

Comments on Miscevic, “The Explainability of Intuitions”

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Draft
comments welcome

1 Summary

Nenad Miscevic argues that it may be rational to rely on physical and scientific essentialist intuitions even if their occurrence and compulsiveness can be naturalistically explained. This is so, according to Miscevic, because evolutionary history cannot give us more than a *partial* justification of our intuitions and only forms the last of a three-step vindication: reliance on intuitions is justified, because they are obvious, indubitable and rationally compelling, they are predictively successful and, last *and* least, they are the result of the adaptive natural history of our species.

Miscevic argues for two claims: *compatibilism*, that the naturalistic explainability of intuitions does not undermine their rational credentials, and *reliability*, that our actual use of intuitions is reliable and rationally justified, even if they are to be naturalistically explained. In the case of scientific essentialist intuitions, he draws an analogy to perceptual seemings and to physical intuitions which are underwritten by successful empirical theories. In this way, he seeks to establish a full reflective justification of our use of intuitions and argues that proceeding in this way will not get us stuck in folk metaphysics.

2 Two types of intuitions

I think that there are at least two different kinds of intuitions and that Miscevic’s argument for his first claim applies at best to the second, his argument for the second claim at best to the first kind of intuitions.

Broadly, these types of intuitions may be distinguished by their contents. Contents of the first kind of intuitions do not, those of the second kind do contain an explicit modal or essentialist element. I therefore call the first group “truth-intuitions”, the second kind “necessity-intuitions”.

In the first case, intuition may e.g. be conceived of as a source of knowledge about causally inaccessible entities, like numbers, sets, propositions and so on. It is invoked to explain the otherwise mysterious capacity of ours to epistemically access such entities and to establish their properties. The content of such intuitions is not, or at least not primarily, modal; modality comes in only at a later stage, in the qualification of the deliverances of our mathematical/logical faculty as categorical. These deliverances are truths which are necessary just because there is nothing in the actual world contingent properties of which could render them false. Modality thus applies to such truths “from the outside” as it were.

A very different kind of role is played by the “intuition” which is supposed to assure us of such truths as that water is necessarily H₂O and that Socrates is essentially human. These are truths

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about this-worldly objects, and they hold necessarily or essentially presumably because they are “deep” truths of some kind about these objects. Here, modality is part of the content; if our knowledge of such truths is due to intuition, intuition is some way of gaining modal knowledge about this-worldly object, over and above the non-modal knowledge we gain about them by other means. This is why necessity-intuitions of this second kind are conditional; the appropriate form to express them is of the form “if water is H_2O , then it is necessary that water is H_2O ”.

3 Their acceptability to empiricists

With respect to the first kind of intuition, the qualms of the empiricist have nothing in particular to do with modality. Instead, the empiricist wonders how such a marvellous faculty of extra-sensorial ‘perception’ could fall short of a magic sixth sense or else, if it is taken to have naturally developed, how it could provide rational grounds for the absolute certainty of mathematics. How can we, the empiricist asks, know arithmetical truths given that we do not have causal contact with the things they seem about?

In the second case, however, it is *only* their supposed modal status which makes the alleged results of intuition objectionable to the empiricist. What, he asks, is required *over and above* Socrates’ humanity or water having such and such a chemical structure to make these claims true? His worry may be of two sorts: there is, first, the Humean contention that there is no necessity in nature. Second, the empiricist may be worried about the fact that such necessities depend on empirical theories. It might have turned out after all that water is not H_2O – so our modal intuition should be sensitive to hydrochemical theory.

4 Miscevic’s arguments

Miscevic’s case study of modal intuitions concerns necessity-intuitions, that is intuitions of the second category. He argues that trusting them is rational because they are part of a modal mindedness which evolutionary developed and led us to modal habits which are overall successful. The problem is that it is not clear what “successful” means here. Granted, it is true that water is H_2O and that our knowing this truth may have been increased our chances of survival and reproduction. What, however, is the extra advantage of knowing not only that it is true that water is H_2O but that it is even necessarily true? As far as I see, the answer Miscevic provides is that modal truths like “water is necessarily H_2O ” serve to *explain* observed regularities. This, however, leaves the empiricist unmoved: for every regularity we are able to observe is a regularity holding in the actual world.

The flow chart argument, if it is successful, shows that there may be, for some truths p , an evolutionary advantage to promoting their status to $\Box p$. If it works, it explains at most the occurrence of necessity-intuitions.

Miscevic’s second argument is to the effect that our reliance on intuitions is justified even if the genesis of our intuition faculty is a “fact of natural history”. It aims to show that our intuitions track modal reality by arguing that our intuitions, at least on the species level, are both safe and sensitive. They are sensitive because, if modal reality were different, we would have different intuitions, and they are safe because, if we had different intuitions, then modal reality would have to be different than it is.

I have two problems with this argument: for one thing, I do not know how to understand the alleged possibility that modal reality is different from what it is. Given the availability of iterated modalities in our this-worldly language, this is not just the thought that metaphysical modality could be weaker than S4. But what else could it be?

The second problem is that it is only for truth-intuitions that I am able to make *some* sense of the modal-factual connections Miscevic mentions in favour of modal interventionism. It might be that, if $2 + 2$ equalled 5, our world would look rather different than it does. I therefore grant that the demand for a de dicto explanation of the following form can be met:

why (most p : my mathematical/logical faculty makes it intuitively appear to me that p) p (1)

It seems plausible, however, as Crispin Wright argued this morning, that in such cases of truth-intuitions, there simply is no gap between our understanding of their contents and our recognition of their truth – so there does not seem to be a need to talk of intuition here.

For necessity-intuitions, however, the explanatory demand is different and de rebus: with respect to these special essentialist constitutive truths, why should our intuitions guarantee their necessity?

(most p : p and it intuitively appears to me that it is a deep truth that p) why $\Box p$ (2)

In this latter case, the task seems to be more difficult. I just do not see how our world would differ from how it actually is if water, while still being H_2O , were just *contingently* so.