INTUITIONS: THEIR NATURE AND EPISTEMIC EFFICACY

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Summary
This paper presents an account of intuitions, and a defense of their epistemic efficacy in general, and more specifically in philosophy, followed by replies in response to various objections.

I.

What is intuition? What accounts for its probative force? Traditionally, intuition is understood on a perceptual model. It is through the mind’s eye that we gain insight. In perception one’s eyes may come to rest on an object seen in good light. A sensory experience then mediates between object seen and perceptual belief. However, nothing like sensory experience seems to mediate analogously between facts known intuitively and beliefs through which they are known. Moreover, many truths known intuitively lie outside the causal order, unable to cause experience-like intuitions, even if there were such intuitions. Nor can such truths be tracked, not if tracking requires sensitivity. What are we to make of the claim that if it were not so that 1 + 1 = 2, one would not believe it to be so? Hard to say, but that is what tracking it with “sensitivity” would require.

Even if there are no experience-like intuitions, intuitive seemings remain distinctive conscious states in their own right, without collapsing into beliefs, as is shown by paradoxes like the liar, or the sorites. Each proposition in a paradoxical cluster exerts a powerful intuitive attraction, despite how compelling it also is that they cannot all be true together. Even when one eventually settles on a solution, moreover, the pull of the rejected proposition is not removed but overcome.

What then might intuitions be, if they are to be conscious states with probative force despite being fallible, while distinct from beliefs?
Elsewhere I defend a conception of intuition as a state distinct from and prior to both belief and knowledge. Intuitive belief is based on intuition but goes beyond it, and in turn constitutes intuitive knowledge only if all goes well. In what follows I will presuppose such a conception of intuitions as intellectual seemings of a certain sort, as attractions to assent derived from the sheer understanding of the propositions involved.

Here we focus on propositional intuition, which has the following features:

a. It is a conscious state.
b. It has propositional content.
c. It is distinct from belief. One can have an intuition that \( p \) without believing that \( p \), as when one resolves a paradox by disbelieving one of its elements, despite the powerful intuitive appeal that it retains.
d. Its content can be false; there can be false intuitions.
e. It does not derive just from perception, introspection, testimony, or inferential reasoning, singly or in combination, not even through the channel of memory.
f. It can serve as a basis for belief, helping thus to provide epistemic justification for the supported belief.

An intuition is hence a representationally contentful conscious state that can serve as a justifying basis for belief while distinct from belief, not derived from certain sources, and possibly false.

Thus:

\[ S \text{ intuits that } p \text{ if and only if } S's \text{ attraction to assent to } \langle p \rangle \text{ is explained rationally by two things in combination: (a) that } S \text{ understands it well enough, (b) that } \langle p \rangle \text{ is true.} \]

How well does this account of intuition fit the profile above? Quite well on the whole, or so I will argue. On this account, intuition is a conscious state of felt attraction rationally explained through the content’s being (a) understood well enough by the subject, and (b) true; and such a conscious state can serve as a justifying rational basis for belief, \textit{ceteris paribus}.

1. 'Intuitions and Truth', in Greenough and Lynch 2006.