

“I just knew that!”: Intuitions as Scaffolded or Freestanding Judgements

A Commentary on Tim Bayne

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How reliable are intuitive or introspective judgments? This question has produced lively debates in two respective discussions. In this commentary I will try to show that the two phenomena of introspective and intuitive judgments are very closely related, so that the two separate philosophical debates about them can substantially inform each other. In particular, the intuition debate can profit from conceptual tools that have already been introduced to discussions about the reliability of introspection. Especially the distinction between scaffolded and freestanding judgements, which has been developed by [Tim Bayne & Maja Spener \(2010\)](#), can be used to more carefully investigate intuitions with respect to their epistemic reliability. After briefly applying this framework to some paradigm cases of “philosophically interesting” intuitions, I will come to the conclusion that most of these must be regarded as freestanding judgments and thus cannot play the role of reliable sources of evidence that they are supposed to play in some discussions in contemporary epistemology and methodology.

Keywords

Epistemic reliability | Experimental philosophy | Global pessimism | Local pessimism | Phenomenology of certainty | Philosophical intuitions | Scaffolded vs. freestanding judgments | Thought experiments

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1 Introduction

What is the evidential status of introspective mental states? Can they be used as a source of knowledge like other classical candidates, e.g. experimental data, induction, or visual perception? Over the last few decades these questions have been addressed in philosophy of mind and epistemology in particular.¹ While on the one

hand optimists consider the wide-ranging use of introspection in philosophical debates unproblematic, pessimists on the other hand are very skeptical about the same subject matter. But how far can their skepticism go? Is it really the case that introspective insights are not only sometimes misleading, but generally false? These are the questions underpinning Tim Bayne’s article “Introspective Insecurity”. Here Bayne argues that a total dismissal of introspection as a tool for gaining information about

¹ In fact, [Eric Schwitzgebel \(2008\)](#) points out that there is a new trend of relying on introspection, even though this method itself is not new and its disadvantages were pointed out with the failure of introspective psychology at the beginning of the 20th century (c.f. [Lyons 1986](#)).

one's own conscious states (global pessimism) would not only be tremendously hard to imagine, but is also not warranted by the arguments raised in favour of that position. What these pessimistic arguments show, however, is that not all kinds of introspection can be used without thorough examination of their truth-tracking capacities. The resulting milder form of skepticism is what Bayne calls local pessimism. This distinction is what I consider Bayne's most important contribution to the introspection debate, because it helps to avoid an overhasty dismissal of a source of information that is used widely, not only in theorizing, but also in everyday life. He points out that what the global skeptic is missing is the idea that there are different kinds of introspective judgments, where not all are equally insecure. To distinguish between more secure cases of introspection and less secure ones, Bayne emphasizes a distinction introduced by him and his colleague Maja Spener in their paper [Introspective Humility \(2010\)](#), namely that of scaffolded versus freestanding judgments. While scaffolded judgments about one's introspective states are quite reliable, because their contents match closely with the contents of the non-introspective processes at work (e.g., visual experience), freestanding judgments lack this sort of reliability due to their abstract character. Simply put, the contents of freestanding judgments lack the close connection to what one wants to find out about the world or one's own mental states.

Another prominent, but also controversial candidate for being an epistemically useful source of evidence is intuition. Much like in the case of introspection, there is a large debate about the reliability and usefulness of intuitions in philosophical theorizing. This debate not only concerns epistemology and philosophy of mind, but also methodology, since many people claim that what philosophy does at its core is conceptual work on the basis of our rational (or conceptual) intuitions ([Bealer 1997](#); [Goldman 2007](#)). In the last few years, however, this idea of how to do philosophy has been harshly criticized from many different perspectives. While proponents of the fairly new project called experimental philosophy have tried to investigate the reliability of intuitions by con-

ducting survey studies collecting lay intuitions ([Weinberg et al. 2008](#); [Knobe 2007](#)), others have even gone so far as to argue that we do not use any intuitions at all in philosophical theorizing ([Cappelen 2012](#)). In any case, it is still open to debate whether intuitions can be used as reliable sources of evidence or not. Here I will first argue that this debate can be substantially informed by Bayne and Spener's idea of scaffolded versus freestanding judgments; this will be referred to as the Scaffolded vs. Freestanding Intuitions Thesis (SFIT). I will try to show that this is the case by highlighting some close connections and similarities between intuitions and introspection. Second, I will argue that in fact intuitions are often made accessible to the debates by introspection, namely in form of introspective insight about one's own private concepts.² This will be called the Introspection of Private Concepts View (IPCW). Thereafter I will make my third claim, namely that many intuitions, at least those relevant in the debates in epistemology and methodology, are best regarded as freestanding judgments and thus should not count as reliable sources of evidence in philosophical debates. This third and last claim will be what I call the Unreliable Freestanding Intuitions Thesis (UFIT). As in the case of introspection, a total dismissal of intuitions is not (yet) warranted, but neither is their wide-ranging use in contemporary methodology. By applying Bayne's framework, i.e., the distinction between scaffolded vs. freestanding judgments, to the phenomenon of intuitive judgments, I will try to use this new conceptual tool to find a possible answer to the question of which kinds of intuitions are trustworthy and which should not be considered as reliable in philosophical debates.

2 Some connections and similarities between intuition and introspection

If one takes a look at the literature on introspection, one can find many metaphors that are derived from visual perception, i.e. that describe

² While in this commentary I will only concentrate on the influence of introspection on intuitive judgments, it is also worth noticing that both phenomena can also influence each other in the opposite direction. One factor that makes introspective insights feel so reliable at first glance is their intuitiveness. This would be a case in which intuition influences introspection.

the phenomenon as a sort of peering into one's own consciousness,³ as well as direct comparisons with visual perception, i.e., stating that the evidential status of introspection is or should be on a par with seeing the outside world. For example, in his depiction of the central idea behind optimism towards introspection, Bayne says that:

Roughly speaking, to regard introspection as able to *reveal* the phenomenal character of one's conscious states is to have an optimistic attitude towards it. (Bayne [this collection](#), my italics)

Or take Schwitzgebel, who, in his arguments against the accuracy of introspection, assesses the phenomenon by the standards of visual perception:

Does introspection reveal it to you *as clearly as visual observation* reveals the presence of the text before your eyes? Can you discern its gross and fine features through introspection as easily and confidently as you can, through vision, discern the gross and fine features of nearby external objects? (2008, my italics)

If one compares this to intuitions, one can see that they are treated in almost the same way. Here, the most prominent historical root of this equal treatment of not only intuitions and perception, but also intuitions and introspection, might be the work of John Locke, who at the beginning of the fourth book of his [Essay Concerning Human Understanding](#) states that all knowledge is at its core introspective and intuitive and can thus be regarded as the perception of agreement or disagreement between two ideas:

Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but *the perception of connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*. In this alone it consists.

³ A further hint at the equal treatment of introspection is the Latin origin of the term 'introspicere', which can be translated as 'to examine' or 'to look into'.

Where this Perception is, there is Knowledge, and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess, or believe, yet we always come short of Knowledge. (1975, p. 525, italics in the original)

But contemporary discussions concerning intuitions also suggest a similarity to perception. Take for example this short description by Ernest Sosa:

Intuition gives us *direct insight* into the general and abstract. (1998; my italics)⁴

For George Bealer, who is maybe the most radical proponent of an intuition-based philosophical methodology, the two phenomena are so closely related that he mentions them both as equal sources of evidence in philosophical theorizing:

So in this terminology, the standard justificatory procedure counts as evidence, not only *experiences, observations*, and testimony, but also intuitions. [...] When one has an intuition, however, often one is *introspectively aware* that one is having that intuition. On such an occasion, one would then have a bit of *introspective evidence* as well, namely, that one is having that intuition. (1997, my italics)

This similarity in the way of speaking about the two phenomena and their obvious entanglement in the debate about what counts as evidence⁵ gives us information about the explananda themselves. Both intuition and introspection can be consciously experienced by the subject that uses them to make a judgement.⁶ Furthermore, they are judged to be epistemically unproblematic, because the subject has direct access to them.

⁴ Here again the Latin origin 'intueri', which can be translated as 'to view' or also as 'to examine', underlines not only the folk psychological connection between intuition and perception but also the similarity between introspection and intuition.

⁵ For a general discussion of what counts, or should count as evidence, see [Williamson \(2007\)](#).

⁶ This does not mean that one always deliberately introspects or intuits. This would be trivially false ([Sosa 1998](#)). What is meant is that one can in principle guide one's attention to the relevant mental state if necessary.

A good example is a classical Gettier-style intuition, such as “It *simply seems to me* that the person in that scenario does know that she is getting the job” (Gettier 1963). Not only the immediate reaction to Gettier cases, but also the way in which Gettier’s conclusion (i.e. that his thought experiments show that justified true belief does not sufficiently describe knowledge) were widely accepted among philosophers indicates that intuitive judgements are treated as unproblematic and reliable. The same holds for introspective judgements that do not only occur in philosophical debates but also in everyday-life belief formation. An example of such a belief could be expressed by a sentence like: “I surely can’t be mistaken in believing that I am consciously experiencing a red object in front of me at this very moment.” In the same way as in the case of intuitions, the results of introspection do not seem to require further questioning. In short, the act of introspecting something and the act of intuiting something both have a phenomenal aspect that makes them appear epistemically secure. In the course of this commentary this aspect will be referred to as a phenomenology of certainty.⁷ In fact, I would say that this phenomenal aspect is the reason why the introspection as well as the intuition debate are as controversial as they are. Both phenomena come at first glance with a seeming of epistemic security (or even infallibility), and only after close examination are some insecurities revealed. This phenomenology of certainty, however, does not immediately show that intuitions and introspection inform a subject securely about the truth of a matter. My introspective judgment about the what-it-is-likeness of understanding a sentence in a foreign language or my intuitive judgment about whether a person has knowledge or not are always in need of further justification. It would be a very hasty step to go from the phenomenology of certainty to full-fledged certainty (Metzinger & Windt 2014).

7 It is important to notice that the “phenomenology of certainty” presupposes a “phenomenology of knowing”. This is best regarded as the “phenomenology of knowing that one knows”. For my purposes here the “phenomenology of knowing”, though important, is not the interesting phenomenal aspect of intuitions or introspective insights. I hold the “phenomenology of certainty” far more interesting, because I think that it is that phenomenology that leads to the strong sense of infallibility of intuitive, as well as introspective judgments.

So then what can the two phenomena inform a subject about? The least controversial description of what introspective states are would be along the lines of (Schwitzgebel’s description:

A word about ‘introspection’. I happen to regard it as a species of attention to currently ongoing conscious experience, but I won’t defend that view here. The project at hand stands or falls quite independently. Think of introspection as you will—as long as it is the primary method by which we normally reach judgments about our experience in cases of the sort I’ll describe.⁸ (2008)

Thus construed, introspection mainly informs a subject about the qualitative aspects of her experience. Simply put, what we do when we introspect is to pay attention to the what-it-is-likeness of our experience.⁹ This aspect of experience, however, is extremely subjective and private. It is (if even possible) not easy to arrive at scientifically informative generalizations¹⁰ from such subjective data.¹¹ What is needed to secure information of that kind is the right kind of embeddedness in other, more secure ways of gaining knowledge about a subject matter. Such judgments about a subject’s experience are what Bayne and Spener, at least by the way I understand them, refer to as scaffolded judgments (2010; Bayne this collection). For ex-

8 The cases he describes in that paper are from the same domains of experience that Bayne discusses in his article for this volume namely emotion, visual perception, and cognitive phenomenology.

9 Note that due to restrictions of space I will cover only, the most relevant interpretation of introspection, which can be described as a sort of inward perception. The word “perception” here is to be read in a metaphorical way. It is not meant to express a commitment to something along the lines of a higher-order perception view on introspection (Güzeldere 1995). Rather this inward “perception” can be understood as kind metacognition that helps a subject to conceptualize her own experiences. For a more detailed distinction between different kinds and qualities of introspection, see Metzinger (2003, p. 35).

10 Though this might not be a problem for relying on introspection in the case of perception, it becomes more pressing when it comes to using introspective data to inform epistemology or methodology.

11 A further methodological problem that needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that when collecting data about introspective or intuitive states one has to rely on a subject’s report about the relevant mental state. This can be a possible source of contamination, which makes an investigation of the phenomena even more difficult (Cummins 1998).

ample, my introspective judgment about my red experience is not exhaustively justified by itself, but by the close match of the content of my introspective state and the non-phenomenal aspects of my visual observation. Only then can introspection play an evidential role,¹² and thus contribute to knowledge about one's own conscious states. But what if there is no such match? If introspection is concerned with more abstract contents, like, for example, the basic structures of intentionality or thought in general, the lack of embeddedness at least increases the insecurity of the judgment and thus makes it an unreliable source of knowledge. Judgments of that kind, again following Bayne and Spencer, are called freestanding judgments.

Let us now turn to intuitions. What are intuitions about? First of all, it is important to say that not all kinds of intuitions are relevant to philosophical debates. Cases of intuitive controls on a smartphone, for example, are not at the core of the debate. What is meant by philosophically interesting intuitions can be most appropriately expressed by the term conceptual intuition. In short, intuitions in a philosophically relevant sense are judgments that are shaped by the concepts a person has of some subject matter or phenomenon. Usually those intuitions are tested by conducting thought experiments in which a case is described that should (or should not) fulfil all necessary and sufficient conditions of a concept. Then one is supposed to take that very concept and check if it applies to the case (or not). This is why Alvin Goldman also refers to philosophical intuitions as “application intuitions” (2007). Probably the most prominent examples of such intuition-testing thought experiments are Gettier cases. Going back to Edmund Gettier's famous paper, Gettier cases describe scenarios in which a person appears to lack knowledge, despite the fact that the classical conditions for having knowledge, namely, having a justified true belief, are met (1963). But can these conceptual intuitions in fact inform us about what knowledge is in general, or do those cases simply inform us about our personal concepts? Findings from the

fairly new field of experimental philosophy, though highly controversial (Cullen 2010), indicate that conceptual intuitions that have been treated as general intuitions, like those in Gettier cases, are in fact highly idiosyncratic, and thus it is still an open question whether they can lead to generalizations about the concept at hand (Alexander 2012).¹³ In other words, one could argue that conceptual intuitions are the reflections of a subject's *idiosyncratic history of concept acquisition* (Bieri 2007).

So intuitions—or more precisely their contents—reflect upon a person's individual, highly subjective concepts. Just like in the case of introspection (which has been shown to be very subjective as well), we need to investigate whether it is possible to move from those personal concepts to general claims about their contents in a reliable way.

I take all of the above-mentioned similarities between introspection and intuition to be sufficient for investigating the reliability of intuitions with conceptual tools and insights that have already been introduced and established to the introspection debate. Thus, I will in the next section try to clarify what counts as an epistemically reliable intuition by applying the distinction between scaffolded and freestanding judgments from the introspection debate to intuitions. In other words, I will investigate intuitions as scaffolded vs. freestanding intuitions (SFIT).

SFIT =_{Df} Due to the similarities between introspection and intuition, one can also distinguish between scaffolded and freestanding intuitions.

3 Philosophical intuitions as freestanding judgments

Before we examine whether philosophical intuitions are best understood as scaffolded or freestanding judgments, it will be helpful to

¹³ In addition to these findings, it is also an advantage of treating intuitions as reflections on personal concepts, because such a view is likely to be naturalized (Goldman 2007). Arguments from obscurity or empirical implausibility of the type that have been raised against other construals of intuition, such as Platonic insights into the laws of nature (Brendel 2004), can thus be avoided.

take a closer look at how intuitions are treated in philosophical theorizing. For this we go back again to the paradigm case of intuition-based philosophy: Gettier (1963) cases. The expected (and therefore long unchallenged) outcome of those thought experiments is that the person reflecting on the cases admits that they describe instances of justified true belief that at the same time fail to count as knowledge. How do we know they're not knowledge? We just know! Reflecting on that answer one can come to the conclusion that one has an intuition about the concept of knowledge. The next question that then needs to be answered is how a person arrives at that conclusion. I claim that this is done by introspection. As described above, introspection is best understood as the act of paying attention to one's conscious states of experience, or in other words about the phenomenal aspects of experience. In the case of an intuition, this phenomenal aspect would be the above-mentioned phenomenology of certainty. To summarize this, conceptual intuitions are reflected upon by introspecting on one's own concepts and their applicability conditions. This practice is what I call the Introspection of Personal Concepts View of Intuitions (IPCIV).

IPCIV =_{Df} Conceptual Intuitions are made accessible by introspecting one's own phenomenology of certainty towards the applicability of a certain concept.

Following IPCIV, this practice is then of course vulnerable to the same skeptical challenges that have been raised against introspection in general. How accurately can I introspect what constitutes my concept of knowledge? What about modal aspects like the necessity of a proposition? These questions can be made more accessible by thinking about intuitions in terms of scaffolded or freestanding judgments.

Again taking the Gettier intuition about knowledge, what makes this intuition, even though not universal, so astonishingly stable among Western philosophers? I argue that this is due to the close match between the content of the intuition (i.e. "She doesn't know!") and the rules that one learns about how to successfully use the concept of

knowledge in our cultural niche (i.e.: "Only ascribe knowledge if a person is justified in the right way to believe a proposition!").¹⁴ So in the context of Western philosophy, the intuitive judgment can be regarded as a scaffolded and thus reliable judgment. It is reliable because it is embedded in our conventional, everyday use of the word "knowledge".¹⁵ But what about knowledge in general, i.e., outside the context of Western culture? In that case, the content of the intuition, due to its personal character, would not match the context-free, abstract use of the concept of knowledge. The judgment would be a freestanding judgment and thus an unreliable source of evidence for making general claims about knowledge. This would perfectly fit the idea of intuitions as individually-acquired concepts and also explain findings from experimental philosophy, which indicate that intuitions are highly variable among different cultures (Weinberg et al. 2008). One could now argue that, even if I am correct about conceptual intuitions like those in Gettier cases, there are basic intuitions that are reliable. A candidate for such an intuition is presented by Bealer in the form of rational intuitions:

By contrast, when we have a rational intuition—say, if P then not not P—it presents itself as necessary: it does not seem to us that things could be otherwise; it must be that if P then not not P. (I am unsure how exactly to analyze what is meant by saying that a rational intuition presents itself as necessary. Perhaps something like this: necessarily, if x intuits that P, it seems to x that P and also that necessarily P [...].) (1997)

The reliability of such a basic intuition can also be accommodated in the terminology of scaffolded and freestanding judgments. Due to the close match between our intuition and the way

¹⁴ Surely this is a very simplified and rough description of concept acquisition. Further details should be empirically investigated, but due to limited space, and for and the purposes of my argument, this must suffice.

¹⁵ The scaffold here would be the proper use of a word or concept in its respective culture or context. Further, notice that it is also possible to have several types of scaffolding at the same time, like conceptual expertise (i.e. cases in which a person has a significant amount of background knowledge about special concept) plus the above-mentioned cultural scaffolding. For a defence of conceptual expertise, see Williamson (2011).

in which we learned to describe the world, in which it never is the case that p while simultaneously not p , we can regard that intuition as a scaffolded judgment. Concerning the intuition about the necessity of this intuited content, however, the personal character of intuitions again does not warrant the generalization. Statements about the modal status of the claim are perhaps secured by correctly applying the laws of logic (like in the above mention example of the principle of contradiction), but not by my personal intuition (Alexander 2012; Pust 2014). But even if this is true and thus if such basic intuitions are always reliable, it still needs to be shown by general optimists, concerning the reliability of intuitions, how this extends to more complex phenomena like those often discussed in the intuition debate (Cappelen 2012). I take the above-discussed cases of Gettier-intuitions and Bealer's rational intuitions as evidence that we should at least doubt that most intuitions that are taken as reliable sources of evidence are sufficiently scaffolded. Until this is shown I would advise that we stay skeptical and regard those intuitions as Unreliable Freestanding Intuitions (UFIT).

UFIT \equiv_{Df} Many intuitions that are treated as reliable sources of evidence in philosophical theorizing lack the right scaffolding and must thus be regarded as freestanding intuitions, which makes them epistemically unreliable.

4 Conclusion

In this commentary I have tried to show that the connections between introspection and intuitions are so profound that the debates about the two phenomena can inform each other substantially, and in particular how ideas from the introspection debate can help to clarify open questions in the intuition debate (SFIT). I have taken the idea of scaffolded and freestanding judgments from the introspection debate and applied it to that about intuitions. In so doing, I have tried to show that the wide-ranging skepticism about introspection also concerns intuitions, since many intuitions are investigated by

introspecting on one's phenomenology of certainty that typically accompanies intuitions, as well as introspection itself (IPCV). Bayne's introduction of the scaffolded versus freestanding judgments idea suggests that a global pessimism towards introspection is not warranted by the arguments that are raised by proponents of such a position. I hope to have shown that the same is true in the case of intuitions, which can also be reliable if they are embedded in the right context, or if concerning the basic structures of our experience. The question for further discussion has now become how big the scope of both scaffolded introspective and scaffolded intuitive judgments actually is. Is it possible to develop clear-cut criteria for when a content is sufficiently scaffolded? Must one draw further distinctions and introduce different kinds, or at least a gradual concept, of scaffolding? So far, applied to often very abstract epistemic targets in philosophy, my predictions for the scope of scaffolded judgments in the on-going debates are not very optimistic. I would advise that without further argumentation for the scaffolding of abstract intuitions they are best regarded as freestanding judgments (UFIT). I agree with Sosa when he says, about the skeptical challenges to intuitions: "If that sort of consideration is a serious indictment of intuition, therefore, it seems no less serious when applied to introspection [...]" (1998). The only difference might be that I hold this to be bad news for proponents of the widespread use of both phenomena, rather than a convincing defence of their general reliability.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Tim Bayne for his inspiring target article, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful suggestions and critical remarks. I would also like to thank Thomas Metzinger and Jennifer Windt for the opportunity to contribute to this collection.

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