Intuitions, Meaning, and Normativity:

Why Intuition Theory Supports a Non-Descriptivist Metaethic

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Non-descriptivists in metaethics should say more about intuitions. For one popular theory has it that case-based intuitions are in the business of correctly categorizing or classifying (as not water, as not knowledge, as impermissible, etc.) merely by bringing to bear a semantic or conceptual competence. If so, then the fact that all normative predicates have case-based intuitions involving them shows that they too are in the business of categorizing or classifying things. This favors a descriptivist position in metaethics—normative predicates have descriptive content—and disfavors a purely non-descriptivist position, like pure expressivism. However, we can say more. We can distinguish two different sorts of intuitional state, A-grade intuitions and B-grade intuitions, based on a cluster of properties that are distinctive of each. While a hypothesis about categorization best explains the cluster of properties enjoyed by A-grade intuitions, it does not best explain the cluster of properties enjoyed by B-grade intuitions. Indeed, a non-categorizational (and so non-descriptive), attitude-expressive hypothesis about the relevant meanings best explains B-grade
intuitions. And intuitions involving thin normative predicates are B-grade.

So intuition theory supports non-descriptivism, not descriptivism, about thin normative predicates.

1. From Intuition to Description?

If we say that some state of affairs is good, or that some action is impermissible, or that some consideration is a reason to act, are we thereby describing or representing real features of that state of affairs, that action, or that consideration (perhaps by attributing real properties)? That is, do normative predicates have descriptive content? That is a nice, tough question in metaethics. Here, I hope to support a negative answer by directing our attention to a different question: What are intuitions, particularly predicative intuitions about actual or hypothetical cases? I will be arguing that the best explanation of some of the surface characteristics of such intuitions supports non-descriptivism about thin normative terms.

You might think exactly the opposite is the case. For one historically respectable position has it that case-based, predicative intuitions (henceforth just ‘intuitions’) are mental states whereby one categorizes or classifies some item in a case merely by understanding the case and bringing to bear a semantic/conceptual competence with the relevant category.¹ This is a big-tent view that allows a number of conceptions of the

¹ See Goldman and Pust (1998, p. 182), Goldman (2007, p. 4; 2013, passim), and Margolis and Lawrence (2003, p. 313), for examples of folks that use ‘categorization’ and ‘classification’ terminology. Sosa does not use ‘categorization’ or classification’ terminology, but seems to agree with the historically respectable position when he says
competence at issue. Regardless of those details, the historically respectable view supports descriptivism in metaethics, at least *prima facie*.² For it says that intuitions are in the business of correctly *categorizing* or *classifying*, which apparently includes intuitions involving normative predicates. Since you cannot correctly *categorize* or *classify* with a predicate unless that predicate has descriptive content,³ it follows that all normative predicates involved in intuitions have descriptive content, including arguably thin ones

“[w]hen we rely on intuitions in philosophy . . . we manifest a competence that enables us to get it right on a certain subject matter, by basing our beliefs on the sheer understanding of their contents”, contents he goes on to characterize as “representational” (Sosa 2007a, p. 102). However, it is not clear whether he would characterize the competence as semantic/conceptual. Elsewhere he calls it epistemic (see, e.g., 2007b, lecture 3), which does not rule out its being semantic/conceptual. To my ear, *sheer understanding* suggests an epistemic competence that is also a semantic/conceptual competence. See note 11 and accompanying text for further complications.


² Compare Peakcocke (2004), who argues that the sort of *a priori* justification moral principles enjoy is incompatible with mind-dependent metaethical theories. He counts Blackburn’s expressivism a casualty (p. 510).

³ I set to one side minimalism about categorization, whereby any predication counts as categorization.
like ‘is good’, ‘is impermissible’, ‘is a reason to act’, and so on. In sum, there appears to be an easy argument from 1) the fact that we have intuitions employing normative predicates, and 2) a historically respectable position about what intuitions are, to the conclusion that C) normative predicates have descriptive content.

In this vein, consider Frank Jackson’s views (1998, Ch. 2 & pp. 129-138; see also 2011, p. 473-74). He suggests that we use ethical intuitions to craft a network analysis—roughly, a set of intuitively true sentences about normative statuses, including how various normative statuses relate to one another and to non-normative statuses—where the referents of the terms in the network will be those features of the world that best satisfy the network role. Why use intuitions to build a network analysis? Because intuitions are categorizations via pattern recognition. And because we do not have more immediate access to the pattern other than by recognizing its instances, best to get the instances of the pattern on the table and see how it takes shape.4

Not to overstate the view, note that it leaves open any number of grounds for rejecting what is intuitive. It could be that any given intuition actually fails to tap into this categorization competence. Even if an intuition is a correct categorization by the lights of the conceptual/semantic standards of the relevant category, the category could be confused or incoherent, or fail to cut nature at its joints. Knowing any of this about a

4 As Jackson notes, this procedure is fallible in many ways. Think of the pattern in nature that ‘knowledge’ picks out. Noting many cases of knowledge, one might think that the pattern is justified, true belief. Gettier comes along and supplies instances of the pattern that reveal otherwise. So one kind of error arises from drawing conclusions based on a limited data set.
given intuition could be grounds for rejecting its content. Still, the existence of intuitions on cases would support the view that the relevant predicates categorize, and so have descriptive content.

And yet I do not think that our best theory of intuitions supports descriptivism in metaethics. I think this not because I reject the historically respectable view outright, but because I think there are certain features many intuitions have that support the respectable view, but they are features that normative intuitions, at least some ostensibly thin ones, lack. Their lack of these features actually supports non-descriptivism for the relevant predicates. Or so I shall argue.

How to proceed? One could proceed by *defining* intuitions as mental states that predicate merely by bringing to bear a semantic/conceptual competence, and *defining* the competence as one of categorization, so that to predicate in these cases is to describe.\(^5\) That would make for a refreshingly short paper. On the downside, there might not be any mental states that fit the stipulated definitions. If we just *assume* that our favored intuitions satisfy the definitions, that looks like a sorry excuse for practicing an *a priori* religion from the armchair. Better is to provide some reason to believe that the states we have been calling intuitions, or at least some of them, predicate merely by bringing to

\(^5\) Compare Kirk Ludwig: “I will use ‘intuition’ to mean an occurrent judgment formed solely on the basis of competence in the concepts involved in response to a question about a scenario, or simply an occurrent judgment formed solely on the basis of competence in the concepts involved in it (in response, we might say, to the null scenario)” (2007, p. 135).
bear a semantic/conceptual competence, and provide some reason to believe that it is a competence with correctly describing or representing things to be a certain way.

I will provide these reasons by cataloguing five features shared by many intuitions—what seems distinctive of them and how they differ from other mental states—that cry out for explanation. I argue that the best explanation of this bundle of features is that the mental states exhibiting them—what I call *A-grade intuitions*—really do categorize, and do so merely by bringing to bear a semantic/conceptual competence. Call this the *categorization-with-competency hypothesis*. Other mental states—what I call *B-grade intuitions*—exhibit only three of the five features enjoyed by A-grade intuitions. Among the B-grade intuitions are ones involving terms like ‘is good’, ‘is impermissible’, ‘is a reason for’. I argue that the best explanation for why they bundle only three of the five features is that they do not categorize, and *a fortiori* do not do so merely by applying a semantic/conceptual competence. Instead, they *predicate without categorizing*, where one’s non-cognitive attitudes relevant to correct predication. Call this the *predication-with-attitude hypothesis*. According to it, B-grade intuitions are not in the business of categorizing things; they do, however, express attitude.⁶

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⁶ Some of my other work gestures in this direction (Bedke 2008, 2010). Gibbard (2008, pp. 20-23) is another non-descriptivist that has views on what intuitions are. He treats all intuitions as of a kind, whereas I think the data support speciating intuitions in a way that is friendly to descriptivism about some terms and non-descriptivism about other terms. To be clear, when I say that normative predications express attitude I do not bring on board expressivism qua non-standard semantic theory, as that has been recently developed. I mean it in a pre-theoretical sense, as Ayer did.
2. Some Explananda

Sadly, there is no consensus on what intuitions are, not just at the level of theory, but even at the level of the surface features that could pick out a rough-and-ready set of mental states for further study. Indeed, one of the lessons to emerge here is that the various things philosophers call ‘intuitions’ are not of a single theoretical kind at the end of the day. So, set the term ‘intuition’ aside for a moment, and focus on mental states that have the following interesting properties (to be elaborated shortly): i) their contents seem true in a distinctive way, ii) they are difficult to revise with counterevidence, iii) it is standard practice to base beliefs directly on them, and we standardly take such reliance to \textit{pro tanto} but defeasibly justify, iv) they tend to reveal subject matter, and v) they do not have modal content, but there are counterpart mental states to hand with modalized contents. These five properties can come apart, of course, but they are often bundled together. When they are bundled together I will say the corresponding mental states are \textit{A-grade intuitions}. (Their modalized counterparts can be called \textit{A+-grade intuitions} and I have more to say about them in section 2.5.)

Some philosophers will be skeptical that there are intuitions even when understood in these pre-theoretic ways. Perhaps some are skeptical that mental states with properties (i)-(ii) and (iv)-(v) are standardly used to form beliefs, or that we standardly take such beliefs to be \textit{pro tanto} but defeasibly justified. Those skeptics are not my primary concern, though I hope some of the elaboration below will move them. My primary concern is to speak to those who recognize that some states have these five properties, to lay out how these features support the historically respectable view, to
show them that other mental states have only three of the five properties, and finally to convince them how significant this is for metaethics. First, some elaboration in order.

2.1. Contents Seem True in a Distinctive Way

Mental life is rife with states that predicate. I believe that the stuff coming out of the gas pump is not water. I believe that my son does not know that there are three cube roots of 1. I had a hunch that the decision to go to war in Iraq after Sept. 11 was wrong. I guess that Apple’s stock will rise. Perhaps these things seem true to me in some anemic sense just by virtue of having a belief, hunch, guess or prediction. But there is a different sort of seeming to be true involved in some mental states. When I think of twin earth (Putnam 1975), I not only believe or guess or have a hunch that XYZ is not water, but it seems that it is not water in a way that differs from any seeming to be true in those other states. When I think of the Gettier-type case of the broken clock (Russell 2009 [1948], pp. 170-71), I not only believe or guess or have a hunch that the protagonist does not know the time, but it seems that he does not know the time in a way that differs from any seeming to be true in those other states. When I think of the footbridge version of the trolley case (Thomson 1985), I not only believe or guess or have a hunch that it would be wrong to push the guy off the bridge, but it seems wrong in a way that differs from any seeming to be true in those other states. And when I consider Parfit’s agony case (2011, p. 73-4), I not only believe or guess or have a hunch that the protagonist has reason to move her hand from the flame, but it seems that she has some reason to move her hand in a way that differs from any seeming to be true in those other states.

Some have called this distinctive sort of seeming a rational or intellectual seeming (see, e.g., Bealer 1998, p. 207; 2000, p. 3; Bengson forthcoming a, Huemer
2005, p. 102). That suggests that the seemings are somehow grounded in our intellectual capacities (as opposed to our sentimentalist ones?). We can remain neutral on that bit of rationalist theory while acknowledging the negative claim that the way contents seem true when presented with these interesting cases differs from any seeming found in any arbitrary belief, hunch, or guess. We can add that it differs from any seeming true found in an arbitrary inclination to believe or perceptual experience as well.

Some hold that this special seeming marks a phenomenological quality to the mental state (Bealer 1998, p. 207; Chudnoff 2011a). That is probably right, but the main idea, and the only idea we rely on here, is that we can tell when a state seems true in this way, and we can tell it differs from any seeming to be true in a variety of other mental states, including beliefs, hunches, guesses, inclinations to believe, and so on. Call them *intuitive seemings*.

The greatest resistance to this claim comes from those who think intuitions are beliefs or inclinations to believe. We can unseat that conviction by noting that something can intuitively seem to be the case even when one does not believe it, and one can be inclined to believe something that is not intuitive. You might, for example, come to believe that knowledge just is justified true belief *despite* what seems true when considering Gettier-type cases (Weatherson 2003). And along the way you might be inclined to believe that some Gettier victim does know the target proposition even though, intuitively, he does know. So there is a seeming true that is not the seeming of belief or inclination to believe (cf. Chudnoff 2011a; Cullison 2010; Bengson forthcoming a).
Now, I am sympathetic with those who would simply identify intuitions with a distinctive kind of seeming state. But I think we can identify a larger bundle of properties that are often fellow travellers with intuitive seeming states.

2.2. Difficult to Revise with Counterevidence

Intuitive seemings, or at least some of them, are much less sensitive to counterevidence than are standard beliefs or inclinations to believe. Typically, beliefs and inclinations to believe change as evidence comes in. When you reflect on the gas pump case, your belief about whether that the stuff coming out of the gas pump is not water can be pushed around by all kinds of evidence. By contrast, intuitive seemings are recalcitrant in the face of putative evidence that the seemingly true proposition about a fixed case is false. As indicated above, theoretical considerations and other sorts of evidence can influence one’s belief about whether a Gettier victim knows, but the intuitive seeming typically persists. Others come to think it is impermissible to flip the switch in the switch version of the trolley problem (Thomson 2008) despite the persistent intuitive seeming that it is permissible. In this way, at least some intuitive seemings are more like perceptual illusions than they are like beliefs – certain contents will persistently seem to be true when reflecting on certain cases, even when one comes to disbelieve those contents. There are ways to revise these intuitive seemings, to be sure. But I am identifying a way of revision—via general theoretical evidence that does not change the category at issue or the case under consideration or one’s cognitive functioning—that is much more difficult for at least certain intuitive seemings than for standard beliefs and inclinations to believe. I call the phenomenon difficult to revise with counterevidence.
To be clear, I am not saying that only intuitive seemings are difficult to revise with counterevidence. And perhaps not all are difficult to revise in that way. I simply ask us to focus on the intersection of states that have the five properties under consideration. So far, we have intuitive seemings that are difficult to revise with counterevidence.

2.3. Standard to Base Beliefs on Them, and Standardly Taken to Justify

Consider a version of Bertrand Russell’s broken clock case. Bertie looks at a clock that has stopped at 2 o’clock. On that basis he believes it is 2 o’clock. And, as luck would have it, it is 2 o’clock at the moment he looks at the clock. If you are like me, you have the intuition that Bertie does not know it is 2 o’clock, and you believe that Bertie does not know it is 2 o’clock based on your intuition. This is standard belief-forming practice. And it is standardly taken to pro tanto but defeasibly justify your belief. More generally, there are mental states whose contents seem intuitively true, that are difficult to revise by counterevidence, and where standard practice takes them to pro tanto, defeasibly justify beliefs of the same content when those beliefs are based directly on the corresponding seeming states (cf. Chudnoff 2011b; Huemer 2001; Pryor 2000, 2004). Not all predicative mental states play this role in our psychology, and not all such roles are taken to pro tanto, defeasibly justify. You cannot generally come by a defeasibly justified belief that \( p \) by basing it on a mere belief that \( p \), for instance. That is an objectionable form of bootstrapping.

It is common to think of the basing relation between intuitive seeming and belief as non-inferential. We can be happy with this characterization so long as it marks a distinction between a) moving directly from an intuitive seeming with content \( p \) to the belief that \( p \) and b) moving from the belief that you have the intuitive seeming that \( p \), and
perhaps some other information (e.g., that your seemings generally track truth), to the belief that \( p \). Intuitive seemings are standardly taken to defeasibly justify when relied upon in the first way. Whether the movement of mind there is an inference or not matters less than whether the movement takes as input the intuitional state or some belief that one has an intuitional state and other information.\(^7\) I should note that some think that we have enough information about distorting influences on intuitional states with ethical contents so that the justification must now proceed in the second way (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2007). That is consistent with my main claims: that intuitive seemings are standardly relied upon in the first way when not defeated, and this move is standardly taken to pro tanto justify when not defeated.

2.4. Tend to Reveal Subject Matter

Now for some less familiar features. It is quite possible for two individuals to have radically different beliefs about some subject matter. And it is quite possible for one individual to radically change his beliefs about some subject matter over time. Two people, or one person over time, can have radically different beliefs about water, heat and arthritis, to take some examples, while still thinking about one and the same subject matter. The same goes for inclinations to believe, hunches, guesses, and so on.

\(^7\) Some intuitional epistemologies in ethics emphasize the non-inferential character of the justification. It is not clear whether such views have much concern with the mental states identified here. Sometimes they focus on the relation between perceptual experiences and ethical belief. See Cowan (2015) for some relevant discussion. Views that posit a special intellectual perception or awareness of abstracta distinct from perceptual experiences more clearly work with the mental states identified here, and I discuss them below.
And yet, faced with sufficient differences in intuitional states of two individuals considering identical cases, a common refrain in the literature is that such individuals are employing different concepts, and so thinking of different things (see, e.g., Goldman 2007, pp. 13-14; Sosa 2009, p. 108; Jackson 1998, p. 32; 2011, p. 469). More cautiously, it is comparatively easier to posit a difference in subject matter when individuals have sufficiently different intuitive seemings (that are difficult to revise and are standardly taken to justify beliefs), as compared with even radical differences in standard belief. If some individuals have consistently different intuitive seemings about Gettier cases, for example, perhaps they are picking out different properties with the term ‘knows that’. Some people might be talking about true belief while others are talking about justified, true belief, while yet others are talking about justified, non-lucky, true belief. That hypothesis is live. For comparison, if two of us merely have different beliefs about who knows what, it would be singularly odd to consider the hypothesis that we are employing different concepts with otherwise orthographically homologous terms, or thinking about different subject matters. Consider divergent beliefs about whether my son knows that there are three cubed roots of 1. A special set of auxiliary hypotheses would need to be in place to make the hypothesis that we are talking about different things with ‘knows that’ a live hypothesis. As I will put it, some sufficiently divergent intuitions tend to betray differences in subject matter. Or, more simply, some intuitions tend to reveal subject matter.

Many intuitive seemings have this property. Consider those who do not have the intuitive seeming that XYZ on twin earth is not water, but rather have the intuition that it is water. Here again, the hypothesis that they are using a slightly different concept from
our own, one that does not rigidly designate but prioritizes similarity in surface properties or functional role, is quite plausible. This need not get in the way of smooth communication, so long as the different concepts expressed in our idiolects sufficiently overlap in content in the standard contexts in which they are used.

Note that I have left normative intuitions employing thin terms to one side in this section. That is because I think they lack this property. They do not tend to reveal subject matter. I address this issue in section 4.

2.5. Have Associated Modalized Counterparts

Some philosophers characterize at least some intuitions in modal terms. Consider George Bealer and Ernie Sosa on the matter.

[W]hen we have a rational intuition—say, that if P then not not P—it presents itself as necessary: it does not seem to us that things could be otherwise; it must be that if P then not not P. (I am unsure how exactly to analyze what is meant by saying that a rational intuition presents itself as necessary. Perhaps something like this: necessarily, if x intuits that P, it seems to x that P and also that necessarily P. But I wish to take no stand on this.) (Bealer 1998, p. 207).

S rationally intuits that p if and only if S's intuitive attraction to assent to <p> is explained by a competence (an epistemic ability or virtue) on the part of S to discriminate, among contents that he understands well enough, the true from the false, in some subfield of the modally strong (the necessarily true or necessarily false), with no reliance on introspection, perception, memory, testimony, or
inference (no further reliance, anyhow, than any required for so much as understanding the given proposition). (Sosa 2007b, p. 61).

I have not characterized A-grade intuitions as having modal contents. In fact, I want to focus in the first instance on intuitions with non-modal contents, but note that at least some of them have modalized counterpart intuitions close to hand, or what we can call A+-grade intuitions.

Consider again the broken clock case and how it seems, intuitively, that Bertie does not know that it is 2 o’clock. As stated, this is an intuitive seeming without modal content. But there are counterpart intuitive seemings with modalized contents close to hand. If we further consider whether Bertie might know the time in this case (pace what seems to be true, as it were), this elicits a modalized counterpart to the non-modal intuition. Intuitively, Bertie’s belief cannot be a case of knowledge. Perhaps less naturally, intuitively, necessarily Bertie does not know it is 2 o’clock.

This modalized intuition needs to be clearly distinguished from other modal information we can glean from the non-modal intuition. For example, if we are

8 See also Ichikawa and Jarvis (2009), who say Gettier intuitions are judgments of necessity (e.g., p. 223). They are replying to Williamson’s suggestion that we read intuitive contents as complex counterfactuals (2007, p. 184-86). He does so, in part, because he finds it difficult to locate a true necessity judgment for Gettier intuitions. That is a problem if the task is to find a proposition that is true in every possible world, regardless of the contextual detail of the case under consideration. It is not a problem if we consider the relevant necessity the (semantically or conceptually grounded) requiredness of applying a predicate to a case, as suggested below.
considering a possible case, then we can infer that, possibly, a belief is justified and true but not knowledge. If so, knowledge is not necessarily coextensive with justified true belief. This is helpful for testing analyses of knowledge. But distinct from all that is the sense that, intuitively, this just cannot be a case of knowledge. Bertie’s belief in the case seems ruled out as a case of knowledge. Indeed, the modal strength of this categorization bolsters the case that knowledge is not necessarily coextensive with justified, true belief.

To be clear, a modalized intuition prompted by a case is limited to—it is focused on—how to predicate in that particular case. The modalized intuition can be sensitive to lots of contextual detail that is not mentioned in describing the case to others, and that might not feature in the content of the intuitive seeming itself. This is just as it is with their non-modal counterparts. Focusing on the details of the case, you might share my intuition that Bertie’s belief is not knowledge, and my intuition that Bertie’s belief cannot be knowledge, for example, which fail to mention relevant detail for the verdict. To be sure, any description of a case will also be incomplete in detail, and so might underdetermine what it is we are focusing on. But presumably we can and do fill in details not mentioned that are relevant to whether it is a case of knowledge or not. And if we share intuitions about cases, presumably we are filling in the details in the same way, probably by making the context normal.

Consequently, the modalized intuitive content should not be thought of as a modal operator on a coarse-grained proposition or sentence divorceable from the relevant context of the case. We are not implying that in all accessible possible worlds where we can identify a Bertie counterpart with a belief about the time, that belief cannot be knowledge. We also need to distinguish contents that are true in every possible context of
use, such as Kaplan’s “I am here now”. Those contents are not modal—indeed, it is false that necessarily I am here now—and they do not focus on any particular case. Last, the modal force does not seem to be derived from modal commitments extraneous to the case and the category one brings to bear.

I take it that many classical thought experiments elicit not just non-modal intuitions but also modalized counterparts so characterized. Consider twin earth again. There, we have the non-modal intuition that XYZ is not water. We might also have a modalized counterpart: an A+-grade intuition that XYZ cannot be water (or something to that effect). We do not derive this intuition from extraneous modal commitments. It immediately seems that it cannot be water when we consider the question, bearing the details of the case in mind. Of course, not all predicative mental states have associated modalized intuitions. When we categorize something as not water based on the fact that it came from a gas pump and the smell of it, and subsequently consider whether this might be water after all, we do not think that in this context it simply cannot be a case of water. Or if we do, it is obviously distinct from the modalized intuitions elicited by the classic


10 You might wonder what flavor of modality we are talking about. Are we talking about conceptual modality? Metaphysical? Some other variety? We should not expect a modalized intuition to wear the flavor of modality on its sleeve. Determining the flavor of modality will be a conclusion of theory and not a transparent part of the data. I will be suggesting that semantic/conceptual competence helps to explain the presence of the modal force of A-grade intuitions.
cases above, something more like an expression of great confidence that the stuff is water, rather than ruling out the possibility that it is not water. (There is also the fact that our mental states prompted by the gas pump case are not intuitions). I also think that intuitions involving thin normative terms do not have modalized intuitions of the right sort and I address this point in section 4.

3. Explaining The Bundle

I am calling mental states that bundle these five properties together A-grade intuitions. The best strategy for fans of the categorization-with-competency hypothesis—a hypothesis that posits a semantic or conceptual competence behind the categorization—is to key in on these five properties and argue that the hypothesis is part of the best explanation for why A-grade intuitions have this bundle of properties and other mental states lack them. More precisely, the more of these properties a mental state has, the better the case that it categorizes merely by understanding some case and bringing to bear a semantic/conceptual competence with some relevant category.

If so, we should expect the hypothesis to explain each property individually. I give these explanations in a moment. But there is greater explanatory virtue in its ability to explain why these properties are often bundled. If we just consider each property singly, there will be explanations that compete with, or perhaps out-compete, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis. But not all of them will predict that their explanandum will be bundled with four others, or explain each of those other properties. So the real prize is to economically explain the bundle.

Having said that, let me begin with some piecemeal explanations of the properties considered singly. First, if some mental states categorize merely by applying a
semantic/conceptual competence, while others are of some other sort, we should expect the former to have a distinct presentation to cognition. We should expect them to present differently from standard beliefs, inclinations to believe, perceptual seemings, hunches, guesswork, and so forth because they are different in kind from these other states. If we did not have a capacity to categorize merely by applying semantic/conceptual competency, there would not be a contrast between the presentation of intuitive seemings and other sorts of mental states. Moreover, the mode of presentation—a distinctive way of seeming true—is entirely apt if these states categorize merely by applying semantic/conceptual competence. If that is what is going on, no wonder that the categorizations seem true.

Second, if some mental states categorize merely by applying a semantic/conceptual competence, while others are of some other sort, we might expect the former to be more difficult to revise in the face of counterevidence. In this respect, they would be more like perceptual seemings that persist even when one knows they mislead. Stock examples are perceptual illusions, such as the Müller-Lyer illusion where one line looks longer than another even when one is certain that the two lines are of the same length. However, under the categorization-with-competency hypothesis A-grade intuitions are more difficult to revise in the face of counterevidence than many other mental states not because they are persistent illusions, but because the former categorize merely by applying a semantic/conceptual competence while the latter do not. If so, we might expect that the ways to alter an A-grade intuition are to interfere with the competence one brings to bear (e.g. via distraction or by clouding cognitive functioning), or to change the case under consideration so that the categorization is no longer
appropriate by the lights of semantic/conceptual competence, or to apply a different category to the case. This is exactly what we find when we consider classic intuitions about water and knowledge – recalcitrant intuitions in the face of counterevidence that can be altered in one of the three ways mentioned above. For comparison, standard beliefs, inclinations to believe, hunches, guesswork, and so forth are all easily revisable with counter-evidence that does not interfere with competence, change case, or alter category.

Third, if some mental states categorize merely by applying a semantic/conceptual competence, while others are of some other sort, we might expect vindication of the standard practice of relying on the former mental states, and for this reliance to deliver *pro tanto* but defeasible justification (cf. Bealer 1998; Goldman & Pust 1998). There are actually two steps here. The categorization-with-competency hypothesis comes in at the second step. The first step is to note that the standard practice makes sense. It makes sense to base one’s beliefs on what seems to be the case—it is hard to find epistemic fault with anyone who does so, at least until one has some reason to mistrust how things seem. In this way, A-grade intuitions have a role in cognition similar to perceptual seemings, memorial seemings, proprioception, and other seeming states. Because A-grade intuitions are states whereby something seems to be the case, they share in the general irreproachability of relying on how things seem unless given a reason to proceed otherwise.

As I said, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis does not explain why it is standard practice to rely on how things seem, or why it makes sense to form beliefs in this way. It does, however, come in at a second level of explanation. It *vindicates* the
standard practices and *underwrites* the thought that it makes sense to rely on them – it explains why these are good practices. For it is not hard to see how basing your belief that \( a \) is \( F \) only on semantic/conceptual competence with ‘\( F \)’, and, of course, your understanding of the case in which \( a \) is embedded, is epistemically respectable, especially defeasibly so. This is not an infallibilist explanation for a couple of reasons. First, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis is offered as a general explanation, and admits exceptional cases. In those cases, one relies on an A-grade intuition that turns out not to be a mere application of semantic/conceptual competency, and the resulting categorization might be mistaken. Second, even if competency is involved, the resulting categorizations might nevertheless involve confused concepts or fail to cut nature at its joints. So we get a qualified vindication of standard practice, a kind of license to carry on while being wary of exceptional cases to the general explanation, and a willingness to replace concepts not worth employing. Competing explanations of the categorization-with-competency hypothesis, then, would either vindicate standard practice in some other way, or debunk standard practice.

Fourth, if some mental states categorize merely by applying a semantic/conceptual competence, while others are of some other sort, we might expect the former to tend to reveal subject matter in a way the latter do not. We might expect sufficient divergence in A-grade intuition to suggest a difference in subject matter. For example, suppose Able considers beliefs in Gettier-style cases and has A-grade intuitions that the beliefs are not knowledge. Bea considers the same beliefs in the same cases but has A-grade intuitions that the beliefs are knowledge. If they give voice to their views, these two would seem to be talking past one another, thinking and speaking of different
things. Under the categorization-with-competency hypothesis, the straightforward explanation of what is going on is that Able and Bea are placing the target beliefs in two different, mutually compossible categories. Able is categorizing in one way merely by employing a semantic/conceptual competence with one category, and Bea is categorizing in a different way merely by employing another semantic/conceptual competency with a different category. Divergent beliefs not based merely in semantic/conceptual competence would not similarly tend to betray differences in subject matter. When mere semantic/conceptual competence is not driving the result, all kinds of difference in evidence can lead individuals to have wildly divergent beliefs about cases without suggesting that they are bringing to bear different categories or speaking of different subject matters.

Fifth, if some mental states categorize merely by applying a semantic/conceptual competence, while others are of some other sort, we might expect the former to have counterpart modalized intuitions close to hand, while the latter have no predictable association with modal content. If it is semantics or conceptual structure alone that is the basis for the categorization, it makes sense that the categorization is required by the bit of semantics or conceptual structure that one is wielding in having the intuition. So, under the categorization-with-competency hypothesis A-grade intuitions have modalized counterparts close to hand because the categorization is required (or forbidden as the case may be) by the bit of semantics/conceptual structure one brings to bear, and the modal force of the intuition reflects these competence-based requirements and prohibitions. Further, the modalized intuition is focused on a case if and when the details of the case are relevant to the propriety of the categorization (by the lights of semantics/conceptual
structure). This appears to be the case with twin earth examples. There, it is crucial that we understand that the watery stuff around here is H\textsubscript{2}O. Without that, it is not clear whether XYZ is water (for the watery stuff around here might turn out to be XYZ). Last, modalized counterpart intuitions are not derived from modal commitments extraneous to the case and the concept at issue because semantics/conceptual structure is settling the issue; \textit{a fortiori} no modal commitments independent of the case and this competence are needed to get to the modalized counterpart. We would not expect this modal force to be present for just any non-intuitive mental state, of course. There is no reason that categorizing the stuff coming of the gas pump as not water, based as it is on some inductive evidence, and perhaps other evidence like its appearance and smell, would seem required. Perhaps so categorizing is not required (semantically or conceptually) but misleading evidence indicates otherwise.

I just gave piecemeal explanations of our five properties. But, as indicated above, the real explanatory force of the categorization-with-competency hypothesis is that it economically explains all five properties and why they are bundled together. Competing hypotheses might do well explaining one or more of our properties, but the standard set by categorization-with-competency is to explain all five and why they are bundled.

Let me add here a sixth consideration that I think important and underappreciated: other states that share the first five features are widely considered to result from a competency. Consider our reactions to sentences that seem well-formed or ill-formed. “The bird the cat caught died” strikes me as well-formed, or grammatical. “Died the bird the cat caught” seems odd. These reactions share analogues of the five features we have been discussing. They seem well-formed (or not) in a distinctive, intuitive way, they are
difficult to revise with counterevidence, they are taken to *pro-tanto* and defeasibly justify beliefs, differences in intuition here would betray differences in grammar, and modalized counterparts are close to hand. Importantly, these states are plausibly what result when we bring to bear a certain kind of competency, in this case a syntactic competency. And it is striking that the categorization intuitions that concern us are so similar in surface features to these other intuitions. The categorization-with-competency hypothesis easily explains the similarities between these states and why they differ from beliefs, hunches, guesses, inclinations to believe, perceptual states, etc. They are both merely the result of a competency, in the one case syntactic and in the other semantic/conceptual.

Now, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis is a big-tent view. It encompasses many conceptions of the competency at issue, including some views by which conceptual competency brings with it a rational capacity to grasp abstract entities and relations among them, but also views by which one competently brings to bear

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11 The classical position is represented in Russell (2008 [1912], chs. IX-XI). See also Huemer (2005, pp. 124-26), and Cuneo & Shafer-Landau (forthcoming). Bengson (forthcoming b) and Chudnoff (2013) are not so clearly under the tent. Whether they are depends on the details of what stories are to count as semantic or conceptual. If mere deployment of a conceptual competency (or, less likely, semantic competency) is involved in what it is to grasp a third realm or have direct intellectual awareness of abstracta, these positions will be included under the tent. Huemer and Cuneo & Shafer-Landau clearly take this route, while it seems to me that Bengson and Chudnoff would not. I am happy to expand the tent to include these latter positions so long as they explain
implicitly grasped, psychologically encoded, rules for using predicates, or psychological realized conceptual structure. Fortunately, this diversity is irrelevant for our purposes. We have adduced evidence for a position they all share. Further evidence would be needed to decide among the positions, evidence I will not consider here.

Is there a better, more explanatory, theory of A-grade intuitions than the categorization-with-competency hypothesis? I cannot be exhaustive. Some cursory remarks will have to suffice. One competing theory is to identify A-grade intuitions with a kind of belief, perhaps beliefs central to a Quinean web of beliefs. This would explain why such mental states are difficult to revise via counterevidence, and perhaps why there would be a distinctive, intuitive seeming, presentation that not all beliefs enjoy. Further, it might be able to explain why A-grade intuitions tend to reveal subject matter, if the web of belief helps to fix reference and beliefs central to the web play a greater role in doing so. However, this view is impossible to square with the observation that you can utterly disbelieve the content of an A-grade intuition. Also, it is not clear how it could explain why A-grade intuitions have modalized counterparts close to hand, or why they share so many features with intuitions about well-formed sentences, and so few features with standard beliefs and other mental states. Last, the Quinean view cannot explain why intuitions are rightly taken to defeasibly justify beliefs of the same content. Though one could reject that standard practice wholesale, that is a high price to pay for a theory with the bundle of properties as well as semantic/conceptual competency views. More on that in the main text.

so many other explanatory shortcomings. All told, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis looks better.

Another competing theory was sketched in note 11: A-grade intuitions are intellectual awarenesses of abstracta, where this does not involve, or goes beyond, any semantic/conceptual competence. This sort of view takes sensory perception as a kind of model case, and posits something similar but distinct – an intellectual capacity to perceive abstracta. The view has some explanatory resources. It arguably does a good job explaining the distinctive quality of intuitive seemings, drawing on an analogy with perceptual seemings and how they present their contents as seemingly the case. It also arguably does a nice job explaining the justificatory role of these states, or even a knowledge-conferring role, as well as why they are relatively difficult to revise with counter-evidence. When it comes to differences in intuitions betraying differences in subject matter, proponents of the view can explain that divergence in intuition can be due to intellectually perceiving different abstracta. And, finally, such a view has the resources to explain intuitions with modal content insofar as those abstracta are necessary existents bearing necessary relations to one another.

Having said this, I have some reservations. How the view handles case-based intuitions without appealing to mere conceptual competency is a bit tricky, for example. Intellectual awareness is most naturally applied to general propositions that would spell out non-context-sensitive relations among abstracta. We might intellectually see that anything that is yellow is colored via awareness of the abstracta of yellowness, coloredness, and their relations. We might intellectually see that identity is transitive via awareness of the abstracta of identity and transitivity and their relations. We might
intellectually see the certain mathematical, geometric or logical relations obtain via awareness of the relevant abstracta and their relations. And we might intellectually see that any belief that is luckily formed in a certain way is not knowledge via awareness of the abstracta of the relevant sort of luckiness and knowledge. But it is not clear how the view extends to intellectual awareness of the *instantiation* of an abstractum in the case-based intuitions we are considering. These cases are often not described in terms of the abstracta that seem to matter. We do not (or need not) describe Gettier cases in terms of *lucky*, true belief, for example, so even if we can intellectually see that the abstractum luckiness (of a certain sort) does not consort with the abstractum knowledge, we still need a way to detect whether in a particular (hypothetical) case the relevant sort of luck would be instantiated, or more directly whether knowledge would be instantiated. Whether it is is typically highly context sensitive. Just how to supplement the sort of intellectual awareness needed for the general propositions above to handle the case-based and context-sensitive intuitions of our concern is not clear. A conceptual competence that enables one to tell whether a concept is satisfied in a case can help, but that moves us toward a categorization-with-competency view and away from a pure intellectual awareness view.

Relatedly, capturing the right kind of modalized necessity is tricky. As indicated, presumably the abstracta one is intellectually aware of are necessary existents with necessary relations to one another. That might deliver intellectual awareness of the necessity of general propositions. As we saw, however, our modalized intuitions do not feature that sort of necessity. To capture the case-based counterpart modalized intuitions to A-grade intuitions, intellectual awareness needs to explain how we are aware that the
instantiation some abstractum in a case-in-context is necessary. Again, it is unclear to me how that story should go if we restrict ourselves to extra-conceptual intellectual grasping.

Consider also the striking similarities between seemings in case-based intuitions and those intuitions about the grammaticality of sentences. These make sense on the categorization-with-competency hypothesis, for that view allows us to make use of explanatory posits already needed for certain kinds of intuitions—syntactic competencies—and merely adapt them for case-based categorizations by replacing ‘syntactic’ with ‘semantic/conceptual’. The intellectual awareness view, on the other hand, requires a set of posits to explain intuitions on cases distinct from the posits needed to explain grammatical intuitions (assuming those are not intellectual awarenesses of abstracta), and would seem to leave the similarities with grammatical intuitions striking coincidences.\(^{13}\) It is noteworthy here that the seeming quality involved in the intuitions of our concern is more like the seeming quality involved in intuitions of grammaticality than the seeming quality involved in perceptual states. For these reasons, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis looks like a better explanation of A-grade intuitions.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\) In sotto voce, let me mention a lingering concern I share with some others that appeal to intellectual awareness yields little explanatory power, as opposed to giving a name to some of the things we would like to explain. But see Chudnoff (2013) and Bengson (forthcoming b) for different takes on the explanatory promise of these views.

\(^{14}\) In section 5 I explain why I think a hypothesis that relies on semantic/conceptual competence also has a better explanation of B-grade intuitions. It looks like the fan of intellectual awareness for A-grade intuitions should say that B-grade intuitions are not intellectual awarenesses of anything. That would explain why B-grade intuitions lack two
A different sort of strategy is to argue against an explanatory posit of the categorization-with-competency hypothesis. One can deny that there is such a thing as a semantic/conceptual competency that can settle the issue of how to categorize in some cases. There are a number of externalist theories of semantics and the concept-content relation that do not posit such a competency. If one is sympathetic to those theories, one might look askance at the hypothesis that some intuitions categorize merely by applying a semantic/conceptual competence. These theories must be taken seriously, of course. But if the standard is inference to the best explanation, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis has a number of things going for it. Not only can it explain why these states of the properties enjoyed by A-grade intuitions. At the same time, it makes it hard to explain their points of similarity. As we shall see, I think the categorization-cum-competency hypothesis for A-grade intuitions can be paired with another hypothesis about B-grade intuitions to form a nice explanatory package that is rooted in semantic/conceptual competency. And I simply doubt that a similarly attractive set of hypotheses is available for fans of intellectual awareness or grasping.

I should also note that those who ground grasping a third realm in conceptual competence, as Huemer and Shafer-Landau seem to do (and Bealer might as well), also have some explaining to do. They have to tell us how conceptual competence can both enable us to identify the (modalized) instantiation of abstracta in cases, and grasp the abstracta and their relations to one another directly. What is conceptual competence such that it does these two things? Nevertheless, by rooting it all in conceptual competence I think they are better situated to explain the similarities and differences between A-grade and B-grade intuitions, which is our direct concern.
have the five properties they do, plus the sixth property of similarity to other competency-based states; it also explains why they show up when considering only certain cases, and why there is broad intuitive convergence for some of these cases within linguistic communities. It is not clear that semantic theories that reject competencies have any explanation at all for these features of A-grade intuitions. Perhaps one can attribute these features to a hodgepodge of psychological processes by which we categorize – a diverse set of ways we gain epistemic access to some category, none of which get elevated to the status of a semantic/conceptual competency. But that suggestion either a) does not predict a distinctive mental state with the five bundled features elicited by some cases but not others, and that pattern in interesting ways within linguistic communities, or b) worse, it predicts the opposite of what we find – it predicts no distinctive mental state, and so no mental state elicited by some cases but not others that could pattern in interesting ways within linguistic communities.

Of course, I cannot rule out all other explanations for the explananda we have discussed. We will have to take them as they come. For now, I think our historically respectable hypothesis is the best one going. At least, it is best for A-grade intuitions.

It is worth stressing that the hypothesis is offered as a general explanation of A-grade intuitions. It could well be that some A-grade intuitions are not categorizations via competency, just as not all intuitions about well-formed sentences come from mere syntactic competency.\(^{15}\) Think of all the intuitions one might have about cases of

\(^{15}\) Consider “The bird the cat the neighbor bought caught died”. That strikes many as ungrammatical, but our best theories of grammar count it grammatical. It is just a slightly
knowledge. Even if many of them directly tap into a competence with the very concept of knowledge, others might fail to do so. If so, there will be some explanation for why these states bundle our five features despite the fact that they do not fit our hypothesis. Given my taxonomy, when that happens we have an A-grade intuition that does not manifest semantic or conceptual competence.

Last point for this section: Maybe I am wrong that the categorization-with-competency explanation is best. If so, my main point can still stand. For \textit{insofar} as these features of A-grade intuitions count as \textit{some} evidence in favor of the hypothesis, there is \textit{less} evidence in favor of that hypothesis for intuitions employing thin normative terms, and more evidence that such intuitions are merely predicating (not categorizing) in part by bringing to bear semantic/conceptual competence, but also in part by bringing to bear one’s non-cognitive attitudes. That is because two of the explananda go missing. I turn to this now.

4. The Pattern of B-grade Intuitions

4.1. Do Not Tend to Reveal Subject Matter

Some intuitions do not tend to reveal subject matter. Consider a version of Parfit’s agony case (2011, p. 73-4). Suppose Erica could not care less about avoiding future agony. She does not care that there is a flame approaching her hand that will cause severe agony if she does not move her hand. Able has the intuition that Erica has reason to move her hand away from the path of the flame. Bea has the opposite intuition, that Erica has no reason to move her hand away. Even if they consistently have opposing intuitions complex instance of center embedding. We do not recognize it as grammatical due to cognitive limitations, so the explanation goes.
about reasons, it is not so easy to posit a difference in subject matter between these two intuiters. Though one could say that Bea is employing a sense of ‘reason’ that is conceptually tied to claims about present motivational states, whereas Able is employing a different concept unmoored to motivational states, that is not at all an attractive hypothesis.  

This is not a point about preserving normative disagreement. For Able could come to believe that some form of reasons internalism is true—that an agent only has reasons to act when so acting would satisfy one of the agent’s present desires—despite regularly having intuitions to the contrary. In that case, there would be no disagreement between Able and Bea, though there would be divergence in their intuitions. So reluctance to attribute different subject matters is not needed to preserve normative disagreement. Also, this is not directly a point about preserving the action-guiding, commendatory force of reason discourse. This is simply the observation that we find it easier to posit differences in subject matter for some divergent intuitions, but not others. If Bea has the intuition that Erica does not have reason to move her hand away, as well as

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16 Parfit was finally driven to this conclusion about Bernard Williams and his defense of reasons internalism. But I take it that most people reject Parfit’s dismissal of Williams on these grounds.

17 Stich (2009, p. 232) levels the objection when Sosa (2009, p. 108) wonders whether East Asians employ a different concept than Westerners when they speak of knowledge. I think Sosa is right that the different-concept hypothesis is respectable here, and I think this shows that our concept of knowledge is not of the same sort as putatively thin normative concepts.
the intuition that XYZ is water, it is comparatively more plausible to say that she is bringing to bear a different concept of ‘water’, or speaking of a different subject matter with her water discourse, than it is to say that she is bringing to bear a different concept of ‘reason’, or speaking of a different subject matter with her reason discourse.

Trolley cases provide familiar examples of intuitions about permissibility. I think the intuition that it is permissible to flip the switch and the intuition that it is impermissible to push the man off the footbridge (Thomson 1985) both tend not to reveal subject matter. Hypothetical divergence in intuitions on these cases and others does not invite the hypothesis that thinkers are fixing on different subject matters. The same goes for many permissibility and impermissibility intuitions, such as unplugging from a world-class violinist (Thomson 1971, pp. 48-9), or the last person in the world destroying all non-human life (Routley 1973, pp. 207-08).

Intuitions about what is intrinsically valuable also fail to reveal subject matter. Consider a child in a rapturous state of enjoyment while swinging (Brandt 1959, p. 303). Intuitively, that experience is desirable, or valuable in and of itself. Yet if another has the intuition that it is not valuable in and of itself, once again it is not attractive to say that she is bringing to bear a different concept, or speaking of a different subject matter. And noting that the devil has divergent intuitions about cases of pain, the hypothesis that he is thinking of something else by the term ‘bad’ is not attractive.

4.2. Do Not Have Modalized Counterparts

Though the issue is a bit tricky, these same intuitions lack modalized counterparts of the sort we find for A-grade intuitions. Consider our version of Parfit’s agony case again. I have an intuition with the following content: that it will avoid Erica’s future
agony is a reason for her to move her hand away. As noted earlier, we can derive some modal conclusions from this and the supplementary premise that this is a possible case. Possibly, one has reason to do something that would not satisfy any of one’s present desires. So, one’s having reason to phi and phiing’s tendency to satisfy any of one’s present desires are not necessarily coextensive. So reasons internalism is not true.

Any associated modalized intuition of the A+-grade variety would be distinct from all this. It would be an intuition with modal content that captures the sense in which the relevant concept is ruling out or ruling in the case. If there is one in the agony case, it would have content along these lines: that moving her hand away will avoid her future agony must be a reason for her to do it. For short, her agony must be a reason.

Is there such a modalized intuition? This is a tricky issue. For it is widely agreed that there are supervenience constraints on normative predication such that if a consideration in a case is a reason, then necessarily any consideration in any case like that in all non-normative respects is a reason. Indeed, it is often thought that some such supervenience thesis is a conceptual truth. We can then move from the non-modal content of the intuition in the agony case—for short, that Erica’s agony is reason-giving—and the supervenience constraint to the conclusion that her agony must be a reason for her to act. This conclusion might even present itself as an intuitive seeming and as not consciously derived from any premises, for we might put all the pieces together at once, so to speak. Would this be the modalized intuition, the A+-grade intuition, we are after? I think not. Though the step from being a reason to necessarily being a reason is arguably settled by the standards of the concept we bring to bear—the supervenience constraint—it is still questionable whether the initial thought that Erica’s agony is reason is settled by the case.
and competency with the concept of being a reason. There is a contrast with the case of A+-grade intuitions that are modalized counterparts for our A-grade intuitions. When considering whether XYZ on twin earth is water, I think it cannot be water. I categorically refuse to call that stuff water, given the setup of the case. It is not as though I rely on my good evidence that the stuff is not water and utilize a supervenience thesis that says if this is not water, then necessarily it is not water. In the agony case, by contrast, I have to admit that the fact that moving her hand away will avoid her future agony might not be a reason for her to do it (despite my intuition to the contrary). The standards of the concept are not ruling it in as a reason, to the exclusion of contrary predications. I hasten to add, I am confident that her agony is reason-giving, and I am quite willing to use the supervenience thesis to conclude that, necessarily, her agony is reason-giving. It is just that this is not the sort of counterpart modalized intuition that we find for A-grade intuitions.

For similar reasons, we will not get our modalized intuitions by subsuming the agony case under a more general modal claim, such as, necessarily, agony is reason-giving. That is not case-focused and concept-applying. So we must do our best to identify modal force that comes from some supervenience thesis that takes for granted some normative status, or that comes from subsuming a case under a general necessity claim, and set it to one side.

Another distraction is that cases like the agony case involve the passions, and impassioned responses can be expressed with modal language. We feel very strongly about such a subject avoiding agony. After all, it is agony. We know what it is like, we know most people want to avoid it, and we very much want people to avoid it. Relatedly,
we might be quite confident that the content of the seeming state is true. Either of these attitudes can make the modal expression quite natural. But again, that is not the modalized intuition we are after. Clear cases of modalized intuition are neither expressions of impassioned response nor expressions of high credence levels. So we must do our best to identify these other modal forces and set them aside.

Last, someone who does not wish to avoid agony, or someone who denies that Erica has reason to avoid it, might dumbfound us. Such an objector must explain himself if we are to make much sense of his position. And it is hard to see what the explanation could be. Most plausibly, the objector is bringing to bear a theory of reasons that ties them to motivational states. Applied to this case, the objector can derive the conclusion that the subject has no reason to avoid agony. But that would be avoidance. We wanted to know whether it intuitively seemed true that Erica has reason to move her hand. Suppose, then, that the objector denies that this seems true. We might then be particularly dumfounded. And we might give voice to this perplexity with modal language. Once again, this is not the modalized intuition we are after. So we must do our best to identify it and set it aside.

Once all these modal forces are isolated and set to one side, I find little evidence of a counterpart modalized intuition of the A+-grade sort in the agony case. To be clear, I think that the agony case must be a case of having a reason to act. I do not dispute that. What I dispute is that this is a modalized intuition of the kind associated with A-grade

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18 Considering the contrast with A+-grade intuitions and all these confounding considerations undermines Cuneo’s and Shafer-Landau’s (forthcoming) contention that some substantive normative claims are conceptual truths.
intuitions – something ruled-in or ruled out in this case, and not an expression of passion, high credence, or perplexity.

Intuitions about cases of impermissible action and intuitions about value also lack the sort of modalized counterparts we find for A-grade intuitions. When one has the intuition that it is permissible to flip the switch in a trolley case, it is not as though the predication is ruled in or ruled out by the case without applying exogenous considerations. This is connected to the point about revealing subject matter. For we can imagine another agent considering this case and having the intuition that flipping the switch is impermissible. Not only is the other agent talking about the same subject, she just might be right. This is unlike cases of XYZ and other classic thought experiments not involving thin normative terms.

In short, I am suggesting that intuitions can pattern in at least one of two ways.

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<td>Tends to reveal subject matter?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Modalized intuition (A+-grade intuition) available?</td>
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And I have suggested that intuitions involving some thin normative terms are B-grade intuitions.

5. Explaining the Smaller Bundle

Why the two bundles? We have one hypothesis for A-grade intuitions. Let me now suggest a hypothesis for B-grade intuitions: they do not categorize, they merely predicate. Moreover, their predication is not settled by semantic/conceptual competence
and case, for that competence identifies but does not itself fill in an extra parameter as relevant to correct predication: the non-cognitive attitudes of the speaker or thinker.

The basic idea is this. Part of having competence with a thin normative term is realizing, even if only implicitly, that semantically/conceptually correct application depends on one’s attitudes. Let me give you an example. For ‘wrong’, the idea would be that competence with the term tells us not to call some action in some case wrong unless that action has features that you disfavor in cases like that. Importantly, how one is to fill in this parameter is readily accessible to cognition. We are not consulting our best physical theory of the world, or our best theory of the underlying nature of a substance that explains its surface properties, or anything like that. Each of us is consulting his/her attitudes. Also important is that the semantic/conceptual competence is fixing what is relevant to correct predication without settling how to predicate – information about one’s attitudes that lie outside of competence is needed to settle correct application. In other words, two agents can be equally competent with a term that features in a B-grade intuition, like ‘wrong’, have different attitudes, and thereby be required to predicate differently. Can we get around this by including facts about one’s attitudes in a description of a case? Would competence plus the case then settle correct application, fitting the pattern of A-grade intuitions rather than B-grade? No. For competence still tells you to defer to your attitudes, and no description of the case can determine what your attitudes are. You bring your attitudes to cases, and so any description of your attitudes in a case will be taken as part of a hypothetical case to which your attitudes will react. As Blackburn (see, e.g., 1993, pp. 152-53) has taken pains to emphasize, if the question is what you disfavor in action, it is implausible that we disfavor action because
they are disfavored by us. More plausibly, what we disfavor in action is pain causing, promise breaking, disrespect, and so on.

There are two ways of interpreting the idea that correct predication depends on one’s attitudes. One is speaker relativism, whereby facts about speaker attitude, or facts picked out by speaker attitude,\textsuperscript{19} are included in the descriptive contents of normative terms. On this view, in saying that an action is wrong, one says that one disfavors the action, or says that the action has features F (features which one disfavors in action). That makes descriptive content speaker-variant. When featured in intuitions, then, the term would categorize items in cases, for it would represent the items as being disapproved of or having certain features (those picked out by one’s attitudes). So speaker relativism does not fit the hypothesis on offer.

The other way to go is non-descriptivist, whereby attitudes are expressed but not described by normative terms like ‘wrong’ (though this need not take on board all the baggage of expressivism qua non-standard semantic theory). On this view, though semantically/conceptually appropriate predication depends on one’s attitudes, the way in which it depends does not bring with it any descriptive content. Instead, one expresses one’s attitudes. This is more like the way correct use of pejoratives terms depend on having negative attitudes, where this does not entail that one talks about one’s attitudes in using pejorative terms. The analogy with pejoratives is limited, of course, and fans of

\textsuperscript{19} This second option is similar to Dreier’s (1990) version of the view, where the character or the way of thinking associated with normative terms is a function from one’s attitudes to some descriptive content that need not be attitude-involving.
attitude expression must say more about what it is to express attitude (as well as address all the difficulties that brings in toe). I am hopeful that they can do that extra work.\textsuperscript{20}

Developing a theory of attitude expression is not the present project. The present project is to show how well a version of non-descriptivism developed along these lines explains the pattern of B-grade intuitions. Let me call the hypothesis given above, where the attitude dependency is cashed out in non-descriptivist ways, the \emph{predication-with-attitude hypothesis}, to be distinguished from the categorization-with-competency hypothesis given for A-grade intuitions. As before, the aim is to explain the bundle of properties associated with B-grade intuitions. Further, we would like to explain similarities with A-grade intuitions so that A-grade and B-grade intuitions can be seen as of a kind, yet predictably distinct. First, let me give explanations of properties distinctive of B-grade intuitions, considered singly.

Consider the failure to reveal subject matter. If some mental states are predications with attitude, we would not expect divergence in the contents of these states to betray any differences in the concept that is being brought to bear, but only to betray differences in attitude. Relatedly, if the mental states are not describing or representing one’s attitudes, or describing features picked out by one’s attitudes, then we would not expect divergence in the mental states to betray differences in subject matter. Under predication-with-attitude, these B-grade intuitions are not \emph{about} any subject matter – at least, the predicate in the intuition is not about any subject matter.

\textsuperscript{20}I lend a hand in some work in progress: “Normativity, Vagueness, and Use: New Directions for Expressivism”.
In the agony case, for instance, we saw that if Able has the intuition that Erica has reason to move her hand away from the flame, and Bea has the opposite intuition, it is unappealing to attribute to them different subject matters or different concepts. We can explain this by saying that ‘is a reason to’ does not purport to describe or represent anything as being the case, though its proper application is sensitive to one’s attitudes, which get expressed with the term. No wonder that divergent intuitions involving it, which nevertheless tap into one and the same semantic/conceptual competence, do not betray differences in subject matter. This basic story can be wheeled out for any intuition that bundles in the B way, as I have suggested intuitions about permissibility and value do.

Second, what of B-grade intuitions that do not have modalized counterparts? If some mental states are predications with attitude, we should not expect the case combined with semantic/conceptual competency to by themselves require or forbid predication. These considerations would not settle how to predicate, for that also depends on one’s attitudes. Hence, B-grade intuitions do not have the modalized counterparts that A-grade intuitions have.

Consider the agony case again. The idea is that semantic/conceptual competency says to predicate ‘reason’ of avoiding future agony if avoiding future agony is the sort of thing you approve of in action (or weighing this positively in deliberation is the sort of thing you approve of, or some such). If this applies to you, then say Erica has reason to move her hand. That is the semantically appropriate thing for you to do, given your attitudes, and recognition of this can explain why it seems intuitive to you that Erica has reason to move her hand. If you do not approve of avoiding agony as such—say, if your
approval depends on whether the target agent now cares about future agony—then say Erica does not have a reason to move her hand. In that case, that is the semantically appropriate thing for you to do, given your attitudes, and recognition of this can explain why it seems intuitive to you that Erica does not have reason to move her hand.

But to have a counterpart modalized intuition for one of these intuitions one must recognize that the case-in-context plus that bit of semantics/conceptual structure one is competent with jointly settle correct categorization, or more broadly, correct predication. Our hypothesis says that there is a parameter (one concerning speaker attitude) relevant to correct predication whose content is not specified by either a) the semantics/conceptual structure one is competently wielding or b) the details of the case, so these things alone do not settle whether the predication is required or forbidden. That being so, there is no recognition that predication is required or forbidden for the case, and so no modalized intuition.

Now, I said before that I think normative truths are necessary truths. All I deny is the existence of the sort of modalized A+-grade intuition we find associated with non-modal A-grade intuitions. This makes sense if semantics/conceptual structure alone does not settle correct predication for any case. For their modal force, B-grade intuitions must look beyond cases and concepts, perhaps by deriving a modal conclusion via a supervenience premise, or some general necessitarian premise. This is consistent with making use of a supervenience thesis built into the meanings of normative terms to arrive at modal conclusions, but those theses depend on non-modal predications that are not settled by competence and case. It is also consistent with making use of general modal premises to arrive at modal conclusions about the case, but this will not be the sort of
counterpart modalized intuition we find for A-grade intuitions, which are focused on cases.

So it seems to me that the predication-with-attitude hypothesis helps to supplement the categorization-with-competency hypothesis to explain the two observed bundles of properties in states widely recognized as intuitions.

Importantly, the hypothesis can also explain the similarities between A-grade and B-grade intuitions. Both manifest in intuitive seeming states, are difficult to revise with counterevidence, and fit the standard epistemic practice of relying on how things seem. It makes perfect sense that B-grade intuitions share in these features if they predicate merely by bringing to bear semantic/conceptual competence plus extra information that the competence tells us to consult and that is readily accessible, namely, one’s attitudes. If that is the source of these mental states, they would manifest differently than standard beliefs, hunches, guesses, inclinations to believe, etc., which are not generally driven by readily accessible considerations identified by semantic/conceptual competence. They would also be comparatively hard to revise with counterevidence. And the standard practice of relying on them in belief formation would be vindicated.

So predication-with-attitude for B-grade intuitions and categorization-with-competency for A-grade intuitions nicely predict the bundles we actually observe. Of course, these are not the only two hypotheses to consider. I have considered some alternatives to the categorization-with-competency hypothesis above. Let me now briefly consider hypotheses for B-grade intuitions that posit categorization and so some descriptive content.
One alternative is to say that descriptive semantics/conceptual structure identifies a parameter that can be filled in in different ways by different thinkers, but where this supplementation helps to identify content that is described rather than identifying some expressed but unreported attitude. For example, conceptual structure could identify a parameter that is typically filled in by a background theory of the target category, theory that might differ from thinker to thinker. Would this explain the properties associated with B-grade intuitions as well as the predication-with-attitude hypothesis?

In fact, this hypothesis—let us call it the *unsaturated parameter hypothesis*—predicts the pattern found in A-grade intuitions, not B-grade intuitions. If there is a parameter typically filled in by background theory, we should be able to craft a case that stipulates its value rather than leaving it to background theory. There will then be cases where semantic/conceptual competence plus case settles how to categorize, and if so we expect not only intuitions on those cases, but counterpart modalized intuitions. We also expect divergent intuitions on cases like that to betray differences in subject matter.

This is exactly what the categorization-with-competency hypothesis should say about some of our classic A-grade intuitions, namely, that the cases that elicit them saturate a parameter identified by competence with descriptive semantics/conceptual structure. To illustrate, on one version of that hypothesis, competence with ‘water’ involves some implicit grasp of a rule like this: apply ‘water’ to the stuff, and only to the stuff, that exhibits *dthat* (the same explanatory composition as *that* stuff [ostending to the watery stuff around here]). This has an unsaturated parameter typically filled in by empirical theory, and so typically categorizations with ‘water’ are not intuitional states, but standard beliefs. The twin earth case, however, stipulates exactly how the parameter
is to be filled in so that the condition is not satisfied by the stuff on twin earth. Hence an A-grade intuition about that case, one that has a counterpart modalized intuition—XYZ can’t be water—and where sufficient divergence on cases like this one betrays difference in subject matter—folks using perhaps slightly different concepts with different extensions.

The predicates involved in B-grade intuitions do not have cases like this. So the unsaturated parameter hypothesis cannot be the right account of B-grade intuitions. The predication-with-attitude hypothesis does better, even though it can be understood as involving an unsaturated parameter of sorts (concerning one’s attitudes). The key differences are these: a) this parameter is not helping to identify contents that are described as being the case, but rather attitudes that get expressed and b) the attitudes helping to drive predication are exogenous to any case under any description. So, however one crafts a case—even by stipulating that the object in the case is the object of one’s relevant attitudes—competence plus case will not settle how to predicate. Any described case about one’s attitudes will be taken as an object of evaluation by one’s attitudes. Again, Blackburn has made the point nicely (see, e.g., 1993, pp. 152-53). In one of his examples, given the hypothetical where we all have pro-attitudes toward bear baiting, bear baiting in that case still seems wrong, as do the pro-attitudes we have toward it. Here, we bring to bear our attitudes to evaluate a case that describes our attitudes, considered hypothetically. If we were merely describing the case, competence plus case might settle certain categorizations in the case. However, we are not merely describing the case, according to the predication-with-attitude hypothesis; we are predicating with guidance from a parameter identified by competence, but not filled in by competence.
Hence the absence of modalized intuitions, and the absence of any tendency to reveal subject matter.\(^{21}\)

What if we relax the unsaturated parameter hypothesis but leave things descriptive, so that the unsaturated parameter is not identified by semantic/conceptual competence? Perhaps instead we have some background theory of the target category that does not help to fill in a parameter identified by any semantic/conceptual competence. Can this explain the profile of B-grade intuitions? I think not, for categorizations so generated would not be intuitional states at all. They would be standard beliefs or inclinations to believe. After all, on this hypothesis it is not mere semantic/conceptual competence on a case that is driving categorization, nor is it that plus some readily accessible information identified by competence but not settled by case. Without semantic/conceptual competence playing these key roles, it is hard to see why the resulting categorizations would manifest as intuitive seemings, why they would be comparatively more difficult to revise with counter-evidence, and why they would play the distinctive epistemic roles intuitions play. Presumably, the gas pump case given above is one where we bring to bear some sort of semantic/conceptual competence, and

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\(^{21}\) There might be versions of speaker subjectivism that make the relevant attitudes exogenous to any hypothetical case, just like predication-with-attitude, but enlist them to help describe cases correctly. This might help explain lack of modalized intuitions. However, it builds in that divergent intuitions will betray differences in subject matter. Plus, it succumbs to other persuasive arguments against speaker subjectivism, such as its handling of disagreement and truth-talk. So no version of this view will be a better hypothesis for B-grade intuitions than the predication-with-attitude hypothesis.
besides this standard evidence not particularly connected to semantic/conceptual competence, to categorize the stuff coming out of the gas pump as not water. And there we get a standard belief, not an intuitional state. So the relaxed picture has a hard time explaining the properties of B-grade intuitions shared by A-grade intuitions.

For similar reasons the intellectual awareness hypothesis given for A-grade intuitions lacks a good complementary hypothesis about B-grade intuitions. To explain the lack of modalized counterpart intuitions and the failure to reveal subject matter, it looks like its advocates must deny that B-grade intuitions are intellectual awarenesses of anything, else they would look more like A-grade intuitions. But then we need some hypothesis about what they are, and it looks like that hypothesis will leave it mysterious why A-grade and B-grade intuitions have three crucial points of similarity in addition to their differences: intuitive seeming, difficult to revise with counter-evidence, and epistemic role. The two hypotheses offered here have semantic/conceptual competency as a backbone, and so can explain those points of similarity. They seem to offer a better package deal than any package available to fans of intellectual awareness for A-grade intuitions.

Having said this, my main projects have been to get a firm grip on the case for the categorization-with-competency hypothesis, to distinguish two sorts of intuitional state, only one of which is plausibly paired with the categorization-with-competency hypothesis, and to offer reasons for embracing a non-descriptive hypothesis for the other sort of intuitional state. If the fan of intellectual awareness for A-grade intuitions has a supplementary hypothesis to offer for B-grade intuitions, that package deal will need to be compared to the package deal offered here.
The last competing hypothesis I will consider is a hybrid one. You might think that predicates in B-grade intuitions have descriptive content, but also depend on attitude in an expressive rather than reporting way. This looks like a promising set of resources for explaining the profile of B-grade intuitions. They would lack counterpart modalized intuitions because the attitude-expressive part of the theory makes sure that competence and case does not settle how to predicate. And folks could have divergent intuitions not because they are employing a different categorization term, but because they have differences in their attitudes. For example, if Able and Bea have different intuitions about whether Erica has reason to move her hand away from the flame, it might be that the descriptive conditions identified by semantic/conceptual competence has been satisfied—avoiding agony has the right features for being categorized as a reason—but additionally competence requires that one endorse acting on the basis of that property. It could be that Able endorses it, and so has the intuition, but Bea does not, and so lacks the intuition. So we get divergence in intuition without difference in subject matter.

That is important to note. But the situation where Bea lacks an intuition that Able has is just one kind of situation to consider. What of cases where Able and Bea have apparently opposing intuitions? On a hybrid view where semantic/conceptual competence fixes descriptive content and requires certain attitudes, it looks like we should say that both the descriptive and attitudinal conditions have been met for Able and for Bea. The fact that they find different things intuitive suggests not just a difference in attitude, but a difference in the conditions they are describing or representing to be the case. So the hybrid gambit does not do so well with the fact that B-grade intuitions fail to reveal subject matter after all.
In the end, I think the weight of the evidence favors non-descriptivism and the predication-with-attitude hypothesis for B-grade intuitions. It certainly favors this hypothesis over the categorization-with-competency hypothesis.

6. Concluding Remarks

To recapitulate, there are A-grade intuitions that bundle features in such a way as to support the categorization-with-competency hypothesis. Inference from the best explanation of their distinctive properties and the ways in which they differ from other mental states supports the view that they categorize and so have descriptive contents. There are also B-grade intuitions that bundle features in such a way as to support the predication-with-attitude hypothesis. Inference from the best explanation of their distinctive properties and their similarities and differences with A-grade intuitions supports the view that they merely predicate (falling short of categorizing) and so do not have descriptive content. These two hypotheses form a nice package theory of intuitions on cases. They make intuitions a unified phenomenon to some extent, and so predict that they share the features they in fact share, but also posit some interesting differences, and so predict that they do not share the features they in fact do not share.

I have focused on intuitions about reasons, permissions and values as examples of B-grade intuitions. How far to extend the net? I do not have a general line on this. To the extent a set of intuitions fit the B mold, there is good evidence of non-descriptivism. There are some hard examples. Philippa Foot (1958, p. 92) asks us to consider whether clasping hands makes a man morally good. As Foot notes, the proposal is singularly odd. We have a hard time making sense of it. More relevant for us is the intuition that clasping hands does not make a person morally good. Assuming we share this intuition, here again
I do not find the modalized force involved in A+-grade intuitions. To be sure, I think that clasping hands cannot make a person morally good – it is not the right sort of thing to make someone morally good. But this very much feels like an expression of being dumbfounded. I find it hard to understand why anyone would think this makes someone good. The modal force in A+-grade intuitions is different.

On the other hand, there is a way of thinking of moral goodness where ‘moral’ is serving to distinguish one kind of evaluation from others. Then the thought might be that clasping hands might make a person good in some way or another, but it cannot make him morally good. If so, there might be a term ‘is morally good’ and an associated semantics/conceptual structure that fits the A-intuition mold. But to tap into it, it seems that we need to emphasize that the evaluation is moral evaluation, understood as a particular type of evaluation that can be descriptively distinguished from non-moral evaluation. And when we do this, there is an aspect to the semantics that is descriptive or representational.

For me, the broader lesson that emerges is that intuitions featuring ostensibly ‘thin’ normative predicates—like, ‘reason for’, ‘reason against’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘permissible’, ‘impermissible’—are B-grade intuitions. They are merely predicative and so have no descriptive content. So we have evidence from the theory of intuitions in favor of non-descriptivism for certain normative terms. Of course, this evidence from intuition must be balanced against evidence from other sources. Perhaps evidence relating to Frege-Geach problems, the possibility of error, genuine normative disagreement, or some such, suggests descriptive content. I believe non-descriptivists can successfully handle those evidential sources, but that has not been the project of this paper. Here, we have
focused on some properties of intuitions and their evidential value when it comes to explaining what intuitions are and whether they categorize or not.

Now, you might doubt the theory of A-grade intuitions on offer, the categorization-with-competency hypothesis. If so, the takeaway message is that there is even less evidence for that hypothesis when it comes to B-grade intuitions. If you follow me in finding that hypothesis plausible or even best for A-grade intuitions, the takeaway message is to withhold that theory from B-grade intuitions, and to be more inclined toward some version of non-descriptivism. More broadly, I have tried to provide a framework for thinking through issues surrounding intuitions, meaning, competence, descriptive content and so on, a framework that moves beyond taking any position for granted and instead considers what needs explaining and what the good explanations look like.22

**Bibliography**


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