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Article

Accepted Version

Andow, J. (2017) A partial defence of descriptive evidentialism about intuitions: a reply to Molyneux. *Metaphilosophy*, 48 (1-2). pp. 183-195. ISSN 1467-9973 doi: 10.1111/meta.12225
Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/69024/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/meta.12225>

Publisher: Blackwell Publishing

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A partial defence of descriptive evidentialism about intuitions: a reply to Molyneux

October 19, 2016

Abstract

Molyneux presents some new arguments against descriptive evidentialism about intuitions. Descriptive evidentialism is the thesis that philosophers use intuitions as evidence. In this paper, I present a partial defence of descriptive evidentialism against these new arguments Molyneux proposes.

1 Introduction

Consider three different papers which I might have submitted in place of this one. Suppose that all three papers present plausible cases for their stated conclusions.

1. A paper arguing that philosophers don't rely on telescopes
2. A paper arguing that philosophers don't use arguments—in which 'use arguments' was used as shorthand for 'use heated debate as a way to exhaust one's critics long enough to bash them over the head.'
3. A paper arguing that philosophers don't use arguments—in which 'use arguments' is used in a more conventional way.

I'd hope that only the latter would stand any chance of getting through the review process. The first paper simply isn't of any philosophical interest. It might excite curiosity as to why on earth anyone would ever feel the need to publicly make the case that philosophers didn't use telescopes, but that's about it in terms of interest. The second paper again isn't really of any interest. The slight difference is that, this time, the language of the paper might suggest the paper was more interesting than it actually is. Who would deny that philosophers use arguments? Everyone accepts that! If there were good reasons to think everyone was mistaken, it would be important for any paper articulating those reasons to be given a good airing! The third paper is different. It would be important for any paper articulating good reasons to think philosophers don't use arguments to be given a good airing.

A number of books and papers have recently argued against descriptive evidentialism about intuitions in philosophy (for example, [Cappelen, 2012, 2014](#); [Deutsch, 2010, 2015](#); [Earlenbaugh and Molyneux, 2009](#); [Ichikawa, 2014](#)). Descriptive evidentialism is the thesis

that philosophers use intuitions as evidence. We can call those who argue against descriptive evidentialism ‘intuition deniers’ (following [Nado, 2015](#)). Debates about intuitions in philosophy are difficult for many reasons. One of them is that there are many different ways of thinking about intuitions available.¹ Another is that, independent of the fact that there are many ways of thinking about intuitions available, there are many ways of understanding the claim that philosophers use intuitions. This means that those arguing against descriptive evidentialism run the risk of appearing—at least to those who argue for or unreflectively accept descriptive evidentialism—a bit like the paper I might have written which only looks like it argues that philosophers don’t use arguments due to an eccentric reading of ‘arguments’.² For example, when the intuition denier [Cappelen \(2012\)](#) understands descriptive evidentialism as making a claim about some method which is distinctive to philosophy, those of us who don’t share the sense that descriptive evidentialism is naturally interpreted as making such a claim can be left feeling that Cappelen’s arguments somehow miss their target.³

Given this background, it is worth paying close attention to intuition denying arguments which take as their target a fairly straightforward reading of the claim that philosophers use intuitions as evidence. [Molyneux \(2014\)](#)’s recent arguments are, by this token, worth considering closely. [Molyneux \(2014\)](#)’s strategy is to consider a number of examples in which intuitions undeniably play a role in philosophy, and in fairly typical ways, but where there is some problem with interpreting those uses as *uses as evidence*.

Here are the three main considerations Molyneux raises:

Insufficiency The propositions that intuition putatively supports are treated as having a degree and kind of certainty and justification that they could not have got from being intuited.

Liberal applicability Intuitions influence us in ways we cannot explain by supposing we treat them as evidence.

Anomalous inadmissibility Certain strong intuitions that persuade us of their contents are treated as inadmissible in the context of justification.

These considerations are important. If Molyneux is right, then the pressure against the view that philosophers use intuitions as evidence is greater than ever.

In this paper, I aim to make some trouble for Molyneux’s arguments. This is done in a constructive spirit. I am not unsympathetic to the idea that the sorts of considerations Molyneux put pressure on descriptive evidentialism. Nonetheless, I will argue as follows: (a) Molyneux’s case for *Insufficiency* and *Liberal applicability* doesn’t work as it is; and (b), concerning *Anomalous inadmissibility*, the cases of inadmissibility Molyneux identifies are not anomalous because they are perfectly explicable by the proponent of descriptive evidentialism about intuitions.

¹This also distracts the debate in other ways which I discuss in [Andow \(2015c\)](#).

²I make a similar point in [Andow \(2016\)](#).

³And there are independent reasons for doubting that philosophers use intuitions in a distinctive way ([Andow, 2015a,b](#)).

2 Insufficiency

The propositions that intuition putatively supports are treated as having a degree and kind of certainty and justification that they could not have got from being intuited

The main point Molyneux raises in favour of this claim is that, in cases where p putatively enjoys evidential support from intuitions, the justification for p is not undermined by attacks on the claim that p is intuitive. This point is intended as a sociological one: as a matter of fact, when philosophers encounter evidence that a claim they take to enjoy intuitive evidential support is not intuitive, their attitude to the claim itself doesn't change, e.g., by reducing credence.⁴

I suspect that this sociological claim is false. Molyneux uses a single example to make his case: the supposedly intuitive proposition that *p is possible only if not- p is not necessary*. This particular example is an atypical example of a proposition which philosophers take to enjoy intuitive support. My sense is that typical examples of propositions which enjoy intuitive support are particular claims with no modal content, e.g., about cases, artworks, trolley problems, sentences, and so on. In order to put pressure on the idea that the *typical* use of intuitions in philosophy is as evidence, we will also need to consider more typical cases. In particular, we need to ask the following. Is it the case that, with respect to more typical cases, evidence that claims philosophers take to enjoy intuitive evidential support are not intuitive doesn't reduce philosophers' credence in the claims themselves? It is clear that there is some work to do here. There are countless cases in the literature which seem to involve philosophers trying to accommodate propositions which they come to believe are intuitive or reducing the weight they give to propositions which turn out not to be intuitive, and countless anecdotes about philosophers conducting casual surveys of their classes and audiences to check that the claims that they are relying on are intuitive. So, absent empirical findings to the contrary, I'm inclined to think the defender of Molyneux's strategy has some work to do where these more typical cases are involved.

Moreover, I even remain unconvinced about Molyneux's more atypical example. I don't deny that general and modal claims are typically taken to enjoy intuitive support by philosophers. But it is worth thinking about the two ways this happens. Molyneux discusses what we might call direct intuitional support. A general and modal claim is supported by the intuition with that content. However, it is often the case that some, most or all the support for such claims comes more indirectly. The intuitive support one has for accepting modal and general claims often comes via intuitions about numerous actual and counterfactual cases or having intuitions about numerous particular claims (which may have no modal obvious content).

Molyneux asks whether philosophers would be inclined to change their attitude to the proposition *p is possible only if not- p is not necessary* when confronted with evidence that the supposed intuitive support isn't in fact intuitive. He might be right about the case in which philosophers are confronted with evidence that *that very proposition* is not intuitive.

⁴We *could* understand the claim as an epistemic one: the fact that p is not intuitive doesn't undermine the epistemic standing of p (where p is something philosophers typically take to enjoy evidential support from intuition). However, such a claim wouldn't help establish insufficiency or put pressure on any claims about what philosophers actually do.

However, ask yourself whether philosophers would be inclined to change their attitude to the very same proposition if confronted with evidence that, for lots of particular claims p_1 – p_n , most people both find it incredibly intuitive that p is possible and not- p is necessary. Now, I don't for a moment think that most people have such intuitions, but that is beside the point for my argument. Ask yourself the question. What do you think philosophers would do were they to become genuinely convinced that such contents—that many particular propositions can be possible and their negations necessary—are genuinely intuitive? I think it is far from clear that philosophers' attitudes to the claim that *p is possible only if not-p is not necessary* wouldn't change. So, I don't think that the sociological claim Molyneux requires is true even if restricted to his atypical case.

Maybe I have been unfair. When Molyneux considers attacks on the claim that p is intuitive, he considers a rather different kind of attack than that which I have been considering. He considers attacks like the following:

For example, the classical Platonist might argue that we don't intuit $[p]$; rather, we recall it. And the contemporary nativist, similarly, may suppose that $[p]$ is not intuited but abstracted from our native beliefs. An empiricist might argue that $[p]$, rather than being intuited, is extracted from lessons learned via past experience, in which it was implicit. And the attitude eliminativist, meanwhile, might even claim that there are no such mental states as intuitions. (page)

That is, he considers attacks on the idea that the relevant propositional mental state counts as an intuition or that the process via which it was acquired genuinely counts as intuitive. Now, I agree that most philosophers don't downgrade their credence in propositions they take to enjoy intuitive support in light of such arguments and positions. However, I think the reason most philosophers remain unmoved (by such arguments and positions in their credence in propositions they take to enjoy intuitive support) is that they remain unconvinced that the claims and arguments of the platonist, nativist, empiricist and eliminativist have got anything going for them. And, if we instead consider the case in which philosophers genuinely become convinced that one of these alternative stories is correct (and convinced that the alternative story suggests no alternative source of support to the support they took the relevant proposition to have in virtue of its being genuinely intuitive), again I think it is far from clear that philosophers' attitudes wouldn't change.

I wouldn't want my aim in the previous couple of paragraphs to be misunderstood. Ultimately, I am not sure what real methodological progress can be made by speculating about what philosophers would do in counterfactual cases such as those in which philosophers come to genuinely accept particular positions and arguments. Rather, the lesson that I draw from the above discussion is that Molyneux's strategy—arguing that philosophers don't downgrade their credence in propositions they take to enjoy evidential support in the face of evidence that those claims are not intuitive—would do well to pay attention to more typical everyday cases of propositions which are taken to enjoy intuitive suppose.

3 Liberal applicability

Intuitions influence us in ways we cannot explain by supposing we treat them as evidence.

What are these influences? (1) Molyneux thinks that intuition influences inference. (2) Molyneux considers the idea that as a sociological fact, philosophers are happy to appeal to intuitions in areas of philosophy where noncognitivism is a live option.

I want to set aside the first. Why? Because although it is natural to think of intuition guiding inference, e.g., intuition leads us to infer q from p and if p then q , such an influence poses no threat to the general picture assumed by the descriptive evidentialist. Remember, Molyneux's target is a claim about how philosophers use intuitions. As he understands the descriptive evidentialists claim:

The claim, then, does not quantify over intuitions, nor even instances where intuitions are used. It quantifies over instances where intuitions are used in the way that has become standard in philosophy. It tells us that such cases should be understood as appeals to evidence. It is that claim that I mean to oppose. (page)

The reason I set aside the idea that intuition influences inference is that such cases are not instances where 'intuitions are used in the way that has become standard in philosophy' in virtue of the fact that they are not *uses* of intuition at all. Using something is rather different from being influenced by it. For instance, take the role that the books on my shelves play in my philosophizing. I do use them. But they affect my philosophizing in many ways which do not involve my using them. My books comfort me. They make me happy. They disguise the despair-provoking stark white walls. They even lend a pleasant fragrance to the air. Without those books surrounding me, I'd likely have rather different thoughts. But this influence is not a way I am using the books.

Molyneux's point about noncognitivism can't be set aside in this way. Noncognitivism is a live option in many domains. Cognitivists and noncognitivists have different interpretations of what is going on when people think and talk about things in the relevant domains. For example, in ethics, while the cognitivist says moral attitudes have propositional contents, such as $\langle \text{murder is wrong} \rangle$, which can be true or false, the noncognitivist says moral attitudes are nonpropositional and so not truth-apt. This creates a problem because many accept that only propositional contents can enjoy *evidential* support. So, if noncognitivism is true of a domain, then descriptive evidentialism about philosophical enquiry in that domain is false.

It is tempting to think that philosophical methodology (of relevant subfields) is simply another domain where cognitivists and noncognitivists should give competing interpretations. Take Molyneux's example.

suppose I wanted to get you to agree to a proscription against killing, even to save others. Then I could pump an intuition to forbid harvesting a healthy person's organs for transplantation, and invite you to generalize. (page)

What is going on when I appeal to an intuition in this way? Perhaps the cognitivist will want to say that what is going on is that I am using an intuition as evidence. Whereas the noncognitivist will have to say something else is going on (although, as Molyneux notes, they can't very well deny that whatever is going on involves an appeal to an intuition). But this leaves the descriptive evidentialist in a bit of a bind, according to Molyneux. They are committed to noncognitivism about any domain in which they think their account applies—and yet their claim is meant to be a general one about philosophical methods. Molyneux thinks that it is unsatisfactory for the descriptive evidentialist to simply own a commitment to cognitivism, saying,

the evidentialist could simply deny noncognitivism. That would be an unfortunate retreat, however, since the right philosophical methodology ought to be compatible with all the open positions. The philosophical method alone should no more tell us which positions are wrong than the judicial procedure alone should tell us which defendants are guilty. (page)

There's an interesting metamethodological principle which seems to play a role in the argument Molyneux is advancing here. This principle is that the final account of philosophical methods should have no implications for which first-order philosophical positions are correct. There are a few ways of interpreting such a principle. I'm not sure any of them help Molyneux's argument. But let's look at some of the options.

First, the relevant metamethodological principle might be one governing either descriptive or normative methodology. The claim might be that no adequate account of *what philosophers actually do* says that philosophers follow a method which has implications in first-order philosophy. On the other hand, the claim might be that no adequate account of *what philosophers should do* says they follow such a method. Some of Molyneux's choice of words might be taken to suggest the latter. However, since descriptive evidentialism is a descriptive thesis, the metamethodological principle Molyneux needs to appeal to is something more like the former.

Second, the relevant metamethodological principle might be one about philosophical methods in the sense of something like *a set of rules or procedures which enquirers conceive of themselves as following*. On the other hand, the principle might be about philosophical methods in the sense of *a theoretical description of what enquirers are doing which enquirers themselves might outright reject*. What Molyneux's argument requires is a principle of the latter variety. Descriptive evidentialists and intuition deniers are in the business of getting beyond philosophers' conceptions of their practice and asking whether philosophers' practices actually involve the use of intuitions as evidence. For example, the fact that many philosophers think that they do use intuitions as evidence provides at best weak and indirect evidence against the views of intuition deniers.

There is something attractive sounding about the type of principle Molyneux advances. I agree, for instance, that there would be something troubling about the situation in which metaethicists sit down and try to work out the best account of moral discourse, and deliberately and knowingly employ a method which they explicitly conceive of in terms which are obviously and straightforwardly incompatible with noncognitivist views. On the other hand, I am not at all troubled if the final account in descriptive methodology ends up diagnosing that what was going on all the time—at a deeper level—was that cognitivists and noncognitivists alike were using intuitions as evidence. It seems perfectly appropriate for the correct account in descriptive methodology to be hostage to truths about the real nature of the discourse in the field whose methods it aims to describe. For example, it would be very strange if the final and accurate description of philosophical methods ended up being neutral on all issues in epistemology, philosophy of action, philosophy of mind, and so on. Thus, I am not persuaded by the aspect of Molyneux's argument that rests on this kind of metamethodological principle.

However, there are other aspects of the problem which Molyneux thinks the issue of noncognitivism raises for the descriptive evidentialist. He says,

the use of intuitions in an area of inquiry is insensitive to whether noncogni-

tivism is endorsed and that this cannot be explained on an evidentialist proposal. To provide an emotivist illustration, suppose that I wanted to persuade you not to boo the termination of a pregnancy. Then I might ask if you find it intuitive to boo a person disconnecting herself from a sick violinist. If you say no, I only need to invite you to boo things consistently... (page)

He then adds,

To argue that [such] strategies are attempts to use intuitions as evidence for expressions of emotion... one has to commit a category error, since [that is not a kind of thing] that can be supported by evidence. But nor do [such] examples seem to differ radically from how we deploy intuitions quite generally. (page)

Molyneux is right about the following: if X says that Y is trying to use intuitions as evidence for expressions of emotion, X is making a category error. But no descriptive evidentialist who accepts a commitment to cognitivism would make such a claim. Rather, their claim would be that the emotivist is doing exactly the same thing that anyone else is doing—using intuitions as evidence for propositions—the only difference being that the emotivist is mistaken about the nature of their practice and their claims. The methodologist who is in trouble is the one who accepts noncognitivism in a domain but maintains that the role of intuitions in the relevant domain is nonetheless evidential. The noncognitivist who unreflectively thinks their method involves the use of intuitions as evidence is making a similar mistake. But it is important to note what their mistake is not. Their mistake is not the following: to use intuitions while endorsing noncognitivism. After all, in the same way that the noncognitivist about ethical discourse can reinterpret what is going on when it might seem people have beliefs about whether particular acts are moral, the noncognitivist can employ a reinterpretation of what is going on when it might seem their method involves the use of intuitions as evidence. For example, the noncognitivist could naturally understand their method in terms of intuitions (understood as nonpropositional attitudes) and some broader non-truth-involving sense of support than evidence.

What I think is right about Molyneux's point here is that descriptive evidentialists as a rule need to say more about the areas of philosophy where noncognitivism is a live option. Do they accept their cognitivist commitments? Do they recognise such commitments as a burden? But I don't think this issue provides a compelling argument against descriptive evidentialism (which is independent of arguments for and against noncognitivism).

4 Anomalous inadmissibility

Certain strong intuitions that persuade us of their contents are treated as inadmissible in the context of justification.

There is a difference between, on the one hand, that which persuades us or that which constitutes our justification, and, on the other hand, that which we adduce to persuade others or that which we judge to be suitable for such a use. Moreover, the facts we find on one side of the distinction may very well not appear on the other side. Why? Because we judge other people to have different dispositions to us. Suppose I am arguing with a rampant capitalist and ask myself the following question. What evidence should I use to

persuade this rampant capitalist to cut their carbon emissions? In this case, it wouldn't make sense for me to assume that the first place to look is my own reasons for thinking it is a good idea for them to cut their carbon emissions, or to what I regard to be the most important evidence for that position. This is to say, features of the dialectical situation can rule out making certain types of appeal in the context of justification.

Sometimes dialectics are weirder than others. In many philosophical debates, the relevant opponent is imaginary. We often attempt to question and defend positions which no one previously ever thought to deny. The weird thing is that, in this kind of debate, one still has to be charitable to one's opponent. Despite the fact that they don't exist, there are rules about what intuitions you are allowed to suppose they have. You are not allowed to suppose that everything which is completely obvious to you is also completely obvious to your opponent. With real opponents, you have to find some common ground in order to avoid begging the question when you give your argument. With imaginary opponents, you have to do something similar.

In weird dialectics with imaginary interlocutors, the rules are sometimes unclear. Take certain infamous debates about skepticism. Here's an argument the skeptic might give.

1. I don't know I'm not being deceived by an Evil Demon
2. If I don't know that, then I don't know that I have hands
3. So, I don't know that I have hands

And here's an argument the antiskeptical might give.

1. I know that I have hands
2. If I know that, then I know I'm not being deceived by an Evil Demon
3. So, I know I'm not being deceived by an Evil Demon

Is it legitimate to use the second argument to argue against the skeptic? It is easy to get oneself into a mindset from which it is clear that such an argument is not legitimate. There is something pretty unsatisfactory about attempting to refute skepticism by simply weighing the relative intuitiveness of *I know I have hands* and *I don't know I am not being deceived*. One way to articulate the unease one might feel about such an argumentative move is to say that it is *uncharitable* to assume that the skeptic would share your relative weighting of the intuitiveness of those intuitions. If you are going to seriously attempt to refute the skeptic, is the thought, this isn't the common ground from which to fight. But this isn't the only mindset available. It is also fairly easy to get oneself into a mindset from which the Moorean-shift type of move feels perfectly legitimate. In particular, it can feel like the second argument provides perfectly legitimate grounds on which to justify failing to engage the skeptic in any further debate. An opponent who isn't even willing to accept such a basic common ground isn't worth engaging, might be the thought.

For the purposes of my argument, I don't need to arbitrate between these two stances or mindsets. I don't know which is the more defensible. Instead, this discussion helps provide a response to Molyneux's argument that the fact that certain strong intuitions are treated as being inadmissible in the context of justification gives us reason to doubt that the standard philosophical use of intuitions is as evidence.

Molyneux doesn't consider the external world skeptic. But his examples all concern skeptics of one stripe or another, e.g.:

1. *The problem of induction* and the inadmissibility of the intuitiveness of the claim that induction is an epistemically virtuous principle of reasoning and the counterintuitiveness of the claim that counterinduction is not in debates about the epistemic virtue of induction;
2. *Kripkenstein* and the inadmissibility of the intuitiveness of plus-answers and the counterintuitiveness of quus-answers in debates about the meaning of 'plus' and thus debates about meaning;
3. *Indeterminacy of translation* and the inadmissibility of the intuitiveness of interpreting 'gavagai' as referring to rabbits rather than undetached rabbit parts...

And his observation about such debates is that,

philosophers do not dismiss these problems so glibly. Why not? If intuitions were standardly used as evidence, then our strong intuitions should have settled these matters long ago. The glib response, in each case, should have been perfectly permissible. (page)

Now we are in a position to see why not—why philosophers do not dismiss these problems so glibly. In each case, the interlocutor is imaginary. No one thinks counterinduction is the epistemically virtuous principle. No one defends understanding 'plus' as quus, 'gavagai' as undetached rabbit parts, or inducing from the fact that all observed emeralds have been grue (to use Molyneux's final example). However, according to a certain mindset, certain dialectical rules apply despite the fact our interlocutor is imaginary. According to such a mindset, for example, if you are going to argue against the various forms of skepticism involved, and to take them seriously, then you cannot make certain assumptions about the common ground. Imagine that I had before me a genuine believer in the idea that 'plus' means quus. It does seem 'off' for us to imagine this individual replete with plus-favoring intuitions. The weirdness of the dialectical situation means that even these basic very strong intuitions are off limits and cannot be deployed in the context of justification. Note that this is completely compatible with thinking that the relevant intuitions do provide very strong evidence, it is just inadmissible given certain assumptions about the way that debates with imaginary skeptics should be conducted.

As with the Moorean shift example, there is another mindset available according to which the 'glib' response is perfectly appropriate, and there is no obligation to engage with an imaginary skeptic who refuses to admit the greater intuitiveness of the commonsense premise. If all philosophers had such a mindset all of the time, then the fact that strong intuitions haven't settled the arguments about all these varieties of skepticism would be a real mystery for the descriptive evidentialist to explain. However, so long as sufficiently many philosophers find themselves in a mindset according to which it is *dialectically* unacceptable to respond to skeptics in such ways sufficiently often, then there is no great mystery here for the descriptive evidentialist to explain.

Maybe there are cases in which intuitions are inexplicably treated as being inadmissible. However, these need to be cases in which it is *not* plausible to say that both (a) philosophers

do use X intuitions as evidence, and (b) dialectical considerations mean that it wouldn't make sense to adduce X intuitions as evidence.⁵

5 Conclusion

I have attempted a partial defense of the claim that the standard use of intuitions in philosophy is as evidence. I have defended this claim against recent arguments by Molyneux which provide, I think, some of the strongest intuition-denying arguments which have been produced to date. It would be a problem for the proponent of the idea that the standard use of intuitions in philosophy is as evidence if examination of actual philosophical practice showed that philosophers' attitudes to the propositions which putatively enjoy intuitive support was typically unchanging in the face of arguments which attack the intuitiveness of those propositions. However, more work needs to be done to demonstrate that philosophers' attitudes are unresponsive in this way. It would also be a problem for the proponent of the idea that the standard use of intuitions in philosophy is as evidence if examination of philosophical practice showed that typical uses of intuition by philosophers simply do not square with the idea that they were being used *as evidence*. However, neither of Molyneux's examples are yet convincing instances of this. Finally, it would also be a problem for the descriptive evidentialist if examination of philosophical practice revealed many cases of strong intuitions inexplicably being treated as being inadmissible in a context of justification. However, all of Molyneux's cases of inadmissibility can be accounted for by the idea that, despite treating the relevant intuitions *as evidence*, dialectical considerations mean that the intuitions can't be *used* as evidence or *adduced* in the relevant contexts.⁶

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⁵Note that the same point I am making here might be made with respect to many debates and types of evidence. For similar dialectical reasons, there are certain propositions which you will not find used by brave folks who seriously and wisely engage with conspiracy theorists, flat earthers, and the like, despite the fact that those propositions are taken to provide very good evidence (and used as evidence in other contexts) by the brave folks concerned.

⁶I am far from unsympathetic with Molyneux's overall project. I suspect that many of our standard uses of intuitions are not properly interpreted as uses *as evidence*. For example, intuitions may play an important role in explanation, rather than justification or discovery (Andow, 2015a). The current article is just an effort to make trouble for Molyneux's arguments on behalf of descriptive evidentialism.

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