

# Exemplary intuitiveness

## Abstract

The paper discusses two opposing types of view about examples, especially as they are employed in philosophy, and develops a moderate, alternative view. The types of view criticised—psychologisation and denial—are extreme opposites, yet they are representative of a wide range of currently popular positions within academic philosophy. Psychologisation is the type of view according to which the evaluation of philosophical claims often proceeds by way of intended examples or counterexamples whose evidential strength is, or is supposed to be, a function of their intuitiveness. Proponents of this type of view include experimental philosophers, phenomenal conservatists, rationalists and others. Denial is a negation of psychologisation. Specifically, denial is the type of view according to which intuition does not play the evidential role that psychologisation ascribes to it: the evidential strength of intended examples or counterexamples is not, nor is it usually supposed to be, a function of their intuitiveness. Proponents of this type of view include Herman Cappelen (2012) and Max Deutsch (2015). The proposed alternative view is not only historically more accurate regarding the actual practice of philosophy; it is insightful, too, with regard to the question of how philosophy should be done.

## Exemplary intuitiveness

It is widely believed that intuitions are treated as evidence in philosophy. Indeed, it is widely believed not only that intuitions are frequently so treated in philosophy but that intuitions are treated as important evidence in philosophy. There are a number of possible reasons for which one might believe that intuitions are so treated, including certain forms of rationalism and phenomenal conservatism. The most widely purported reason for believing this, however, is a view of the practice of philosophy according to which the evaluation of philosophical claims often proceeds by way of intended examples or counterexamples whose evidential strength is, or is supposed to be, a function of their intuitiveness. For instance, Alvin Goldman writes:

One thing that distinguishes philosophical methodology from the methodology of the sciences is its extensive and avowed reliance on intuition. ... To decide what is knowledge, reference, identity, or causation ..., philosophers routinely consider actual and hypothetical examples and ask whether these examples provide instances of the target ... People's mental responses to these examples are often called 'intuitions', and these intuitions are treated as evidence for the correct answer. (Goldman 2007, 1)<sup>1</sup>

Edmund Gettier's cases against the theory that knowledge is justified true belief are typically cited as a paradigm of this supposed practice. For example, George Bealer writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Expressions of the same type of view can also be found in Baz 2017; Boghossian 2014, 2016; Bonjour 1998; Bealer 1992, 1996, 1998, 2004; Dennett 2013; Goldman 1986, 2007, 2010; Gutting 1998; Jackson 2011; Kornblith 1998; Pust 2000; Sosa 1998, 2007, 2014; and Weatherson 2003, 2014.

At one time many people accepted the doctrine that knowledge is justified true belief. But today we have good evidence to the contrary, namely, our intuitions that situations like those described in the Gettier literature are possible and that the relevant people in those situations would not know the things at issue. (Bealer 1996, 122)

Some people have argued that this kind of view of the practice of philosophy is incorrect. According to these people, it is a needlessly psychologising representation of actual practice and thus misrepresents the epistemological status of this practice. Moreover, they claim that an accurate epistemological description of the philosophical practice of examples and counterexamples need make no mention of intuition, because intuition does not play any noteworthy epistemic role in this practice whatsoever. So, their own view in this connection simply amounts to the negation of the type of view that they regard as an unnecessary psychologisation; specifically, it amounts to the opposing type of view according to which the evidential strength of intended examples or counterexamples is not, nor is it usually supposed to be, a function of their intuitiveness.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent monograph, Max Deutsch has presented the perhaps most plausible account in support of this type of view to date.<sup>3</sup> Deutsch examines two cases in detail: Kripke's Gödel case against the descriptivist theory of reference and Gettier's Ten Coins case. In arguing that

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<sup>2</sup> See especially Cappelen 2012, Deutsch 2015 and Williamson 2007 and 2018.

<sup>3</sup> My discussion focuses on Deutsch 2015, because this work depends on relatively few assumptions about the nature of intuition, evidence and philosophy. By contrast, the definition of intuition in Cappelen 2012 has been widely criticised for being too narrow, while the argument in Williamson 2007 and 2018 is largely based on scepticism about the definability of 'intuition' for the purposes of the philosophical debate; the argument in Deutsch 2015, on the other hand, works with no particular definition but proceeds instead from examples of intuition that are commonly accepted. (For an explanation of my own use of the notion of intuition, see Note 5 below.)

intuitions do not function as evidence in either Gettier's argument or Kripke's, Deutsch emphasises a distinction between logical and psychological qualities of cases that are intended as examples or counterexamples. He writes: 'The psychological question of whether the counterexamples are intuitive is independent of the logical question of whether the examples are *counterexamples*' (2015, 47). In other words, the logical question is whether a given case constitutes an example in support of (or a counterexample against) a given thesis; and the psychological question is whether it so appears intuitively.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of this distinction, Deutsch argues that what is treated as evidence in the practice of evaluating claims by way of examples or counterexamples is not intuitions, but (simply) examples or counterexamples. Thus, he argues: 'It is only this logical question that is relevant to whether Gettier and Kripke succeed, with the Ten Coins and Gödel cases, in refuting the JTB theory of knowledge and the descriptivist theory of reference' (2015, 47).

The distinction between the logical and the psychological question is an important one. However, it is not only the logical question that is relevant to whether Gettier's and Kripke's arguments succeed. Both the logical and the psychological question are relevant in this connection: while the logical question strictly concerns whether the arguments are sound, whether they succeed further depends on whether their supposed soundness will be recognised as such and, thus (at least potentially), on whether the cases which are intended to be examples (or counterexamples) appear to be examples (or counterexamples) intuitively.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Deutsch asks 'whether the examples are *counterexamples*' and distinguishes between genuine and non-genuine examples and counterexamples. I shall more strictly distinguish between cases and examples (including counterexamples) and, hence, ask simply whether a given case is, or is not, an example (or a counterexample).

<sup>5</sup> Regarding 'intuition', I shall be following a similar strategy to that of Deutsch in proceeding from examples of intuition that are commonly accepted; in addition, the interested reader is referred to the

Perhaps the failure of Deutsch and others to account for the epistemological significance of the psychological question stems from the incompleteness of their historical approach. For example, in defending his choice to focus on the original texts in which the relevant cases first appeared, Deutsch asks rhetorically: ‘Could there be a better source for insight into how *Gettier* refuted the JTB theory of knowledge, or *Kripke* refuted the descriptivist theory of reference for proper names, than Gettier’s and Kripke’s own work on the subject?’ (2015, 41)<sup>6</sup> It is true that original sources are generally the best possible ones. However, the relevant chunk of the history of philosophy for this kind of insight comprises not only Gettier’s and Kripke’s original texts but also the genesis of these texts and their subsequent reception. How did the authors of the original texts come to believe that these particular cases were suitable for publication? And how did readers come to believe that the cases worked?<sup>7</sup>

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natural and well-established distinction in psychology between intuitive and non-intuitive judgements, where intuitive judgements are standardly characterised, for example, as being associative, automatic, effortless, fast, implicit, impulsive, reflexive, spontaneous and unconscious, and non-intuitive (also sometimes called ‘analytic’ or ‘reflective’) judgements as being conscious, controlled, deductive, effortful, explicit, rule-based and slow. In virtue of the modest use I make of this apparently stable and innocent notion of intuitive judgement, including a few (I hope) uncontroversial extensions, my argument stands unaffected by the scepticism in Williamson 2007 and 2018. (Some excellent relevant works from the psychological literature are Evans 2007, Frederick 2005, Kahneman and Frederick 2002, Kahneman and Klein 2009, Kahneman 2011, Klein 1998 and Mercier and Sperber 2009; see also Nagel 2012, which employs the same kind of strategy regarding the definition of intuition.)

<sup>6</sup> Herman Cappelen also works with a nearly exclusive focus on original texts, and he offers the same sort of justification as Deutsch; see Cappelen 2012, 162 and 169. See also Cappelen 2014, which contains a partial response to relevant criticism by David Chalmers (2014) but fails to address the kind of argument made by the present paper.

<sup>7</sup> Readers may appreciate being reminded of the original texts at this point. Here is Gettier:

Part of the answer to these questions is that their coming to hold these beliefs is partly due to the psychological fact that the cases appear to be counterexamples to the theories in question *intuitively*, for this psychological fact is evidence in favour of the claim that these cases are counterexamples to the theories in question. Deutsch disagrees: ‘The right answer to the evidence-for-the-evidence question is not that intuitions ... count as our evidence-for-the-evidence ... The answer is instead that *further arguments* play this role’ (2015, 57). Deutsch is

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Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:

(d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

Smith’s evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones’s pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails:

(e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true.

But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false. In our example, then, all of the following are true: (i) (e) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not *know* that (e) is true; for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith’s pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith’s pocket, and bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones’s pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will get the job. (Gettier 1963, 122)

Here is Kripke:

Suppose someone says that Gödel is the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, and this man is suitably well educated and is even able to give an independent account of the incompleteness theorem. He doesn’t just say, ‘Well, that’s Gödel’s theorem’, or whatever. He actually states a certain theorem, which he attributes to Gödel as the discoverer. ... In the case of Gödel that’s practically the only thing many people have heard about him—that he discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic. Does it follow that whoever discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is the referent of ‘Gödel’?

... Suppose that Gödel was not in fact the author of this theorem. A man named ‘Schmidt’, whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and it was thereafter attributed to Gödel. On the view in question, then, when our ordinary man uses the name ‘Gödel’, he really means to refer to Schmidt, because Schmidt is the unique person satisfying the description, ‘the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic’. Of course you might try changing it to ‘the man who *published* the discovery of the incompleteness of arithmetic’. By changing the story a little further one can make even this formulation false. Anyway, most people might not even know whether the thing was published or got around by word of mouth. Let’s stick to ‘the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic’. So, since the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is in fact Schmidt, we, when we talk about ‘Gödel’, are in fact always referring to Schmidt. But it seems to me that we are not. We simply are not. (Kripke 1972/80, 83–4)

right that, in order to establish key examples, authors typically present supporting arguments; and he is right that Gettier and Kripke do so for their 'Ten Coins and Gödel cases.'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, other philosophers who read and evaluate the work will typically proceed by way of even more arguments, and layers of arguments, both for and against the logical status of the cases as examples (or counterexamples). However, this does not mean that the intuition that a case is an example is not treated as evidence in favour of its being an example. There is a stage in the history of the evaluation of a case like Gettier's or Kripke's at which the best available evidence of its being an example (or a counterexample) is that it intuitively so appears. The evidence afforded by such intuitiveness may be very weak—especially as compared with that which might be afforded by detailed and extensive argumentation—but the potential efficacy of this evidence should not be underestimated, for at this initial stage in the evaluation of a case it might well be what gets the ball rolling.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the type of view with which this paper began—according to which the evaluation of philosophical claims often proceeds by way of intended examples or counterexamples whose evidential strength is, or is supposed to be, a function of their intuitiveness—is indeed, as Deutsch and others have pointed out, a misrepresentation of the practice of philosophy in general and of what is treated as evidence in philosophy in particular, including what is treated as evidence in the evaluation of claims by way of intended examples or counterexamples. In all of these important respects, this type of view does indeed entail an uncalled-for psychologisation, for which it has been rightly criticised. However, the opposing type of view

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<sup>8</sup> Cappelen demonstrates this point with respect to several other influential cases; see especially his 2012, chapter 8.

<sup>9</sup> Goldman makes a similar point: 'It wasn't the mere publication of Gettier's two examples, or what he said about them. It was the fact that almost everybody who read Gettier's examples shared the intuition that these were not instances of knowing. Had their intuitions been different, there would have been no discovery' (2007, 2).

that denies that intuition plays any evidential role in this connection—that is, the type of view according to which the evidential strength of intended examples or counterexamples is not, nor is it usually supposed to be, a function of their intuitiveness—equally misrepresents the practice of philosophy in some of the same respects. Although proponents of this type of view are right to emphasise the evidential role played by argumentation, the denial of any evidential role being played by intuition is incorrect for the reasons given above.

A suitably moderate view might perhaps be expressed as follows: the evaluation of philosophical claims often proceeds by way of cases that are intended to be examples (or counterexamples) and that are designed to so appear intuitively, because such intuitiveness will constitute significant, albeit weak, evidence in favour of the claim that the case is an example (or counterexample).

Although psychologisation and denial are historically incorrect, they remain worth considering from a normative perspective. All philosophers should, at least occasionally, reflect on their own ways of evaluating claims, and ask themselves whether they should perhaps *more, or less, often* proceed by way of intended examples (or counterexamples) whose evidential strength is, or is supposed to be, a function of their intuitiveness.

The proposed moderate view entails that, even if the evidence afforded by the intuitiveness of an example (or counterexample) is weak—which, at least in philosophy, it arguably tends to be—it can be significant evidence nonetheless, because the epistemic situation may be such that it is the best available evidence. For example, effective thinking is sometimes fast and sometimes slow: we must learn to strike the right balance, including knowing when to rely on intuition and when not to. Effective communication, on the other hand, is always fast: we must learn to bring others to understand with only minimal signalling. Naturally, the difficulty of achieving this will tend to correspond to just how complex the matter in question is. This degree of difficulty or complexity, in turn, gives a useful measure of the epistemic potential of

an example's intuitiveness—that is, of the fact that a given case's being the intended example, or counterexample, is intuitively apparent—and, thus, it gives a useful measure of the philosophical achievement represented by such brilliant cases as Gettier's and Kripke's.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that the seminal character of the relevant works was a simple function of their respective example's intuitiveness, but rather that had these authors not devised such brilliant, *intuitive* examples, their important work might well never have caused the explosions of new thinking, discourse and knowledge that it did.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, cases like Gettier's and

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<sup>10</sup> Other cases that constitute the same kind of outstanding philosophical achievement include Tyler Burge's arthritis case, David Chalmers's zombies, Foot's trolley cases, Frank Jackson's Mary, Parfit's fission cases, Putnam's twin earth and Judith Jarvis Thomson's violinist. This is to name just a few obvious instances from within the analytic tradition, but the world history of philosophy contains many more instances that have at least the same kind of epistemic potential.

<sup>11</sup> This point is illustrated by the fact that cases that are logically but not psychologically equivalent to Gettier's were already presented by Plato and Russell, but without having the same influence. Russell describes the case of 'the man who looks at a clock which is not going, though he thinks it is, and who happens to look at it at the moment when it is right' (1948, 140). Russell officially presented his case as an example of the insufficiency of true belief, not of *justified* true belief; Plato's presentation mirrors Gettier's more closely in this respect. In the *Theaetetus* (201c–210b), Plato has the main characters of the dialogue, Theaetetus and Socrates, agree with each other—and with Gettier—that justification must be fallible in order to figure in a useful analysis of knowledge (208c–210a); moreover, Plato has them agree that, if it is fallible, justification cannot give a sufficient account of knowledge when paired only with true belief (206c–e), because there exist counterexamples—like those of Gettier—in which justified true belief does not amount to knowledge (207c–208b). Similarly, a case that is logically but not psychologically equivalent to Kripke's Gödel case was already presented by John Searle, in a paper which Kripke (correctly) described as a *locus classicus* of the descriptivist theory of reference he was attacking. Notably, Searle's presentation takes the form of a rhetorical question, and he evidently assumes the correct answer to be one that is different from what later generations of scholars and

Kripke's deserve to be studied by philosophers, and indeed any serious scholar or teacher, as examples of examples—or, perhaps, *exemplars* of examples—and, more specifically, as examples of an example's intuitiveness.

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students, post-Kripke, have come to believe. Searle writes: 'Suppose most or even all of our present factual knowledge of Aristotle proved to be true of no one at all, or of several people living in scattered countries and in different centuries? Would we not say for this reason that Aristotle did not exist after all, and that the name ["Aristotle"], though it has a conventional sense, refers to no one at all?' (Searle 1958, 168)

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