10
Intuition and A Priori Justification

Paul Boghossian

1. Introduction

We take ourselves to be a priori justified in believing certain propositions, for example:

(1) All simple quadrilaterals have four interior angles.
(2) If Mary ate the apple and the pear, then Mary ate the apple.
(3) It is necessary that whoever knows p believes p.
(4) In the standard Gettier scenario, Mr Smith has a justified true belief but does not know.
(5) It is morally wrong to inflict pain upon a human being merely for one's own amusement.

How is it possible for us to be a priori justified in believing these and similar propositions?

In earlier work (Boghossian, 1996, 2003, 2012), I argued that at least in some cases of a priori justified belief, our justification derives from the *understanding* that we have of those propositions. However, I have also argued (Boghossian 2020a) that we cannot rely *solely* on understanding-based accounts to explain the full range of the propositions that we are a priori justified in believing, and that there are *synthetic* a priori *propositions*—propositions that are not a priori justifiably believed merely in virtue of being understood. The most important examples of such synthetic a priori propositions are general *normative* principles of the type:

Necessarily: For all x, if x is D, then x is N

where 'D' is a canonical descriptive predicate and 'N' is a canonical normative predicate. An example of such a principle is the claim labelled (5) above: that if you inflict pain on a human being merely for your own amusement, what you do is wrong. Another example might include (4), on the quite plausible assumptions that the notion of knowledge presupposes the notion of justification and that the notion of justification is normative in character.

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If the understanding alone is not sufficient to justify our belief in normative principles, how is the trick turned?

A natural answer is that we need to appeal not merely to the understanding but also to the traditional Rationalist resource variously referred to as 'intuition', 'intellection', or 'rational insight'. I will stick to the term 'intuition': what will matter is not the terminology but the explication that we give of this notion and of its ability to do the requisite epistemic work.

Of course, any account along these lines will seem highly unsatisfying to any philosopher who is sceptical about the very existence of intuitions, at least if they are understood to be sui generis, pre-doxastic mental states, distinct from inclinations to judge (see, e.g. Williamson 2007; Cappelen 2012; Deutsch 2015). It will also seem highly unsatisfying to any philosopher who, even if friendly to intuitions, regards them as capable *at most* of disclosing to us what is contained in our understanding of our own concepts (see Sosa 1998; Goldman 2007; Pust 2000).

I don't rule out such understanding-sourced intuitions; indeed, I appeal to them myself in certain instances of understanding-based explanations of a priori justification—those in which there is no inferentially articulable transition from our understanding to the a priori truth in question (see chapters 13 and 15 (2020a, 2020b), of Boghossian and Williamson 2020). However, if intuitions are to help us explain instances of the synthetic a priori, we must show how they are capable of providing justification for beliefs that goes beyond merely disclosing to us what is contained in our understanding.

If this appeal to intuitions in connection with the synthetic a priori is to have any prospect of success, then we must show how to meet both of these types of scepticism. This is a large task and I don't know how much progress I will be able to make in this chapter.

I certainly hope to go further than was possible in chapters 13 and 15 (2020a, 2020b) where I was able merely to scratch the surface. Since those chapters were part of a series of exchanges with Timothy Williamson (2020a, 2020b) in which, as matters were there arranged, he got the last word, I will here take the opportunity to respond to those of his criticisms that had to be left unanswered.

The chapter will be organized as follows: I will first take up the question what intuitions are and why we have reason to believe in them. I will then look at why they are properly regarded as providing justification—indeed, sometimes very considerable justification—for beliefs, and at why that justification is properly regarded as priori. Finally, I will confront the question whether a philosophy that is friendly to intuitions inexorably leads to National Socialism.[1]

[1] On all of these topics, I am hugely indebted to previous theorists of intuitions such as Bealer (1992, 2000), Bonjour (1998), Bengson (2015), Pust (2000), Malmgren (2006), Chudnoff (2013), and others, although, inevitably, of course, some of the details will be my own.

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2. What are intuitions?

An intuition is an *intellectual seeming*, a notion that was brought back to prominence in recent times by George Bealer (1992, 2000) and, in a somewhat different way, by Laurence BonJour (1998). Like many other philosophically useful notions, it is not possible to give it a reductive definition; however, it is possible to characterize it in various helpful ways.

To help us in that task, let's first ask about *sensory* seemings. As I understand it, a sensory seeming is a state, with both propositional content and a sensory phenomenology, which directly *presents* a proposition as true. 'Direct' is strictly redundant given 'presents': to present p as true is to display it as true in a direct, non-inferential way. A perception of a Müller–Lyer diagram, for example, presents two lines as being of unequal length.[2]

Such a sensory seeming is not itself a judgement, belief, or a disposition to believe; it is pre-doxastic. However, because such a sensory seeming presents a proposition as true, it typically *results* in an inclination to believe that proposition (unless that inclination is checked by background knowledge).

There are, of course, many other mental states that also engender inclinations to believe—for example, a strong desire for p to be true can incline you to believe p. But it doesn't do so by presenting p as true. A strong desire for Harris to win the election may incline you to believe that she will win; but it doesn't do so by presenting that proposition as true.

A sensory seeming that p, then, has the feel of a state whose content purports to reveal how things really are in the changing environment in which it finds itself; and it engenders belief, or an inclination to believe, for that very reason. You may, if you wish, call this 'feel' a type of 'phenomenology', too; whether to do so is, I believe, largely a matter of terminology.

In what ways is an intellectual seeming similar to a sensory seeming and in what ways is it different?

An intellectual seeming is similar to a sensory seeming in presenting a proposition as true; it is dissimilar to it in not necessarily having a sensory phenomenology.[3, 4]

[2] The importance of the notion of 'presentation' in characterizing these notions has been very well explained by Bengson (2015).

[3] Its intellectually seeming to you that Lionel Messi is self-identical may have a sensory phenomenology by virtue of involving an image of Messi; but it need not have such a phenomenology. (Thanks to Elia Zardini for this point.)

[4] Bengson (2015) distinguishes between seemings and presentations; he identifies intuitions with the latter but not the former. The difference between them is supposed to be that while the content of a seeming is always explicitly available to a subject, the content of a presentation might be available only under ideal conditions. I don't make this distinction since I am not averse to thinking that it might take some introspective effort to figure out what the content of a seeming is. I am also not averse to thinking that it might take some time and effort (and perhaps even training) to *arrive* at an intuition. In the relevant sense, then, intuitions are not those fast, off-the-cuff, 'System 1' judgements beloved by psychologists (Kahneman 2011).

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An intellectual seeming is similar to a sensory seeming in being pre-judgemental; it is dissimilar to it in that a sensory seeming is capable only of presenting a proposition as true simpliciter, whereas an intellectual seeming is capable of presenting a proposition not only as true, but as false; and not only as true (false) but as *necessarily true (false)*.[5]

I'll follow Bealer in calling those intuitions that present a proposition as necessarily true (false) *rational intuitions*, to distinguish them from intuitions simpliciter that simply present a proposition as true (false).

Presenting p as necessarily true (mutatis mutandis for 'false' henceforth) is to be distinguished from presenting 'It is necessary that p' as true. The latter involves the concept of necessity in the content of the proposition; the former need not.

What, then, is it to present p as necessarily true? And why is it clear that some intellectual seemings do that?

While it is possible for an intuition to present a proposition as simply true, as, for example, when you have an intuition that a particular sentence is ill-formed, the intuitions that are typically at work in a priori epistemology have a deep tie to necessity—that is, they are typically rational intuitions. A rational intuition can be characterized as Pust (2017, n.p.) does:

> S has the *rational intuition* that p if and only if either [A] (1) it intellectually seems to S that p and (2) if S were to consider whether p is necessarily true, it would intellectually seem to S that necessarily p, *or* [B] it intellectually seems to S that necessarily p.

According to this account, a rational intuition either presents 'It is necessary that p' as true or presents p as simply true but in such a way that, were the subject to consider whether it is also necessarily true, they would affirm that it is. The presentation's character grounds the truth of the counterfactual. When you have the intuition that, in a standard Gettier scenario, Mr Smith has a justified true belief but does not know, this will either seem necessarily true to you or would so seem to you were you to consider the question.

What is it about the presentation's character that explains its presenting 'It is necessary that p' as true, or its presenting p in such a way as to ground the counterfactual in [A](2)? This is an important and difficult question; here I can only sketch the beginnings of an answer.

The answer I am tempted by is that rational intuitions are, and present themselves as being, insights into the natures of the properties they concern and, in particular, into the relations of metaphysical *compatibility*, *incompatibility*, and

[5] I don't also say that a rational intuition can present p as *possibly* true. Perhaps that is also true. What I am inclined to think, though, is that cases which might look as though they satisfy that description are cases where the proposition 'It is possible that p' is presented as true, or as necessarily true.

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entailment that properties stand in to one another. Since relations between properties that are grounded in their natures are when true, necessarily true, this would help explain why a rational intuition presents a proposition as necessarily true in Pust's sense. Thus, in the standard Gettier thought-experiment, we have the apparent insight that

> the epistemic condition that Mr Smith is in entails that he has a justified true belief p,

but also the apparent insight that

> the epistemic condition he's in is incompatible with his knowing p.

Sometimes these insights are grounded in our understanding of the relevant concepts; at other times, as in the case of the synthetic a priori, they are grounded in our grasp of the natures of the properties themselves.

Of course, how all this is possible is a complex question, some of which, but not all, will be further addressed below.

3. Why believe in intuitions?

Why should we believe in rational intuitions? I believe that the case for them parallels to a large extent the case that can be made for visual impressions.

(A) In the *perceptual* (empirical) case, there are powerful reasons for believing that, in addition to whatever beliefs and inclinations to belief there may be, there are pre-doxastic *visual impressions* that play important epistemic and explanatory roles. In particular, visual impressions are often the *consciously accessible reasons for which* we not only believe something but are disposed to believe it. Furthermore, these visual impressions are the justifiers for our believing their contents when we do so.

(B) Similarly, in the a priori case: intuitions are often the *consciously accessible reasons for which* we not only believe something but are disposed to believe it. Furthermore, these intuitions are the justifiers for our believing their contents when we do so.

Williamson (2020a, 2020b) denies both claims. In the perceptual case, although he admits that there *are* visual impressions (how could he not?), he believes that they are not pre-doxastic in the relevant sense, and so can't play the explanatory and epistemic roles assigned to them in the description I gave above. And in the a priori case, Williamson maintains that there is *nothing* akin to a visual seeming, and so

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nothing like an intuition that can play the role of the consciously accessible reason for which we believe what we do; there are just beliefs and inclinations to believe.

Since the matter is interesting in its own right, and since it will shed light on the issues that arise in the a priori domain, let's look first at the perceptual case.

3.1. Digression: sense perception

Why should we believe that there are pre-doxastic perceptual seemings? Consider a subject, S, being presented with a Müller–Lyer illusion for the first time. I take the following eight propositions to provide a plausible description of the central elements of this case.

1. S has a visual impression that presents two parallel lines as being of unequal length (call this *content* of the visual impression 'UNEQ'). In addition to its propositional content, this visual impression also has phenomenal features: there is something qualitative that it's like to have such an impression. (*Existence*)
2. S comes to have a disposition to believe UNEQ.
3. S's visual impression that UNEQ is the *consciously accessible reason* for which S is disposed to believe that UNEQ: if S is asked *why* they are disposed to believe UNEQ, they will respond that it's because that's how the lines look. (*Explanation*)
4. Barring any defeaters (and given an interest in the question), S's inclination will be realized, and S will come to believe UNEQ.
5. S's belief UNEQ is prima facie justified by their visual impression that UNEQ. (*Justification*)
6. Once S performs certain measurements, and sees that the lines are of equal length, S loses their belief UNEQ.
7. They may also, perhaps only after long experience with the diagram, lose any *inclination* to believe UNEQ. (*Loss*)
8. Still, the visual impression *persists*, unshakably presenting the two lines as being of unequal length. Indeed, it's quite clear that the visual impression of unequal lines *never* goes away, no matter how much S may come to know, and grow used to, the fact that the lines are equal in length.[6] (*Persistence*)

To sum up: our visual impression that UNEQ is the *consciously accessible reason* why we are *disposed to believe* UNEQ. And it is also what *justifies* us in believing

[6] Why does the visual impression remain unchanged? The answer, I assume, is because vision is to a considerable extent *modular*, and so stays unaffected by S's background knowledge that UNEQ is false. However, I need take no stance on this issue for present purposes.

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UNEQ when we do so. After discovering that the belief is false, we lose the belief, and may also lose any disposition to have the belief. However, the visual impression that UNEQ never goes away when we look at the diagram.

Now, this is, of course, a description of perceptual justification that is highly congenial to an internalist about justification and anathema to an externalist. Given his externalist commitments, Williamson has to reject it. His strategy for doing so is highly efficient: he denies the pillar on which the entire picture depends, namely that the visual seemings are *pre-doxastic* in the relevant sense. This is what he has to say (it will be useful to quote him at some length):

> Boghossian now tries to show that we *can* find pre-doxastic seemings in ourselves quite easily. He starts with perceptual seemings. According to him, in the Müller–Lyer illusion, once we learn that the two lines are the same length, although one still *seems* longer than the other, we lose the inclination to judge that it *is* longer. But that description of the case is unconvincing. Of course, my all-things-considered disposition is to judge that the two lines are the same length. But that is because a better source of information overrides the still felt visually-based inclination to judge that one line is longer. Without the latter, I have no visual impression or seeming that one is longer. Boghossian gives a natural explanation for the persistence of the visual impression:
>
> > perception, being to a considerable degree modular, is not penetrable by the background knowledge about the length of the lines. Hence, the impression of inequality persists despite our discovery. (Chapter 15, p. 226)
>
> Indeed, but a parallel explanation goes for the persistence of the felt inclination to judge the lines unequal … Boghossian has not made plausible his key claim: that the visual impression is *more* persistent than the felt inclination to judge. Thus the Müller–Lyer illusion is an unhelpful analogy for Boghossian's purposes. (2020b, pp. 232–233)

Williamson's view, then, is that, while we do have visual impressions, those impressions, with their contents, can't be said to be pre-doxastic in the relevant sense because their contents are *constitutively* tied to a disposition to believe their contents. As he puts it, where there is no disposition to believe UNEQ, there can be no visual impression that UNEQ. Call this the Constitutive View (ConV).

On the alternative description that I gave above, the visual impression that UNEQ is not constitutively tied to the doxastic disposition to believe UNEQ; rather, it is constituted independently of that disposition and gives rise to it *causally*. Call this the Causal View (CauseV). (Incidentally, Williamson mischaracterizes my view when he says that I claim that the inclination to believe UNEQ is lost *as soon as* we discover that the belief is false, even as the visual impression remains the same; instead, I only say that the disposition to believe UNEQ *can* be lost, perhaps

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only after a period of time and given extensive familiarity, even as the visual impression remains the same.)

Which of the two views, ConV or CauseV, is the more plausible view?

On ConV, we obviously have to give up both the claim that the visual impression that UNEQ is the consciously accessible reason why we are disposed to believe UNEQ (something can't causally explain that to which it is constitutively linked), and the claim that the visual impression that UNEQ justifies the belief UNEQ (since a disposition to believe p can't justify believing p). That is, Williamson has to give up both *Explanation* and *Justification*.

Intuitively, that would appear to place Williamson's view at a significant disadvantage, since both of those theses are very plausible. In particular, giving up on *Justification* saddles you with the burden of trying to give a plausible account of perceptual justification using only externalist resources—reliability and so on—with all of that stratagem's known failings. But, of course, all of this was foreseeable; so perhaps Williamson can dismiss these considerations as manifestations of a larger ideological dispute that cannot be settled merely through such examples.

What cannot be dismissed so easily, however, is the combination of *Loss* and *Persistence*, since the question of their truth is clearly not part of an ideological dispute within epistemology, or any other part of philosophy.

As a matter of empirical fact, we know that the appearance of the Müller–Lyer lines as unequal *never* goes away, no matter how well we may have absorbed the lesson that they are equal. That much is established psychological fact.[7]

However, isn't it entirely clear that we *could* lose the disposition to believe UNEQ as a result of intimate familiarity with the illusion? That would certainly appear to be metaphysically possible; indeed, it would appear to be even nomologically possible. In general, dispositions to believe are highly responsive to background knowledge. For example, when I discovered that Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election in 2016, I not only abandoned my belief that she had won the election; I also abandoned any inclination to believe that she had won the election.

Interestingly, this is a point that Williamson himself tends to insist upon: indeed, his whole argument against constitutive understanding-assent links depends on it. Thus, in talking about how the expert on logic could give up something as intuitively compelling as conjunction-elimination, he says:

> This is not very different from someone giving up smoking: at first he retains the disposition to smoke, while inhibiting it; later, as he gets used to not smoking, he may lose even the disposition to smoke. Exactly the same can happen with

[7] There is some evidence that the effect can be decreased by changes of attention and other tricks, but the effect itself never goes completely away and doesn't decrease as a mere result of familiarity with the illusion (see Predebon 2006).

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> the deviant expert …. In the first flush of deviance, she retains the disposition to assent to any instance of the classical principle at issue, while inhibiting it on theoretical grounds in a subclass of cases. As she gets used to not assenting in those cases, she loses even the disposition to assent there. (2020b, p. 228)[8]

In addition to these considerations, a very serious blow to ConV is dealt by the ample evidence that pigeons, parrots, and even insects are subject to the Müller–Lyer illusion, although presumably we should be reluctant to attribute dispositions to belief to these creatures.[9]

To sum up, visual impressions can clearly be pre-doxastic in the relevant sense, thereby refuting ConV and compatibly with CauseV. Consequently, the door is open for us to give the compelling internalist picture of perceptual justification sketched out above.

3.2. Back to intuitions

In my view, there are important analogies between the perceptual case and the a priori case. In particular, I wish to argue that just as *Explanation*, *Justification*, *Loss*, and *Persistence* obtain in the perceptual domain, so there are cases of a priori justified belief in which their counterparts obtain, with intuitions playing the role of visual impressions.

To help us think about this, consider the normative proposition (5) from the start of the chapter, and let's give it a name:

> (NoTorture) It is morally wrong to inflict pain upon a human being merely for one's own amusement.

When you consider NoTorture, and decide that it is true, what is the consciously accessible reason why you are disposed to believe it? There are two possibilities here: either you are aware of such a reason or you are not.

If you are aware of no reason for being disposed to believe NoTorture, you would be in the situation of a 'blind-intuiter'; just like the blind-sighter, you would experience the phenomenology of making the judgement as akin to taking a stab in the dark, of guessing.

However, that clearly isn't the phenomenology of a typical subject judging NoTorture to be true. The judgement doesn't feel like a stab in the dark; there

[8] You might wonder how I can accept Williamson's point here, given my defence of understanding-assent links. I don't deny that anyone can lose any disposition; what I deny is that you can retain any concept you like while losing certain dispositions.

[9] See Nakamura et al. (2006), Pepperberg et al. (2008), Srinivasan (1993), and Feng et al. (2017).

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appear to be consciously accessible reasons for making the judgement which explain your making it. What are those reasons?

In the perceptual case, as we saw above, the consciously accessible reason for your making the judgement UNEQ is its visually seeming to you that UNEQ. The consciously accessible reason for your judging p is simply its visually seeming to you that p.

Williamson's view about the a priori case, however, is that there is *nothing* in that domain analogous to a visual impression. His view is not that there are intellectual impressions but that, like visual impressions, they can't be said to be pre-doxastic because they are constitutively individuated in terms of the inclinations to belief to which they give rise. Rather, his view is that there are *no* such impressions; there are just the inclinations to believe.

Now, this entails that, for Williamson, if the subject of the NoTorture judgement is to have a consciously accessible reason for which they are inclined to make the judgement, that reason can't be merely that it seems true to them, but rather a more revealing, substantive reason why the judgement is true. Williamson claims that this is anyway as it should be:

> For all I know, Boghossian sometimes does feel his inclinations to judge to be non-circularly based on seemings. I have no such feeling about my inclinations to judge. They do *not* present themselves to me as based on their seeming true. When I ask 'Why am I inclined to judge *p*?', the answer 'Because *p* seems true to me' sounds forced and feeble, its explanans far too close to its explanandum to provide significant insight. It replaces a question of the form 'Why am I inclined to judge *p*?' with a question of the form 'Why does *p* seem true to me?', merely postponing the serious explanatory work by inserting a redundant middleman. What matters is why I favour *p* in the first place. (2020b, p. 233)

Williamson's remarks here somewhat miss the point. No one denies that there are more interesting answers to the question 'Why am I inclined to believe p?' than 'Because p seems true to me'. And no one denies that these more interesting answers should be pursued, even if, on some given occasion, we can do no better than give the 'seeming' reply for the time being.

The point, rather, is that there are many cases of justified intuitive judgement where one can cite no consciously accessible reason for which one makes the judgement *other than* its seeming true, in exact parallel with the visual case. As I explained in Boghossian (2020a, p. 194), in the case of many thought-experimental judgements p, if we didn't have the intellectual impression that p to appeal to, we couldn't consciously identify *anything else* on which the judgement is based.

Why are we inclined to judge that it's wrong to inflict pain on a human being just for one's own amusement? Is a utilitarian principle behind this verdict? Is it

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a violation of rights? An impermissible trampling of human dignity? It's not clear. What is clear is that, for whatever reason, it strikes us as wrong.

Similarly, in the Gettier thought-experiment if you asked me why I judge that Mr Smith has a justified true belief but does not know, I could cite the substantive factors which incline me to judge that he has a justified true belief, but not the substantive factors which incline me to judge that he doesn't know. If I did cite some such factor, my commitment to its being the correct one would be tentative and conjectural. Is it because Smith employs a false lemma in his reasoning? Is it because his belief is only true by 'accident'? It's not clear. Epistemologists have been arguing about it ever since, and the person making the intuitive judgement need not even think of these possible explanations. All that may be clear to them is that, for whatever reason, it strikes them that Mr Smith doesn't know.

If we were not allowed to appeal to intellectual seemings in such cases, we would not be able to attribute any sort of consciously accessible reason for our judgements. And this seems wrong phenomenologically: it would blur the difference between an ordinary intuitive judgement and the judgements of a 'blind-intuiter'.

And, of course, without a consciously accessible reason for the intuitive judgement, we would have nothing but externalist resources to rely on in explaining the justification for that judgement, with all of that stratagem's known failings.

Intuitively, that would appear to place Williamson's view at a significant disadvantage, since both of these theses are so plausible. But, of course, all of this was foreseeable; so perhaps Williamson can dismiss these considerations as manifestations of a larger ideological dispute that cannot be settled merely through the provision of such examples.

Once again, though, the a priori counterparts of *Loss* and *Persistence* provide neutral ground on which the dispute can be adjudicated in favour of the intuitional picture.

Consider, for example, the major premise of the Phenomenal Sorites:

> (Phenomenal Sorites) If two things look exactly alike, then if one looks red, so does the other.

This principle not only looks true, it looks to be *epistemically analytically true*—true merely in virtue of being understood.[10] However, we know that it is not true because, applied unrestrictedly, it leads to falsehood. Knowing this, we not only lose the belief that it is true, we lose even the disposition to believe that it is true. Even after we have abandoned any disposition to assent to it, though, it continues to look not only true but epistemically analytically true.

[10] Thanks to Crispin Wright for this example.

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Notice that, in this case, Williamson can't try to claim that my description of the case is unconvincing, in parallel to his claim that my description of the Müller–Lyer is unconvincing on the grounds that the visual impression that UNEQ and the inclination to believe UNEQ are constitutively linked to one another. By denying the counterpart of *Existence* in the a priori domain—that is, by denying that there are any pre-doxastic intellectual seemings—he has relinquished any right to talk about the a priori analogue of the 'still felt visually-based inclination to judge': since there are no intuitions, on his view, there can be no 'still felt intuitionally-based inclinations to judge'.

To sum up: ordinary intuitive judgements are backed by consciously accessible reasons; the phenomenology of such judgements is not that of guessing or taking a stab in the dark. Those reasons, however, are not always of a revealing, substantive kind. In many important cases, our consciously accessible reasons for our being disposed to believe them is just that they seem true to us. If we were not allowed to appeal to intellectual seemings in those cases, we would not be able to explain the difference between ordinary intuitive judgements and those of a blind-intuiter. Furthermore, without such consciously accessible reasons in such cases, we would have nothing but externalist resources to rely on in explaining how such judgements are justified. Finally, the persistence of certain intellectual impressions—as in the case of the seeming truth of the major premise of the Phenomenal Sorites—long after one has lost the inclination to believe it shows that these impressions can be (and clearly often are) pre-doxastic.

4. The justificatory power of intuitions (I)

This concludes my case in this chapter for believing that there are pre-doxastic intuitions. It is time to turn to the question how we might explain their alleged capacity to deliver justification for beliefs like (3)–(5).

It's initially plausible that there are at least three central epistemic features of intuitions that need accounting for:

A. Intuitions justify independently of background beliefs.
B. Intuitions provide a priori justification.
C. Intuitions sometimes provide such strong justification that they can defeat deeply entrenched beliefs.

In other words, intuitions can provide foundational justification; the justification they provide is a priori; this justification can sometimes be very strong.

However, none of this should be taken to imply that:

D. Intuitions are infallible or indefeasible.

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Or that:

E. If p is supported by intuition, it cannot also be supported by argument.

That is to say, intuitions can mislead; and it is possible for them to be either defeated, or bolstered, by further considerations, including considerations of an *empirical* nature. It is one thing to say that a belief has an experience-independent justification, and another to say that it cannot be defeated by experience-dependent considerations. Only the former, weaker notion of a priori justification is at issue here.

How might we explain how intuitions can possess epistemic properties A–C without possessing properties D and E?

If intuitions are the intellectual analogue of visual impressions, then we would expect the epistemic principle governing them to be analogous to the one that governs visual impressions. Here, of course, there are many deep issues, though mostly ones that are well beyond the scope of this chapter. For present purposes, I will assume the story to which I am most sympathetic in the case of vision—namely, the Dogmatist story powerfully articulated by Pryor (2000, 2004)—and will explore if we can tell a satisfying analogous story about intuition. According to Perceptual Dogmatism (Perceptual Dogmatism, PD):

> If it visually seems to you that p, you are thereby prima facie justified in believing that p.

The justification is, of course, only prima facie, and so can be defeated by other considerations. The corresponding principle for intellectual seemings would be this:

> (Intellectual Dogmatism, ID) If it intellectually seems to you that p, you are thereby prima facie justified in believing that p.

And, finally, a principle for rational intuitions:

> (Rational Intuition Dogmatism, RID) For any necessary proposition p, if you rationally intuit that p, you are thereby prima facie justified in believing that p.

Since rational intuitions present p as necessarily true, they are apt only for justifying propositions that are necessary.

Assuming RID to be correct, how well would it explain the features of rational intuitions outlined above? According to RID, if a subject has a rational intuition p, that would thereby suffice to give them some prima facie justification for believing p. Since the intuition suffices for prima facie justification, it can provide that justification without relying on any other justified attitude. Hence, it provides foundational prima facie justification. Of course, that prima facie justification might

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get defeated by other information available to the subject, including, as I've said, empirical considerations; but that is merely to say that justification by intuitions is not automatically all-things-considered.

5. Intuition and the a priori

This brings us to the question why intuition should be regarded as providing prima facie justification that is a priori as opposed to a posteriori.[11]

Given the distinction between intuitions and rational intuitions, it's not intuitions per se that are linked to the a priori, but only *rational* intuitions. As Bealer (2000) points out, you could have the intuition that a house whose foundation has been undermined will collapse; but that would not be a rational intuition but merely a 'physical' intuition, since it does not present the fact in question as (metaphysically) necessary.

So, our question becomes: why should rational intuitions be regarded as a source of a priori justification? If a proposition is shown to be justifiably believed merely in virtue of being understood, that has an obvious connection to the a priori. But once we introduce a notion of intuition that is supposed to provide justification for belief that goes beyond what is contained in the understanding, a substantive question seems to arise about why that justification should be thought to be a priori.

The question may seem especially urgent for views, like mine, which emphasize the analogy between visual impressions and intellectual impressions. If both types of state are, in some broad sense, states of 'seeing', why are the former said to provide a posteriori and the latter a priori warrant?

The answer is that what makes ordinary perception a source of a posteriori justification is that ordinary perception is, and presents itself as being, a source of causally sensitive presentations of the shifting contingent facts in its environment. Sources of information that so present themselves are paradigm cases of a posteriori warrant; that is why both *introspection* and *proprioception* are also so regarded.

By contrast, rational intuition, as I previously stated, does not present itself in that way but rather as a source of non-causal insight into the timeless natures of the properties it treats, and, in particular, into the timeless modal relations of compatibility, incompatibility, and entailment that hold between them. And that is exactly what you would expect a source of a priori justification to look like.

[11] This section expands upon, and clarifies, the account of the relation between intuition and apriority given in Boghossian (2020b), in the section entitled 'Intuitions and the A Priori', pp. 220–221. The main substantial difference between the two treatments is the appeal that I am now making to the difference between intuitions simpliciter and 'rational intuitions', a distinction that wasn't clear to me when I wrote that section.

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Williamson (2020a, pp. 211–212) tries to make trouble for the claim of apriority by describing a case in which intuition purportedly justifies a proposition that is clearly empirical.[12] He imagines you receiving an invitation from Donald Trump to his birthday party and having the direct and unmediated intuition that you should not accept it. And yet, he says, how to respond to a birthday invitation from Donald Trump is clearly not an a priori matter. Hence, it is not clear what intuitions have to do with a priori justification.

This challenge was fair to the treatment in Boghossian (2020b), since I was there not distinguishing between intuitions simpliciter and rational intuitions. I would now emphasize that it is only rational intuitions that have a tie to a priori justification. And I assume that the intuition that someone might have that they ought not to attend Trump's birthday party would not be a rational intuition—it would not present it as necessarily true that they ought not to go, but, at most, just true that they ought not to go. Through no fault of Williamson's own, the example fails to bite against the view as now developed.[13]

In my (2020b, pp. 220–221), I also claimed that, the distinction between intuitions and rational intuitions aside, Williamson's thought-experiment was unrealistic. If it were to seem true to me that I shouldn't accept an invitation from Trump, that would typically be grounded in my intuition that, other things being equal, I ought not to help celebrate the birth of someone so morally reprehensible (fill in your favourite account of Trump's character), not a direct intuition about the proposition: I ought not to attend Trump's party. And that more general moral principle is necessary and so a fit object for justification by (rational) intuition.

This reply gives an inferential account of the justification for the conclusion that I ought not to attend Trump's birthday party, with a moral principle as an a priori premise and a non-moral premise asserting that Trump has the attributes mentioned in the antecedent of the moral principle. But it is not committed to holding that I must have explicitly run through such an inference in my head in order to justifiably reject Trump's invitation. The inference may be tacit; or it may be that it, or a sufficiently similar inference, was once explicit, but has now been thoroughly automated. However, if the circumstance is sufficiently novel, as we may assume an invitation from Trump would be for most of us, I stand by the claim that being fully justified in one's verdict would require a certain amount of explicit moral reasoning.

Williamson finds this ludicrous. He treats us to a description of his mental life which apparently *never* involves considering the reasons why one ought to adopt one or another moral stance:

[12] Williamson develops the example in terms of intuitions rather than rational intuitions, but I assume he would not object to my reformulating his objection in terms of the latter notion.

[13] Although no doubt he would be able to think of others that would.

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> Perhaps Boghossian makes his daily decisions in the elaborate way he describes. Speaking for myself, I am not sure that I have ever justified a universal moral principle in my life, quickly or slowly, a priori or a posteriori. I suspect that I am not unusual in that respect .... Speaking for myself again, I rarely reach decisions by reasoning from general principles, at least, not in any way to which I have conscious access. When the decision is difficult, and there is plenty of time for reflection, I do not consciously reason; I simply procrastinate until one morning I wake up knowing what I am going to do. When the decision is easier, or there is less time for reflection, I procrastinate less, without reasoning more. I doubt that I am unusual in that respect either. (2020b, pp. 235–236)

If Williamson's account of his own moral (non-)reasoning is even somewhat accurate, I won't be asking him for moral advice anytime soon! The idea that you should simply trust what you wake up finding yourself inclined to do with regard to a difficult moral question strikes me as faintly absurd.

Even with respect to something much less difficult, such as Trump's party invitation, if the circumstance is sufficiently novel, any reasonable person would want to think through the conflicting reasons: 'Perhaps, if I went, I would be able to influence him, or others, in a way that could lead to some good; on the other hand, that is unlikely, and I wouldn't want my presence to be misinterpreted as support; etc, etc.'

Williamson makes life easier for himself by making it sound as if, on the alternative view, you first have to establish some extremely ambitious, exceptionless, universal, moral principle before proceeding to deliberate about the narrow case at hand. In practice, of course, what one does is consider various reasons, weigh them up against one another, and arrive at a final all-things-considered judgement which implicitly encodes a general principle: on balance, and given the following facts, I shouldn't go because these reasons not to go outweigh those in favour of going. This principle need not be thought of as speaking to all possible circumstances in all possible historical time periods. It could be localized and qualified by generous ceteris paribus clauses (as my original formulation was). But it is hard to see how one could be properly justified in arriving at the conclusion that one should reject Trump's invitation without some consideration of the reasons pro and con, and some determination of how they stack up against one another.

6. The justificatory power of intuitions (II)

It's time to turn to the question how intuitions could have the third of the properties we identified, namely the ability to (occasionally) provide so much prima facie justification that they are able to defeat strongly justified beliefs.

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How could a deeply entrenched view, such as the Justified True Belief view of knowledge, be refuted on the basis of its intellectually seeming to us that a handful of hypothetical scenarios are counterexamples?

You might think that a large part of the explanation is already contained in the fact that the justification that an intuition provides is foundational, and so not dependent on any other beliefs for its plausibility. But that can't be an adequate explanation all by itself, since it's consistent with a justification's being foundational that it be quite weak.

I have already emphasized that rational intuitions can present propositions as being *necessarily* true. In addition, it's clear that rational intuitions often supply impressions not merely of necessary truth, but of *obvious necessary truth*.

What does it mean for a proposition to be presented to you as obviously true? It means (cf. Quine 1986, p. 206) that it is presented to you in a way that should command assent from you without any further evidence; that the likelihood that the belief should turn out to be false is extremely small; and so that it should take considerable counterevidence to rationally shake your conviction in its truth. In this sense, perception, too, presents certain propositions as obviously true.

Thus, intuition presents the proposition that two circles of unequal radii can intersect at most at two points as obviously necessarily true. As a result, you are justified in believing it; justified in believing it without further evidence; and justified in requiring something extraordinary to shake your conviction in its truth. Given all that, it's not surprising that a small handful of intuitions about cases can sometimes provide one with a more or less immediate refutation of a previously deeply entrenched belief.

You may ultimately be wrong to take p to be true. But in the absence of defeaters, if you find p obvious, you are prima facie entitled to believe p and to insist that considerable counterevidence would be needed to defeat it. Thus, it would appear that the proponent of intellectual seemings seems to have the resources with which to explain all the central epistemic features of intuitive judgements.

7. Misleading intuitions

However, if intuitions are not infallible, that means that they're capable of being false. Won't allowing that false intuitions provide prima facie justification, especially in the moral domain, lead to some unpalatable consequences?

Williamson (2020a, p. 213; 2020b, p. 238) asks us to consider a card-carrying member of the Nazi party (call him 'Hans'). Whenever Hans reflects on an otherwise ordinary scenario in which he has the opportunity to kill or enslave some non-Aryans, it seems true to him that he should kill or enslave them, and he endorses that general proposition. Doesn't such a case refute RID?

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Williamson notes that proponents of intuitions may well try to defend themselves against such a case by emphasizing that intuitions provide only prima facie justification and so are subject to defeat. However, he asks, what if such defeaters don't turn up in the case of Hans? Should we then say that Hans is fully justified in his odious views? And if we do say that, and Hans acts on those views, isn't the internalist committed to Hans having acted justifiably and is that not an intolerable consequence? Here is Williamson giving voice to this train of thought:

> The qualifier 'prima facie' may sound reassuring. Perhaps something will turn up to defeat the prima facie justifications for the bigoted beliefs. But Boghossian's internalism drastically restricts the scope for such defeat. If only consciously accessible mental states of the subject are available for that purpose, defeat must take the form of something like internal inconsistency or incoherence .... What if there is no such internal incoherence?
>
> All this raises the spectre of the consistent Nazi .... Of course, in practice it is hard for *anyone*, including a Nazi, to be consistent. But a consistent Nazi is possible in principle, and so makes a legitimate example .... If the same approach is applied to the justification of action as to the justification of belief, the view also implies that the consistent Nazi is justified, all things considered, in acting on his belief and enslaving or killing those who do not belong to a master race ....
>
> ... I am not attributing those consequences to Boghossian's own views. But an urgent, central challenge faces his internalist approach to justification, and others like it. To put it in terms of the example: how, if at all, does the internalist approach *not* imply that the consistent Nazi is justified in believing that he ought to enslave or kill those who do not belong to a master race—and justified in enslaving or killing them? (2020b, p. 238)

This type of argument against Dogmatist-style internalist principles is familiar from the literature; a very similar argument was pressed, for example, by Littlejohn (2011). Let us take Williamson's points in reverse order, starting with the connection between justified moral belief and justified action.

Williamson wonders how the internalist could possibly block the odious conclusion that Hans would be justified in *acting* on his bigoted belief, if that belief ends up being all-things-considered justified on an internalist view. In pressing this challenge, Williamson is assuming that something like the following principle is correct:

> (JJ) If an agent justifiably believes that they should A, they would be justified in A-ing.

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There are, however, well-known difficulties with this principle, as Feldman (1988) and others have shown. For example, suppose that what action you are justified in performing is a matter of which action would have the best consequences. You may be perfectly justified in believing that A would have the best consequences, and so justified in believing that you should A, even though A is not the best action under the circumstances and so that you are not justified in A-ing.

The essential point for our purposes is that being justified in what to *believe* may be (as the internalist maintains) a function of the agent's *perspective*, in a way in which what the agent has reason to *do* need not be. One type of reason, after all, has to do with how to change one's mind, whereas the other has to do with how to change the world. It wouldn't be surprising if the former type of reason were more perspective-dependent than the latter. I don't deny that there are many subtle issues that remain after one has said this; my only point is that we cannot automatically assume that the epistemic internalist is committed to something like JJ, and so cannot automatically assume that the putative full justification of Hans's odious belief will translate into a justification for his *acting* on his odious belief.

But wouldn't it be bad enough for an internalism about epistemic justification if it allowed that Hans could be fully justified in his odious belief? And wouldn't it follow that there could be such a fully justified Hans if we allow that bigoted ethical intuitions provide *some* prima facie justification for his bigoted beliefs?

For all it would take for Hans to be fully justified in his bigoted belief is that he has no defeaters for it; and, given internalist constraints, all *that* would require is that there be no internal inconsistency or incoherence in his set of beliefs and intuitions.

How easy is it, though, for Hans to be fully internally coherent? Williamson rightly notes that, in practice, it's very hard for anyone to be fully consistent. We all traffic in concepts that have been shown to lead to inconsistency; none of us is fully aware of all the tensions that obtain between our many views, nor would we necessarily be able to remove them if we were to become fully aware. That said, though, doesn't it get *much harder* to achieve internal coherence when you start to add completely outlandish beliefs to your belief set?

Look at the empirical case. It's one level of difficulty for an ordinary person to maintain a fully coherent web of empirical beliefs; it's quite another for a person who is otherwise ordinary but who believes that the moon is made of green cheese. If it really is made of cheese, why doesn't it rot away? Why did it seem to the astronauts who landed there that it was rocky and dusty? How would the view that it's cheese fit in with other known astronomical facts? And so on, and so on.

Obviously, to make a web of belief that incorporates this crazy view internally coherent, you would have to change very many other aspects of the web; and all of those changes would themselves have to be backed by their seeming true. The task seems well-nigh impossible; and if it were possible, the end result may well not be recognizable to us as a system of belief at all.

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Similarly in the moral case: the more outrageously false a person's particular moral belief, the harder it will be to reconcile it with the very many beliefs they are likely to share with the other ordinary folk with whom they were brought up.

Any actual Nazi would have many defeaters for the odious belief that non-Aryans should be killed whenever possible. For example, any such person is likely to believe that human life is precious; that many people they admire and love, some of whom may be friends or family, are non-Aryans; that you can't blame people for having features that are not under their control; that many non-Aryans have, throughout history, produced many things of great value; and so on and so forth. All of these beliefs would be in considerable tension with his nasty view.

In parallel with the empirical case, and as we have repeatedly learned over the years (see especially Street 2009), it is much harder than we tend to assume to present a case where someone consistently holds a shockingly crazy normative belief. In order to describe such a case, you would have to describe someone so different from anyone we are familiar with that our intuitions about what *that* person has reason to believe may well be worthless. Although it is a bit of a cliché to invoke the fully coherent Nazi as a putative counterexample to internalist/coherentist views of moral justification, it is much harder to make such an example work than Williamson and others allow. The blithe assumption that such a person is possible 'in principle' overlooks the fact that we have no idea what such a person would end up looking like and whether we could be at all confident that we wouldn't end up dismissing them as utterly crazy and so not justified at all.

All of this may seem to be beside the point, however, if you think that even the more modest claim—that Hans's bigoted intuition provides him with *some* prima facie justification for his bigoted view—is in itself intrinsically implausible and the death knell for Dogmatist-style internalist views of epistemic justification.

Once again, let's look first at perception.

In the 'new evil demon' case (Cohen 1984), an envatted brain is fed the same sense perceptions as a normal human being: the envatted brain's perceptions are systematically false, the normal human being's true. The raison d'être of internalism is to formulate a conception of epistemic justification that would rule that the envatted brain would be justified in believing exactly what the ordinary human does—indeed, that it would be crazy for them to believe anything else. So, far from being embarrassed by the commitment to its being possible for a massively false set of beliefs being justified, that is precisely the very result the internalist is after. And isn't a fully consistent Hans (conceding his possibility for the sake of argument) just the case of the envatted brain transposed to the moral domain, a moral brain in a vat, so to speak?

It might be thought that there is a significant epistemic difference between Hans and the ordinary brain in a vat. In the latter case, we may assume that the agent's cognitive faculties are in good order and performing as well in belief-management as could be expected; it's only their external circumstances which frustrate them

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from arriving at the truth. In the case of Hans, however, surely his bigoted intuitions stem from some sort of internal *defect* in his capacity for moral insight or reasoning. So, it might be thought, the analogy between Hans and the brain in a vat is not perfect.

Of course, if the defect in question affects the agent's capacity to reason cogently, to proportion their belief to their evidence correctly, the internalist would have no qualms about letting those facts negatively impact the epistemic status of their beliefs. But what if the defects impacted not the reasoning itself but what evidence the agent had, the *inputs* into their reasoning? Could impressions of truth that resulted from such internal defects also be thought to provide prima facie justification?

Consider an agent who, unbeknownst to them, suffers from the cognitive defect of being red–green colour-blind. Such a person will reliably falsely believe X and Y to be the same colour when they are not because their colour perception doesn't discriminate between them.

I think it is intuitively obvious that such a person would have prima facie justification, on the basis of their sense perception, for believing that X and Y are the same colour. Of course, once they discover that they are in fact red–green colour-blind, that will defeat the justification provided by their perceptions. However, until they have made that discovery, it's hard to deny that they are justified in their colour judgements, including the ones that are reliably false.

This is a simple case; but its ramifications are profound. It shows decisively that impressions of truth that result from internal defects, at least when those are defects of the sensorium, do not undermine their capacity to provide prima facie justification.

Consider, next, the type of hypothetical case described by Siegel (2017) (I don't know to what extent such cases are psychologically realistic). Jane's background anxiety makes Jack's face appear angry, even though he is not angry, and even though his face would not be taken to look angry by an uninvolved bystander. Siegel wants to say that Jane's perception is irrational and hence cannot be relied upon to even prima facie justify her belief that Jack is angry.

I believe that this verdict is intuitively mistaken: Jane is prima facie justified in believing Jack to be angry on the basis of her perception. Of course, once she discovers that her perception is being distorted by her background anxiety, that will defeat the justification provided by her perception. However, until she has made that discovery, it's hard to deny that she is justified in her judgements about Jack's frame of mind.

However, even if you were inclined to be sympathetic to Siegel's verdict in this case, it would be hard to reconcile that verdict with the obviously correct verdict in the colour-blindness case. For how should we distinguish, for normative epistemic purposes, between the inaccuracy fostered by a distorting factor in one's sensorium and one fostered by a distorting factor in one's emotional makeup? Why should the one factor be relevant if the other is said not to be?

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Finally, consider a case that may be thought to make the most difficulty for Dogmatist-type principles. Harry is a delusional psychotic to whom it vividly seems that people in black masks are coming to stab him with knives at the ready, when in fact he is just sitting on a quiet park bench drenched in sunlight surrounded by unmasked friendly people. He acts as though to defend himself; his actions make sense from his perspective. Is Harry prima facie justified in believing that people are out to attack him?

I do not find it implausible to say that he is, while noting, of course, that Harry will have lots of defeaters for his belief, which, sadly, he may not be in a position to use. Once again, though, even if you were inclined to disagree with me about the verdict in this case, it would be hard to reconcile that attitude with the correct verdict in the colour-blindness case.

At least when it comes to sense perception, then, Dogmatist-type principles deliver the correct verdicts for a wide range of cases, including cases where the perceptions are reliably in error, or distorted by background defects in the agent's faculties.

Do matters look different in the a priori domain? It should be emphasized that the question here is about one's epistemic justification to believe a particular moral principle, not the *truth* of that principle. The internalist is perfectly entitled to assume that Hans's odious moral beliefs are *false*.

There are some philosophers, even some of an internalist stripe, who believe that in the a priori domain, justification and truth must coincide, and that it is not possible to have an a priori justified belief that is false (see, e.g. Smithies forthcoming). It is not impossible to combine internalism about epistemic justification with an infallibilism about a priori belief: all you need to do is set up your theory of meaning in such a way that you don't even count as thinking, or having intuitions, about the good and the right, unless those thoughts (or at least a very significant number of them) are true.

You can do this, and so avoid the problem of Hans altogether, but I think that would be a cop-out. I believe it's quite clear that you can be a priori justified in believing something false. Andrew Wiles was justified in believing he had proved Fermat's Last Theorem on the basis of his first, subtly fallacious proof; so were those who inspected his proof and found no flaw in it. Our ancestors were mistaken in many of their moral beliefs (there is moral progress, after all), but they may have been justified in holding them: perhaps, given the development of moral thought at the time, it would have required a moral genius to have seen that they were mistaken.

Given that a priori belief can be fallible, allowing false intuitions to provide prima facie justification for false moral beliefs seems like the correct outcome. What the preceding considerations hope to show is that you can endorse this plausible commitment without fearing that it will immediately lead to the depredations of the Third Reich.[14]

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