

## The nature of rational intuitions and a fresh look at the explanationist objection

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In everyday language, we use the term “intuition” to refer to a broad range of phenomena.

[when a state of affairs strikes us immediately as plausible; when we suddenly have the unmistakable feeling that our judgment about something is correct, although we cannot say what it is based upon – like when we predict the development of weather patterns or of the stock market, or when we suddenly foresee some future event, such as the death of a close friend or the success of our job application; when we have a sudden insight or idea; when we respond to a question automatically by giving a memorized answer; when we know exactly how somebody feels, but can’t say how we know. Countless other examples could be added.]

In all these cases, we make an evaluation or judgment without being aware of any inference, perception or memory upon which the judgment is based. This is the criterion according to which most psychologists define “intuition.” Gopnik and Schwitzgebel write, for example: “we will call any judgement an intuitive judgement, or more briefly an intuition, just in case that judgement is not made on the basis of some kind of explicit reasoning process that a person can consciously observe” (Gopnik/Schwitzgebel 1998, p. 77). It is no surprise that psychologists who endorse this definition do not rate the epistemic value of intuitions all too highly. For one thing, intuitions in the everyday sense are not *source-specific*. A judgment whose source is unknown to us could have any one of a number of sources, e.g. memory, experience, background knowledge, wishful thinking, prejudices, guesswork or subliminal perception. The reliability of these sources varies so greatly that one can hardly call intuition as a whole reliable: there are simply too many irrational factors involved in the production of intuitive judgments. It would be equally false to say that intuitions in the everyday sense are independent of experience, or a priori, since – as I just mentioned – they are often covertly guided by perceptions, experiences or empirical background knowledge.

In the Rationalist tradition the attempt has been made to distinguish a philosophical concept of intuition from the everyday, source-unspecific concept. In this philosophical sense, intuitions are not spontaneously experienced judgments but a specifically Rationalist source of evidence. Intuitions are reasons that are characterized by the clear and distinct appearance of truth, and these reasons arise purely a priori. By and large, we say that understanding certain propositions is sufficient to cause an evidential state or clear and distinct insight into the truth, independently of empirical reasons.

[Some typical examples of such propositions would be:

- (1) Everything is necessarily identical with itself.
- (2) Something cannot have the property of being triangular and not have it.
- (3) No object can simultaneously be entirely red and entirely green.
- (4) 2 plus 2 necessarily equals 4.
- (5) If someone knows a proposition p and knows that p logically implies the proposition q, and thus deduces that q, then she necessarily knows that q.
- (6) If someone were in an area full of fake barn facades and, in clear view of the one real barn, made the justified, true judgment “That is a barn there,” then she would have no knowledge of this fact.

In these cases, philosophical intuition is directed at logical or epistemic principles and simple mathematic truths, but also concerns the evaluation of counterfactual instances that – as in (6) – are of fundamental importance as test cases in corroborating or impugning philosophical analyses.]

In all these cases, intuition refers to modal facts. The proponents of Rationalism also hold that modal intuitions are reliable and can justify the corresponding judgments a priori. Although

many Rationalists have also claimed that intuitions are infallible, this additional claim is inessential. Today there are hardly any Rationalists who would hold to the infallibility claim.<sup>3</sup>

Using George Bealer as a starting point, I am going to begin my talk by fending off a few objections to the philosophical concept of intuition as a source of evidence. Then I will address what is at present the most serious objection to intuitions as evidence, namely the explanationist objection. I will try to show that this objection cannot discredit the evidential value of philosophical intuitions.

## I

According to George Bealer, philosophical intuitions are “intellectual seemings.”<sup>4</sup> They are not judgments or beliefs, but conscious cognitive states with the same propositional content as the judgments based upon them. They differ from these judgments only in their propositional attitude. That, intellectually, it seems to me that p, is not the same as my belief that p. [The case of perception is quite similar. That, sensuously, it seems to me that p, does not mean that I believe that p. In a perceptual illusion, the perceptual experience persists even when I no longer believe in my perception because I know that it does not correspond to the facts. On the other hand, believing something does not suffice to make me perceive it with my senses.<sup>5</sup> For Bealer, sensuous evidence is analogous to intellectual seeming in that it is a conscious psychological state that is independent of judgment and has an intentional content. In both cases there is a kind of evidence that is independent of judgment. In other respects, of course, there is a disanalogy between perception and philosophical intuition. Perception has a non-conceptual intentional content, whereas intellectual seeming is obviously conceptual. And, of

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<sup>3</sup> The best defence of the compatibility of a priori justification and fallibility can be found in Casullo 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bealer 1998 and Bealer 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jackson’s critique of the epistemic analysis of perception.

course, both have different sources. In perception, it is the sense organs and the information they deliver that are decisive; in intellectual seeming it is only a matter of understanding the relevant proposition and the concepts it contains. After all, philosophical intuition is supposed to be an a priori kind of evidence.] So the decisive point for Bealer is that philosophical intuitions are independent evidential states. What is obviously true is that they (in contrast to the psychological concept of intuition) are not judgments or beliefs. This point can be illustrated especially clearly by paradoxes where we find various premises intuitively evident but discover that they yield a contradiction. Although we can no longer believe in all the premises, they nevertheless retain their intuitively evident character even in the absence of the corresponding belief. By the same token, beliefs are not automatically intuitively evident, no matter how firmly they may be held. I have calculated that the sum of 1256 and 768 equals 2054. I am firmly convinced of this, but I do not grasp its truth as intuitively evident in the same way that I grasp the truth of “ $2+2=4$ ” as intuitively evident. Thus, beliefs are neither necessary nor sufficient for philosophical intuitions.

It does not automatically follow, however, that intuitions are independent evidential states, i.e. intellectual seemings. This is demonstrated by Ernest Sosa’s suggestion that intuition be regarded as an inclination or attraction to the corresponding judgment.<sup>6</sup> Such an inclination could exist even when the judgment is not manifest. But the purely dispositional analysis of intuition is relatively implausible, since intuitions are conscious, whereas dispositions exist whether or not we are conscious of them. That is why Sosa introduces an additional condition: intuitions are inclinations to judge of which we are introspectively aware.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they are based solely upon an adequate understanding of the proposition. Phenomenologically, though, it is not immediately clear that inclination or attraction has a purely intellectual cause. So I

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<sup>6</sup> Cf, Sosa 1998 and Sosa Ms.

<sup>7</sup> Sosa 1998, p. 259.

would like to leave that aside for the moment. According to Sosa, intuitions are introspectively conscious inclinations to judge (if they are based solely upon an adequate understanding of the proposition). Sosa finds this analysis more plausible than Bealer's account of intellectual seemings because he does not think that this supposedly evidential foundation of the inclination to judge is phenomenologically demonstrable.<sup>8</sup> When we consider a proposition, an attraction to assent arises immediately.

As I see it, there are three objections to this analysis of philosophical intuition as an introspectively conscious disposition to judge. First, intuition itself seems to be just as episodic and conscious as the introspective judgment about it. If Sosa wants to do justice to this fact, he will have to assume that the disposition manifests itself, in which case judgment and intuition can no longer be distinguished.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, there is no phenomenological difference between a case where we feel inclined to a certain judgment because of a prejudice and one where we feel so inclined simply because we have understood a given proposition. The causal processes would in fact be different, but we would not grasp the difference introspectively. Nonetheless, we have the impression that there is a clear phenomenological difference between the two cases. And this difference can be explained very well by reference to the fact that there is an intellectual seeming in only one of the two cases, namely when the inclination results directly from understanding the proposition. The third objection is, in my view, the strongest. When I have the intuition that 2 plus 2 equals 4, this state of affairs itself strikes me as self-evident. In other words, intuitions have a transparent content. When something strikes me immediately as self-evident, then it also strikes me immediately that it is true. 2 plus 2 cannot yield anything other than 4. And since that is so, I usually believe that it is true. But I would not be characterizing this transparency of intuitive consciousness

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<sup>8</sup> Sosa, Ms., p.12: "No such state of awareness, beyond the conscious entertaining (of the proposition, T.G.) itself, can be found in intuitive attraction."

<sup>9</sup> That follows from definitional proposal (13) in Sosa 1998, p. 259.

accurately if, like Sosa, I said that I were in fact only intuitively conscious of a psychological fact, namely that I feel inclined to assent to the judgment. For Sosa there is no conscious state that is independent of the judgment and that has this transparent content. But only such a state could adequately explain the phenomenological facts and at the same time deliver an *explanation* of the inclination to judge – the existence of which can hardly be denied, although it is not basic. But why does the characteristic, evidential state of intellectual seeming elude our attention so easily? Probably because – unlike perception – intuition has the same kind of content as belief. That is what beguiles us into overlooking the fact that intuition is an independent evidential state.

Bealer, Sosa and Bonjour characterize the content of intuitions as necessary. So whenever I grasp something through rational intuition, I grasp that this fact is necessary.<sup>10</sup> This thesis seems too strong to me. A core group of central philosophical intuitions refers to the evaluation of counterfactual situations in which assumptions about necessary and sufficient conditions must prove themselves. We imagine a possible situation and ask whether the application of a given predicate (such as knowledge, justification, personal identity or freedom of the will) to this possible situation seems intuitively evident to us. We have the intuition, for example, that the believer in a Gettier-situation does not have knowledge, although we do not have the intuition that she *necessarily* has no knowledge in this situation.<sup>11</sup> Hence, rational intuitions have a modal content, but may not contain necessary facts.

[Could one perhaps even go so far as to claim that intuitions have no modal content at all but, rather, can be reduced to judgements about actual cases? Why can't we simply find exotic

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bealer 1998, p.207: “when we have a rational intuition (...) it presents itself as necessary: it does not seem to us that things could be otherwise (...)” For similar views, cf. also Bonjour 1998, p. 106-7, Sosa, Ms., p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> For a similar view, see Pust 2000, p.38.

examples in actual history or in distant parts of the actual world and look at our actual judgements in these cases?<sup>12</sup> This proposal, I think, underestimates the modal, counterfactual dimension of our intuitions. The method of cases serves does not only serve to undermine philosophical analyses of necessary and sufficient conditions by counterexamples but also may confirm it. If we only consider actual cases, as far-fetched as they may be, there is no way we can confirm conditions of necessity. Even if in the actual world all cases of justified true beliefs were cases of knowledge, that still could not confirm the thesis that justified true beliefs necessarily amount to knowledge. We could be dealing with a universal but contingent co-variation of two properties. So we have to consider as many possible scenarios as we can imagine and ask whether they are cases of knowledge or not. Hence, the evaluation of actual cases is not sufficient for our purposes. In fact, it is not necessary either, since the only thing that is of relevance for the philosophical analysis is what we *would* say if the situation *were* such-and-such. If, on the basis of the available data, we happen to have been mistaken about the actual facts – if, in other words, the situation turns out in fact not to have been as we had thought – that would not impugn the relevance of our evaluation for the philosophical analysis in the least. It is sufficient if the case is possible. In order to understand philosophical intuition, then, it is essential to take into account its modal, albeit not in all cases necessary, content.]

So let's assume that philosophical intuitions are independent evidential states in the sense of Bealer's intellectual seemings, and that they have at least a modal content. Bealer, Bonjour and Sosa go one step further in claiming an a priori, albeit fallible, status for this evidence. That is the step at which naturalists like Hilary Kornblith balk. It may well be, they say, that philosophical intuitions have a certain epistemic value. But, since scientific progress may necessitate their revision, they do not represent an ultimate authority. For naturalists, the

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<sup>12</sup> Williamson 2004 goes in this direction.

provisional epistemic value of intuitions can be explained by the fact that they are dependant upon our earlier empirical theories, although we cannot know that introspectively. Intuitions are, as it were, the platitudes of yesterday's empirical background theories.<sup>13</sup>

But the phenomenological facts oppose this general suspicion. If intuitions were only the platitudes of yesterday's theories, they would in principle have to be conservative. Our received worldview should suffice to explain them. But, interestingly enough, our intuitions often yield counterexamples to the traditional analysis of a phenomenon. Gettier-like counterexamples to our traditional conception of knowledge demonstrate that especially well, as do the Frankfurt-scenarios, which contradict the traditional view that moral responsibility implies the existence of alternate possibilities to act or decide. In such cases, we have revolutionary intuitions that contradict our traditional worldview.<sup>14</sup>

But intuitions do not have to be revolutionary in order to demonstrate their independence from background knowledge. In many cases, we have intuitions even in areas in which we possess no knowledge whatsoever.<sup>15</sup> The slave Menon is probably the primordial case of intuitive acquisition of mathematical knowledge. This impression becomes all the more firm when one recalls that philosophical intuitions have a modal content and have something to say about remote counterfactual situations and, indeed, all possible worlds. It may be that modal knowledge can to some extent be extrapolated from empirical theories, but it seems unlikely to me that all our modal intuitions could ultimately be empirical, i.e. based on knowledge about the actual world.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Kornblith 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Williamson 2005, p.128 draws attention to this non-conservative dimension of our intuitions.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. also Bealer 1998, p.209.



[Williamson (in Williamson 2005) considers the possibility that our usual (i.e. empirical) ability to make counterfactual judgments is sufficient to account for the essentially counterfactual dimension of some counter-examples. He is thinking here above all of counter-examples that bring the metaphysical possibility of particular cases into play. Williamson suggests understanding the metaphysical necessity of A such that for any proposition p: if p were the case, then A ( $\Box A = \text{Def.}:\forall p(p \Box \rightarrow A)$ ). Accordingly, the metaphysical possibility of A would be understood such that there is at least one proposition p such that it is not true that if p were the case, A would be false ( $\Diamond A = \text{Def.}:\exists p \neg(p \Box \rightarrow \neg A)$ ). If this is right, Williamson thinks, we can base our judgments about metaphysical modalities epistemologically upon usual counterfactual judgments. But, as I see it, our empirically based competency to make counterfactual judgments does not get us all that far. It just so happens that our background empirical knowledge does not enable us to say whether A would or would not be that case if p described a situation that were very remote from our actual situation. Hence, we could not justify (but only, in the best case, refute) metaphysically necessary propositions in this manner, nor could we refute (but only, in the best case, justify) metaphysical possibilities. So I contest that our empirical ability enables us to recognize Williamson's counterfactual basis for reduction of modal judgments. Moreover, Williamson's analysis commits him to saying that we can only recognize necessary truths inductively through counterfactual evaluation of arbitrarily many scenarios. Phenomenologically, though, it seems that we grasp the necessity of at least some truths directly (Everything is necessarily identical with itself," "2+2=4"). If that is so, then it would not be the justification of counterfactual conditionals but the justification of our judgments of necessity that is epistemically primary. Thus, that it is true for any proposition p that, if they were true, A would be true, we recognize BECAUSE we recognize that A is necessary, not vice versa.]

I think that should make it sufficiently clear that philosophical intuitions cannot in general be explained by our empirical background knowledge. If we regard clear cases in which intuitions have a non-empirical origin as paradigmatic, then cognitive science should investigate whether the psychological mechanism that operates in these cases always operates when intuitions arise. This question, like the question about the nature of the fundamental mechanism, cannot be answered purely introspectively; both questions demand careful empirical-scientific study. For the moment I am simply going to assume – although, as I say, this assumption could turn out to be empirically false – that in all cases in which an intuition arises, it arises solely because the proposition in question, along with the concepts it contains, has been understood.

## II

Among contemporary challenges to the idea that intuition is a source of evidence the explanationist objection figures most prominently. This objection has been formulated in various ways by Paul Benacerraf, Hartry Field and Alvin Goldman.<sup>16</sup> The core of the objection can be reconstructed in the following form as argument (A):

- (P1) If the truth-makers of judgments based on reasons of type X do not (or cannot) play any causal role in the causal explanation of these reasons of type X, then reasons of type X have no justificatory or epistemizing force.
- (P2) Modal facts can play no role in the causal explanation of our philosophical intuitions.

Ergo: Philosophical intuitions have no justificatory or epistemizing force.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Benacerraf 1973, Field 1989, Goldman 1992. For a good reconstruction of the argument, see Pust 2000, Ch. 3.

This argument appears highly plausible at first glance. The first premise satisfies the criteria we commonly accept. We all assume that perceptual reasons justify our perceptual judgments about the world around us and – under favorable circumstances – even lead to perceptual knowledge. Under favorable circumstances, for example, the tree in front of me causes me to have a visual experience of it. From the explanatory perspective, we can explain our experiences of perceptual evidence causally by appealing to the operations of our cognitive-perceptual apparatus. From a broader perspective, one could say that the distal causes of our perceptual reasons are normally objects that correspond to our perceptual judgments. Perception – the paradigmatic case of a good epistemic reason – satisfies the condition formulated in the first premise. Consider, in contrast, the case of clairvoyance. We do not attribute justificatory or epistemizing force to clairvoyant reasons, regardless of how accurate a clairvoyant’s predictions may be. Since, in this case, we don’t know any story that causally relates the reasons to the events predicted, the connection appears to us to be purely accidental. In short: the first premise satisfies quite well the criteria we commonly accept.

The second premise (that modal reality can have no causal influence upon our psychological intuitions) is sometimes justified by saying that modal reality per se, as a region of abstract Platonic entities, is causally impotent, or at least that it can have no causal influence upon psychological facts in the natural world, since the natural world is causally closed and allows no external causal influence.<sup>17</sup> This argument, however, is dependent upon strong ontological assumptions about the nature of modal reality and of the natural world. Such assumptions are not necessary, though, to demonstrate the causal impotence of modal facts. This is a point made by David Lewis:<sup>18</sup> causal relations are relations that contain a modal dependency between two events or facts. Usually that relation is expressed by the use of a counterfactual conditional: if the cause had not occurred, then the effect would not have occurred either.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Benacerraf 1973.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Lewis 1986, p.111.

Now, if you regard modal facts as candidates for causes and assume that what is necessary is necessarily necessary, and that what is possible is necessarily possible, then you will quickly realize that the antecedent of a counterfactual statement that refers to modal facts can never be true. The modal facts simply could not have been other than they are. Thus, according to Lewis, all counterfactual conditionals are vacuously true. But if they are trivially true, then they cannot express the substantial modal dependence between two facts that would be required for causality. Modal facts are therefore causally impotent, regardless of which ontological analysis happens to be on offer.

I think this point demonstrates that (P2) is beyond challenge. Moreover, the argument appears to be valid. What options remain, then, for someone who wants to defend the epistemic value of philosophical intuitions? On the one hand, an intuition freak could try to show that the argument at the core of the explanationist objection is inconsistent. On the other hand, she could attack (P1) directly. If she chooses this course, she again has two options. She could accept the requirement of an explanatory connection between evidence and the corresponding truth-maker, but deny that this connection has to be of a causal nature. Then, of course, she would have to come up with a non-causal explanation of philosophical intuitions. Her second option would be to show that the requirement of an explanatory connection does not have universal scope but, rather, is restricted to reasons for our beliefs about non-modal facts. I think that the attempt to demonstrate the inconsistency of the argument fails, although I have no time to show this here. Instead I will argue that (P1) is implausible as an unrestricted condition.

[Joel Pust has recently made the claim that the explanationist argument is, in a certain sense, self-defeating.<sup>19</sup> This kind of self-defeat can be characterized more precisely as epistemic inconsistency. An argument is epistemically inconsistent if either (a) its conclusion is inconsistent with the justification of at least one of the argument's premises or (b) one of the premises contradicts its own justification. The conclusion of an argument that contains an epistemic inconsistency can, of course, be true. But an epistemic inconsistency robs anyone asserting the conclusion of her *entitlement* to that claim.

Let's have a closer look at Pust's two arguments that the explanationist objection contains an epistemic inconsistency. The first argument runs as follows:<sup>20</sup>

- (1) The conclusion of the explanationist objection impugns the justificatory force of philosophical intuition.
- (2) (P1) can only be justified by philosophical intuition.

Ergo: If the conclusion is true, then (P1) is not epistemically justified.

Pust's second argument runs as follows:<sup>21</sup>

- (3) If (P1) is true, then all statements about facts that do not play a role in the causal explanation of our evidential states are devoid of epistemic justification.
- (4) The facts referred to in (P1) play no role in the causal explanation of our evidential states.

Ergo: If (P1) is true, then (P1) is not epistemically justified.

Self-defeating arguments always have the drawback that they can, in the best case, show that a certain position is false or, at least, that one would not be justified in espousing it, but never *why* that position is false or unjustified. But Pust's arguments fail for a different reason. First

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Pust 2000, Ch.4.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Ch. 4.3.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Ch. 4.4.

of all, premises (2) and (4) can be challenged. Pust thinks that epistemic principles (like that formulated in (P1)) can only be justified by intuition, or at least that they cannot be justified by experience. Both premises rest on this assumption. A naturalist like Kornblith, however, would probably insist that we could justify a premise like (P1) simply by empirically investigating the nature of paradigmatic cases of justified belief. If this is true, then the reason for (P1) satisfies the condition (P1) formulates and is not dependent on intuitions in the philosophical sense. In other words, Pust's argument presupposes the falsity of naturalism. So, in view of the fact that the explanationist objection is raised by naturalists, Pust's counterargument amounts in the end to begging the question.

But even if Pust's arguments could persuade us that the explanationist objection harbors an epistemic inconsistency, it would not automatically follow that the objection falls apart. Let's look at another, comparable case. Putnam once formulated the following meta-inductive argument against induction: if one looks at the history of the sciences, one observes that every inductively based empirical theory has eventually been falsified and abandoned. If all inductively based empirically theories in the past have turned out to be false, then one can induce that all inductively based theories are false. Thus, induction has no justificatory force. This is an epistemically inconsistent argument. If the conclusion is true, then it is not justified, because the argument itself is based upon induction. I can only show that induction cannot justify by using induction. Still, the argument could yield a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the method. If applying a method to itself reveals that the method is unreliable or epistemically worthless, that undermines the justificatory force of the method. A proponent of the explanationist objection could argue in the same parasitic fashion: if one judges philosophical intuitions according to conditions of justification that they themselves support, they do not measure up. That would suffice to undermine the justificatory force of intuitions. As I see it, Pust's self-defeating argument fails for both reasons.]

Let us examine the arguments that speak in favor of (P1). *Argument from the causal conception of knowledge:* Early proponents of the explanationist objection, such as Benacerraf, based (P1) upon a causal conception of knowledge. Since, according to Benacerraf, one can speak of knowledge if and only if a true belief (or the reasons for it) were caused by the truth-maker, there cannot be knowledge of the causally impotent modal world.<sup>22</sup> But, as is well known, the causal conception of knowledge failed. A causal relation between a true belief and its truth-maker is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge. The successor-theory to the causal conception was reliabilism, according to which a belief is justified if and only if the belief-producing process gives rise to true beliefs in most cases in the actual and in relevant, nearby possible worlds. Perfect reliability is required for knowledge. Reliabilist theories contain no causal condition in the definiens, and they cite only necessary conditions for justification. Hence, a reliabilist can undermine Benacerraf's justification of (P1) by denying the causal condition of knowledge. Moreover, the argument can only, in the best case, formulate a condition for knowledge. It has no relevance to the possibility of justification anyway.

Let's take a look at a second argument for (P1). *Argument from old-fashioned foundationalism:* Many old-fashioned foundationalists claim that we have direct knowledge only of intra-mental states – that is, of our percepts, of episodic memory, and also of our intuitive reasons. To these we have introspective access; and if we want to justify beliefs about the external world, we can only rely on an inference to the best explanation. If this picture of our epistemic situation is correct, then it follows directly that we can have no justified beliefs and no knowledge of regions of the external world that have no causal power with respect to our intra-mental states. But, as it happens, this is not a true picture of our

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<sup>22</sup> Benacerraf 1973.

epistemic situation. It just is not true that we first have introspective knowledge of our own mental states, and then base our beliefs about the external world upon this knowledge. Rather, we base these beliefs directly upon sensuous experiences, episodic memories or intuitions. The putative intermediate step through introspection is demonstrable neither by phenomenology nor by cognitive science. Justified beliefs about the external world do not presuppose justified beliefs about intra-mental facts. If this is correct, then the evidential connection between our perceptual, mnemonic or intuitive reasons and our judgments cannot be characterized as an inference to the best explanation. On the contrary, in these cases we take at face value the contents of our reasons. Hence the argument considered for (P1) collapses.

And so we come to a third argument for (P1). *The argument from internalism*: Even if the method in question does not itself contain an inference to the best explanation, one can of course ask whether our perceptual experiences or our intuitions are reliable indicators with respect to the facts referred to in the judgments that we base upon them. If we want to answer this question impartially – that is, independently of the method in question – then we will look for an epistemically non-circular meta-justification of these methods. The obvious choice would be an inference to the best explanation. If we ask ourselves whether the beliefs that we base upon perception, memory or intuition arise in a reliable manner, and if we do not want to rely on perception, memory or intuition in answering this question, then we have to consider the possibility that the facts that correspond to our beliefs would provide the best explanation of our perceptual, mnemonic or intuitive evidence. If one also takes an epistemically non-circular meta-justification to be a condition for justification, then one can derive a version of (P1). The argument goes as follows:

- (1) A reason can only justify a belief if its reliability is meta-justified in an epistemically non-circular manner.



(2) Only if an inference to the best explanation can be made from the occurrence of a reason to the truth-maker of the belief based on that reason can the reliability of that reason be justified in an epistemically non-circular manner.

(3) The inference to the best explanation from the occurrence of the reason to the truth-maker of the belief based on that reason is only valid if the truth-maker plays a role in the causal explanation of the occurrence of the reason.

Ergo: If the truth-maker of a belief based on a reason of type X plays no role in the causal explanation of the occurrence of type X reasons, then type X reasons have no justificatory force.<sup>1</sup>

Surprisingly, this argument that Goldman proposes for (P1) is purely internalist.<sup>24</sup> For the reliabilist there is no need to accept that a reason has justificatory force only if its reliability is meta-justified in an epistemically non-circular manner. If, on the other hand, this condition is dropped, the argument for (P1) collapses. But if, from an internalist perspective, one were to accept the argument, it would be equally fatal to all basic cognitive faculties (including perception and memory). Admittedly, perceptual reasons, unlike intuitive ones, can be explained causally by referring to what makes the beliefs based upon them true. But skeptical objections demonstrate that there are equally good alternative explanations (like the brain-in-a-vat or the evil daemon hypothesis) that get by without referring to the corresponding truth-

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Goldman's justification of (P1) takes the same course. He writes: "What evidence is there that our possession of these algorithms (Goldman calls in this passage the intuitive procedures ,algorithms') is somehow related to mind-independent modal facts? The only evidence that has been adduced is our intuitions (...). And the mere occurrence of these intuitions does not have much probative force once we recognize that there are competing explanations that make no commitment to extramental modal facts. (...) Isn't it more likely (or at minimum, equally likely) that one of these competing explanatory stories – one that makes no commitment to extra-mental modal facts – is a better explanation, a more reasonable explanation (...), Than some explanatory story that makes such commitment? (...) The question is: are our conceptual dispositions (...) reliable evidence for objective metaphysical fact? Is inconceivability a reliable indicator of impossibility? Unless there is some story that underwrites this indicator relationship, the epistemic status of the intuitions is problematic." (Goldman 1992, p.62-3)

<sup>24</sup> Pust, too, is baffled by Goldman's Internalist argumentative strategy; see Pust 2000, p.64, Fn.12.

maker.<sup>25</sup> In short, this justification of (P1) would imply a global skepticism about the external world. Thus, it does not yield a specific argument against intuition as an epistemic source.

The fourth argument for (P1) is much more promising. *Argument from metaphysics*: as soon as we discover that the reliability of some given reasons cannot be explained with reference to a causal connection between those reasons and the corresponding truth-maker, the justificatory force of the reasons is neutralized. A so-called defeater has come into play. Hartry Field formulates this point as follows: “The challenge (...) is to provide an account of the mechanisms that explain how our beliefs about these remote (...) entities (or our grounds for these beliefs) can so well reflect the facts about them. The idea is that if it appears in principle impossible to explain this, then that tends to undermine the belief in (...) (these) entities, despite whatever (initial) reasons we might have for believing in them.” (Field 1989, p. 26)<sup>26</sup> There is one important question that Field unfortunately does not answer, namely: why does a defeater arise when we discover that we cannot explain a reliable connection between beliefs or reasons and facts? Answering this question will enable us to make the requirements for an explanation more precise.

First: Someone’s prima facie reason for one of her beliefs is defeated either if she discovers something that impugns the truth of this belief (i.e., a rebutting defeater) or if she acquires a reason that impugns the reliability of the prima facie reason (i.e. an undercutting defeater). In the case at hand, one thing is clear – namely, that the discovery of an explanatory gap with respect to the reliability of the reason does not impugn the truth of the belief. So we are not dealing here with a rebutting defeater. The other possibility would be an undercutting defeater. But why should the reliability of, say, perceptions as indicators of extra-mental facts be impugned if that reliability cannot be explained? I see here only one course to take –

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Alston 1993.

<sup>26</sup> Casullo, too, interprets the argument like this; see Casullo 2003, p.144-5.

namely, to say that the reliability of a reason is *not a brute fact* but, rather, depends on implementation by a metaphysical link between the facts and the reason. It would be natural to conceive of this metaphysical link as a causal nexus. Without the metaphysical link, the modal tie between reasons and facts, which is necessary for reliability, cannot obtain. The demand for an explanation of reliability, in other words, is not a demand for a *causal* explanation of reliability but, rather, for a *reductive* explanation, which would describe the mechanism that realizes this reliability. Such a mechanism normally consists in a causal link between reasons and facts. In his explication of the explanationist objection, Bonjour uses a striking example: “suppose that there is a person who holds a belief that is at least putatively about some specifiable element or region of reality, for reasons or evidence that seem initially substantial and compelling, but where neither the specific content of the belief nor the person’s reasons for holding it are in fact causally shaped or otherwise influenced, directly or indirectly, by the element or region of reality in question. In such a situation, though the belief might still be true, it seems clear that its truth could only be accidental, a cognitive coincidence.” (Bonjour 1998, p. 157) But why does the reliability require implementation by a causal link? Bonjour is perfectly clear on this point as well: “in the absence of such (causal) influence, the character of the reality in question could just as well have been different in such a way as to make the belief false without either the belief or its supporting reasons being affected in any way (...)” (ibid.). So, as long as the normal causes of our reasons and beliefs lie elsewhere than in the truth-makers, the counterfactual co-variation of facts and reasons that would be required for reliability is missing. If our reasons were not caused by the facts, the facts could have been different without our reasons registering that difference. And that undermines their reliability. This is exactly the situation in the case of clairvoyance. Which is why we do not think that clairvoyance leads to justified beliefs, regardless of how often any given clairvoyant may de facto be right in her predictions.

This line of thought makes the assumption plausible that there can be no reliable reasons that are not causally dependent upon the corresponding truth-makers. Thus, if we should discover that there is no causal link between truth-makers and reasons – or, indeed, as in the case of modal intuitions, that there cannot be any such link – that would seem to impugn the reliability of our reasons. We would have an undercutting defeater that would undermine the justificatory force of our reasons.

So the slogan “There is no reliability unless the truth-makers have a causal influence on our reasons” may well be right in many cases. In my view, though, it cannot be generalized as it is in the argument for (P1). To see why, let’s take a look at our reasons for contingent truths. In this domain, reliability requires a metaphysical link between reasons and truth-makers. This link, however, can be realized in a number of different ways. First of all, the truth-makers could cause our reasons on a regular basis (as in the case of perception). Or the modal co-variance of reasons and truth-makers that is necessary for reliability could be explained by saying that the truth-makers supervene on facts, which, in turn, cause our reasons. This may be true for our moral intuitions, given that moral facts supervene on physical facts and are themselves not causally efficacious. Or the required co-variance could be explained by saying that our reasons cause the truth-making facts. Or, to put a provisional end to this list, the requisite co-variance could be explained by postulating common causes of our reasons and the truth-making facts. Even if consciousness is an epiphenomenon, as some suspect, there could still be a reliable link between our phenomenal judgments and the facts of consciousness, as long as they have a common causal pre-history. In short: the reductionist explanation of reliability does not have to imply that the truth-makers are the causes, and our reasons and beliefs the effects.

But it is a completely different matter if – as with our philosophical intuitions – our reasons support beliefs about modal reality. In that case, the modal tie between our reasons and the truth-makers, which is essential for reliability, can obtain even if it cannot be explained by any influence, interaction or relation of dependence between them. What BonJour prophesies for the event that such an influence should be absent – namely, “that in the absence of such influence, the character of the reality in question could just as well have been different in such a way as to make the belief false without either the belief or its supporting reasons being affected in any way” – cannot happen here, since modal reality, viewed counterfactually, cannot vary anyway. It is necessarily as it is. The stability of modal facts alone attests that the facts could not change without our reasons changing accordingly; indeed, the modal facts cannot change. Hence, it would be superfluous for the facts to influence our reasons. The reliability of our modal intuitions is simply a byproduct of the cognitive mechanism of our intuitions and the modal facts. There neither is nor needs to be a further explanation that describes metaphysical relations between the modal facts and our psychological mechanism. From the isolated standpoint of the laws of nature and from the isolated standpoint of the nature of modal reality, the veridicality of our modal intuitions seems to be purely accidental, because the two regions are metaphysically completely independent of each other. But if one takes account of both regions together, the modal link is every bit as tight as the causal nexus that connects perceptions and their distal causes. That can be seen clearly by considering the following point: if modal reality is not itself responsible for the occurrence of our intuitions about it, then, of course, those intuitions that are in fact reliable could lead us systematically astray if, for example, the initial conditions or the laws of the natural world were different leading to completely different outputs of the faculty of intuitions. But, if that were the case, the causal link between our perceptual experiences and the corresponding distal causes would also disappear. The impression that the relationship is accidental in the one case but not in the other rests upon a perspectival deception. The explanatory asymmetry that naturalists have

observed between our natural cognitive abilities and philosophical intuitions does not point to a shortcoming of intuition but, rather, to a difference in kind between the two domains. The absence of an explanation is therefore no deficit, but a reflection of the fact that the reliability of our modal intuitions does not depend upon a metaphysical link between reasons and truth-makers. To construct from this an objection against the justificatory force of our intuitions would be to overlook the categorical difference between the two domains. If I am right about this, then (P1) is the result of a hasty over-generalization.

A proponent of the explanationist objection could perhaps be tempted to insist that there is at least a fundamental difference between, let's say, perception on the one hand, and modal intuition on the other, and that it is this difference that undermines the justificatory force of intuition in contrast to perception. For we can explain causally why organisms have reliable perceptual abilities with respect to their environments. Empirical evolutionary biology does so by noting that organisms without reliable perception cannot successfully negotiate their environments and thus fall victim to natural selection. There is no analogous causal explanation of why we should have *reliable* modal intuitions. That we can be prepared for various alternative situations is surely useful in planning how to act with limited knowledge of the actual future course of the world. But this usefulness depends only on our being able to pick out the actual future course of the world from all the possibilities under consideration, not on our being able to grasp non-actual possibilities correctly. There is no naturalistic causal explanation of why we have acquired reliable methods of modal knowledge. And, for reasons I have already mentioned, there cannot be a non-naturalistic causal explanation of this fact either. So the naturalist's observation is absolutely right: there is no causal explanation of why we have come to possess a reliable source of modal knowledge. But I do not see why any negative epistemological consequences should result from this really existing explanatory

gap. As long as proponents of the explanationist objection leave this question unanswered, I regard this version of their objection as harmless.

I shall recapitulate briefly. I have tried to show two things: first, that philosophical intuitions can be understood as a priori evidence for modal judgments; and secondly, that the explanationist objection against the epistemic value of intuitions fails since it relies on at least one premise without good reason.

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