

Is Explaining Intuition Compatible with Trusting it?

Nenad Mišćević, Maribor – Budapest

I

First, a summary of anti-naturalist criticism of explanationism, taking Th. Nagel's work (1997) as typical. A common assumption in the debate is the following one: if there is a causal explanation of our intuitions, it will appeal to the design of our mind, and ultimately to the causal-historical forces shaping it. In other words, the thinkers find their intuitions immediately compelling because they, the intuitions, reflect the built-up of thinker's minds. The intuition-contents, on the other hand, tend to be true, since the built-up of the mind reflects the most general structures of reality that has been causally shaping it. Most explanationists offer the design account as the best available explanation-sketch. The anti-explanationists, from Kant (Critique of Pure Reason, B 176) through Wittgensteinians (e.g., J. Lear) to Th. Nagel (1997), G. Bealer (1987) and J. Pust (2001), perform a modus tollens on this design-focused account. Since it is self-undermining and has unacceptable normative consequences it should be rejected, they claim. Here is Nagel's recent formulation of the use of evolutionary hypothesis about the origin of our mind-design:

But is the hypothesis really *compatible* with continued confidence in reason as a source of knowledge about the nonapparent character of the world? In itself, I believe an evolutionary story tells against such confidence. Without something more, the idea that our rational capacity was the product of natural selection would render reasoning far less trustworthy than Nozick suggests, beyond its original "coping" functions. There would be no reason to trust its results in mathematic and science, for example. (And insofar as the evolutionary hypothesis itself depends on reason, it would be self-undermining.)¹³

Unless it is coupled with an *independent* basis for confidence in reason, the evolutionary hypothesis is threatening rather than reassuring. It is consistent with continued confidence only if it amounts to the hypothesis that evolution has led to the existence of creatures, namely us, with a capacity for reasoning in whose validity we can have much *stronger* confidence than would be warranted merely from its having come into existence in that way. I have to be able to believe that the evolutionary explanation is consistent with the proposition that I follow the rules of logic because they are correct – not merely because I am biologically programmed to do so...And one cannot be outside them (*of argumentative thoughts, NM*) and inside them at the same time. (T. Nagel, 1997, 135-136.)

Nagel goes on to blame every "radically contingent" account of having such disastrous consequences. The general format of anti-explanationist criticism is the following:

1. We have intuitional or reason based knowledge R.
2. Features like rational certainty, justifiedness and rationally binding character are essential (descriptively and normatively) for R.
3. Causal explanation shows that R does not and cannot have these features,

therefore,

4. Causal explanation both descriptively and normatively undermines R.

5. R is crucial for causal explanation C (it uses mathematics and logic).

6. Causal explanation C undermines itself (by 3, i.e. since it undermines R, which it itself uses).

The crucial premises are 2. and 3. I intend to question the incompatibilist premise 3. Since it claims that causal explanation is incompatible with and undermines rational justifiedness, it leads directly to the issue of the right justificational structure to be used in assessing its truth.

II

Fortunately, in this particular issue the common ground is suggested by the format of the question itself: are thinkers justified in trusting their otherwise compelling intuitions? This in turn suggest a distinction of levels: place upon the first level the source of beliefs in question, e.g. intuition. Place upon a second, meta-cognitive level thinker's reflective awareness about the quality of her first-level source, e.g. one's reflective questioning of or trust in one's intuitions. Thinkers, including ourselves, spontaneously find their intuitions true in very compelling manner, and therefore, on a reflexive level, consider their intuition-capacity and their reason generally *de facto* reliable. This reliability of first-order source, if available, yields an external, 3rd person justifiedness. In contrast, the reflexive or meta-cognitive, second-order trust in one's own reliability, if justified, would make us, the thinkers, reflectively justified on the second level. As reflective creatures aiming at truth, we need both levels of justification. Such a two-level view of justification has been probably implicit in classical epistemology (Plato, Descartes, and Spinoza), and is nowadays proposed by various authors, most prominently E. Sosa (1991), but also K. Lehrer, W. Alston and J. van Cleve (with a lot of difference of detail). It can therefore serve as a suitable common ground between the explanationist and the anti-explanationist (the naturalist-explanationist will do well to present the epistemic rules as goal-based, grounded in the naturalistically acceptable truth-goal). I shall follow the most generous variant (of the kind favored by Sosa and Lehrer): the thinker may on the second level of reflexive questioning use *all the available sources* in order to assess the reliability (and other virtues) of a given first-order source, in this case of intuition or reason.

Within such a picture one can distinguish degrees of reflective, meta-cognitive achievement on the second, reflective level. The lowest degree is guaranteed by the immediate compellingness of contents, i.e. of intuitional propositions. If the thinker psychologically cannot doubt some such proposition, then she is *prima facie* allowed to believe it: epistemic ought implies epistemic can. Still, a more conscientious thinker would want to have a coherent meta-cognitive perspective on deliverances of her cognitive abilities, and an explanatory view on functioning of abilities. Again, we may distinguish immediate or folk view (of e.g. perception or intuition ability) from theoretical perspective on these abilities.

This suggests a line of response to Nagel's worries about rational certainty. They allege that if one accepted

harmony pre-established by evolution, one would have to believe logic and mathematics on grounds of evolutionary biology. The naturalist need not and should not pursue the silly line that we should believe truths of elementary arithmetic on the strength of believing evolutionary theory. In case of naturalism this would indeed lead to additional implausibility, summarized by the incompatibilist in premise (5) above: in order to do evolutionary biology one needs to rely upon logic and mathematics, but in order rationally to rely upon mathematics, one has to believe truths of evolutionary biology. And this is manifestly absurd. So, one should be careful to establish the proper order of justification on the second, reflective or meta-cognitive level.

First, psychological obviousness and indubitability gives the thinker a *prima facie* reason for accepting one's intuitions. No naturalist should deny this, since for a naturalist normative permissibility should follow from descriptive compellingness.

In the next step the thinker tries to achieve a general coherent view of her cognitive abilities and their outputs. It is the interplay of (the deliverances of) all capacities, plus the best explanation of the whole, that indicates whether a particular capacity, in this case intuition is reliable. Merely negative coherence with explanation is sufficient: in other words, if the explanation does not seriously contradict the explanandum (and we have argued that it does not), we have good reasons to trust our intuitions.

The explanation-based doubts about intuition, for example, make it vivid for her that the immediate compellingness of an intuition need not be sufficient. But then, the *indispensability and success* come in. Our intuitions cohere with our empirical hypotheses, and enable these hypotheses to be tested and confirmed. Indispensability and success are thus capable of almost completely justifying the reliance on intuitional knowledge. They come in very handy since they point to the massive empirical success of everyday knowledge and of science in which such beliefs are essentially used. The success does a posteriori vindicate the certainty of elementary logical and mathematical intuitions, for which there is a *massive overlap* with factual domain.

This already shows that in the proper order of justification a reliance on evolution for warrant is subsidiary to and parasitic upon the simpler but more powerful reasons to trust intuitions, i.e. their compelling character and their success. We can say more. There is a reasonable philosophical worry that some flaw in the origin of our intuitions might annihilate their justification. What if they come from a demon, Descartes asked. What if they are just figments of our imagination? How can information coming from within have any "validity" for a mind-independent world, Kant asked (and opted for an anti-realist solution). It is here that the evolutionary explanation comes in. Its role is remedial, i.e. to alleviate or to forestall the subtle, purely philosophical skepticism focusing upon a distantly and merely possible flaw in the causal ancestry of our intuitions. It thus removes the lingering perplexity about the mystery of scientific applicability and success of our logical and mathematical intuitions.

III

Let me address a residual problem. The anti-explanationist might claim that evolution of correct logical abilities is not only contingent (like evolution of any ability, and of mankind as a whole), but very improbable. A breed of people might have evolved, very much like us, but with a completely deviant logic, trusting it with the same

compellingness we trust our logic. And might we not actually be this breed?

Here is, in brief, a way for the moderate naturalist explanationist to avert the charge. Assume that minimal practical rationality brings practical advantages. Then, argue that logic is universal, i.e. minimal rationality very probably involves practical understanding of logical constants. How do you aggregate your thoughts without conjunction, how do you infer without implication, and how do you think of incompatibilities without negation? The line is neutral between naturalism (for instance, and famously Quine) and anti-naturalism (see, for instance the recent paper by S. Evnine (2001) who points out the importance of aggregation and incompatibility. So, Being minimally rational very probably involves being minimally logical. Therefore, any process that results in there being minimally rational creatures, also very probably results in there being minimally logical creatures. And, if evolution produces rational creatures, then it very probably produces minimally logical creatures. *Given evolutionary naturalism, minimal logical capacities are to be expected.*

Notice that high conditional probability of logic given rationality is enough. Nobody would seriously question causal explanation on the ground that the emergence of life itself is relatively improbable, or that evolution of nervous system is antecedently quite improbable. The challenge is more geared to the alleged possibilities of evolution of intelligent creatures similar to ourselves, but devoid of logical rules. So, although the evolution of rational creatures might in itself "radically contingent" (extremely improbable), the fact that once rational creatures are on their way, minimally logical creatures are on their way is *not* radically contingent. We have no reason to doubt our own rational capacities and basic logical intuitions on the grounds of evolutionary theory. Evolutionary theory does not undermine itself.

The critic might claim, like, for instance, Evnine (2001) that universality of logic is itself provable on a priori grounds, against the claim of naturalists. The answer is that universality of logic is the best explanatory hypothesis available. Witness the connectionism debate, in particular Smolensky vs. Fodor&Pylyshyn debate. E.g. We simply know of no other way, and this is enough for the present argument.

Returning to the normative issues, the naturalist can accept that logic is basic in the way of justification, i.e. that a thinker is *prima facie* justified in following logical rules simple in virtue of their basicness and compellingness. This is the common ground of naturalists and anti-naturalists, briefly visited in section II. Such justificatory basicness is neutral, i.e. compatible with ultimate apriorism and ultimate aposteriorism (e.g. with logical intuitions being ultimately, but not *prima facie* justified by our total theory). The naturalist will add justification by empirical success, thus enhancing and not diminishing the justifiedness of our basic intuitional beliefs.

Let me recap. I have been arguing, although in very sketchy and programmatic manner, that explanationism is compatible with justification of intuition- and reason-based beliefs. Using the model of two-stage justification, acceptable for both parties, one can insure sufficient justifiedness of such beliefs, without having to shun broadly causal explanations of their reliability. And if you can explain your intuitions, you have more reason to trust them. Surprisingly, the explanationist can thus do more justice to the reasonableness of our trust in intuitions, than her opponent, who relegates them to the realm of unexplainable mystery.

References

- Bealer, G. 1999 "A Theory of the A Priori", in *Philosophical Perspectives*, No. 13, *Epistemology*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bealer, George 1987 "The Philosophical Limits of Scientific Essentialism." in *Philosophical Perspectives* 1. Oxford: Blackwell, 289-365.
- Evnine, S. 2001 "The Universality of Logic", *Mind* 110, 438.
- Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*, N. Kemp Smith transl.
- Lear, J. 1984 "The Disappearing 'We'", *PAS*, Suppl. V, LVIII.
- Nagel .T. 1997 *The Last Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pust, J. 2000 *Intuitions as Evidence*, New York: Garland.
- Sosa, E. 1991 *Knowledge in Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.