

---

# INTUITIONS, THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS, AND INDIVIDUATION

**Manhal Hamdo**

*Ph.D. Student, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, Delhi, India  
Room No. 83, International Students House, University of Delhi, Delhi*

---

**Abstract:** The deep source of interest in this paper lies in the paramount argument it provides for philosophy namely, articulating an individualistic view of the nature of intuition. This is fundamental to saying what is significant and distinctive about one being intuiting. On this view, intuitions are individualistically individuated. Contrary to common opinion, the proposed account suggests that an intuition is built out of facts about the individual intuiter. It is something this intuiter has personally experienced. Hence, it is better to be understood from the first person point of view. Revising what is intuition in contemporary philosophy, I shall support my argument first through using some empirical findings of some studies from neuroscience and psychology as well as theoretical analysis of some texts that were often thought to be among the main works that contain thought experiments in which the authors rely on intuitions. I will also try to consider some probable objections to my argument showing their failure.

**Keywords:** Disposition, Intuition, Individuation, Subject.

---

**Introduction:** At least since the publication of Edmund L. Gettier's brief but very influential paper, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," in 1963, it has been standard practice in the philosophy of intuition to develop theories both about the nature of intuitions as well as their relationship to truth. Those who care about the truth value of intuition used to do that on the basis of their view of the nature of intuition. However, although much has been written on these two issues, creative discussions of contemporary philosophers on them have never shown patterns of convergence. Keeping in mind that it is only the nature of intuition what interests us here, this paper will not make any effort to stand with any of the dominant streams. Instead, I shall attempt to show that there is something missing from their lines of arguments namely, not taking intuition to be intuited exactly by a particular intuiter. The idea that an individualistic account of the nature of intuition is possible is not new. For example, Goldman constructed his account of intuition on a psychological ground in the individual sense. That is, intuition is a mental representation in the head of the individual who bears it. However, it is safe to say that he has not truly developed this idea beyond a statement of it. Rather, he skipped directly to a different problem namely, whether it is possible to move from the personal psychological intuitions to socially shared ones [1]. I will focus on his idea of an individual psychological ground of intuition, trying to make it more sophisticated within my argument. It is worth mentioning that the issue of how a view as such may influence the epistemic status of intuition will be postponed to be discussed in some other occasion.

The flow of the argument will go as follow. In the first section, I will go through recent literature about intuition wondering whether or not it does not really matter to hide the subject, the individual intuiter, while talking about her own intuition. In the second section, I will try to draw an alternative argument according to which intuition is done by individual. So it cannot be properly understood unless we attribute it to her keeping in mind her relevant facts. To that end, I will be attempting to determine these facts. I will first use some findings from neuroscience and psychology to show that we should care about emotion, mood, and disposition as some of the mechanisms that individualize an intuition. In the third section, I will go on to argue that there are other facts about the intuiter one should care about such as one's being oneself (e.g. Kripke), being interested in this or that problem, etc. Using textual evidences, I will argue that these mechanisms boost the view that intuition should be taken from the first person point of view. Intuition is a story cannot be narrated, except by the intuiter herself. In the

fourth section, I will be examining some probable challenges to my argument showing their failure. In the fifth section, I shall conclude that subject and her relevant facts play an essential role in determining the nature of intuition.

**The Nature of Intuition in Philosophy: Paradigm Examples:** As a preliminary, let us review some widespread identifications of intuition. To fix ideas, it is worth noting that my aim here is to provide a brief survey of what is intuition from the relevant literature of recent philosophical community, and not how philosophers semantically use the word 'intuition'. We will see that the subject was often hidden from their way of formulating an intuition. The question I take up here is why. Or isn't better not to do so?

Let us begin with Ernest Sosa who thinks that intuition is a constitutive and "conscious state with propositional content," which supplies severely foundational base of justification for the belief it justifies but differs from [2]. This account indicates something like the following: no matter who is the subject (S), S has the intuition that p if and only if S is foundationally justified to believe that p merely on the basis of conscious mental state that Sosa calls elsewhere as a virtue or competence [3]. What Sosa calls as conscious propositional content is extensively shared view about intuition. Nevertheless, it seems as if it is not immune to objections. For example, McGahhey & Leeuwen draw an important distinction between two concepts of intuition. One is a propositionally unarticulated intuition; it is more like hunch, feeling, etc., as in one's response to philosophical thought experiments. Another is a propositionally articulated judgment, which is the previous one after thinking about it in light of background beliefs [4]. In other word, it is a distinction between pre-reflective intuition and judgment in the sense of post-reflective intuition. If McGahhey & Leeuwen are right that there are at least some intuitions that have no propositional content, then Sosa is wrong. He mistakenly mixed up two different things, intuition and judgment. This entails that different subjects can have different non-propositional intuitions. Maybe the movement from the status of being nonpropositional intuition to the status of being propositional judgment depends on who is the subject. If so, why, it may be asked, does not matter who is S? Does not also matter to know what is/are her cognitive and psychological motivation(s) to believe the deliverances from a competence as such? If no, we need to know why. If yes we need to know the roll of those motivations in constructing an intuition.

These questions required George Bealer who answers as follow. These questions do not interest philosophers even. Philosophers are not interested in particular questions and answers. Rather, they are interested in questions and answers that are "phrased in quite general terms without mention of particular individuals" [5]. Intuition therefore should be taken in general as if it is not done by a historical individual. Bealer gives two accounts of the nature of intuition. One is negative account in which he articulates what intuition is not as follow. Rational intuition is distinct from data of experience, belief, guesses, hunches, or common sense. Another is positive account in which he articulates what intuition is as follow. Rational intuition is just some sort of seeming [5]. Therefore, we have two kinds of seemings. Unlike physical intuition, rational intuition's "seeming is intellectual, not experiential—sensory, introspective, imaginative" [6]. This account, the positive one, indicates something like the following: no matter who is the subject (S), S has the intuition that p if and only if it intellectually seems to S that p. Yet, it is not clear why it must seem to every particular s that p. Is it really not possible that different particulars of S may intuit different things that seem to them like that? For example, one may wonder why only Gettier, not Nilanjan, for instance, has the intuition that Smith does not know. If Gettier did not exist, would we even hear about the intuition he came up with? Would not we be now comfortably celebrating Plato's conception of knowledge? How different facts about the intuer do not influence the universality of the intuition.

The same interpretation goes well for other accounts, for example: David Lewis' view according to which intuition is identical to belief or simply opinions [7]. Such account can be read as follow. No matter who is the subject (S), S may have the intuition that p if and only if S believes that p. This view is problematic. Maybe if we know who is S, we may know she intuits without believing, or vice versa. Similarly, Chudnoff in turn tries to situate his view of intuition within the scope of the a priori theory of

knowledge. On this view, intuition is ‘intellectual perception’ [8]. That is, intuition possesses presentational phenomenology with respect to its content. This statement suggests the following: No matter who is the subject (S), S intuits that p if and only if S experiences p’s presentational phenomenology. This entails that phenomena phenomenologically present themselves to every subject in an equal manner. If so, mathematical axioms would not have presented themselves differently to Kurt Gödel, for example. Surely we can go farther and farther to show that the same description goes for more and more accounts. But I think what has been said so far is good enough for our purpose here.

**An Alternative Picture:** In previous section, I discussed some prominent examples that show how philosophers often dealt with the issue the nature of intuition. I argued that their views are committed to the problem of generalization through anonymizing the subject of an intuition. In Bealer’s words, for them, philosophers’ questions like intuitions, for example, “do not pertain to this or that individual” [5]. In this section, I am going to argue in favor of an alternative way of thinking. That is, intuition is intuited by a particular subject. If so, those who care about a better understanding of the nature of intuition should also care about not to isolate intuition from its intuer as individual and her relevant facts, regardless of what a strategy as such may entail regarding the epistemic status of intuition as a royal road to truth. So, our counterargument should unanonymize the subject by identifying her relevant facts. To that end, I shall first use some empirical findings from neurosciences and psychology.

In recent years, several neuroscientists’ empirical studies link intuition to emotions. For example, Greene and his Colleagues have shown that “brain areas associated with emotion would be more active during contemplation of dilemmas such as the footbridge dilemma” [9]. They conclude that deontological intuitions are emotions driven. Similarly, intuition, assert some other studies, “has been shown to be crucially involved in emotionally driven decisions” [10]. This can be very well linked to the point of nonpropositional intuition made by McGahhey and Leeuwen. We can give an example analogous to what usually happens in empiricists’ surveys on people intuitions. Suppose that subjects were asked to give their intuitions about torturing animals. All what the researcher would get is a check on the emotional responses of the subjects. By the same token, Lieberman considers intuition as a subset of emotional experience. He writes that “there are definite empirical links between striatal function and intuitive phenomena including nonverbal communication skills, emotional experience, and language use” [11]. What is more, to many people emotion or mood is necessary for the coherency of intuitions. For example, Bolte and colleagues argue that emotional states play a crucial role in producing coherent semantic intuitions. They conducted three experiments that show that individuals in a positive mood are more able to produce coherent semantic intuitions than those in a negative and neutral mood can do [12].

Moreover, attempting to rearticulate the link between intuition and psychology, Jennifer Hawkins in turn emphasises ‘affect’ that “underlies and informs both emotions and moods.” On this view, moods influence and shape both our emotional experiences as well as value judgments. She admits that moods are “short lived” possessing a low level of “cognitive content.” Nevertheless, she asserts that there is a “relatively stable set” of “deeper” and “affective dispositions.” This is what she calls as “theory SKETCH ... that combines in an innovative way the individual’s own evaluative rankings and the rankings that a pure appeal to affective states would generate.” Either way, she links intuition with other dispositional mental states i.e. short and long lived moods of an individual intuer [13]. If so, then emotion, mood, and disposition are some of the intuer’s relevant facts one should take into consideration while speaking about the nature of intuition. A particular mood motivates a particular subject to intuit a particular intuition. But this is only half of the story. There is also the other half, the further relevant facts of an intuer one should care about while attempting to understand the nature of intuition.

**More about the Identification of the Subject: Textual Cases:** The kind of intuitions that are considered by philosophers like Sosa and his colleagues to have an interest in philosophy are similar to the following examples: ‘it is out of the question for a rational being to believe both p and not-p in the same time,’ or ‘Killing in principle is an evil deed,’ or ‘it is not possible for a triangle to have four sides,’ or ‘1 plus 1 equals 2,’ or so forth. For example, Sosa says that “if it were not so that  $1+1=2$ , one would not

believe it to be so" (Sosa, 2006, p. 209). But those kinds of intuition are not the ones contemporary philosophers rely on in their thought experiments. Following Cappelen way of arguing, let us look into two written texts that are wildly considered as paradigmatic examples of contemporary philosophers' reliance on intuitions [14].

One is Gettier's well-known thought experiment in which he argues against Plato's concept of knowledge as justified true belief. To that end, he gives two examples in which the protagonist, Smith, was shown to have a belief that is both true and well justified, yet is not knowledge. What was considered as intuition on which Gettier relies is 'Smith does not know' [15]. Now, let us compare between Gettier's intuition and the kind of intuitions Sosa and his colleagues talk about. Suppose that I said '1 plus 1 equals 2.' It makes sense. And, if I said 'X has an intuition that 1 plus 1 equals 2.' It does also make sense. Actually, it does not make difference if I said 'Ram has an intuition that 1 plus 1 equals 2.' Contrary to that, if I went to group of people and said 'Smith does not know.' I suspect it makes any sense to them. They will start asking who is Smith and what is that thing he does not know? In addition to that, they will ask who X is if I tried to make it clear by saying 'X has an intuition that Smith does not know.' The only way to make it different is to disclose the subject, X, by using the first person pronoun 'I.' Suppose that Gettier says 'I have an intuition that Smith does not know.' Now, the intuition 'Smith does not know' makes sense in virtue of being attributed to its subject, Gettier, along with all the facts related to him, such as: it is him, Gettier, the philosopher/epistemologist who had a particular mood that made him interested in the question about knowledge. That is why he questioned Plato's concept of it proving its weakness by giving two examples in which he came to know that apart from having justified true belief, 'Smith does not know.' Unless the intuition is particularized through the facts about intuiter as such, her intuition will not convey any sense. It is worth mentioning that those facts do not refer to any other name, except the intuiter or subject of the intuition herself. They do not help to identify the intuiter as if she is Manhal, for example, so that we can say 'Manhal has an intuition that Smith does not know.' That will also be nonsense.

The same strategy can be followed regarding the second example that is famously known as Kripke's Gödel-Schmidt example, which was often considered as one of his many arguments against the descriptivist theory of reference according to which proper names, by using the definite descriptions associated to them, do provide reference to objects. The example can be summarized as follow. The incompleteness theorems were attributed to someone called Gödel, because all what people know is that it is published in his name. But the truth is that he has stolen it from his friend, Schmidt who died just after that. If the descriptivist theory is true, says Kripke, then we should refer to Schmidt while using the name Gödel. But we do not do that [16]. What was considered as intuition on which Kripke relies on is 'we do not refer to Schmidt by using the name Gödel.' Not to repeat, I suggest that if we apply the same strategy of analysis followed in the previous case, this intuition can make sense only if we considered to be said from Kripke's mouth as follow: 'I have an intuition that we do not refer to Schmidt by using the name Gödel.' Unless we individualize it like that, this intuition will not be significant. That is why I assert that intuition should be taken from the first person's point of view. Sosa and his colleagues, while talking about intuition and giving their aforesaid examples as instances of the concept, need to illuminate that they talk about intuition in the sense of what prominently dominated the philosophical writings of Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, etc. As we have seen, this is not the case when it comes to contemporary philosophical writings. I have to remark that I can provide more textual support to my argument. But I think these two examples are well enough for my purpose here. However, cannot this argument be challenged? This is what I am going to consider in the next section.

**Objections:** In view of the fact that the best argument is not the one that shows only its own reasonability but the one that shows also the weakness of its opponents' ones, in this section, I will be considering some probable objections to my line of argument.

Objection 1: it may be asked that since you provide textual support to your argument that intuitions on which contemporary philosophers rely on while theorizing are different from those that theoreticians about intuition talk about, can you follow the same strategy to show that the authors of these texts



themselves want us to follow your individualistic view while dealing with their intuitions? In reply to this challenge, I will again refer to the two previous texts. In his text, Gettier did not clearly mention that. Yet, it is obvious since he already intended not to share Plato's intuitions. The same story goes for Kripke who intended to the intuitions of Russell and Frege. But Kripke is different from Gettier, because he clearly uses the first person pronoun 'we.' Let us hear from his mouth. When he wanted to say that we are not referring to Schmidt by using the name Gödel, he said "we are not. We simply are not" [16]. He also says that "but we do in fact refer to Gödel. How do we do this?" [16]. Another clue of the idea that the subject of intuition should be individually identified appears in his text when he introduces his alternative account to the description theory namely, names as rigid designators according to which name is "a rigid designator if in every possible world it designates the same of object, a nonrigid or accidental designator if that is not the case" [16]. Consider, for instance, the following example: suppose that 'Manhal has the intuition that he is a Ph.D. student.' Since the subject of the intuition is individuated, we can rigidly designate this proper name, Manhal, in counterfactual conditions. That is, to state its truth conditions in terms of relations among possible worlds. But this paves the way for the problem of transworld or cross identification. To this, Kripke replies: "we begin with the objects we have, and can identify, in the actual world. We can then ask whether certain things might have been true of the objects" [16]. That is to say that cross identification does not arise unless individuation is in place. Manhal as an individual, proper name, rigid designator or subject of the intuition can be cross identified only relative to already individuated Manhal. In one sense, individuation becomes a necessary condition for the problem of cross identification. Objection 2: one may argue that my argument is committed to generalization. That is, I took only two texts from which I went on to make a very general claim that might not be true regarding the texts I did not investigate. To this, I say that I have mentioned repeatedly that these were just two representative examples among many available that can also be dealt with in the same way. Nevertheless, I will be happy if anyone can cite any contemporary thought experiment in which the author rely on the intuitions Sosa and his colleagues talk about. Objection 3: If one should understand intuitions from the first person's point of view, then we should let the authors themselves narrate about them. Otherwise their intuitions are taken from the second or third person point of view. Concerning this objection that is closed somehow to the first one, I agree that first-person point of view can be narrated only by one oneself. That is all I tried to say. To take something to be said from the first-person point of view as a way of describing is to consider it to be said by the author using the pronouns 'I' or 'we.' That is how we can see the author's mind's eye views the things. It puts one in the author's mind. For example, 'I/Kripke have an intuition that we do not refer to Schmidt by using the name Gödel' or 'I/Gettier have an intuition that Smith does not know.' The accusation would be true, if I used the second person pronoun, 'you' (i.e. people being addressed) or the third person pronouns such as 'He,' 'She,' 'It' or 'They' (i.e. people being talked about). But I did not do that, none of it.

**Conclusion:** We have come to a conclusion that for a better understanding of an intuition of the form 'X has an intuition that so and so,' not only we should not hide its subject; but rather, the subject should be disclosed by using the first person pronoun. Intuitiveness is a property of an intuition made by a subject with certain kind of cognitive makeup and certain motivations. Different subjects intuit different things by different ways. So, each intuition must always be taken to have an explicit subject. The subject cannot be anyone, except the teller himself. Do I argue that intuition is done by individuals and other people cannot have the same intuitions? No. For example, I share Kripke's intuitions on Gödel and Schmidt. What I say is that intuition is owned by individual and other people can individually share it. Or to put the point in Kripkean style, the problem of sharing intuition can only arise once intuition is individuated.

## References:

1. Alvin I. Goldman. "Philosophical intuitions: their target, their source, and their epistemic status." *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 74. 1 (2007): pp. 1-26.

2. Ernest Sosa. "Intuitions and truth." In Patrick Greenough & Michael P. Lynch (eds.), *Truth and Realism*. Oxford University Press. (2006): pp. 208—26.
3. Ernest Sosa. *a virtue epistemology: apt belief and reflective knowledge*, volume I. (2007): Oxford University Press.
4. Marcus McGahhey & Neil Van Leeuwen. "Interpreting intuitions." To be published in Julie Kirsch Patricia Pedrini (ed.), *Third-Person Self-Knowledge, Self-Interpretation, and Narrative*. Springer.
5. George Bealer. "on the possibility of philosophical knowledge." *Philosophical Perspectives*, 10 (1996): pp. 1-34.
6. George Bealer. "Intuition and modal error." In Quentin Smith (ed.), *Epistemology: New Essays*. Oxford University Press. (2006): pp. 189- 223.
7. David Lewis. *Philosophical papers: volume I*. New York (1983): Oxford University Press.
8. Elijah Chudnoff. *Intuition*. (2013): Oxford University Press.
9. Joshua D. Greene, R. Brian Sommerville, Leigh E. Nystrom, John M. Darley & Jonathan D. Cohen. "an fMRI investigation of emotional engagement in moral judgment." *Science* 293. 5537 (2001): pp. 2105-2108.
10. Kirsten G. Volz and D. Yves von Cramon. "What neuroscience can tell about intuitive processes in the context of perceptual discovery." *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 18. 12 (2006): pp. 2077–2087.
11. Matthew D. Lieberman. "Intuition: a social cognitive neuroscience approach." *Psychological Bulletin* 126. 1 (2000): pp. 109-137.
12. Annette Bolte, Thomas Goschke & Julius Kuhl. "Emotion and intuition: effects of positive and negative mood on implicit judgments of semantic coherence." *Psychological Science* 14. 5 (2003): pp. 416-421.
13. Jennifer S. Hawkins. "the subjective intuition." *Philos Stud.* 148 (1980): pp. 61–68.
14. Herman Cappelen. *Philosophy without intuitions*. (2012): Oxford University Press UK.
15. Edmund Gettier. "Is justified true belief knowledge?" *Analysis* 23. 6 (1963): pp. 121-123.
16. Saul Kripke. *Naming and necessity* (pp. 83–4, 84, 89, 48, 53). (1980): Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

\*\*\*