

## The Failure of Hope as an Epistemic Standard

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Jonathan Weinberg (2007) attempted to show how to challenge intuitions empirically, without risking skepticism. In this paper, I raise several objections to his project. In the first section I will clarify and explain several terms. Specifically, what I mean when I use intuition in this paper and what Weinberg means by hopefulness. Clarification of these terms is essential to this paper, as both intuition and hopefulness have become somewhat muddled terms in recent literature. In the second section I will reconstruct Weinberg's argument against philosophers' appeals to intuition. Weinberg aims to show that philosophers' appeals to intuitions are epistemically hopeless –i.e., not sensitive to its errors and hard to correct for its errors. In the third section, I will raise objections to hopefulness as an epistemic standard and to his evaluation of how perception does on the standard of hopefulness. In the fourth section I will explore how Weinberg could respond to these objections, and I will respond to the potential responses. Weinberg's argument against intuitions as a source of evidence fails in showing that hopefulness is a necessary and correct epistemic standard for putative sources of evidence, because if correct, it results in full-blown skepticism.

### **I. Clarification of Terms**

When I use the word *intuition* in this paper, I mean in George Bealer's (1992) sense of intellectual seemings. I take *intellectual seemings* to mean a kind of conscious episode where some proposition intellectually appears to be the case. These intellectual seemings are distinct from perception, explicit inferences, memory, and physical intuitions. When you consider DeMorgan's laws, though at first they may not seem either true or false, eventually, something 'clicks', and they strike you as obviously true. That's an intellectual seeming, but the idea that a house undermined will fall, is a physical intuition (Bealer 111). When I use the word *intuition*, I also do not mean a hunch. Bealer gives the example of a man randomly guessing which hand of mine I hold a coin in. The random man might have a hunch that it is in my right hand, but he does not have the kind of conscious episode that we describe as an intuition. After I open my hands to show him, it will be obvious that the coin is in my left hand (perceptually obvious, not like an intuition). So, not all non-inferential judgments are intuitions (Bealer 112). I take Jonathan Weinberg (2007, 320) to mean something similar, as he calls intuitions "Intellectual happenings in which it seems to us that something is the case without arising from or inferring it from any reasons that it is so." He does not go on to spell out what he means by *intuition* as clearly as Bealer does, but the definition I offer above is the one that will be used in this paper.

Weinberg argues that intuitions are hopeless. Weinberg defines *hopeful* like so: “[A source of evidence] is hopeful to the extent that we have the capacity to detect and correct for its errors.” And he defines *hopeless* devices as “devices that lack an appropriate sensitivity to their errors, and capacity for correction when such errors are found” (ibid, 327).

Weinberg gives four necessary conditions for a source of evidence to be hopeful: (1) external corroboration, (2) internal coherence, (3) detectability of margins, and (4) theoretical illumination. The first criterion is external corroboration. Weinberg gives our five senses as an example here, as each sense can corroborate another sense, and “our senses can be corroborated by our more theory-mediated predictions about the world” (ibid, 325). The second criterion is internal coherence. He explains internal coherence as: “in terms of agreement both within and across subjects” (ibid, 325). In other words, using the same method should return the same results across subjects and time. The third criterion is detectability of margins. In order for a source of evidence to meet this condition, it must be true that “the practice is sensitive to the conditions in which the device is less likely to give good results” (ibid, 325). It seems he means that it will be clear when the source is working well and is appropriate to use, and clear when it is not working well and inappropriate to use. He offers vision as an example, as when a room is dark, it is clear to us that our eyes are not functioning well. Darkness is a margin for our visual perception, as is dazzling brightness, fog, and other things that obscure our vision. The fourth and final criterion is theoretical illumination. In order for a source of evidence to be hopeful, we must have a scientific account of how a source of evidence works. Before moving on, Weinberg clarifies that often, hopefulness does “not always come from intrinsic aspects of the source of evidence itself, so much as from the particular practices of using it” (ibid, 325). So, Weinberg’s concern is not so much that intuitions themselves are hopeless, just the way in which philosophers use them.

## **II. The Alleged Hopelessness of Philosophers’ Appeal to Intuition**

Weinberg’s view is that we cannot appeal to our intuitions as a source of evidence, especially, “when the intuitions are participating in practices that are hopeless, lacking any substantive means of error-detection and error-correction” (ibid., 339). I take this to be Weinberg’s thesis. He aims to show that we cannot trust our philosophical appeals to intuition because the way in which we appeal to our intuitions is hopeless. I think Weinberg gives the following main argument in his paper:

- 1) If a source of evidence is hopeless, then we should not trust that source of evidence.
- 2) Intuitions, as used by philosophers, are hopeless.
- 3) Therefore, we cannot trust our intuitions in philosophy.

He gives several sub-arguments for each premise that I will detail below. First, I will motivate premise (1), the inference from a source of evidence being hopeless, to our obligation to distrust such sources. Weinberg argues that if a source is hopeless, then we do not know how to use the source carefully, making ourselves more prone to error. Weinberg also worries that hopeless sources of evidence do not have a clear-cut way of resolving disagreements, making intractable problems in such a field more likely. He further argues that hopefulness is already a part of the epistemic standards governing science. He claims, “Indeed, it is science’s capacity to catch and moreover learn from its mistakes that some have taken to determine the dividing line between science and pseudoscience” (Ibid., 328). He continues to say that since perception has such a wonderful track record of making predictions and being reliable, we ought to look to it for norms governing the use of evidence. I think his argument for premise one has the following form:

- a) If certain sources of evidence are more reliable than other sources of evidence, then we should try to use only the more reliable sources of evidence.
- b) Hopeful sources of evidence are more reliable than hopeless sources of evidence.
- c) So, we should use only hopeful sources of evidence.

I take the inference from c) “we should use only hopeful sources of evidence” to 1) “If a source of evidence is hopeless, then we should not trust that source of evidence” to be straightforward.

Now let’s turn to Weinberg’s argument for his second premise. The second premise, recall, was that “intuitions, as used by philosophers, are hopeless.” First, he thinks that philosophers’ appeals to intuition do not meet his third criterion. That is, we lack a clear sense of the appropriate margins of intuitions. Weinberg claims, “We currently possess no standard reporting procedures for registering any degrees of tentativeness or certainty with intuitions” (ibid., 335). He argues that far-out thought experiments like Chalmers’s phenomenal zombies are too strange to be used as intuition pumps. It is unclear if these cases are beyond the scope of intuitions or not, so Weinberg claims that intuition fails this criterion.

Secondly, he finds philosophers’ appeals to intuition as a scientific grey area –i.e., we do not have an underlying neuro-psychological account of intuitions. This deficiency of intuitions does not meet his fourth criterion, theoretical illumination. Since we do not know about or have a working theory of where our intuitions come from, we cannot trust them. Weinberg argues that until we have a better understanding of how intuitions work, we should be careful of using them.

Third, he finds the recent experimental philosophy findings that people from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds have different intuitions regarding Gettier Cases troubling. He thinks that this lack of inter-subjective agreement indicates some kind of larger flaw in the practice of appealing

to intuitions. If intuitions were to be reliable sources of evidence like vision, Weinberg thinks that when using the same information and method, we ought to all have the same intuition.

Lastly, Weinberg objects to intuitions lack of external corroboration. He continues, “There simply may be no area outside of philosophy that really can speak to it.” He is worried that if we cannot check our intuitions against our other sources of evidence, then philosophers’ appeals to intuitions may run amok. If intuitions give us insight into content that other sources of evidence are unable to, then this seems to be an impossible standard for philosophers’ use of intuition to meet.

### **III. The Hopelessness of Perception**

Now we understand Weinberg’s four criteria that qualify for hopefulness and how philosophers do not meet this standard, I will argue that, contrary to Weinberg’s claims, perception does not meet these criteria either. And if this is the case, then we should not do away with using perception as a source of evidence, but rather we should reject Weinberg’s criteria that would lead us to doubt perception. These objections are meant to show that the four conditions for hope are too stringent and we ought to doubt the conditions for hopefulness. I aim to defend the following argument:

- i) If hopefulness as a standard for sources of evidence entails that we should be skeptical of our perceptions, then hopefulness as a standard for evidence is wrong.
- ii) Hopefulness as a standard for sources of evidence entails that we should be skeptical of our perceptions.
- iii) So, hopefulness as a standard for evidence is wrong.

Perception does not do any better on Weinberg’s second criterion—internal coherence—than intuition does. Recall that he defines internal coherence as “agreement both within and across subjects.” But there are many cases across the world where one subject seems to see one thing and another person seems to see something different, while looking at the same object. Imagine a case where Lucy and Jimmy are looking at the same red fire engine. Lucy sees the fire engine as red, while Jimmy sees the fire engine as rusty brown, as he is color-blind. Lucy and Jimmy disagree on what color the engine is, as their perception of the engine differs. It seems that in this case, that Lucy is right. The fire engine is red. We should not take the mere presence of disagreement as evidence that perception is hopeless. So, we need something beyond mere peer disagreement to not satisfy the condition of internal coherence. It is not clear that intuition does any worse on this criterion than the fire engine case. It is also not clear what degree of agreement we need a source of evidence to meet in order to satisfy the internal coherence standard. If it is less than 100 percent –i.e., a source of evidence does not have to internally cohere 100 percent of the time

and there is some acceptable degree of error-- which I think it must be, then we will have a hard time justifying any other number we pick. For example, if a source of evidence has to internally cohere 75 percent of the time, it will be hard to justify why we picked 75 percent and not 76 percent, 74 percent, or any other percentage. However if it is 100 percent, then perception cannot meet the condition of internal coherence. So, the skeptic about intuition must either get rid of both intuition and perception, or keep both.

Perception does not do any better on the third criterion, detectability of margins, than intuition. Recall that Weinberg defines detectability of margins like so: “the practice is sensitive to the conditions in which the device is less likely to give good results” (ibid, 325). Weinberg gives the example of how our vision is less clear in the dark than it is in the day. But from this, does it really follow that we are good detectors of the margins of our senses? It often happens to a person that he thinks quite confidently that he had seen one thing, when really his eyes were faulty and he saw another thing. Imagine we are reliably misrepresented to by our senses. That is, we do not have direct, unmediated access to the external world. If this were the case, which seems *prima facie* plausible, we would not think that our perception was flawed to the extent that we would stop trusting it. Just because we sometimes know that our vision is less likely to be reliable, it does not follow that we will always know when our vision will be unreliable. This reveals the error in reasoning that Weinberg commits when he claims perception meets this condition of hope. If all of our senses were wrong or consistently misrepresented the external world to us, we would not be able to learn that from our senses alone. So, Weinberg does not show that perception meets the third criterion: detectability of margins, and in fact, it looks like perception does not meet this third criterion.

Our ability to detect the margins of efficacy of our intuitions is just as good as our ability to do the same with perception. Philosophers often use phrases like ‘I have a strong intuition that’ or ‘I do not have a clear intuition in this case’ to describe how clear on their intuitions are in a given case. In the same way, we often describe our perceptual experiences this way. When we do not have crystal clear intuitions, we should trust them less. This is the same principle that Weinberg says we should give our vision. Just as we should be skeptical of our vision in a dark room, we should be less reliant on these foggy intuitions. We do have the tools to expose the less clear intuitions built into the faculty of intuition. That is, we know when we have stronger, or less clear intuitions just by how the intuition strikes us.

Perception does not do well on the first criterion. The first criterion is external corroboration, which he describes as, “our senses can be corroborated by our more theory-mediated predictions about the world” (ibid, 325). It seems odd to claim that theory-mediated predictions should be understood as external corroboration to our senses. This is because not only are our theories and predictions about the external world largely, if not solely, informed by our observations and perception, but also because we

understand the results of these predictions via our perception. When we observe a correct prediction about the external world, we do so via our perception. So, to claim that these predictions are external to our senses seems wrong. It appears that the main way we corroborate our senses, is through our senses. This is no different from how we corroborate our intuitions with other intuitions.

Weinberg is correct in assessing our theoretical understanding of how intuitions work is not as complete as our understanding of how perception works, but it seems he is a bit bullish on how good our scientific accounts are, especially of vision. The “Hard Problem of Consciousness” has led to lots of unanswered questions, specifically about how we end up with phenomenal experiences. Also, we have reason to doubt that perception does any better on his first three criteria than intuition. Perception clearly does better on the fourth criterion than intuition, but that is irrelevant. Below, I will explain why the fourth criterion is not a good epistemic standard.

We should not use theoretical illumination as a criterion. Before we had a coherent, well-fleshed-out scientific account of how our vision and other senses worked, we had to use these senses to develop such an account. That is, we had to trust these senses as good sources of evidence before we had the account of how they worked. If it was permissible to trust perception before we had an account of it, intuition should enjoy the same status. In short, having a scientific account of something does not seem to be a necessary condition of a good source of evidence, as perception was a good source of evidence before we had the scientific account of how it worked. Furthermore, as many have pointed out, in rejecting the use of intuitions, Weinberg is using intuitions (Bealer 1992). Every inference he makes relies on intuition. The inference strikes him as obvious. If this is the case, then his argument might be self-defeating.

We ought to be skeptical that perception really does any better on the first, second, or third conditions for hopefulness than intuition does. This reveals to us that it is not perception and intuition we ought to be skeptical of, but of the standard –i.e., hopefulness. If perception really does not meet the conditions for hopefulness, we ought to get rid of hopefulness as an epistemic standard, not get rid of perception as a putative source of evidence.

### **V. Weinberg’s Response to my Objections and Conclusion**

In response to my first objection, that is, that perception is not 100% internally coherent, Weinberg might respond that a source of evidence is more hopeless the less internally coherent it is, and that he does not need to pick a sharp cutoff point. This might be right, but he has not shown, nor argued for perception being more internally coherent than intuitions. So, even if he avoids the specificity problem, he still must show that our perception is significantly more internally coherent than our intuitions. We have good reason to think that perception and intuition are not totally internally coherent.

Weinberg anticipates some of my objections and has responses ready. Specifically, he rejects my comparison of mathematical intuitions and philosophical intuitions. He concedes, “Logic and mathematics are excellent domains with hopeful intuitions” (ibid., 339). He continues to argue that we can trust these intuitions because they are regularly cross-checked by different sorts of intuitions. He is also willing to allow in intuitions regarding epistemic norms and justification, arguing “I am willing to place some confidence in our intuitions about the norms that govern justification, for example, because I expect that where we need to we can appeal to something outside of those intuitions themselves.” While Weinberg acknowledges the threat of self-defeat, as his argument at least partially relies on epistemic intuitions, it is not clear he has saved it from the self-defeat problem. Every single inference Weinberg makes relies on intuition. It does not seem that those are the same intuitions as the ones that govern justification. This point also narrows the domains of intuitions under attack. So, Weinberg thinks that we can trust our mathematical, logical, and epistemic intuitions as evidence because they are all checked by either other intuitions or other ways of inquiry. However, it is not very clear what type of external corroboration one could have for an intuition regarding the norms of justification, other than different intuitions.

This distinction between the intuitions he accepts as evidence and does not accept as evidence is fuzzy at best. What intuitions is Weinberg imagining that never come into contact with any other intuitions, or other types of inquiry? Our moral intuitions certainly corroborate one another. For example, I have a strong intuition that arbitrarily killing innocent people is wrong. I have other moral intuitions that corroborate this one, like the intuition that personhood is important, or that we should do just actions. These all seem like distinct intuitions, and they certainly corroborate one another. So, if this is what distinguishes trustworthy intuitions from dubious ones, I think we can comfortably use our moral intuitions as evidence. It seems that almost all of our appeals to intuitions corroborate one another in this sense.

Weinberg’s other option is to respond that yes, more than just logical, mathematical, and epistemic intuitions can be allowed to be used as putative sources of evidence, but stipulate that thought experiments such as Chalmers’s phenomenal zombies are bad not because they appeal to intuitions, but because they do not bring us clear intuitions. I think this is at the heart of Weinberg’s objection. He thinks lots of people use bad thought experiments that are outlandish and do not lead us to clear intuitions. This seems tenable, and he could still get a similar conclusion to what he originally argued for. This new standard would be about clarity. Weinberg could stipulate that good sources of evidence, especially intuitive sources of evidence must meet some level of clarity in order to be useful. Perhaps many contemporary philosophers violate this clarity condition, but it still does not seem that hopefulness is

savable. Clarity, that's where the action is. But, if that is the case, then Weinberg's project is misdirected, as hopefulness as an epistemic standard has little to say about clarity.

In conclusion, we have reason to be skeptical of premise one in his main argument. If hopefulness is the correct standard for a putative source of evidence, then we must cast equal skepticism on perception and intuition, as perception does no better than intuition on three of the four conditions. Furthermore, we have good reason to doubt theoretical illumination as a necessary condition for putative sources of evidence. This failure of hopefulness to save perception from skepticism suggests that the problem is the standard itself. It is not that we should doubt perception or intuition as sources of evidence, but we should doubt hopefulness as the principle that can distinguish putative and non-putative sources of evidence from one another.



## Works Cited

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