

Philosophy without Intuitions, by Herman Cappelen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 242 pp.

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Metaphilosophy is a frustrating field. Since philosophy includes such diverse areas – struggling with what we can know, should do, and can hope – and in all these areas developed radically different approaches, it seems almost impossible to provide an interesting and adequate metaphilosophical outlook. Unless one characterizes at a rather abstract level what all these different approaches in those different areas have in common (which is likely to result in something pretty uninteresting), one will end up with a metaphilosophy that will at best be adequate for a rather small pocket of philosophy.

That is not only because philosophy is such a salad bowl of areas and approaches, but also because metaphilosophy is *itself* philosophy. In order to say something interesting about philosophy as a discipline, one will have to say something interesting about first-order philosophy, too; presumably about metaphysics (What is the nature of the objects of philosophical inquiry?), epistemology (How can we know about the objects of philosophical inquiry?), and philosophy of science (How do our methods reflect our epistemic access?). Given the prominent perception of at least some of analytic philosophy as being either concerned with language ('linguistic turn'), or else the mind ('cognitive turn'), the philosophies of those areas will probably have to be addressed too, along with meta-ethics, if one intends to include practical philosophy in one's metaphilosophical account. This fact exponentially increases the dilemma for the metaphilosopher: either one keeps one's first-order philosophical commitments low, and ends up with nothing very interesting to say, or one takes up a stance on all this, and ends up with a metaphilosophy that might at best be adequate for what oneself and one's closest colleagues are doing when engaged in philosophy, but probably inadequate for most of what is going on in the discipline.

During the last couple of years, it seemed though as if there was an interesting and adequate topic for metaphilosophical reflection: *the role of intuition in the method of cases*. It seemed as if in areas as diverse as epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of language, philosophy of action, and whatnot, philosophers, regardless of their further philosophical convictions (being rationalists, empiricists, or post-empiricist naturalists), were using appeals to intuitions – typi-

cally in response to hypothetical cases – as evidence for or against philosophical theories. Although, of course, there were different accounts of the nature, significance, and justifiedness of this methodology, at least it seemed as if there was a certain stable methodological unity in philosophy, which could now be studied from a metaphilosophical point of view.

In *Philosophy without Intuitions* Hermann Cappelen destroys this hope for an interesting and adequate metaphilosophy built on the role and nature of intuitions. The book interprets and attacks a thesis Cappelen calls ‘Centrality’ that seems to be at the heart of a lot of current metaphilosophy, including all of so-called ‘experimental philosophy’:

Centrality (of Intuitions in Contemporary Philosophy): Contemporary analytic philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence (or as a source of evidence) for philosophical theories. (p. 77)

Cappelen intends to show that Centrality is false, under all reasonable disambiguations of the central problematic notions in it, such as ‘intuition’, ‘rely on’, ‘philosophy’, ‘evidence’, and ‘philosopher’. His main strategy is to undermine two arguments for Centrality: the *Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk* (AIT), and the *Argument from Philosophical Practice* (APP).

The AIT takes wing from the fact that there is quite a bit of ‘intuition’-talk in contemporary philosophical texts, when philosophers are characterizing their key premises or are referring to their evidence, and argues that this shows that philosophers are heavily relying on intuitions as evidence.

The APP, on the other hand, does not so much depend on how ‘intuition’ is used in philosophical prose, but argues that the best account for philosophical practice, especially for the prominent use of thought experiments, is to assume that philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence.

After an introductory chapter that introduces this terminology and explains the overall strategy, Cappelen’s book is divided into two parts. The first part, Chapters 2-5, deals with the AIP; Part II, Chapters 6-11, deals with the APP. The book closes with a chapter of ‘Concluding Remarks’.

The AIT argues that we can read off the philosophers’ use of ‘intuitive’ and ‘intuition’ when stating their arguments, that they are

using intuitions as evidence in their theorizing. Now, certainly, many philosophers often do use these words, but when they use these, does their meaning suggest that they are characterizing a source (or form) of evidence? In order to get clearer on that question, Cappelen first looks in Chapter 2 at 'intuition'-talk in ordinary English. What are 'intuitively, p ', or ' p is intuitive', or 'it seems that p ' etc. used for in ordinary English? It turns out that these words are used to characterize a very heterogeneous collection of things, like operating systems, melodies, or chess playing, and typically are *not* used to modify propositions or contents.

Since it is used for such wild variety of things, the content of 'intuitively' is highly context sensitive, and it thus does not have *one* content that could be supportive for Centrality. In the rare cases where it modifies propositions, it is usually used as a 'hedging' expression, indicating that the speaker does not want to fully commit herself to the content of her utterance, or indicating that she has not carefully reflected on the content (p. 41). A similar hedge use can be found for ordinary uses of 'seems'. Unlike 'intuitive', 'seems' can be used to hedge judgments that are based on reflection and/or evidence, but indicates that this evidence or reflection might be incomplete (as in the detective's utterance at the crime scene 'it seems that the victim was killed in the bedroom and then the body was dragged into the bathroom'). In any case, 'seem' does not denote genuine kinds of conscious episodes, as some epistemologists of intuitions have it, at least with respect to ordinary English. 'It seems to me that Fred and others are nuts and totally out of touch with reality', 'It seems red, but I know it is blue', and 'It seems to me that Woods was honest' are all utterances we can make sense of without assuming that for these to be true, the speaker has to be in some unique kind of state (p. 46). Thus, if philosophers are using these words in their ordinary meaning, this use cannot provide support to Centrality.

Perhaps philosophers have developed their own use of 'intuition'-talk, and are simply not using these words in the way of ordinary English? Although that is arguably true for some philosophical usage, it does not help Centrality. Insofar as philosophy has introduced 'intuitive' or 'intuition' as a technical or theoretical term, its introduction was a failure. As Cappelen argues in Chapter 3, there just seems to be a spectacular amount of disagreement about how to define 'intuition', what cases would be paradigmatic for its extension, and what should be its theoretical role. This indicates that the use of

'intuition' in philosophy is defective, which calls for a charitable reinterpretation of that defective discourse. Chapter 4 provides examples of cases where it is either possible to just drop 'intuitively' without loss, and other cases where it is just used as a hedge, viz. those uses where it indicates a judgment or understanding reachable on little effort and reasoning, and those cases where it qualifies a judgment or understanding as pre-theoretic or in the common ground prior to inquiry. Besides some complicated mixed-cases, these reinterpretations fit Cappelen's chosen examples, and of course, none of these re-interpretations are supportive of Centrality either.

In Chapter 5, Cappelen discusses whether a philosopher who has established that not-p is obliged to explain away other philosophers' intuition that p. Cappelen also here arrives at a negative result. If 'intuition' in philosophical usage means what it seems to mean up to now (characterizing a judgment as not properly reflected, or pre-theoretic, or not fully accurate), then there is obviously no obligation to explain recalcitrant intuitions away.

Perhaps, though, looking for philosophers' usage of 'intuition' and 'intuitively' is the wrong approach. Maybe Centrality is rather supported by philosophical *practice*: if we just looked at how philosophers argue for their claims, we would see that they ultimately rely on intuitions as evidence. This is the argument that is at the center of Part II. In chapter 6, Cappelen begins this discussion with characterizing 'methodological rationalism' (MR), an account of philosophical activity that seems to be presupposed by both, friends and foes of intuition-based methodology (p.98). It implies a picture of what mainstream analytic philosophers are doing, a practice which is then defended by authors like Bealer, Bonjour, and Platinga, and attacked by authors like Stich and Weinberg, Kornblith or Goldman. The picture that MR implies has the following components:

- P1:** Intuitive judgments are mental states (or events) with a distinctive etiology or phenomenology or both.
- P2:** Intuitive judgments are at the center of philosophical argumentation – in particular they are essential to the method of cases.
- P3:** Intuitive judgments about cases are treated as having a kind of [...] default justification.
- P4:** Philosophers assume that it is because intuitions have this privileged status that they can provide the foundation of the method of cases, and this method can be at the core of philosophical inquiry. (p. 105-106)

Chapter 7 develops diagnostics for telling whether these claims about philosophical practice are adequate. Cappelen identifies three features that proponents of Centrality seem to find characteristic for appeals to intuition, and discusses the intricacies involved in applying these features as diagnostic tools. The features are

F1: Seem True/special phenomenology. [A]n intuitive judgment has a characteristic phenomenology.

F2: Rock. [I]ntuitive judgments serve as a kind of rock bottom justificatory point in philosophical argumentation. [...]

F3: Based solely on conceptual competence. [A] correct judgment that p counts as intuitive only if it is justified solely by the subject's conceptual or linguistic competence [...]

Obviously, telling for a given philosophical text, argumentation, or debate whether it contains central judgments that instantiate these features is tricky. How to tell whether a judgment is supposed to have special phenomenology, unless the author explicitly says so? Does the occurrence of a chain of reasoning from p to q in a text establish that q does not have Rock-status, or could it be that this chain of reasoning is an abductive argument for p , after all? etc. But Cappelen does an excellent, very careful job in surveying the direct and indirect evidence that might speak for or against the instantiation of these features.

Chapter 8 then turns to case studies. Cappelen discusses ten puzzle cases from influential philosophical papers, that (with a few exceptions) mainly have in common that our initial 'intuitive' judgments about the case seem unsatisfactory, and then lead to the development of a philosophical theory that can deal with the case in a more satisfactory way. These cases include, for example, John Perry's messy shopper, Judith Jarvis Thomson's trolley cases, Bernard Williams' torture case, Tyler Burge's arthritis case, etc. Of course, in these texts, the initial intuitions about the case do not have Rock-status, presumably lack special phenomenology, and the relevant judgments at the beginning and then end of these discussions do typically not stem from a mere application of conceptual competence.

Cappelen's selection of cases is odd, if one is familiar with the literature on thought experiments, which would treat these cases as outliers (since they are 'thought experiments' that only seem to serve a certain heuristic function, and thus do not lead to the interesting

epistemological problems in accounting for how thought experiments can produce new knowledge all by themselves). Cappelen mainly ignores this literature. What might justify Cappelen's choices is the fact that experimental philosophers as well as many methodological rationalists are likewise not very careful when characterising 'the method of cases', suggesting that every discussion of a hypothetical case already counts as an instance of that method.

In chapter 9, Cappelen addresses these (and related) concerns, like (to paraphrase) 'Why didn't you look at thought experiments that provide counterexamples?' (p. 195), or 'Why did you ignore the work done on the logical reconstruction of various types of philosophical thought experiments?' (p. 197), etc. Unfortunately, Cappelen's replies are not very convincing here. He seems to overlook that the epistemic status of such counterexamples in philosophy is often *prima facie* problematic (p. 196), while it is for this reason that intuition as a justifier for certain modal judgments gained any respect in the first place. (It is here where all that work was done on the conceivability/possibility-inference and the role of intuitions in modal epistemology.)

Cappelen also overlooks that the point of formal argument-reconstructions is precisely to identify which premises in these arguments seem to have a problematic status. Since he ignores this work, he ends up with a lot of cases in which the 'intuitive judgments' about the hypothetical cases do not have these problematic roles. This is unfortunate, since it leaves friends of Centrality with a loophole that could have been closed by a better selection of examples. The last part of chapter 9 explains how Cappelen sees his work in relation to Timothy Williamson's.

Williamson's work also plays a central role in Chapter 10. Here Cappelen argues that one cannot make a better case for Centrality even if one restricts one's philosophical aspirations to conceptual analysis. The most convincing argument in this chapter seems to be that this move would not work because there are no conceptual truths (as Williamson has supposedly shown). That this chapter leaves the reader overall a bit unsatisfied is due to the fact that a lot has been written recently on the possibility and function of conceptual analysis, and it is simply impossible to do justice to this discussion on fourteen pages.

The last chapter then turns to experimental philosophy. If Centrality is false, experimental philosophy must be a huge mistake. If intui-

tions do not play a role in philosophy in the way that Centrality suggests, then knowing what intuitions non-philosophers have, and knowing how intuitions (including those of philosophers) might be influenced by various factors, is simply irrelevant for philosophy. Experimental philosophy seems to be attacking a mere strawman.

Although I believe this is largely right, it leaves at least those sympathetic with experimental philosophy with another puzzle. I do not think that for philosophers like, for example, Stephen Stich, the main motivation for engaging in experimental philosophy is a false belief in Centrality. I think that Centrality is their mistaken *diagnosis* of what is wrong with mainstream analytic philosophy. Learning now that Centrality is false, will probably not convince Stich that analytic philosophy is doing fine, after all. But if it is not Centrality, then what is wrong with analytic philosophy for people like Stich, Weinberg, Machery, etc.?

Cappelen's book is a wonderfully clear, largely well-argued case against a central assumption of many contemporary metaphilosophers. As I indicated in the beginning paragraphs, it makes the prospect of a general metaphilosophy look very dim. However, I think there are two topics that metaphilosophers can still engage in, even if Centrality is false.

Firstly, as I noted above, there is the interesting question of the form and function of 'thought experiments' in philosophy and other sciences, which, as metaphilosophers have argued, instantiate similar structures and serve similar functions across inter-philosophical and even interdisciplinary boundaries. Even if what role 'intuition' plays in them is perhaps not a terribly interesting question (as I agree), studying their form and function might nonetheless inform us about the methodology of philosophy in general.

Secondly, Cappelen emphasizes that good meta-philosophy is usually done by good 'first-order' philosophers, reflecting on the methodology for solving their problems. I think this is correct, but I also think that 'intuitions' of some sort (*viz.* dispositions to use and interpret expressions in certain ways) *do* play an important role in the methodology of certain areas of philosophy of language. Thus, even if Centrality is false, there might still be good first-order philosophical reasons to assign 'intuitions', of a more narrowly defined kind, crucial roles in certain areas of philosophy.

One last note: the whole book is poorly edited. There are too many spelling mistakes and the text formatting in places appears to be

totally random. This does not merely negatively affect the pleasantness of the reading experience, but sometimes also affects comprehension. I understand that the book addresses a 'hot topic' in contemporary philosophy, but I doubt that a day or two more for copy-editing would have significantly slowed down philosophical progress or lessened the interest in this publication. After all, this is a well-argued, interesting book, challenging contemporary metaphilosophy fundamentally; I highly recommend it.

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