

Intuition pump

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Intuition pump is a term coined by Daniel Dennett to describe a thought experiment which is intended to help a listener engage their philosophical intuition and understand a philosophical question. Examples include the Chinese room and Russell's teapot.

It is useful in explaining what a given question is about, but is susceptible to misuse when utilized as an argument in favor of a specific answer.

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The proper use

His definition:

“ A popular strategy in philosophy is to construct a certain sort of thought experiment I call an *intuition pump* [...]. Intuition pumps are cunningly designed to focus the reader's attention on "the important" features, and to deflect the reader from bogging down in hard-to-follow details. There is nothing wrong with this in principle. Indeed one of philosophy's highest callings is finding ways of helping people see the forest and not just the trees. But intuition pumps are often abused, though seldom deliberately.

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Dennett holds that intuition pumps, like analogies, should be used to illustrate an argument, and not as an argument in and of themselves. The listener must be aware of the defects and limitations of their intrinsic philosophical intuition and not treat it as automatically reliable. As Feynman put it, "The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool."

Problems

Part of the series on
Logic and rhetoric



Key articles

- Logical fallacy
- Syllogism
- Argument

General logic

- Continuum fallacy
- Fallacy of opposition
- Imprecision fallacy
- Jonanism
- Omnipotence paradox
- Pragmatic fallacy

Bad logic

- Appeal to identity
- Appeal to mystery
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- Counterfactual fallacy
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Intuition pumps are useful when they help a listener get the feel of an argument. They are problematic when they appeal directly to the listener's philosophical intuition as a *reliable* black box, rather than as something constructed by evolution for its purposes and plagued with cognitive biases.

Outside of philosophy, intuition pumps are often abused to get away with making an argument by assertion. The most common problems with them are using false assumptions to structure the thought experiment such that it will lead to one and only one (faulty) answer or making use of a false analogy around which the experiment is constructed. Dennett calls John Searle's "Chinese room" argument a classic intuition pump.

The danger of intuition

Ludwig Wittgenstein demonstrated the problem of relying solely on intuition in a conversation with Elizabeth Anscombe on flat earthers:

“ He once greeted me with the question: 'Why do people say that it was natural to think that the sun went round the earth rather than that the earth turned on its axis?' I replied: 'I suppose, because it looked as if the sun went round the earth.' 'Well,' he asked, 'what would it have looked like if it had looked as if the earth turned on its axis?'^[2] ”

Apologetics

Because religion has little fact-based information to work from, theological argumentation tends to rely heavily on intuition pumps, of the sort that treat a person's philosophical intuition as a reliable black box.

One common argument that attempts to explain why a "loving god" would cast human souls out of heaven to live on Earth goes something like the following:

Imagine God and all the happy little human souls playing around in the perfection and goodness of heaven. Because we can't truly understand good without evil, we could never truly appreciate the infinite good of god and heaven if we never experienced evil. So God creates a universe outside heaven and sends us into it, Earth specifically, to experience evil, so that we can truly understand the infinite goodness and love of God when we get back to heaven.

This plays on the fact that humans tend to experience things in a relative fashion intuitively, such that something is more difficult to define without an opposite (good vs. evil in this case). The intuition pump directs us away from all the faulty assumptions it's built on, like, say, why couldn't God just cordon off a section of heaven as an "evil zone?" Why did he need to make something separate from heaven? If we can't truly understand God's goodness without experiencing evil, that contradicts his omnipotence because he can't create anything "smart" enough to understand his goodness without creating evil as well. And, most importantly, how the hell do you know this?

Politics

Intuition pumps tend to run rampant in politics and political theory as well, especially where there is little to no empirical evidence for a belief. Dennett mentions that classic examples of this are the various "state of nature" theories proposed by political philosophers over the years.^[3] This generally involves cooking up a theoretical starting point for humanity to justify some moral or ethical system that "naturally" flows from this state of nature. While these thought experiments can be useful to some extent, they tend to ignore evidence from the social sciences about how humans actually behave in favor of a purely theoretical approach.

External links

- *The Third Culture*, Chapter 10, DANIEL C. DENNETT, "Intuition Pumps" (<http://www.edge.org/documents/ThirdCulture/r-Ch.10.html>)

References

1. *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, D.C.Dennett, 1984
2. G.E.M. Anscombe. (1959) An Introduction To Wittgenstein's Tractatus. (<http://archive.org/details/introductiontowii009827mbp>)
3. See, e.g., Hobbes' state of nature (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes-moral/#StaNat>) or Locke's state of nature. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/#StaNat>)

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