other group that those in power intuitively believe to be lesser than themselves.

Many within the analytic tradition may find themselves aghast that I dare compare them to Peterson. Yet as much as such a comparison feels below the belt, I can't, for the life of me, find a meaningful distinction between their treatment of intuition, in the last analysis, and Peterson's. Indeed, many titans of the analytic tradition have made claims reminiscent of Peterson's regarding the challenging of intuitions. David Lewis, for example, said that "[o]ne comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or justify these pre-existing opinions to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system" (1983, 88). This view—that philosophy should not challenge, but merely systematize, our intuitions—amounts to what Della Rocca calls "the taming of philosophy" (2020, 260): preventing philosophy from raising any real challenges to the way our society operates, preventing it from being able to raise claims that may be seen as "dangerous," and thus, ultimately, ensuring that philosophy always happens to find itself aligned with the interests of hegemony.

The defender of the MI will likely argue that we can distinguish between intuitions that are fundamentally rooted in hegemony and those that are not. Yet it seems difficult to draw a principled line between intuitions that rely on racist, sexist, or other hegemonic assumptions in some way and those that do not. Ideally, intuitionists could commit themselves to rejecting any intuition that directly upholds hegemony while accepting non-hegemonic intuitions. Yet this is not feasible for at least three related reasons. Firstly, it might be impossible to draw such a line at all, as the way hegemony affects how we think about the world is highly complex and many intuitions likely spring from it in unconscious ways. We may not consciously recognize that a given intuition involves a shade of subtle racism, for example, or that it is tacitly homophobic. For this reason, even intuitions that at first appear to be non-hegemonic might uphold hegemony in subtle ways. For example, it is possible that even the Mary's room thought experiment tacitly relies upon particular cultural biases among those doing philosophy that relate to how they categorize color, and other communities might construe or classify colors differently. Secondly, it seems impossible to draw such a line in a non-circular or non-question-begging fashion, as ultimately the matter of whether or not a given intuition is rooted in hegemonic assumptions will itself generally be determined intuitively. Finally, drawing such a line prior to doing philosophy and as a starting point for philosophy makes determining which intuitions are

hegemonic and which are not a pre-philosophical matter that would, thus, itself seem to be outside of the bounds of philosophical investigation. As a result, such a move may make philosophy unable to challenge hegemony. And again, even if it were feasible to draw such a line, there would still be no good reason to assume that non-hegemonic intuitions are any more accurate than hegemonic intuitions are. Ultimately, totally rejecting the MI has a dialectical advantage over merely rejecting particular intuitions, as the defender of the MI has no coherent way to distinguish between those intuitions that are fundamentally rooted in hegemony and those that are not or those that are reliable and those that are not.

There is only one solution. If philosophy is to be liberated from hegemony, philosophers must reject the MI. As an alternative starting point, I will defend a method based on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or PSR—i.e., the view that, for each fact F, F has a cause that fully explains F. This method will reject arguments from intuition in favor of arguments from explicability, i.e., arguments that rest on the assertion that there are no inexplicable facts. Beginning with the PSR will make philosophy as a whole less vulnerable to the biases of its practitioners. Accordingly, the remainder of this essay will be devoted to defending the PSR as a possible basis for philosophy moving forward.

In the same way our imagined intuitionist is placed at a dialectical disadvantage by merely rejecting certain intuitions while retaining others, our imagined non-rationalist is placed at a similar disadvantage insofar as they must draw an arbitrary line between those explicability arguments they accept and those they reject. Della Rocca makes this clear in his paper titled “PSR,” where he argues that, because non-rationalists (including most analytic philosophers) already accept many explicability arguments, i.e., arguments that begin from the assumption that a particular event is explicable or has an explanation, they must either draw a principled line between those explicability arguments that they accept and those that they reject—or accept the PSR in its entirety. Leibniz provides us with a simple example of an explicability argument in the form of a discussion of Archimedes’ scales:

[Archimedes] takes it for granted that if there is a balance in which everything is alike on both sides, and if equal weights are hung on the two ends of that balance, the whole will be at rest. That is because no reason can be given why one side should weigh down rather than the other. (Della Rocca 2010, 2)

This is, of course, because, if one of the weights went down and the other went up, and both weights were identical (and all other considerations were equivalent), such an event would be inexplicable. Yet most opponents of the PSR would not wish to suggest that such a thing is possible. At the same time, however, to accept that no things are inexplicable would simply be to accept the PSR. Therefore, the denier of the PSR must draw a principled line between those explicability arguments that work and those that do not, and doing so has proven to be an extraordinarily difficult task. Della Rocca thus says:

One can see my argument as highlighting an important dialectical advantage that our imagined rationalist (i.e., me) has over our imagined non-rationalist (i.e., you). I have been arguing that the non-rationalist who accepts some explicability arguments has no non-question begging way to avoid the rationalist position, i.e., no non-question begging way to avoid the PSR. By contrast, the rationalist who accepts the necessitarian implication of the PSR is not under any pressure, as far as I can see, to accept the non-rationalist position, i.e., to deny the PSR. In this way, the rationalist position is internally coherent in a way that the position of the non-rationalist who accepts some explicability arguments is not. (2010, 13)

Della Rocca's argument shows that accepting the PSR (all explicability arguments) is a far stronger position than doing the contrary.

However, it is not immediately evident how an acceptance of the PSR helps us with philosophy's general subservience to hegemonic identities, even after we have accepted that the PSR is true. After all, the mere fact that a philosophical principle is true does not necessarily make its adoption useful in the fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, or any other bigoted superstition. One might ask, "How does reasoning based on the PSR differ from reasoning based on the MI such that it is able to avoid the biases currently ingrained in analytic philosophy?" The answer is that philosophical reasoning moving forward from the PSR can be made far more objectively than reasoning derived from the MI. Rather than relying on arbitrary intuitions, in accordance with the MI, one who starts from the PSR proceeds from explicability arguments based on well-defined axioms. This does not mean that philosophy can ever exist outside of cultural and social

constraints. While the PSR liberates philosophy from such constraints as much as is methodologically possible, the practitioners of philosophy are, in general, going to be both seeking employment and avoiding putting forth views that could lead to their assassination. Rationalists, i.e., defenders of the PSR, have never stood outside of history. Spinoza, for example, held reactionary views regarding both women and pagans. However, these parts of his overall picture can be shown to lack justification in accordance with the PSR, and can be rejected, while the vast majority of the Ethics has stood the test of time as an incredible work of rationalist philosophy. Unlike the MI the PSR does not place intuitions beyond the scope of philosophy, it places all our assumptions about the world on the table and holds them up to scrutiny. While rationalists themselves may be racist, sexist, homophobic, etc., arguments made from the PSR, precisely because and insofar as they cleave to this criterion of thoroughgoing rationality, will never endorse such biases. This is parallel to how the racism of mathematicians is of little consequence regarding the accuracy of mathematical proofs per se. On the other hand, the MI, as we have seen, often does sanction such superstitions.

However, Spinoza did in fact have reactionary views about women and pagans. So while rationalism will not ultimately justify the biases of hegemonic identity, it might not directly challenge them in the way those of us committed to liberatory politics would like. It is entirely possible for hegemonic biases to maintain themselves within a philosophical discipline that accepts the PSR, and such biases, while no longer able to damage the arguments themselves, will still damage what questions are asked by philosophers and the influence that academic philosophy exerts over society as a whole. Tragically, it seems that a shift in the philosophical paradigm in favor of the PSR over the MI will not single-handedly solve racism within the field; efforts both to diversify the field and to fight the various bigotries within it remain necessary. Yet while embracing the PSR will not single-handedly solve bias, the choice to accept the PSR over the MI is fundamentally an anti-racist one. While hegemonic biases can still exist within a philosophical paradigm dominated by the PSR, they will not be able to go unquestioned. In conclusion, it is necessary to replace the method of intuition with the Principle of Sufficient Reason as a basis for future philosophical endeavors, both because the MI is deeply flawed and the PSR is true and because the MI legitimizes bigoted superstitions while the PSR does not.

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