

BOOK REVIEW

Chudnoff, Elijah, *Intuition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. xi + 2013, £35 (hardback).

Talk of intuitions is commonplace in recent philosophy, as are debates about the role of intuitions in philosophy, how frequently they are appealed to, and what evidential value they have. Given this interest in intuitions, it is perhaps surprising to find basic disagreement in the literature about just what intuitions amount to. Following one thread, it appears that many philosophers take intuitions to be judgments that are not arrived at through conscious reasoning. To illustrate, when Kuntz and Kuntz [2011] asked professional philosophers to rank-order seven definitions of ‘intuition’ with regard to consistency with philosophical usage, the top-ranked was ‘judgment that is not made on the basis of some kind of observable and explicit reasoning process’. While this definition was the top-ranked one, only 32.3% of participants actually ranked it first. And a comparable percentage of participants (23.3%) selected the next most highly ranked definition—‘an intellectual happening whereby it seems that something is the case without arising from reasoning, or sensorial perceiving, or remembering’. Clearly, philosophers are somewhat divided on this issue.

In *Intuition*, Elijah Chudnoff offers a detailed account of intuitions that accords with the second definition given above. His basic claim is that intuition is a form of intellectual perception—‘intuitions are experiences that purport to, and sometimes do, reveal how matters stand in abstract reality by making us intuitively aware of that reality’ [1]. This rough idea is then fleshed out in terms of five key theses [3]:

(IP1) Intuitions are experiences.

(IP2) Intuitions immediately justify beliefs.

(IP3) Intuitions are similar to sensory perceptions in that they purport to, and sometimes do, put us in a position to gain knowledge by making us aware of their subject matter.

(IP4) The subject matter of intuition is not the subject matter of sensory perception.

(IP5) Though intuition experience can involve sensory experience, it is a distinctive experience and can also occur autonomously.

The rest of the volume is devoted to laying out and defending a view of intuitions corresponding with these theses. And Chudnoff does this in an admirably clear and detailed fashion. Given that both friends and foes of appeals to intuitions in recent philosophy are often unclear about just what they mean when they use ‘intuition’ and related terminology, this volume is an important addition to the literature.

In line with Chudnoff’s goal of laying out and defending his view of intuition as a form of intellectual perception, the volume spends little time describing how ‘intuition’ talk is used in contemporary philosophy; nor does Chudnoff argue that philosophers generally use such talk in a way that aligns with his account. Given the seeming disagreement amongst philosophers about what is meant by

‘intuition’ talk, this is unfortunate. This comes up, in particular, with regard to objections to the practice of appealing to intuitions in philosophy, such as those coming from certain quarters of experimental philosophy, which Chudnoff takes to fuel much of the recent interest in the topic [107]. In so far as it is unclear to what a given philosopher is appealing, and in so far as there is reason to think they are often appealing to ‘intuitions’ construed in a different way than Chudnoff targets, it is unclear that his defence hits the mark.

While Chudnoff offers little reason to think that his preferred usage of ‘intuition’ is widely used in philosophy today, he does make the case that it has been historically important, locating views similar to his own in figures ranging from Plato to Descartes to Husserl. Given this historical support, it is worth noting that some significant philosophical figures have also been critical of the view that we have an intuitive faculty that is analogous to our perceptual faculties. Most notably, perhaps, are J.S. Mill and C.S. Peirce in the 19th century, who argued that we lack evidence for an intuitive faculty of mind and that other cognitive faculties can play the role attributed to the intuitive faculty. From such considerations, Pierce [1868: 141] concludes that ‘we have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions.’ This critique remains relevant today, capturing many of the concerns I have with Chudnoff’s account, especially as codified in (IP1) and (IP2).

In line with (IP1), Chudnoff understands intuitions in terms of ‘conscious experiences’ that have ‘presentational phenomenology’, where this is defined in terms of both the experience ‘[making] it intuitively seem to you that p and [making] it seem to you as if this experience makes you intuitively aware of a truth-maker for p ’ [48]. And, in line with (IP2), Chudnoff holds that such an intuition experience justifies the experiencer in believing that p because of this presentational phenomenology. Not surprisingly, how compelling you find this account is likely to correspond with the credence you put in the claim that intuitions have presentational phenomenology and with whether you think that its seeming to you as if you are intuitively aware of a truthmaker for p is a good indication that you are in fact aware of such a truthmaker.

With regard to sceptical concerns about our having intuition experiences with presentational phenomenology, Chudnoff admits that ‘this felt presence to mind of abstract items can be elusive’ [51]. His primary strategy for combatting this is to present examples for which he thinks the presentational phenomenology will be especially clear. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, his primary examples are mathematical. And, while Chudnoff does discuss a few more distinctively ‘philosophical’ intuitions elsewhere in the text, these cases are notably less clear, extending the concern raised above about just how applicable this account is to the typical use of ‘intuition’ language in recent philosophy.

Setting this worry aside, let’s consider one of the mathematical examples on which Chudnoff focuses—the proposition that every concave figure can be rounded out to give a convex figure with a greater area and smaller perimeter [48–9]:

Initially, it might neither seem true nor seem false to you, and you neither have justification for believing it nor have justification for doubting it. You might reflect further on the matter, however. Suppose, for example, you illustrate the relevant kind of mapping from concave to convex figures to yourself by imagining a concrete example . . . Imagining such a concrete example affords you an improved grip on what the proposition is about, and in light of this improved grip it likely seems to you to be true . . . That is, you have an intuition experience.

On Chudnoff's definition, this includes having presentational phenomenology such that you seem to be aware of a truthmaker for the proposition. He then suggests 'a many-many mapping from concave figures to convex figures that associates each concave figure with those convex figures that bound a greater area in a smaller perimeter' [49] as a plausible candidate for this truthmaker.

Speaking just for myself, however, it simply doesn't seem to me as if I am aware of such a mapping in considering the proposition. It does not seem to me as if what I have done is to 'render an infinite, abstract mapping present to mind by visualizing a partial, concrete realization of it' [49]. No such mapping seems present to my mind. Rather, it seems to me as if I've spent some time trying to imagine a convex figure that *cannot* be closed off so as to bound a greater area in a smaller perimeter, on some geometrical assumptions, and that my failure to come up with such a counter-example, coupled with a belief that I've attempted to vary the relevant features, leads me to accept the proposition. Is this perhaps the same thing as having the intuition experience that Chudnoff describes? Perhaps so, although they seem rather different to me.

In response to what he dubs the 'absent intuition challenge', Chudnoff notes that 'what you find in your stream of consciousness does not just depend on what is there; it also depends on what you are equipped to find' [53]. And perhaps I am not equipped to find (or accurately describe) what is in my consciousness. But this could also cut the other way: often people find what they've equipped themselves to find, especially when they're expecting it to be elusive. (Think, for example, about cases like Bondlot's 'discovery' of N-rays.) And here it would seem to me that if my judgment about what's in my stream of consciousness can be mistaken (in failing to find an intuition experience where there is one), then equally Chudnoff's judgment about what's in his stream of consciousness might be mistaken (in finding an intuition experience where there is none).

In so far as one's judgments about the phenomenology of supposed intuition experiences can be mistaken, this raises an additional question for (IP2) and for the claim that you have 'prima facie justification for believing the proposition precisely because you have had an intuition experience representing it as true' [94]. One could grant Chudnoff's claim that intuitions can justify beliefs 'even if [they] are unreliable, so long as they have the right phenomenology' [121], but question our ability to assess when we have the 'right phenomenology'. Of course, this concern will be especially pressing for those who find it 'puzzling how an experience can make its subject aware of an abstract object' [207]. Space prevents me from delving very far into the rather clever 'naïve realist' response that Chudnoff offers to this puzzle in Chapter 7; the empirically inclined, however, are likely to be concerned with just how this account could work, given that Chudnoff accepts that 'abstract objects are causally inert' [225]. Specifically, one might wonder just how an intuition experience's parts would come to be so arranged that its phenomenology would differentiate an abstract object from its background [224] if we assume that object is causally inert.

Returning to the role that appeals to intuitions play in contemporary philosophy, however, I suspect that there is a yet more pressing problem. The problem is that, while Chudnoff argues that the presentational phenomenology of a person's own intuition experience can justify *that person* in believing a proposition, in presenting philosophical arguments we are generally trying to convince *other people*. And it is unclear why my claiming to have an intuition that justifies me in believing that *p*, on Chudnoff's account, would justify you in believing that *p*. Of course, my report might prompt you to go looking for a corresponding intuition of your own; but this is a rather indirect way to proceed, given that a more direct route is available on Chudnoff's account: namely, instead of appealing to one's intuition, one could

describe the truthmaker that is supposedly present to mind and the way it was arrived at—as Chudnoff in fact does with the examples he discusses, including the convex/concave example discussed earlier.

References

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- Peirce, Charles Sanders 1868. Some Consequences of Four Incapacities, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2/3: 140–57.

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