

# Intuitions Might Not Be *Sui Generis*: Some Criticisms of George Bealer

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## ABSTRACT

George Bealer provides an account of intuitions as “intellectual seemings.” My purpose in this paper is to criticize the phenomenological considerations that Bealer offers in favor of his account. In the first part I review Bealer’s attempt to distinguish intuitions from beliefs, judgments, guesses, and hunches. I examine each of the three phenomenological differences – incorrigibility, implasticity, and scope – that Bealer adduces between intuitions and these other types of mental contents. I argue that any difference between intuitions and these other types of mental contents with regards to their incorrigibility, implasticity, and scope is unproven and likely to remain unproven. In the second part I criticize Bealer’s analogy between intuitions and sensory seemings by suggesting that intuitions do not display the theoretical virtues—consistency, corroboration, and confirmation—that Bealer claims for them. Moreover, I suggest that intuitions do not display the theoretical virtue that would indicate a similarity to sensory seemings, consilience.

## INTRODUCTION

The nature and epistemological significance of intuitions is a question of importance given the frequency with which intuitions are invoked to support philosophical theories in areas such as ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and metaphysics. In contemporary accounts of intuitions, two types of view predominate. One type of view attempts to account for intuitions as instances of some more familiar kind of mental content; intuitions as beliefs,<sup>1</sup> or dispositions to believe.<sup>2</sup> Another view is that intuitions are their own *sui generis* kind, distinct from these more familiar mental contents. An influential version of this latter is offered by George Bealer, according whom intuitions are “intellectual seemings”<sup>3</sup> akin to sensory seemings. If such a view is right, then plausibly intuitions are a significant and basic source of evidence

about reality, in a way that sensory seemings are and in a way that beliefs are not. If Bealer's view and those akin to it turn out to lack good arguments in their favor or turn out to be incorrect, the methodology frequently employed in the areas of philosophy noted above becomes more questionable.

Bealer's argument for intuitions as intellectual seemings is not constituted entirely by the phenomenological considerations I will discuss here, but it does draw on them in two ways. First, Bealer uses phenomenological considerations to help establish what intuitions are not. He proceeds to the view that intuitions are not beliefs, judgments, guesses, or hunches, by highlighting the incorrigibility, implasticity, and narrower scope of intuitions. Second, Bealer uses phenomenological considerations to help positively establish that intuitions are seemings analogous to sensory seemings, arguing that intuitions display the same theoretical virtues as sensory seemings – consistency, corroboration, and confirmation. In this paper my aim is to criticize these two moves.

## I. DISTINGUISHING INTUITIONS FROM BELIEFS, JUDGMENTS, GUESSES, AND HUNCHES

Bealer mentions several characteristic features of intuitions. According to Bealer intuitions are a *sui generis* "primitive propositional attitude."<sup>4</sup> This attitude relates only to propositions that are both *a priori* and necessary.<sup>5</sup> Intuitions are evidentially basic,<sup>6</sup> though not infallible.<sup>7</sup> Intuitions are conscious episodes that appear phenomenologically as seemings.<sup>8</sup> To ground the distinction between intuitions and beliefs Bealer raises two phenomenological considerations, which I dub "the incorrigibility of intuitions" and "the implasticity of intuitions." To ground the distinction between intuitions and judgments, guesses, and hunches, Bealer adverts to the narrower scope of the propositions that intuitions can be about.

### I.1 THE INCORRIGIBILITY OF INTUITIONS

Bealer claims that intuitions and beliefs must be different because one can have a belief about some matter whilst having no intuition about it, and vice versa have an intuition about some matter whilst having no belief about it: "one can believe something and not intuit it, and one can intuit something and not believe it." By itself, this claim by itself seems insufficient to distinguish beliefs and intuitions – if beliefs and intuitions are otherwise phenomenologically indistinguishable, I would be unable in any given case to say

whether I had a belief and lacked an intuition, or had an intuition and lacked a belief. But, as I read him, Bealer has more to say. Bealer notes that:

“there are many mathematical theorems that I believe (because I have seen the proofs) but that do not seem to me to be true and that do not seem to be to be false; I do not have intuitions about them either way”<sup>10</sup>

And again that:

“I have an intuition—it still *seems* to me—that the naive truth schema holds; this is so despite the fact that I do not believe that it holds (because I know of the Liar paradox)”<sup>11</sup>

The idea here seems to be that beliefs are highly responsive to evidence – in the first example a belief is called forth by seeing the proofs of the mathematical theorems and in the second example belief is absent because one knows of the Liar paradox. Beliefs do not persist in the face of superior countervailing evidence but rather are “automatically overridden... displaced.”<sup>12</sup> By contrast, in the examples given intuitions are not highly responsive to evidence – in the first example no intuition is called forth by seeing the proofs of the mathematical theorems and in the second example an intuition persists despite one’s knowing of the Liar paradox. Let’s call this responsiveness to evidence, especially as it concerns superior countervailing evidence, corrigibility, and its opposite incorrigibility. With this phenomenological difference we are provided with quite a handy method of determining whether a given propositional attitude is an intuition or a belief – we can expose ourselves to superior countervailing evidence about some proposition, and if a pro-attitude remains towards the proposition, then the attitude is plausibly an intuition and not a belief. My reading of Bealer’s argument here is that:

(1) Intuitions are incorrigible.

(2) Beliefs are corrigible.

Therefore, (probably) intuitions are not beliefs.

I offer two criticisms against this argument. First, regarding (1), it is not clear that most or all intuitions are incorrigible. Bealer offers a handful

of examples. Even if we were to multiply these examples, we could not be sure that (1) held quite generally. Whether intuitions are generally incorrigible or not is a question that can in principle be empirically investigated. However, as Kenneth Boyd and Jennifer Nagel remarked in 2014, thorough investigation of whether one's "intuitions are wholly insulated from theoretical commitments"<sup>13</sup> (one type of incorrigibility) has not yet been conducted. It seems that significant methodological difficulties would attend making investigations into the incorrigibility of intuitions. Since such investigations would concern how intuitions change (or do not) in response to superior countervailing evidence, it seems that a philosophically sophisticated subject pool would be required, as well as either accurate recollection and report of potentially long-lost intuitions, or a longitudinal study.

To this criticism, a defender of Bealer might respond that such investigations are unnecessary, since it appears that there are at least some intuitions which are incorrigible, and that these form a set of counterexamples to taking intuitions as beliefs. To this I respond in turn that incorrigibility must be a widely-shared characteristic of intuitions if it is to ground a distinction between intuitions and beliefs. Without this being shown, alternative understandings of the situation remain plausible, e.g. perhaps incorrigibility is only a feature of some small subset of what we call intuitions—e.g. only mathematical intuitions—other intuitions then being ripe for assimilation to the category of belief.

Importantly, against (1) there is significant anecdotal evidence counting against the general incorrigibility of intuitions: reflecting on one's own philosophical development or with that of philosophers with whose work one is intimately acquainted, one might identify many intuitions that proved corrigible, e.g. the thoroughgoing utilitarian who has not only abandoned the belief that "killing one to save five is wrong" but who also no longer has the corresponding intuition, a necessitarian who no longer has the intuition that various counterfactual states of affairs are even metaphysically possible, or a materialist who no longer has the intuition that philosophical zombies are possible.

As a second criticism, regarding (2), Bealer's case here depends on beliefs being generally corrigible. As a question of normative epistemology, I take it is a borderline platitude that when faced with superior countervailing evidence one ought to revise one's beliefs, that one's beliefs should be corrigible. But this is not our question. As a matter of "descriptive epistemology," psychology, or of the phenomenology of belief, it is much less clear that in general people's beliefs are corrigible. Indeed, we might note many cognitive biases which seem to involve incorrigible beliefs: various forms of prejudice,

positive or optimistic illusions,<sup>14</sup> the positive beliefs of “recalcitrant smokers” about smoking,<sup>15</sup> or the belief in a just world.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the possibility remains that what we term intuitions are incorrigible beliefs. This is not to say that the person with incorrigible beliefs is (always) someone who irrationally refuses to even weigh countervailing evidence, but rather that they properly fulfill their epistemic duties yet find that their belief persists nevertheless.

I also note that whilst conceptually it is incoherent to “believe *x* and know that *x* is false,” or even “believe *x* and not believe *x*,” it is not clear that these are descriptively impossible—we cannot infer from conceptual incoherence to the actual impossibility of such phenomena, otherwise a phenomenon like cognitive dissonance could not occur. So, that we find cases in which someone takes both a pro and a con attitude towards some proposition does not imply that one of their attitudes must be a belief and the other something other than a belief (such as an intuition, a hope, an imagining, etc.) – rather both attitudes could be beliefs.

## 1.2 THE IMPLASTICITY OF INTUITIONS

As another ground for the distinction between intuitions and beliefs, Bealer adverts to the implasticity of intuitions: “Belief is highly plastic. Using (false) appeals to authority, cajoling, intimidation, brainwashing, and so forth, you can get a person to believe almost anything, at least briefly. Not so for intuitions.”<sup>17</sup> Bealer does not further characterize (im)plasticity, but the four examples he uses all seem to involve a belief being altered by means which are plainly non-evidential.

I take it then that implasticity concerns whether a propositional attitude can be induced or diminished by sundry non-evidential factors. My reading of Bealer’s argument here is that:

(3) Intuitions are implastic.

(4) Beliefs are plastic.

Therefore, (probably) intuitions are not beliefs.

My responses regarding the implasticity distinction parallel my responses to the incorrigibility distinction. Regarding (3), Bealer has not shown empirically that intuitions are implastic. Rather, there is some evidence that the opposite is true. Anecdotally, the familiar case of a professor having to coach students into “getting the right intuition,” say in relation to a Gettier example, seems to involve an appeal to authority and a little cajoling—which

suggests the plasticity of some intuitions. The findings of experimental philosophy suggest that the prospects for Bealer's contention being borne out are poor. To note two well-known cases, order of presentation effects<sup>18</sup> and linguistic framing effects<sup>19</sup> have been shown to influence intuition reports, suggesting a high degree of plasticity given how mild these methods are. Likewise, regarding (4), it seems that there are certainly some beliefs (that there are other minds, that such-and-such an action is immoral, etc.) which are highly implastic for most people regardless of appeals to authority, intimidation, and so forth. Given these garden-variety cases, the burden of proof is on Bealer to show any general difference of plasticity between belief and intuition. Though this criticism of Bealer is straightforward, Bealer repeats his claims about (im)plasticity on four occasions.<sup>20</sup>

Bealer does admit that "there is disagreement about the degree of plasticity of intuitions" but claims that "it is clear that they are inherently far more resistant to such influences than beliefs"<sup>21</sup> and again that "it is clear that, collectively, they [intuitions] are inherently more resistant to such influences than beliefs."<sup>22</sup> Bealer's strategy here seems to be to weaken (3) and (4) in some way, to a claim along the lines that intuitions have a higher degree of implasticity than beliefs, or that intuitions are on average or typically more implastic than beliefs (it seems that Bealer could pursue a similar strategy in relation to incorrigibility). The problem with this strategy is that it would deprive us of the tools to identify in any specific case whether a mental content was an more-than-usually plastic intuition or a more-than-usually implastic belief, causing problems for the use of intuitions in the justification of philosophical theories. Without some further ground being adduced, we might suspect that there was just one type of attitude here that comes in degrees of plasticity (and likewise for incorrigibility).

### 1.3 THE SCOPE OF INTUITIONS

In distinguishing intuitions from judgments, guesses, and hunches, Bealer appeals to a distinction of scope: "there are significant restrictions on the propositions concerning which one can have intuitions; by contrast, there are virtually no restrictions on the propositions which one can make a judgment or a guess or have a hunch."<sup>23</sup> As noted previously, Bealer has in mind that intuitions can only be about matters which are *a priori* and necessary. My reading of Bealer's argument here is that:

- (5) Intuitions can only be about *a priori* and necessary propo-

sitions.

(6) Judgments, guesses, and hunches, can be about virtually any propositions.

Therefore (probably) intuitions are not judgments, guesses, or hunches.

Here, I grant both (5) and (6). I suggest, though, that this distinction of scope is not sufficient to rule out that intuitions are not simply a conventionally defined subset of either judgments, or guesses, or hunches. To illustrate, I might invent the term “hannch,” and claim that a hannch, though otherwise like a hunch, was very different from a hunch because a hannch only ever concerns *a priori* and necessary matters, whilst hunches might be about anything, e.g., “I have a hannch that the ontological argument is sound.” Although one is at liberty to invent such a category, it seems clear that hannches are always legitimately described as a subset of hunches rather than as a *sui generis* kind. So, this distinction of scope cannot by itself, without some further phenomenological difference, show that intuitions are not just judgments, guesses, or hunches.

Bealer cites one further difference, the choice-like nature of guesses:

“Judgments are a kind of occurrent belief; as such they are not seemings. Guesses are phenomenologically rather more like choices; they are plainly not seemings. And hunches are akin to merely caused, ungrounded convictions or noninferential beliefs; they too are not seemings.”<sup>24</sup>

Bealer seems correct that guesses are phenomenologically more like choices, involving an element of volition that seems absent in both belief and intuition. However, for Bealer judgments and hunches are beliefs. Therefore, it seems that to distinguish them from intuition on phenomenological grounds, Bealer would have to appeal to his incorrigibility and implasticity distinctions, which if my previous criticisms were right, will be a move of no avail. Therefore, although Bealer successfully distinguishes intuitions from guesses on phenomenological grounds, it seems that intuitions might still be a type of belief, judgment, or hunch.

## 2. THE THEORETICAL VIRTUES OF INTUITIONS AND SENSORY SEEMINGS

Bealer argues that intuitions are analogous to sensory seemings in the

theoretical virtues that they enjoy, helping to establish that they are intellectual seemings. An analogy to this effect would aid the case that intuitions are not beliefs, judgments, or hunches, and would also help establish the evidential value of intuitions. I note in passing my qualm that any analogy between intuitions and sensory seemings might be unduly attractive to us due to the deeply engrained metaphorical associations between thought and sight (“I see what you mean,” “Look at it from my perspective”).

## 2.1 CONSISTENCY, CORROBORATION, AND CONFIRMATION

Bealer argues that intuitions and sensory seemings display the same theoretical virtues. Both display “consistency, corroboration, and confirmation.”<sup>25</sup> Regarding consistency, Bealer claims that intrapersonally “a person’s concrete-case intuitions are largely consistent with one another.”<sup>26</sup> Regarding corroboration Bealer claims that there is an impressive agreement interpersonal agreement between people with regards to their “logical, mathematical, conceptual, and modal intuitions.”<sup>27</sup> Regarding confirmation Bealer claims that “intuition is seldom, if ever, disconfirmed by our experiences and observations.”<sup>28</sup> Sensory seemings display these same theoretical virtues, whereas beliefs do not. My reading of Bealer’s argument here is that:

- (7) Intuitions display the theoretical virtues consistency, corroboration, and confirmation.
  - (8) Sensory seemings display the theoretical virtues consistency, corroboration, and confirmation.
  - (9) Beliefs, judgments, and hunches, do not display the theoretical virtues consistency, corroboration, and confirmation.
- Therefore, (probably) intuitions are intellectual seemings.

I do not dispute (8) or (9). I have three criticisms to make of (7). First, it seems that Bealer could be too optimistic in his assessment of intuition’s theoretical virtues. For one thing, as noted it seems that the experimental philosophy literature contains some cases of intrapersonal inconsistency in intuitions over time, and cases of interpersonal inconsistency in intuitions at a time.<sup>29</sup> For another, it seems odd to claim that there is an intrapersonal consistency in intuitions over time, since it seems that a large part of the influential “reflective equilibrium” method of philosophizing consists in trying to ascertain whether our intuitions really are consistent, finding that often they are not, and then abandoning some intuitions. For instance, we are almost

all initially responsive to deontological and utilitarian intuition pumps, but at some point some of us abandon, or stop “feeling the force of,” one or the other sorts of intuition—which implies that most people’s intuitions could not be described as consistent before they began philosophizing. At any rate, intuitions plausibly display these three theoretical virtues to a significantly lesser degree than sensory seemings do.

Second, Bealer seems to employ very minimal conceptions of consistency, corroboration, and confirmation. Consistency and corroboration are fulfilled merely so long as people’s intuitions do not contradict each other, whilst confirmation is characterized negatively; as intuition being “seldom, if ever, disconfirmed by our experiences and observations.” Each seems to be reduced to something like non-contradiction. Granting that intuitions do exhibit these minimal conceptions of these theoretical virtues, it is unclear that they exhibit more expansive conceptions of these theoretical virtues. One might say that corroboration and confirmation should involve novel predictions by way of falsifiable hypotheses. But it is not clear that investigations into intuitions involve corroboration and confirmation in this more expansive sense. Nor does it seem that one can make a claim like “If philosophical theory *x* is correct, then we won’t encounter intuitions of sort *y*” without *y* quickly being encountered for some significant proportion of subjects. By contrast, I take it that sensory seemings do exhibit these more expansive conceptions of these theoretical virtues. So, the similarity between sensory seemings and intuitions *vis-à-vis* these theoretical virtues is weakened when we see that it is equivocal between different conceptions of these theoretical virtues.

A third criticism is to question whether intuitions can by themselves enjoy these theoretical virtues at all. Consistency, corroboration, and confirmation, we might say, are virtues that we attribute to theories, or to constellations of theories and propositions, or to the relationships that propositions bear to one another in virtue of being mediated by some theory. For instance, let’s say that one has the intuition that “it is right for the bystander to push the fat man off the bridge to save five” and that one then has the intuition that “it is wrong for the doctor to take the organs of one patient to save five.” One might at first say that the second intuition is inconsistent with the first, or that it tends to falsify the first, or to disconfirm it. Rather, it seems that we can only say that the two intuitions have this effect on one another when we are reflecting on them in light of some familiar moral theory. For instance, if I am an act-utilitarian the second intuition might seem to tend to falsify and disconfirm both my act-utilitarian moral theory and my first intuition. But if I have some more exotic moral theory, the second intuition might be perfectly compatible with the first, or even help confirm it – e.g. I have a moral

theory that places great emphasis on role-based or associative duties I might take these two intuitions to be consistent and to corroborate and confirm one another. Therefore, I suggest then that Bealer is wrong to claim that there is an “on-balance agreement of elementary concrete-case intuitions”<sup>30</sup>, because such agreement only arises after intuitions have been brought under some theory, and other some other theory the very same intuitions might disagree. Without some theory that mediates them, we might say that two intuitions are the same proposition, or are different propositions, or are directly contradictory propositions (“X” and “not-X”), but not much else.

By contrast, I take it that sensory seemings (which it seems are not propositional attitudes at all) can be assessed as consistent, corroborating, or confirming before we have any explicit theories of, or beliefs about, how the world is. This is because we carry around with us sensory schemas and a naïve physics that develops in early childhood,<sup>31</sup> that accompanies our sensory seemings—surprise or confusion arises when a sensory seeming is inconsistent with them, falsifies, or disconfirms them (e.g. violations of object-permanence achieved by sleight of hand, the sudden disappearance of a rabbit, the sudden appearance of a rabbit).

## 2.2 CONSILIENCE

I suggest that the theoretical virtue that would both show intuitions to have a high evidential value and to be closely akin to sensory seemings is consilience, but that intuitions cannot display consilience. For my purposes I characterize consilience as being when a hypothesis is evidenced independently by several different types of evidential source. An indication of consilience’s importance is given by Laurence Bonjour’s case of the clairvoyant, in which the clairvoyant’s reliable ability to have true beliefs about the president’s whereabouts is so dubious because this reliable ability was not at all consilient with the clairvoyant’s other faculties, such as their sensory seemings.<sup>32</sup> My argument here is that:

(10) Sensory seemings display consilience.

(11) Intuitions do not display consilience.

Therefore, probably intuitions are not intellectual seemings.

Regarding (10) I take it as highly plausible that consilience is ordinarily rampant amongst the various types of sensory seemings; a skunk gives rise to visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, thermoceptive and noci-

ceptive seemings (depending on what we do to it).

By contrast, regarding (11), there is little consilience between intuitions and sensory seemings. Recall Bealer's claim about the rarity of disconfirmation of intuitions by sensory seemings. This might be explained by the remarkable consilience of the two. But more plausibly this is explained by the fact that intuitions (as characterized by Bealer) and sensory seemings concern disparate domains, on the one hand the *a priori* and the necessary, on the other *a posteriori* and the contingent. Since they are about disparate domains, there is little consilience between intuitions and sensory seemings. There would be evidential value to a high degree of consilience amongst intuitions, yet it seems that what would be more desirable is consilience about the same subject matter from different types of evidential source. For example, if I am blindfolded and I feel a spherical object with my hands, and come to believe "this object is spherical," the best further evidence that I can obtain that conciliates with my tactile seemings to support this belief is to remove the blindfold and get some visual seemings of the object. What is less desirable, but what it seems that intuition has to make do with, is akin to simply feeling the spherical object over and over, or feeling some cubes and some oblate spheroids to develop one's tactile acuity, consiliating tactile seemings with yet more tactile seemings, without being able to call upon further types of evidential source.

An advocate of Bealer's views might suggest two ways in which at least some intuitions are in fact consilient, amongst themselves even if not with sensory seemings.

First, they might say that a given philosophical claim can be evidenced by numerous consilient intuitions. For example, consider the innumerable Gettier cases. Perhaps these give rise to consilient intuitions each of which independently provides evidence for the claim that "knowledge is not true justified belief." My response to this is that such Gettier cases are not consilient with one another, because they are in a sense all fundamentally the same case; whilst the details may vary, all elicit the very same intuition; "an instance of true justified belief that is not knowledge!" That this is so is shown by the thought that the repetition of cases is merely illustrative, rather than providing new evidence against the traditional analysis of knowledge. If this latter were true then one could build evidence against the traditional analysis of knowledge by hiring philosophers to devise Gettier cases *ad infinitum*. This response seems to be conceded by Bealer when he states that "use of such examples can be 'modalized away'. That is, such examples can, at least in principle, be dropped and in their place one can use *a priori* intuitions."<sup>33</sup>

Second, an ally of Bealer might claim that intuitions are consilient

when numerous different intuitions provide evidence for a particular philosophical system. One might imagine a philosophical system-builder who invokes distinct intuitions at different points in his or her system-building—e.g. at one point to support libertarian free will, at another to support consequentialism—the result being a wide-ranging philosophical system. Here, I agree that the system exhibits the virtue of consilience – although no intuition is about the system itself, but rather each intuition is about some proposition within the system, the intuitions all evidence the system. But again, this consilience is a result of theorizing, prior to which the intuitions could not be described as consilient. By contrast, with sensory seemings the various types of seemings are consilient in that they evidence the very same object—the skunk is apprehended through vision, audition, etc.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, I have questioned both the negative and the positive aspects of Bealer's phenomenological case for intuitions being intellectual seemings. Examining the incorrigibility, implasticity, and narrower scope of intuitions does not establish that intuitions are not just beliefs, judgments, or hunches. Likewise, intuitions and sensory seemings seem not to share the theoretical virtues that Bealer suggests that they do. I emphasize that there are aspects of Bealer's account of intuitions that I have not addressed, and knock-on consequences of my argument that may impinge on Bealer's wider dialectical purposes.<sup>34</sup> Likewise I note that more recently other authors have noted or emphasized other phenomenological features of intuitions that supposedly distinguish them from other mental contents,<sup>35</sup> so my arguments here are in no way intended as a complete discussion of the contemporary literature on the phenomenology of intuitions, but I take it that my arguments, if successful, do tend to weaken the case for the *sui generis* view of intuitions.

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