

1. Evaluate the role of intuition in different areas of knowledge.
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*THE POWERS
AND PERILS OF
INTUITION*

PRESCRIBED TOPIC:

Evaluate the role of
intuition in different
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Theory of Knowledge

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THE POWERS AND PERILS OF INTUITION

*You don't know your own mind.*Jonathan Swift, *Polite conversation*, 1738.¹

We could compare intuition to a fishing trip. First there is a nibble, then we've got to hook the fish. Fine, but what is intuition exactly? James Van Cleve writes, *There is such a thing as just 'seeing' – by a kind of intellectual vision – that a proposition is true.*² *Seeing* of this sort is what many philosophers call intuition, but what we should consider is that in the very same situation different people have different intuitions and that *intuitive* is not always *rational*, just like *rational* is not always *sensible*. Shakespeare's Hamlet praised us as *noble in reason! ... infinite in faculties! ... in apprehension how like a god!*³ but, as Pascal insisted 3000 years ago, *no single truth is ever sufficient, because the world is complex. Any truth, separated from its complementary truth, is a half-truth.*⁴ With reference to different areas of knowledge we should distinguish between different types of intuition – or rather emphasize the way it can shape itself to fit the circumstances, talking about its relationship with reason and experience. Still, whatever is to be said, I do not expect to get it right – I merely hope to get it less wrong, since while pondering upon such vague a subject we make use of our intuitive, not rational knowledge. Now, are the intuitives' intuitions about intuition valid?

¹ Jonathan Swift, *Polite Conversation*, Hesperus Press Ltd, London, 2007.

² Ed. by J. Van Cleve, R.E. Frederick, *The Philosophy of Right and Left: Incongruent Counterparts and the Nature of Space*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1990.

³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Routledge, London, 2001.

⁴ ed. by Sergio Della Sala, *Tall tales about the mind & brain*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007.

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Let us consider one of the human sciences, economics. ⁵The classic principle of economics is Law of Supply and Demand, which states that if goods are in short supply and you need them, the price goes up. The conception is in a way intuitive, but here's a story picturing how far removed economic theory is from a common man's intuition. Now, the income of a taxi-driver depends on circumstances. On good days, with lots of passengers around, he will do well; on bad days, he won't. A rational taxi-driver will therefore work longer on good days and give up early on bad ones. However, a study of taxi-drivers in New York carried out by ⁶Colin Camerer shows the exact opposite. Taxi-drivers seem to aim to earn daily a specific sum of money, and stop working once they do so. Their intuition errs, because it is not accompanied by sufficient rational knowledge. Similarly, the acclaimed game theory⁷ talks about intuitive decisions in a setting where people are perfectly rational. In practice it rarely works, because people aren't perfectly rational creatures. That appears to be one of the cardinal sins of intuition; a cache of rational knowledge is needed to get it on the right track.

Still, Albert Einstein himself would hold that the only real valuable thing is intuition. In an essay *On the method of theoretical physics* he asks: *If...this axiomatic basis of theoretical physics cannot be extracted from experience but must be freely invented, can we ever hope to find the right way? Nay more, has this right way any existence outside our illusions?* ⁸The ultimate goal of a physicist is to arrive at those elementary laws using pure deduction, as there is no logical path to them. Many scientists dislike any reference to intuition because it suggests irrationality - they like to think that scientific achievement and scientific truth depend on reason alone. A nice strategy,

⁵ Terry Pratchett, Jack Cohen, Ian Stewart, *The Science of Discworld*, Ebury Press, London 2002.

⁶ Camerer, Colin F., *Engineering & Science (Taxi Drivers and Beauty Contests)*, No. 1, 1997.

⁷ Roger B. Myerson, *Game Theory: Analysis of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997.

⁸ Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It*, Citadel, New York 2001.

⁸ <http://www.modern-thinker.co.uk/1a%20-%20Reason%20and%20Intuition.htm>

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but it does not reflect the reality of the thinking process. Science does not have a theory that explains the characteristics of intuition, and yet, many great scientific discoveries relied heavily on intuitive insights. ⁹*The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes a leap in consciousness, call it Intuition or what you will, the solution comes to you and you don't know how or why.* A well-documented case of intuition concerns Frederick Kekule's discovery of the structure of benzene, prompted by a dream of a snake coiled and biting its tail. In an intuitive flash, Kekule realized that the molecular structure was characterized by a ring of carbon atoms. Now, we should consider, for instance, our knowledge that $2+3=5$ and that the interior angles of any triangle add up to 180° . ¹⁰These truths of mathematics are synthetic judgments, the sum of the interior angles is not contained in the concept of a triangle. Yet, clearly, such truths are known *a priori*, since they apply to all of the objects of our experience. The question is, how do we gain such knowledge? If experience does not supply the required connection between the concepts involved, what does? What comes to mind is that we do it ourselves, intuitively. And so: ¹¹*Let us learn to dream, gentlemen ... then perhaps we shall find the truth... but let us beware of publishing our dreams before they have been put to the proof by the waking understanding.*

One thing that can be established beyond reasonable doubt is that ideas brought forth by intuition have to be compatible with other intuitions, otherwise errors lurk somewhere. As proposed by Nietzsche, there are only perspectives of truth. Each person's truth will be constrained by his empirical experience. Intuition relates feelings to beliefs and desires. *When such beliefs are free of self-deception then intuition can be of a pure form; in this case we may use the term 'feeling of truth' rather than 'intuition.* Sadly, intuition is all too often coloured by existing prejudices. That is a standard problem we meet, for instance in ethics. Spiritual leaders are prone to

⁹ http://www.observatorul.com/articles_main.asp?action=articleviewdetail&ID=1853

¹⁰ <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/5f.htm>

¹¹ Kekule: quoted by Aaron J. Ihde, *The Development of Modern Chemistry*, Harper & Row, New York, 1964.

¹² <http://www.modern-thinker.co.uk/1a%20-%20Reason%20and%20Intuition.htm>

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claim that their truths are infallible. This is a misconception - all that is possible for the leader to access without error is the feeling of truth, not the cognition of truth. Even if at the level of his frame of mind intuition was to be reliable, he has to *try to enclose it within a conceptual boundary*: he has to put into words what he feels. Too bad - ¹³the words, even of the wise, are always merely parables.

¹⁴In history it seems commonplace that we have facts to work with, such as *there was a world war between 1939 and 1945*. However, a question should be asked how much of history is fact and how much interpretation. Since facts themselves are silent, the historian must *intuitively* interpret them. This suggests that we can never get past interpretation, intuitive knowledge, to the ultimate meaning or definitive account of the past. Consider, for instance, an art historian: by deciding to give the history of a painting, he or she presupposes implicitly that the work is *art* – not trash. However, deciding what is or is not art is far from simple. Intuitive decisions are made about what to include or exclude. Furthermore, we are used to hearing numerous claims like "I don't understand it." And "Can you explain it?" The problem is that one cannot understand art, explain art, or say why it is good or bad. Our familiarity with art can be enhanced by good writing on aesthetics, but this bears no relation to direct experience with the work. Too often the talk itself becomes the justification for the art. The public is pleased that it is all being explained to them, but they confuse the explanation with the art itself, thereby forcing the art to become an illustration for the explanation. ¹⁵*Art must be experienced intuitively, just as it is created*. Paul Gauguin himself revealed to have done his paintings as fantasy took him, as the moon dictated and we should follow in his footsteps. In contrast to other areas of knowledge, art demands no rational knowledge - in fact, it discourages it.

There is mystery in the dark heart of reason, a skeleton in all of our closets that we would prefer to keep hidden from the light of day - this is the justificatory status of intuition. Steven D. Hales argues in *The problem of intuition* for a stunning conclusion:

¹³ Franz Kafka, *On Parables, The Complete short stories*, Vintage, London, 1992.

¹⁴ <http://www.galilean-library.org/int18.html>

¹⁵ <http://newcrit.art.wmich.edu/plain/JGword.html>

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*appeal to intuition is justified only if there is at least one preposition whose justification depends on nothing other than itself.*¹⁶ Thus, should we assume that unless we can establish that some intuitions are justified, no area that provides non-empirical knowledge is credible? Come what may, intuition about empirical facts has got bad press because human beings turn out to be frequently in error about the natural world. The universe seems intuitively Newtonian to us, not relativistic. The *sun's* apparent motion through the sky is intuitively best explained by the hypothesis that it really does move relative to the stable Earth. The thesis that a benevolent creator is responsible for all the order and complexity has tremendous intuitive appeal. Yet ¹⁷*hypotheses generated by our empirical intuitions must eventually face the tribunal of experience, and all these plausible inferences have been laid waste by science.* However, we aren't limited to this sort of intuition. Philosophers' intuition is rational, not empirical. Instead of relying on experience, they test the intuitions against one another, and their logical consequences are drawn out and presented as evidence. Weaker, less rooted intuitions get trumped and ultimately eradicated.

Indeed, it may seem abstract, unreliable, even. Still, if you think about it, doesn't this statement hold true, or at least shouldn't it hold true, for all of the areas of knowledge – history, mathematics, art, ethics, natural sciences, human sciences? Ultimately speaking, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, if even reality seems to be a mere illusion? Regardless of the subject, we may distinguish between ¹⁸the knowledge of general truths and the knowledge of individual things; the former is to be associated with reason, the latter with intuition – *intuitively speaking.*

¹⁶ Stephen D. Hales, *The Problem of Intuition*, *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 84, No. 3 (March 1975).

¹⁷ Stephen D. Hales, *The Problem of Intuition*, *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 84, No. 3 (March 1975).

¹⁸ Spencer Carr, *Spinoza's Distinction Between Rational and Intuitive Knowledge*, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Apr., 1978).

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