EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND
THE TWIN EARTH INTUITION

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1. Introduction

Experimental philosophy is characterized, on the one hand, by its method: the conduction of surveys on philosophical intuitions. It is characterized, on the other hand, as the position which criticizes traditional philosophy for its armchair reliance on intuition. The critique is rarely spelled out precisely; rather, experimental philosophers gesture skeptically at the admittedly surprising results of intuition surveys, which are, roughly, that intuitions vary with factors presumed to be irrelevant for the subject matter in question and that there is both intra-subjective as well as inter-subjective incoherence. However, the question what is wrong exactly with armchair philosophy is rarely answered adequately.

Jonathan Weinberg (2007) has offered what I take to be the most compelling answer so far: Reliance on intuition is problematic because we have no way of detecting its errors. Weinberg introduces the technical term hopefulness for the property of methods to allow for the detection of error. A method is hopeful if it meets all or most of the following desiderata to some sufficient degree: external corroboration, internal coherence, detectability of margins, and theoretical illumination. A method is hopeless when it clearly fails to meet any of the desiderata to a sufficient degree. According to Weinberg this is the case for the philosophers’ practice of appealing to intuitions. In conclusion, he demands that the practice be abandoned or revised.

I will argue in this essay for the normative claim that Weinberg’s demand for hopefulness should not be applied to traditional appeal to intuition. My

2. Jonathan Ichikawa (manuscript) defends intuitions along a different line. He argues that traditional practice does indeed meet Weinberg’s desiderata to a sufficient degree.
claim is that Weinberg goes wrong in treating philosophical appeal to intuition analogous to the appeal to evidence in the sciences. Due to limitations of space I must restrict my discussion to what I take to be the most interesting desideratum, external corroboration. Weinberg defines external corroboration in the broad sense of “comparing deliverances of the device to results from other methods” (Weinberg 2007, 331). He argues that philosophical intuitions cannot be externally corroborated and that this fact presents a major shortcoming for the philosophers’ practice of appealing to intuitions. The following passage summarizes Weinberg’s concern:

As for external corroboration, I take it to be clear that philosophical intuition has not had very much of this. By and large, we have not found much other access to the particular propositions in question than the intuitions themselves. For many of the domains in question (e.g., the metaphysics of modality) there simply may be no area outside of philosophy that really can speak to it, and for many of these domains we simply have not found any other way of investigating them other than intuition-mongering. (Weinberg 2007, 338f.)

I defend traditional practice against Weinberg’s critique with the argument that some intuitions are true simply in virtue of being intuited by the majority of people.

Before presenting my argument I will briefly clarify which intuitions the experimentalists’ critique is directed at. The intuitions in question are typically elicited by thought experiments: One imagines a hypothetical scenario and then makes an intuitive judgment on a moral, epistemic, modal, semantic, or other philosophically interesting property of the scenario. These kinds of judgments are the intuitions in question. Roughly speaking, the experimental philosophers’ main concern is with “esoteric, unusual, far-fetched, or generally outlandish” scenarios. (Weinberg 2007, 321) Weinberg explicitly does not want to criticize intuition per se. For, an unqualified attack on all of intuition would lead to broad skepticism which cannot be the aim of experimental philosophy. But even within this group of far-fetched cases I am uncomfortable making general claims about intuitions as I take them to be a heterogeneous class comprised of many kinds of mental states differing in epistemic, psychological, and cognitive aspects. Therefore, I will argue along one paradigmatically far-fetched case, viz. Hilary Putnam’s Twin Earth.