

**An Outline and Commentary on
Edmund Handby's
“Assessing the Use of Intuitions in Contemporary Political Theory”**

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Outline:

- John's interpretation: tripartite thesis
 1. Intuitions play an important role in political theory and political philosophy
 2. These intuitions are subject to various *specific biases* in various *specific ways*
 3. But there are methods which could potentially correct these biases
- 1. Intuitions play an important role in political theory and philosophy
 - Intuitions = “a kind of mental state – akin to an opinion or belief – that is formed without explicit or considered reasoning... a kind of non-conscious inference from data” (p. 4)
 - Example of intuitions:
 - Ian Carter who defines freedom wrt intuitions, esp. comparative intuitions
 - Handby notes they are used in philosophy, such as in conceptual analysis
 - Some authors treat intuitions with caution
- 2. Intuitions are subject to various *specific biases* in various *specific ways*
 - Mechanisms qua ways of biasing:
 - Anchoring
 - “The notion of anchoring refers to instances where estimates, perceptions, or intuitions are shaped by a ‘starting point’” (p. 12)
 - E.g. intuitions about what freedom is and what freedoms are permissible
 - Default rules
 - “Default rules are, according to Sunstein and Thaler (2003, 1175) the ‘network of legal allocations that provide the background against which agreements are made’, which influence the behaviour of consumers, workers, and married persons” (p. 12)
 - E.g. constitutional arrangements constituting default rules about freedom
 - Nudges
 - “Nudges occur where institutions of the state employ covert practises to shape citizen behaviour [behaviour is important].” (p. 13)
 - Affects intuition through affecting behaviour:
 - E.g. encouraging organ donation also encourages intuitions about the value of being an organ donor
 - Availability heuristic
 - “the availability heuristic refers to the assessment of the probability of an event with reference to the ease that similar events can be brought to mind” (p. 10)
 - E.g. Estimation of the extent to which one is unfree

- Types of biases:
 - Parochialism:
 - “Intuitions are parochial insofar as they are contingent upon the circumstances of one’s home country or city.” (p. 16)
 - E.g. Permissible freedom of speech in Australia vs. the USA
 - Endogeneity:
 - “Political actors and politicians have particular motives – either explicit or implicit – when designing or shaping institutions, an effect well-established in behavioral economics (see Aghion, Alesina and Trebbi 2004). In this way, those motives will feed into our intuitions via institutions.” (p. 18)
 - E.g. Gerry mandering: “Oftentimes these various electoral rules will alter intuitions and perceptions of the legitimacy of institutions and elections.” (p. 19)
 - Idiosyncrasy:
 - “The issue of idiosyncrasy is that, given the ways by which the features of the world can shape intuitions (via various cognitive processes, shortcuts, and heuristics), our intuitions can depend on the random life history of certain people.” (p. 20)
 - E.g. a prisoners view of what it means to be “subject to authority” may differ to someone else’s
3. But there are methods which could potentially correct these biases
- Exploring and testing the empirical content of intuitions?
 - Examining the institutional context of intuitions in comparative political theory and political studies?
 - Reversal test qua imagining that current setups do not exist?
 - E.g. Imagining that reasons for restrictions on permissible freedom do not exist, such as national security reasons
 - Abandoning intuitions from idiosyncratic experiences?
 - Techniques from survey methods and experiments (e.g. anchoring vignettes)?

Questions:

- Metaethical and epistemological foundations:
 - Cognitive biases are deviations from the ground truth (or ways of reasoning that conduce to the ground truth) and there are methods of correcting biases that we know track the ground truth:
 - Estimating the probability of a 30yo dying from a heart attack:
 - Biasing methods:
 - Anchoring: first estimate of 5% biases later estimates
 - Availability: a memorable story of a 30 yo dying of a heart attack biases later estimates of probability
 - Ground truth: the frequency with which 30 yos die of heart attacks
 - Correction mechanism: statistics
 - But is there a worry that there is no obvious ground truth in political theory nor mechanisms which can track it?
 - For example, consider which freedoms are permissible:
 - Biasing mechanism:

- Anchoring: your country of origin may bias your view of which freedoms are permissible
- Ground truth: what is the ground truth here?
- Correction mechanism: how do these correction mechanisms track the ground truth?
 - E.g. comparing intuitions a la comparative politics, or imagining away current setups, doesn't obviously result in the "right" intuition which tracks the ground truth
- Upshots:
 - The considerations in the paper may give rise to an argument for the following theories:
 - Error theory about political theory:
 - Arguments in political theory are for false claims since the arguments track biased intuitions and not ground truths
 - Subjectivism:
 - Arguments in political theory are for claims whose truth depend on the intuitions of the specific subject
 - Relativism:
 - Arguments in political theory are for claims whose truth depend on the intuitions of the arguer's cultural context
 - Objectivism with supplementation:
 - Arguments in political theory are potentially biased by intuitions but can sometimes be corrected in ways so that they objectively track the ground truth