**DO PHILOSOPHICAL INTUITIONS NEED CALIBRATION?**

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**Abstract**

In his seminal paper Robert Cummins ‘Reflection on Reflective Equilibrium’ argued that if intuitions are to serve as reliable guides to philosophical truths then we should be able to check their reliability in particular cases. However, if we can check the reliability of intuitions then that means that we have an independent non-intuitive access to the domain that intuitions are supposed to disclose, which in effect makes intuitions obsolete. Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood in their book ‘An Introduction to Metaphilosophy’ respond to Cummins’ argument by claiming that at least logical intuitions do not demand independent validation because they provide cases of obvious noncontroversial truths. In this paper I discuss one aspect of the question concerning the reliability of philosophical intuitions. In particular, by relying on the so-called Curry’s paradox, I argue that even the intuitions concerning the validity of the basic logical rules, such as the modus ponens, can be problematized. In this respect, I argue that Cummins’ argument remains a viable challenge for those who think that intuitions provide special and undisputed authority in philosophical theorising.

**Keywords:** conceptual analysis, Curry’s paradox, intuitions, metaphilosophy

1. Introduction

Reflection on the methodology of philosophical inquiry reveals that the traditional analytic philosophy is conducted in accordance with the method of conceptual analysis.[[1]](#endnote-1) The method of conceptual analysis consists in imagining “a possible general characterisation of the cases falling under some concept C” and then testing it by way of “trying to find or imagine a particular situation which fits the suggested characterisation and yet would not be a situation to which C could be truthfully applied”. [[2]](#endnote-2) In other words, roughly, the method of conceptual analysis consists in testing the *correctness* of applying a concept to a certain situation against our *intuitions* about the appropriateness of the concept application to the situation in question. Of course, philosophical activity does not consist only in conceptual analysis construed narrowly; it also incorporates devising accounts that provide meaning to (or rather explanations of) our common-sense activities, concepts, relations between experience and science, our place in the world, etc. In that respect intuitions take a notable position, because, not only do they serve as evidential basis for philosophical accounts, they also provide grounds for claiming that philosophical methods are *a priori* and therefore, philosophy as a discipline should be granted a certain methodological autonomy.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In what follows, I will first introduce Cummins’[[4]](#endnote-4) objection that intuitions need to be calibrated and are therefore obsolete. Second, I will support Cummins’ objection by arguing that even in the case of the basic logical rules, intuitions can lead us astray. In this respect, I will conclude that Cummins’ objection still holds as a viable challenge that needs to be taken into account by proponents of the thesis that *a priori* intuitions provide solid grounds for methodological autonomy of philosophy. Finally, I will provide some thoughts about how we could proceed in justifying our logical intuitions, and what are the potential implications of this approach for the methodological autonomy of philosophy.

1. Calibration of the epistemic instruments: Cummins’ challenge

By putting intuitions at the centre of philosophical methodology and by giving them such a prominent role in philosophical theorising one provokes many questions that surface in meta-philosophical reflections. For example, one is confronted with the questions about the sources of intuitions, their nature and their reliability for deciding the veracity or plausibility of philosophical accounts. The topic of this paper will address one aspect of the problem of determining the reliability of philosophical intuitions. It is common to construe the role of intuitions in philosophy analogously to observations in science.[[5]](#endnote-5) Indeed, intuitions are often thought of as psychological states functionally similar to perceptual or observational states, in the sense that they provide grounds or evidence for beliefs, but are themselves distinct from beliefs proper.[[6]](#endnote-6) This common view of intuitions is captured in the following statement:

*“S* has the intuition that *p* if and only if it intellectually seems to *S* that *p*.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

This view captures the idea that intuitions have contents but are different from propositional attitudes such as beliefs, since what seems to be the case might be false or we might fail to believe it for some other reason. Consider an example. In the Müller-Lyer illusion, people keep perceiving the two lines as being of unequal length even though they know they are actually of the same length. In the same way, it could intuitively *seem* to one that *p* is the case, but she might know or have a justified belief that actually *not-p* is the case. Nevertheless, when there are no defeating conditions, intuitions or intellectual seemings that *p* normally lead to or provide significant grounds for holding beliefs with the same content. For the purposes of this paper, this notion of philosophical intuition will be assumed.

The analogy between intuitions and perceptions or observations in general, leads us to the question what gives the authority to intuitions in the case of philosophy*.* What reassures us about the reliability of scientific observations, for instance, is the possibility of *calibrating* the instrument or the observational technique that produces the observations. Calibration of observational instruments enables us to produce accurate representations of the target domain. Robert Cummins explains the notion of calibration with the following example:

When Galileo pointed his newly devised telescope at the moon and saw mountains—earthlike blemishes on what should have been a perfect celestial object—it was legitimate for the opposition to inquire whether the apparent mountains were artifacts. The proper response was to point the telescope at something of known size, shape, distance, color, and so on to determine what distortions it introduced; to calibrate it, in short.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Similarly, in order for the philosophical intuition to play the role of an instrument for obtaining philosophical truths we should be able to calibrate it, just like an astronomer is able to calibrate her telescope to check its reliability for observing objects at a greater distance.[[9]](#endnote-9)

However, it seems that at this point of the discussion the analogy between intuitions and empirical observations breaks down. Cummins’ argument against the epistemic usefulness of intuitions in philosophy can be summarized in the following way: In order to calibrate the source of intuitions we need to have an independent access to the target domain. For example, in the empirical case Cummins says that a telescope could be calibrated by pointing it “at something of known size, shape, distance, color” so that we can check where are the mismatches (if there are any) between what we see through the telescope and what we know about the target domain through other sources. Furthermore, we cannot calibrate intuitions by invoking other intuitions because that would introduce either infinitive regress or vicious circularity. Therefore, it seems that in order to calibrate intuitions we need an independent non-intuitive access to the target domain of our intuitions. However, if that is the case, then the accessibility to the target domain *via* an independent source, renders the intuitions obsolete. We can just use the independent non-intuitive source to build or justify our philosophical accounts.[[10]](#endnote-10) Cummins formulates this point as follows:

But even if philosophical intuition can be calibrated, it never is calibrated, because philosophers could have no possible use for intuition in a context in which the relevant theory was well enough settled to form the basis of a credible calibration test. Philosophical theory in such good shape is ready to bid the Socratic midwife farewell and strike out on its own in some other department. Philosophical intuition, therefore, is epistemologically useless, since it can be calibrated only when it is not needed.[[11]](#endnote-11)

1. Do intuitions really need to be calibrated?

In their recent book on metaphilosophy, Søren Overgaard, Paul Gilbert, and Stephen Burwood,[[12]](#endnote-12) against Cummins’ argument, defend the method of conceptual analysis that is based on the reliability of intuitions. Their principal response to this kind of worry is to question the justifiedness of the demand for calibration in the case of our most basic intuitions. In the case of logical intuitions, they ask the following rhetorical question:

(…) is it really plausible to suggest that your intuition that Q follows from (P🡪Q) & P needs to be ‘calibrated’ before you can rely upon it?[[13]](#endnote-13)

Recent research in philosophical logic indicates that it might be a formidable task to decide what people mean by the notions of *following*, *entailment* or *implication.*[[14]](#endnote-14) However, as a general approximation, we can safely assume that what philosophers usually mean, for example, with the locution that Q follows from (P🡪Q) and P, is that there is a principle, namely *modus ponens*, which warrants the inference. Furthermore, what is usually presupposed is the claim that such a principle belongs to a set of principles that are valid in the sense that they “‘recommend themselves’ as reliable or truth-conducive” when used in reasoning.[[15]](#endnote-15) This idea of truth-conduciveness can plausibly be taken to minimally presuppose logical validity, which is standardly explained in terms of necessary truth-preservation.[[16]](#endnote-16)

With this in mind, the following idea seems to provide a plausible reading of the view according to which basic logical rules are self-evident; to say that *modus ponens* inferences do not need additional justification in order to be used in reasoning amounts to saying that it is *intuitively obvious* that *modus ponens* inferences *preserve* truth in every case. From this seemingly innocuous claim, we can derive the following proposition: to say that *modus ponens* is valid amounts to the claim that every instance of a schema that exemplifies the conditional that corresponds to a *modus ponens* inference is true.[[17]](#endnote-17) For this intuitive reason a proponent of intuitionism (in the methodological sense) can say that there really is no need to check the reliability of the source of the intuition; because the intuition that forms the ground for the belief that *modus ponens* (and the corresponding conditional) is valid is so basic and compelling that it could not fail to track this conceptual truth.

In what follows, I will put pressure on the latter contention by drawing on an example that is familiar in the literature on semantical paradoxes. I will claim that the so-called Curry’s paradox can be used to argue that even intuitions about the general validity of the basic rules of logic, such as the *modus ponens,* can lead to absurdities and that therefore, their underpinnings should not be *a priori* exempt from the demands of calibration.[[18]](#endnote-18)

1. Curry’s paradox

Hartry Field in a series of papers shows that when we take into consideration the paradoxes concerning the concept of ‘*truth*’ we realize that logical rules do not always *preserve truth*.[[19]](#endnote-19) In other words, there are cases in which the connection between forming a logical belief in accordance with logical rules and truth breaks down.

In order to demonstrate the paradox we need to take it for granted that the competence with the concept of *truth* involves the disposition to reason in accordance with the following *truth schema*:

‘p’ is true iff p.

Rules that govern the ‘truth’ (T) predicate are:

T-introduction: p |-- T<p>

T-elimination: T<p> |-- p

Now, let *K* be a sentence that is equivalent to

a) T(<K>) → I’m the Pope

That is, the sentence *K* is equivalent to the sentence that in ordinary language reads: “If this sentence is true then I am the Pope”.[[20]](#endnote-20)

To illustrate when someone might utter or conceive a sentence that corresponds to our *K* above, Field gives the following scenario:

(…) in passing a department store window I might see a TV display, showing what I take to be my least favorite politician, leading me to say “If what that guy is now saying is true then I’m the Pope”. If in fact the display is of those passing the window, then my utterance is “equivalent given the empirical facts” to the claim that if it itself is true then I’m the Pope.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The paradoxical result is that from this sentence we can prove any sentence whatsoever or in this case that I am indeed the Pope. Here is the formal derivation:

1. T(<K>) supposition

2. K 1.T-elimination

3. T(<K>) → I’m the pope 2. equivalence to a)

4. I’m the pope 1., 3. → elimination

5. T(<K>) → I’m the pope 1., 4. → introduction

6. K 5. equivalence

7. T(<K>) 6. T-introduction

8. I’m the pope 5., 7., → elimination[[22]](#endnote-22)

This instance of the Curry’s paradox[[23]](#endnote-23) is plausibly taken to show that logical rules are not *necessarily* truth-preserving.[[24]](#endnote-24) In the derivation of the false sentence, one only needs to use four rules: truth introduction, truth elimination, conditional (<→>) elimination and conditional introduction. Since the only premise of the argument was discharged in the derivation of the conclusion and the premise is a well-formed sentence, we have a decisive reason to search for the culprit among the rules that enabled the derivation. In order to rectify the situation one could try to modify any of these four rules. However, none of the modifications will feel particularly satisfying. Let us have a glimpse at what happens when we restrict the aforementioned rules one by one.

We could try to restrict in some way the application of the T-introduction rule. For example, we could claim that there are some cases in which although some conclusion is logically follows from premises still the T-introduction rule would not be permitted. Let us take a particular case. We could say that *modus ponens* can be indiscriminately applied to all sentences of our language, because it is a rule that is in some sense warranted in our accepted logic. However, despite our belief that the rule is warranted, we still recognize that there will be these strange cases in which it will *not* preserve the truth (for example in cases which involve premises of the Curry’s paradox or the Liar paradox). In other words, if we restrict the application of the T-introduction rule we would need to recognize that not every instance of the conditional that corresponds to the *modus ponens* inference, namely ‘(A & (A→B))→B’, will be true. Hence, our intuition that from A & (A→B) always follows B should be revised depending on how we construe the concept that something validly follows from something else.

The second possibility is to restrict the T-elimination rule. However, this restriction brings another set of unintuitive consequences. T-elimination restriction would make it possible that there is such a case in which we accept, for example, the proposition that (T(<A>) & T(<A→B>))→T(<B>), but do not endorse every instance of it as true. That is, the restriction of the latter kind would amount to the claim that the rule T(<A>)|--A itself is not generally truth-preserving. That seems to be highly implausible; one might wonder how can the inference from ‘A’ is true to the conclusion that A is the case be anything other than truth-preserving? Then again, this is one of the possible moves to make in order to resolve particular paradoxes that infect our language and thought.

The third possibility attempts at resolving the paradox by restricting the inference forms that relate to the application of the conditional. This could involve a possible modification of the introduction rule for the conditional. For example, we could restrict it by making it illegitimate to apply the rule of the introduction of the conditional indiscriminately. That is by making it illegitimate to make indiscriminately transitions from A and (A→B) to B. However, in that case it would follow that we would not be able to preserve the general truth of the corresponding conditional statement. That is, we could not accept as valid every instance of the conditional (A & (A→B))→B). We would not be able to do that because its proof would need to invoke the rule of the introduction of the conditional.[[25]](#endnote-25) Nevertheless, on this approach exactly this rule is supposed to be limited in order to avoid Curry style paradoxes.

The fourth possibility is to restrict the application of the elimination of the conditional rule, that is, to introduce a restriction on *modus ponens* inferences*.* If we restrict the possible domain of application of the *modus ponens*, then we open up a possibility that there is a conditional sentence of the form (T(<A>) & T(<A→B>))→T(<B>) which we accept but at the same time do not accept that T(<B>) follows from the acceptance of (T(<A>) & T(<A→B>)). This move in effect concedes that *modus ponens* does not in general preserve the truth or that it preserves it only in limited cases.

The apparent upshot of the present discussion is that however we try to resolve the truth-paradox(es) it is likely that whatever logical rules we accept and find intuitive will not be generally truth-preserving.[[26]](#endnote-26) So, again, the necessary connection between truth and the use of *modus ponens* or its corresponding conditional would be broken.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The point of the Curry’s paradox in the present context is to show that even in this kind of basic case an argument could be made to the effect that even our most basic intuitions are not insulated from the demand of calibration. At least some kind of justification for the *a priori* reliability of logical intuitions must be offered, since the latter paradox shows that it could very well be the case that there is no general *necessary* connection between indiscriminate usage of *modus ponens* and the truth. In that respect Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood’s[[28]](#endnote-28) claim that there are some intuitions, such as those that pertain to *modus ponens*, whose status as being self-evident must be reconsidered in the light of Cummins’[[29]](#endnote-29) argument. Curry’s paradox enables us to contemplate the possibility that even our deeply engrained logical beliefs might not be secured from doubt and that reliance on our *a priori* intuitions and how they figure in conceptual analysis might not be enough to justify their special status in philosophical methodology.

1. Intuitions and the philosophical methodology

There are different proposed solutions to the Curry’s paradox in the literature on philosophical logic, and their discussion goes beyond the limits of the present paper.[[30]](#endnote-30) What I take as relevant for the present discussion is the lesson that can be drawn from Curry’s and similar paradoxes: even the most entrenched and intuitively justified beliefs or *intellectual* *seemings* can lead to unexpected falsehoods when taken for granted. In effect this shows that Cummins’ objection that philosophical intuitions somehow need to be calibrated and that consequently their epistemic relevance needs to be justified still presents a viable challenge that should be more seriously addressed by the proponents of methodological intuitionism.

However, Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood make a good point when asking how to calibrate intuitions such as those involved in our basic logical beliefs. [[31]](#endnote-31) The question of calibration arguably needs to be replaced with the more familiar question of how to justify our basic logical beliefs. The method that immediately comes to mind is the method of reflective equilibrium.[[32]](#endnote-32) It enables us to balance the intuitions or considered judgments against more general principles (rules, norms, etc.) in order to reach a state that will provide stable justification for our practices. Since the process of equilibration is essentially dynamic, it will enable us to revise our intuitions when they do not cohere with our more reflective beliefs and observations.

A further lesson that might be learned from the present discussion is that the justification of intuitions might demand the application of the wide reflective equilibrium. The reason stems from the fact that logic provides basic normative principles that underlie rational thinking.[[33]](#endnote-33) In that respect, logic’s normative role underpins all of our cognitive projects.[[34]](#endnote-34) This inescapability of basic logical inference rules for our cognitive projects might be used to counter sceptical doubts that are raised by the Curry paradox. However, if we seriously entertain this line of thought then we will have to admit that the reason why the inescapability of logic justifies us in using its principles in our reasoning processes is not solely based on *a priori* considerations that stem from intuitive obviousness.[[35]](#endnote-35) At least this much is shown by the Curry paradox. In this respect, we need to recognize that a significant part of justification comes from *a posteriori* considerations. In particular, those considerations that relate to facts about the successfulness and usefulness of our reasoning (logical) strategies in accomplishing our most cherished cognitive projects.[[36]](#endnote-36) In that respect, we might also need to recognize that the *validity* of logical principles will often have a more local character, depending on the pragmatic considerations that relate to specific projects in which those principles might be usefully applied.

1. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I aimed to show that Cummins[[37]](#endnote-37) provides a genuine challenge to the view that philosophical intuitions can serve as an indubitable source of evidence. To this end, I argued that Curry’s paradox might be used to to argue that even basic logical beliefs might not be truth-preserving in general. Furthermore, I indicated, albeit sketchily, that if the plausible resolution of the paradoxical situation involves the application of the wide reflective equilibrium which includes reliance on the knowledge of some important empirical facts then the idea that philosophical inquiry includes a strong *a priori* aspect that makes it an autonomous discipline should probably be revised. As a final remark, echoing David Hume’s insight, we can note that the case of the Curry’s paradox, appears to confirm that the faculty of *Reason*, taken to be exhausted by what our (empirically unaided) *a priori* intuitions provide, tends to hopelessly undermine itself.[[38]](#endnote-38)

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1. See Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood (2013) ch. 4, Jackson (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood (2013) p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g. Jackson (1998); for a contrasting view see Miščević (2001). In his influential book on metaphilosophy Williamson (2007) argues against the *a priori* and *a posteriori* division of forms of knowledge. By doing this he in effect also rejects the autonomy of philosophy that is embedded in a strong view of conceptual analysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Cummins (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Kagan (2001/2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Pust (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Pust (2012), see also Huemer (2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cummins (1998) pp. 116-117. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Cummins (1998), pp. 116-117. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a detailed discussion of Cummins’ calibration argument see Weinberg et al. (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cummins (1998) p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood (2013) p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Beall and Restall (2000), Field (2009a). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Wedgwood (2011) p. 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See e.g. Beall and Restall (2000) and Smokrović (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In more formal terms that means that every instance of the following inference schema P, P🡪Q |-- Q will have a corresponding true conditional statement of the form: (P&(P🡪Q))🡪 Q). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. It must be noted that several authors have contested the validity of modus ponens, in particular. For a seminal paper on this topic see McGee (1985). For a more recent argument in the context of normative logic see Kolodny and MacFarlane (2010). However, in this paper I rely on Curry’s paradox because it casts more general doubt on a wide range of intuitions that pertain to logical validity. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Field (2008), (2009a), (2009b). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Field (2009a). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Field (2009a) p. 350. In Field (2008) p. 84 Field gives another instantiation of the sentence *K*: “Again, we might construct this in innocuous ways: ‘‘If the man in this picture is now saying something true then the earth is flat’’, where unbeknownst to me it is a picture of myself.” [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. cf. Field (2008) p. 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Curry’s paradox is sometimes in the literature referred to as Löb's Paradox. For an introduction to the different versions of the paradox and its historical sources, see Beall (2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Field (2009a). Beside Field (2008), for another book-length discussion of paradoxes related to the concept of truth and possible solutions, see also Maudlin (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Field (2009a) p. 352. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See Field (2009a) p. 351and Field (2009b) p. 263. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. One might respond to the present discussion by saying that Tarski’s explication of truth in terms of model-theory resolves the issue by showing that rules such as *modus ponens* are valid and therefore necessarily truth-preserving in *model-theoretical* sense. However, as Field (2009a) p. 348 points out model-theoretic notion of validity does not capture the pretheoretical notion of validity. Field gives two reasons for this claim; one “is that by varying the definition of ‘model’ ” one can capture “large family of notions, ‘classically valid’, ‘intuitionistically valid’, and so on” Field (2009a) 348, for which it is not clear that any of them represent what is really meant by the pretheoretical notion of validity. The second reason is that models in model theory misrepresent reality; namely, models have sets as their domain, but the full universe cannot be a domain of a model (because the full universe includes all sets, and being a domain of a model would imply that full universe is a set of all sets). Since the actual world that corresponds to the full universe cannot be represented in a model then even if logical inferences preserve truth in all models (suitably defined) it does not follow that they preserve truth in the actual world. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Cummins (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See e.g. Field (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood (2013) p. 99, although see Weinberg et al. (2012) for an insightful discussion of this issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See e.g. Daniels (1979). I am aware that I do not provide any argument in favour of the epistemic validity of the method of reflective equilibrium. However, I will just note that I share the intuition that the method descriptively captures how we proceed when we test the acceptability or plausibility of philosophical theories, see e.g. Thagard (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Field (2009b). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. For a discussion of the idea that logic is inescapable for all of our cognitive projects, see Miščević (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. In any case, I claim that this is not the *entire* explanation why logic entitles us to derive normative principles that our reasoning processes need to satisfy. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Miščević (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Cummins (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Hume (1739-1740/2003).

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    Williamson, T. (2007). *The Philosophy of Philosophy.* Oxford: Oxford: Blackwell. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)