The claim that contemporary analytic philosophers rely extensively on intuitions as evidence is almost universally accepted in current metaphilosophical debates and it figures prominently in our self-conception as analytic philosophers. No matter what area you happen to work in and what views you happen to hold in those areas, you are likely to think that philosophizing requires constructing cases and making intuitive judgments about those cases. A theory of a topic X isn’t adequate unless it correctly predicts intuitive responses to X-relevant cases. This assumption also underlies the entire experimental-philosophy movement: if philosophers don’t rely on intuitions, why would anyone do experiments to check on intuitions? Our alleged reliance on the intuitive makes many philosophers who don’t work in metaphilosophy concerned about their own discipline: they are unsure what intuitions are and whether they can carry the evidential weight we allegedly assign to them.

The goal of this book is to argue that this concern is unwarranted since the claim is false: it is not true that philosophers rely extensively (or even a little bit) on intuitions as evidence. At worst, analytic philosophers are guilty of engaging in somewhat irresponsible use of ‘intuition’-vocabulary. While this irresponsibility has had little effect on first-order philosophy, it has fundamentally misled metaphilosophers. It has encouraged metaphilosophical pseudo-problems and misleading pictures of what philosophy is and how it is done.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the role this mistaken assumption about intuition plays in contemporary philosophy and an introduction to the not inconsiderable difficulties involved in a careful evaluation of it.
1.1 The role of intuitions in the self-conception of contemporary analytic philosophers: Centrality


‘Intuition’ plays a major role in contemporary analytic philosophy’s self-understanding. (p. 215)

When contemporary analytic philosophers run out of arguments, they appeal to intuitions. It can seem, and is sometimes said, that any philosophical dispute, when pushed back far enough, turns into a conflict of intuitions about ultimate premises: ‘In the end, all we have to go on is our intuitions’. Thus intuitions are presented as our evidence in philosophy. (p. 214)

The assumption that we do rely on intuitions has given rise to a research project—that of understanding how we can rely on intuitions, whether we should rely on intuitions and what intuitions are. Again, here is Williamson:

Yet there is no agreed or even popular account of how intuition works, no accepted explanation of the hoped-for correlation between our having an intuition that P and its being true that P. Since analytic philosophy prides itself on its rigor, this blank space in its foundations looks like a methodological scandal. Why should intuitions have any authority over the philosophical domain? (2007, p. 215)

A spectacularly wide range of philosophers endorses the view that we as a matter of fact do rely on intuitions. Hilary Kornblith, an opponent of intuition-based philosophy, is one example:

George Bealer does it. Roderick Chisholm does it a lot. Most philosophers do it openly and unapologetically, and the rest arguably do it too, although some of them would deny it. What they all do is appeal to intuitions in constructing, shaping, and refining their philosophical views. (1998, p. 129)

Alvin Goldman, a proponent of intuition-based philosophy, is another:

One thing that distinguishes philosophical methodology from the methodology of the sciences is its extensive and avowed reliance on intuition. (2007, p. 1)

¹ Though Williamson is claiming that this assumption is endorsed by more or less all participants in contemporary meta-philosophical debates, it will become clear later in our discussion of Williamson’s position that he does not himself endorse it.
A leading experimental philosopher, Jonathan Weinberg, agrees, describing the practice as essential to analytic philosophy:

Intuitions are odd critters: intellectual happenings in which it seems to us that something is the case, without arising from our inferring it from any reasons that it is so, or our sensorily perceiving that it is so, or our having a sense of remembering that it is so. When they occur, they frequently stand out with great psychological salience, but they are not forthcoming about their own origins—envoys to our conscious deliberations from some unnamed nation of our unconscious cognition. But intuitions are also among the chief tools in the analytic philosopher’s argumentative repertoire, in particular intuitions that a particular hypothetical case does or does not fall under some target concept. It can seem that analytic philosophy without intuitions just wouldn’t be analytic philosophy. So there is a gulf between our understanding of intuitions and their importance to us, and as a result it is perhaps unsurprising that intuitions have become not just one of philosophy’s tools but part of its subject matter as well. (2007, p. 318, my bolded emphasis)

Here is a first stab at an articulation of the assumption this diverse group of philosophers endorse—I’ll call it ‘Centrality’:

**Centrality (of Intuitions in Contemporary Philosophy):** Contemporary analytic philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence (or as a source of evidence) for philosophical theories.

This book has two primary goals. The first is methodological (or meta-methodological): to figure out how to interpret Centrality. The second goal is to argue that Centrality is false: on no sensible construal of ‘intuition’, ‘rely on’, ‘philosophy’, ‘evidence’, and ‘philosopher’ is it true that philosophers in general rely on intuitions as evidence when they do philosophy.

As I see it, the majority of the participants in contemporary methodological debates have included Centrality in their common ground; this has generated their joint research program: some are in favor of intuition-based philosophy, some are against it, and others are simply deeply concerned and not sure what to think about what they take to be their own methodology. The rejection of Centrality makes most of these issues irrelevant and redirects philosophical methodology towards more productive issues.²

² This book is an attempt to refute Centrality in all its forms. I think I do that very conclusively. Sometimes, faced with this refutation, my audience will start doubting whether Centrality really is a widely accepted view. Further evidence of the overwhelming influence of Centrality on the self-understanding of contemporary philosophers can be found in Bealer (1992, 1996, 1998), BonJour (1998), DePaul and Ramsey (1998), Goldman and Pust (1998),
1.2 Two arguments for Centrality: the Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk and the Argument from Philosophical Practice

A difficulty in writing about Centrality is that none of those who rely on it in their theorizing ever present a systematic, detailed argument in its favor. In George Bealer’s work, for example, Centrality plays an essential role. But at no point does he present any evidence for the claim that philosophers as a matter of fact rely on intuitions as evidence. Bealer (1996) asserts that it is a “plain truth” (p. 3). Though he lists several arguments in which he says that intuitions are used as evidence, he doesn’t tell us why he thinks those are cases in which philosophers rely on intuitions. Experimental philosophers, while on the other end of the theoretical spectrum, are equally cagey about why they think philosophers rely on intuitions. We find, for example, Weinberg (2007) telling us that “analytic philosophy without intuitions just wouldn’t be analytic philosophy” (p. 318), but we are not told why. It is simply assumed in a great deal of literature that it is trivial and obvious that philosophers rely extensively on intuitions as evidence.

I take it two kinds of arguments are tacitly assumed. Part I of this book concerns the first kind of argument: I call it the Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk (AIT). Part II is about the second: the Argument from Philosophical Practice.

1.2.1 The Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk

Some philosophers are no doubt inclined towards Centrality in part because of the promiscuous way in which many contemporary philosophers use ‘intuitive’ and cognate terms. The reasoning is straightforward: If philosophers characterize key premises in their arguments as ‘intuitive’, we have reason to suspect they are, in some way or another, relying on intuitions as evidence.


3 This might seem like hyperbole, but I think it is literally true: the assumption is central to more or less all the current literature on metaphilosophy, but it is always just taken for granted; it is assumed to be obviously true or for some reason not in need of empirical justification. The normative version of the claim, that philosophers should rely on intuitions, is by contrast sometimes argued for (see, e.g., Bealer 1992, 1998).
It’s not hard to find such usage among philosophers. Here are but a few examples all from important work by prominent philosophers (emphases added):

Kaplan: “Intuitively, (6) ["I’m here now"] is deeply, and in some sense, which we will shortly make precise, universally, true.” (1989, p. 509)

Hawthorne: “If, unbeknownst to me, a wealthy long-lost relative is planning to bequeath me a large amount of money in the very near future, though, by happenstance, it will turn out that the money is never bequeathed, then my self-ascription that I know I will not have enough money to go on an African safari is intuitively incorrect” (2004, p. 65)

Williamson: “Intuitively, what goes wrong is that the counterfactual supposition p can take one to worlds at which one believes p on too different a basis from that on which one actually believes.” (2000, p. 310)

Burge: “I shall have little further to say in defense of the second and third steps of the thought experiment. Both rest on their intuitive plausibility, not on some particular theory.” (1979, p. 88)

Such examples are not hard to find: open more or less any journal these days, and you’re likely to find ‘intuitive’ or cognate terms after a quick browse. Such language encourages some proponents of Centrality. What better evidence can we have that philosophers rely extensively on intuitions?

1.2.2 The Argument from Philosophical Practice

Here is how I think the second argument for Centrality should ideally be presented: a proponent of Centrality first specifies a set of features she thinks intuitive judgments have, say \( F_1, \ldots, F_n \), and then tries to show that the judgments philosophers rely on at central points in their arguments have \( F_1, \ldots, F_n \). This kind of argument need not rely on how philosophers use ‘intuition’-terminology. The focus, instead, is on features of how we do philosophy—on the practice of arguing for philosophical views. Chapter 8 spells out the relevant features that we are asked to look for (summarized as \( F_1-F_3 \) in Section 8.1), and Chapter 9 goes through a number of case studies to see whether judgments with these features figure centrally in philosophical practice. For introductory purposes, here is a brief overview of the kinds of philosophical practices that can be cited in

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\(^4\) Other locutions are also appealed to by proponents of Centrality, e.g. ‘what we would say’, and ‘it seems’, as will become clear in Chapter 2.
support of Centrality (each of these will be explored further in later chapters):

1. **Intuition and the Method of Cases**: Proponents of Centrality typically assume that philosophers use something called ‘the method of cases’. We can characterize it as follows:

   **Method of Cases (Intuitive)**: Let $X$ be some philosophically important topic. $T$ is a good theory of $X$ only if it correctly predicts our intuitions about $X$-relevant cases (whether actual or hypothetical.)

   If intuitions figure centrally in the method of cases and the method of cases is the contemporary philosopher’s chief tool, we have strong evidence for Centrality.

2. **Armchair Activity and Apriority**: Philosophy is often described as an ‘armchair activity’. The claim is based on the widely held assumption that philosophers typically don’t conduct experiments or do empirical research of any kind. If this is right, it raises the question of just how philosophical knowledge can be obtained ‘from the armchair’ (as it is often put). Intuitions are sometimes brought in as an answer: they provide the kind of a priori starting point for theorizing that allows us to stay in the armchair (see e.g. Bealer 1996 and BonJour 1998). It is worth noting that even some of those who reject the picture of philosophy as an a priori activity still think of philosophy as an armchair activity. Timothy Williamson so describes philosophy in his 2007.

3. **Intuition and Conceptual Analysis**: Some of those who think philosophy is an armchair activity think it is so because philosophers are primarily engaged in so-called conceptual analysis, i.e. in the business of analyzing concepts such as causation, reference, and justice. Sometimes this view is accompanied by the assumption that the proper way to engage in conceptual analysis is by appeal to intuitions.

4. **Rock-bottom Starting Points for Arguments**: Many philosophers think of intuitive judgments as having a kind of foundational epistemic status in philosophical theorizing, even without endorsing (2) or (3): intuitions provide evidence for other claims without themselves requiring

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5 See also Chapter 6, §5, and Chapter 7, §3, of Williamson (2007).

evidence. All arguments must have foundational starting points, assumptions that are not subjected to further justification. It is not uncommon to find philosophers who think that philosophizing is characteristic in that its starting points are intuitions. Without intuitions, philosophizing could not get off the ground. Some of those who think this think it because they think philosophers are engaged in a priori conceptual analysis, but you don’t need to have those commitments to think that intuitions have an important kind of privileged epistemic status.

For many of those who endorse Centrality, these four practices are closely connected: For some of those who endorse (2), the other three follow somewhat naturally. But not all proponents of Centrality endorse all of (1)–(4), and each element can be interpreted in different ways; these variations will be explored further in Part II.

Obviously, ‘intuition’-talk is part of the practice of doing philosophy, so the distinction between the Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk and the Argument from Philosophical Practice is somewhat artificial. I suspect that in many cases the reason one or more of the practices are assumed to rely on intuitions is because those who engage in those activities use ‘intuition’-talk extensively when they so engage. What this shows is that the failure of the Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk would have significant negative implications for the Argument from Philosophical Practice.

1.3 ‘Intuition’ in Centrality

I am using ‘Centrality’ as a label for what is in effect a family of theses—you can spin out versions of Centrality by considering various interpretations of its key terms. This is an issue I’ll return to over and over again in this book. Here I present a simple initial overview of some meanings some of the terms have been given by defenders of Centrality and I contrast these with some alternative interpretations that are more problematic for Centrality.

Those who endorse Centrality don’t agree on what ‘intuition’ denotes—they don’t even fully agree on what language Centrality is formulated in. While some think it is the ‘intuitive’ of English that occurs in that formulation, others think it is the ‘intuitive’ of a special idiolect, Philosophers’-English? (for more on this see Chapter 2). The taxonomy of

7 Put another way, they take the ‘intuition’ in Centrality to be a technical philosophical term, which differs in meaning from ‘intuition’ in English.
intuition—theories can be done in different ways. Compared to, say, theories of knowledge, this is still a fairly unexplored territory, so even the large-scale categories are up for dispute. What follows is a classification that will be useful for the purposes of this work.

Many philosophers, including proponents of Centrality, take ‘intuition’ to denote a psychological (mental) state or event. Those who hold this view can be divided into two categories: those who think of intuitions as *sui generis* mental states and those who think of intuitions as a subset of some other kind of mental state.

*Intuitions as *sui generis* mental states*

According to, e.g., George Bealer intuitions are mental states that are *sui generis*, or not reducible to any other kind of mental state. He thinks that an agent *A* can have an intuition that *p* even if *A* doesn’t believe that *p* and *A* can believe that *p* without having the intuition that *p*; moreover an intuition that *p* is also different from a guess that *p*, a snap judgment that *p*, and a (felt) inclination to believe that *p* (1998, pp. 208–10). Bealer provides a wealth of such negative characterizations. On the positive side, not much is said beyond claiming that intuitions are *sui generis*. The closest Bealer comes to a positive characterization that doesn’t just re-use ‘intuitive’ is when he appeals to what he calls *intellectual seemings*:

At *t*, *S* [rationally] intuits that *p* if and only if at *t*, it intellectually seems to *S* that necessarily, *p*.8

But at no point are we told what intellectual seemings are.9 Pust holds a view close to Bealer’s, but doesn’t think the seeming’s content needs to involve necessity. Rather, according to Pust,

*S* has a rational intuition that *p* if and only if (a) *S* has a purely intellectual experience, when considering the question of whether *p*, that *p*, and (b) at *t*, if *S* were to consider whether *p* is necessarily true, then *S* would have a purely intellectual experience that necessarily, *p*. (2000, p. 39)

Again, we are not told what it is to have a purely intellectual experience; we are, perhaps supposed to know them by acquaintance.

*Intuitions as beliefs or inclinations to believe*

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8 This is Pust’s summary of Bealer’s view (2000, p. 36).
9 For a more detailed exposition of Bealer’s view, see Chapter 6 in Part II.
Some of those who think intuitions are mental states or events are reductionists about intuitions. Some prominent philosophers, including van Inwagen, Lewis and Williamson (at least on one reading), take ‘intuition’ to denote any belief or inclination to believe. This is the most liberal of all theories of what ‘intuition’ denotes. Other reductionists or eliminativists take ‘intuition’ to denote a particular subset of beliefs or inclinations to believe. This subset is generally taken to have one or more of the following four features:

   i. **Beliefs accompanied by special phenomenology:** Some intuition-theorists think intuitions are beliefs (or inclinations to believe) that come with a certain kind of phenomenology. Many intuition-theorists say that it is a necessary condition on an intuition that it comes with a certain phenomenology. Plantinga talks of “that peculiar form of phenomenology with which we are all well acquainted, but which I can’t describe in any way other than as the phenomenology that goes with seeing that such a proposition is true” (1993, pp. 105–6).

   ii. **Beliefs with special kind of justification:** Some intuition-theorists think intuitions are beliefs (or inclinations to believe) that are justified a certain way. The characteristic way in which intuitions are justified is characterized both positively and negatively. On the negative side, it is often said that an intuition is a judgment that we can be justified in making even though it is not supported by experience, memory or inference. On the positive side, two kinds of views are common. Some think intuitive judgments must be based solely on conceptual competences (Goldman and Pust 1998, Bealer 1998, BonJour 1998, Sosa 2007a). Kirk Ludwig (2010) also advocates this strategy. He says that a judgment is an intuition only if it relies solely on conceptual competence:

   > It is only if a judgment is solely an expression of one’s competence in the contained concepts and their mode of combination that it counts as an apprehension of a conceptual or a priori truth. Insofar as we think of intuitions as insights into conceptual truths [as Ludwig does], they are to be conceived of as judgments or beliefs which are the product of our competence in the deployment of the concepts involved. (2010, p. 433)

\(^{10}\) Although see Appendix to Chapter 4, note 25, for an alternative interpretation of these authors, particularly Williamson.
Others rely heavily on metaphors, invoking a special faculty whereby we can ‘see’ or become directly intellectually aware of certain truths. Plantinga (1993, pp. 105–6) and BonJour (1998) come close to this kind of formulation. Charles Parsons’ ground-breaking work on Gödel’s views on intuition provide the best introduction to this kind of view that I know of. Gödel says:

The similarity between mathematical intuition and a physical sense is very striking. It is arbitrary to consider “this is red” an immediate datum, but not so to consider the proposition expressing modus ponens or complete induction (or perhaps some simpler propositions from which the latter follows). For the difference, as far as it is relevant here, consists solely in the fact that in the first case a relationship between a concept and a particular object is perceived, while in the second case it is a relationship between concepts. (quoted in Parsons 1995, p. 62)

Charles Parsons comments:

In this passage and in many others, we find a formulation that is very characteristic of Gödel: In certain cases of rational evidence (of which we can easily grant modus ponens to be one), it is claimed that “perception” of concepts is involved. (1995, p. 62)

These brief descriptions do not exhaust the ways in which intuitions can be characterized in terms of their justification; alternatives will be explored later in the book.

iii. Beliefs with a certain kind of content: Some intuition-theorists exclude all judgments concerning contingent truths from the intuitive. Such philosophers follow Bealer and Pust in thinking that we can have an intuition that \( p \) only if \( p \) is a necessary truth.

iv. Beliefs with a certain etiology: Other intuition-theorists think intuitions are beliefs (or inclinations to believe) that are caused (or generated) in a certain way. There are many versions of this view. According to one version, often found in the psychological literature on intuitions, they are beliefs (or inclinations to believe) that are generated in a certain kind of ‘spontaneous’ or ‘unreflective’ way. Here is Jennifer Nagel’s (forthcoming) initial description of the view:

Mercier and Sperber describe intuitive judgments as generated by ‘processes that take place inside individuals without being controlled by them’ (Mercier and Sperber, 2009, 153). The spontaneous inferences produced by these processes modify or update what we believe ‘without the individual’s
attending to what justifies this modification’ (ibid.). . . . When we read the emotions of others in their facial expressions—to take an example of an uncontroversial case of intuitive judgment—neurotypical adults are remarkably accurate at detecting and decoding the minute shifts in brow position and nostril contour that distinguish emotions such as surprise and fear (Ekman and Friesen, 1975). But judgments reflect these cues without our attending to the cues: the cross-culturally robust ability to recognize basic emotions does not depend on any personal-level attention to the facial configurations and movements that justify these swift intuitive classifications (Ekman, 1989; Ekman and Friesen, 1975).

Putting aside the details of this characterization, it exemplifies a general strategy: restrict the extension of ‘intuition’ to those beliefs (or inclinations to believe) that have a certain kind of etiology.

Three Centrality-unfriendly construals of ‘intuition’

I turn now to some ways in which ‘intuitive’ has been construed that are not Centrality-friendly. These are construals that would render Centrality too obviously false, and so are not ones proponents of Centrality should, or are likely to, endorse.

A view that I’ll return to throughout this work is that intuitions are beliefs or inclinations to believe that have a certain dialectical role. Here is Parsons characterizing philosophers’ use of ‘intuitive’:

When a philosopher talks of his or others’ intuitions, that usually means what the person concerned takes to be true at the outset of an inquiry, or as a matter of common sense; intuitions in this sense are not knowledge, since they need not be true and can be very fallible guides to the truth. (1995, p. 59)

I take this to be an instance of a view according to which the intuitive is characterized by its dialectical role. On such a construal, Parsons is proposing that ‘intuitive’ serves to mark off claims we happen to find in common ground prior to careful research of some topic T. Such propositions can have any kind of content, can be generated in any kind of way, and can be justified by any kind of evidential source. So ‘intuitive’, on this construal, does not denote an epistemic or psychological kind. As I will point out repeatedly below, this is a construal of ‘intuitive’ that is not Centrality-friendly.

Looking ahead, there are two additional views of the function of ‘intuition’-talk that are not covered by the categories above and that are not what proponents of Centrality have in mind. In Chapters 2 and 5 I suggest that for many uses of ‘intuitively’, the most charitable interpretation treats it as a
device of hedging: a way of qualifying a speech act (much like ‘I think’ functions in some utterances of ‘She’s in Paris, I think’). So used it does not denote any kind of mental state or source of evidence. Finally, and anticipating a view that will be explored in Chapter 3 below, there is also the possibility that some uses of ‘intuitively’ are semantically defective—they fail to have a semantic anchor and so literally mean nothing. Put loosely, the view here is that some uses of ‘intuitive’ are such a mess that they fail to mean anything at all. Note that this would be a proposal unfriendly to Centrality, in particular if ‘intuition’ as it occurs in Centrality is defective in just this way.

‘Intuitive’ as a context-sensitive term

Cutting across the above distinctions is the question of whether ‘intuitive’ is a context-sensitive term. This issue is not much discussed in the current literature, but I will argue that ‘intuition’ is context sensitive both in English and as used by philosophers. This, I will argue, has implications for the Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk. It also has the consequence that different utterances of the sentences that are used to express Centrality will mean different things depending on the context they are uttered in.

‘Intuition’ as non-factive

Practically all intuition-theorists agree that if ‘intuition’ denotes a mental state, it is non-factive: you can have an intuition that $p$, even if $p$ is false. It is also typically assumed that an agent can have the intuition that $p$ even if she does not believe that $p$ (this is why I constantly use the cumbersome ‘belief or inclination to believe’). An example often used to illustrate these alleged features of intuitions is the naïve comprehension axiom: For every predicate, there is a set that consists of all and only those objects that satisfy that predicate. Many intuition-theorists say they have the intuition that the axiom is true even though they do not believe it and indeed know it to be false.

1.4 More on how to interpret Centrality

‘Intuition’ isn’t the only component of Centrality in need of further clarification. Various issues will come up throughout this book, but five issues are worth highlighting at the outset.

11 Although see Ludwig (2007) for an exception.
1. **Centrality and the distinction between evidence and sources of evidence**: In stating Centrality I left open whether it claims that philosophers rely on intuitions as *evidence* or as *sources of evidence*. Proponents of Centrality differ on which version they endorse. We find Bealer, for example, present as one of his central observations about philosophical practice that intuitions are evidence for philosophical theories (see e.g. Bealer 1996, p. 2). However, in other passages he talks of intuitions as a *source* of evidence (see Bealer 1992, n. 7). On the first view it is *A has the intuition that p* that serves as evidence. On the second view, *p* is the evidence and the source of that evidence is *that A has an intuition that p*. The distinction will play an important role at certain points, but when the distinction is not important I will, for simplicity, talk only of ‘intuitions as evidence’, by which I will mean ‘intuitions as evidence or sources of evidence’.

2. **Centrality and philosophical theories of evidence**: A central question in epistemology and philosophy of science is the nature of evidence. It is striking that those who defend Centrality as a descriptive claim about philosophical practice typically do so without committing to any general theory about the nature of evidence. It is a view that is supposed to be acceptable to, more or less, anyone, independently of the endorsement of any particular philosophical theory of the nature of evidence more generally. The occurrence of ‘evidence’ in Centrality itself isn’t supposed to be read as committing the defender of Centrality to a particular philosophical account of evidence.

I will for the most part follow proponents of Centrality in trying to stay neutral about the general issue of what evidence is. Nonetheless, it is difficult to run the debate about Centrality in complete isolation from these more general issues. To see how hard it is to be neutral on these issues, consider the influential view due to Williamson (2000), according to which one’s evidence consists of one’s knowledge ($E = K$). As we have seen, practically all those defending Centrality take intuitions to be non-factive and so an endorsement of Williamson’s view would immediately make the practice described in Centrality deeply defective. Does that mean we should take all those who endorse Centrality to be committed to denying Williamson’s view? Not necessarily. The way I have formulated Centrality, it describes what a certain
group of people treat as evidence. That could, of course, be very different from what their evidence is. So a proponent of Centrality could endorse Williamson’s view of evidence. In what follows I will try to avoid imposing a particular theory of evidence onto the proponent of Centrality.\footnote{There are a number of other issues about the nature of evidence that proponents of Centrality typically try to stay neutral on. Here are two: can physical objects—say a dead body—be evidence or is that status reserved for propositions? Similarly, the issue of whether coherentism is true will have an impact on the evaluation of Centrality. Proponents of Centrality typically assume that the truth of Centrality doesn’t depend on how these issues are settled.}

3. Centrality as normative claim vs. Centrality as descriptive claim: It is worth continually keeping in mind the difference between Centrality as a descriptive claim and as a normative claim. The descriptive claim says something about how philosophers, as a matter of fact, go about doing philosophy. It describes a practice and can only be verified by careful study of that practice. This is how Centrality is interpreted in this work. The normative versions concerns how philosophy ought to be done—it’s compatible with the truth of Centrality construed normatively that, as a matter of fact, we do not rely on intuitions and so the refutation of the descriptive version doesn’t amount to a refutation of the normative version.

That said, the two questions are not independent. In several influential arguments for the normative claim, the truth of the descriptive claim serves as the central premise. George Bealer’s work (1992, 1996) can serve as an illustration here. According to Bealer, assigning no evidential weight to intuitions leads to what he calls “epistemic self-defeat” (1996, p. 8). All of the versions of this argument found in Bealer’s work start with the assumption that intuitions as a matter of fact play an important evidential role in what he calls our ‘standard justificatory procedure’. For example Bealer writes that “according to our standard justificatory procedure, intuitions are used as evidence (or as reasons). The evidential use of intuitions is ubiquitous in philosophy” (1996, p. 4). As a result, he says, those who want to exclude intuitions from our evidential base are
... confronted by a hermeneutical problem produced by their departure from the standard justificatory procedure. They would have us circumscribe our evidence by just excluding intuition. ... The question to consider, therefore, is this: when we implement the standard justificatory procedure’s mechanism of self-criticism does intuition get excluded as a source of evidence? (Bealer 1996, p. 8)

Bealer goes on to argue that intuitions will have to play a role in adjudicating whether intuitions should be included or excluded in what counts as admissible evidence—i.e. they will have to play a role in the standard procedure’s mechanism of self-criticism. This is the source of the alleged ‘epistemic self-defeat’ of those who deny intuitions evidential status.¹³ There are, in my view, many weak points in this argument, but what I want to highlight here is that the descriptive claim is at the center of the argument for why we ought to rely on intuitions. More generally, most of the arguments I know of in favor of the normative claim that intuitions ought to play a role assume that as a matter of fact they do. As a result, a rejection of the descriptive version of Centrality will serve to undermine most of the normative versions.

4. Centrality as a generic: The various formulations of Centrality presented above talk about what philosophers do. Claims of the form ‘Fs are Gs’ are called generics, and they are hard to interpret. ‘Fs are Gs’ can be true even though not all Fs are Gs. The pattern of allowable exceptions is a disputed issue and one of the central topics in the theory of genericity. This generic element of Centrality makes it hard to evaluate and leaves an uncomfortable amount of wiggle room for its proponents. It would, obviously, be preferable if proponents of Centrality-like claims avoided genericity and instead opted for more precise claims. Absent such precisification, I will treat this generic

¹³ Here is Bealer’s description of the practice of his opponent: “in their actual practice empiricists typically make use of a wide range of intuitions. For example, what does and does not count as an observation or experience? Why count sense perception as observation? Why not count memory as observation? Or why not count certain high-level theoretical judgments as sense experiences? Indeed, why not count intuitions as sense experiences? Likewise for each of the key notions that plays a role in the empiricist principles (i) and (ii) [Bealer’s formulation of Quinean radical empiricism]. What does and does not count as a theory, as justified (or acceptable), as an explanation, as simple? The fact is that empiricists arrive at answers to these questions by using as prima facie evidence their intuitions about what does and does not count as experience, observation, theory, justified, explanation, simple. In their actual practice, empiricists use such intuitions as evidence to support their theories and to persuade others of them” (Bealer 1992, p. 105).
element of Centrality as a claim about what is characteristic of philosophy. It allows for some exceptions, but is true only if it applies to a wide range of paradigms of contemporary philosophical practice.¹⁴

5. *Centrality and philosophical exceptionalism:* Since Centrality is a claim about what is characteristic of philosophers, it should not be construed as an instantiation of a universal claim about all intellectual activity or even a very wide domain of intellectual activity. Suppose that *all human cognition* (or a very wide domain of intellectual life) appeals to intuitions as evidence, from which we can derive as a special instance that philosophers appeal to intuitions as evidence. Such a view would not vindicate Centrality, since according to Centrality the appeal to intuitions as evidence is meant to differentiate philosophy—and, perhaps, a few other kindred disciplines—from inquiries into the migration patterns of salmon or inflation in Argentina, say. If it turns out that the alleged reliance on intuitions is universal or extends far beyond philosophy and other allegedly a priori disciplines, that would undermine Centrality as it is construed in this work. Timothy Williamson (2007) puts a related point in terms of “philosophical exceptionalism” (p. 3). The targets in this work are those philosophers who endorse Centrality and construe it as an instance of philosophical exceptionalism (or at least exceptionalism about disciplines traditionally thought to be a priori). As a result, it will turn out to be crucial when evaluating an argument for the significance of intuitions to keep track of its scope. An argument that shows that *all* intellectual activity relies on intuitions as evidence, and then derives Centrality as a corollary, will not be acceptable given how Centrality is presented by its proponents.¹⁵

¹⁴ The question of what we should count as paradigms is addressed in Part II.

¹⁵ Are all the proponents of Centrality that I have cited so far also committed to a version of philosophical exceptionalism? I think the answer is ‘yes’, with some qualification. If you look at the various places where Centrality is articulated, including those cited above, you also typically find the claim that reliance on intuitions as evidence makes philosophy different from most other intellectual disciplines. Centrality proponents don’t start out with the view that *marine biologists, archaeologists, economists, engineers, philosophers, etc. rely on intuitions as evidence,* and then do conjunction elimination to get to Centrality. The claim is that this is a peculiar feature of contemporary analytic philosophy. This is often connected to the view sometimes expressed by saying that philosophy is an armchair activity. Some construe this as the claim that philosophy is an a priori activity. Centrality is then thought to be an answer to
1.5 Burning questions for proponents of Centrality: the pessimists, the enthusiasts, and the concerned

Endorsement of Centrality gives rise to the impression that two connected questions are extremely important:

- What are intuitions?
- Can intuitions serve as evidence for philosophical theories?

If Centrality is true, these are indeed the burning questions of the day. If we have no clear answers to these questions, and in particular, if there is suspicion that the answer to the second question might be ‘no’, then contemporary analytic philosophers might be no better off than crystal ball gazers. Centrality proponents divide, roughly, into three categories: the pessimists, the enthusiasts and the concerned. Enthusiasts think Centrality is a good thing. They think intuitions can provide good and solid foundation for philosophy; it is the kind of evidence (or source of evidence) that we should be relying on. Examples of enthusiasts are Bealer, Pust, Sosa, Goldman, Ludwig, and, in more restricted domains, Chomsky, Gödel, and Rawls.

The pessimists accept Centrality and conclude that this is bad news for philosophy because intuitions are not solid or reliable as evidence for philosophical claims. Pessimists who see the reliance on intuitions as central to contemporary philosophy are thus very pessimistic about the current state of the profession. Examples of such pessimists include Stich, Weinberg, and many other so-called experimental philosophers.16

The third group I call ‘the concerned’: they endorse Centrality and thus accept the view that intuitions play an important role in contemporary philosophy. They are concerned by what they see as reliance on intuitions, they don’t quite know how to do philosophy without it, and so agree with the enthusiasts and the pessimists that the research project of properly understanding what intuitions are is of outmost importance.

the question: How can philosophical knowledge be obtained from the armchair? Since the study of migration patterns of salmon and inflation in Argentina are not done in the armchair, the proponents of Centrality don’t see it as relevant to those disciplines.

16 Not only experimental philosophers, however, are pessimists in this sense; e.g., Kornblith (1998) and Cummins (1998) both represent this strand of thought.
1.6 Rejection of Centrality: Philosophy without intuitions

In this book I argue that Centrality, on any reasonable interpretation, is false. If you share that view, the Burning Questions will no longer burn. There’s no urgency in figuring out what intuitions are and what epistemic status they have. It might be of some interest as a local issue in philosophy of mind epistemology or philosophy of psychology, but it doesn’t take on the kind of urgency it has for proponents of Centrality. If you reject Centrality, you have no reason to be a pessimist, an enthusiast or even concerned.

Centrality has many components, all of them spectacularly vague. Nonetheless, I argue that Centrality is false on all reasonable precisifications of all its components. In Part I of this book I evaluate the Argument from ‘Intuition’-Talk. I argue that proponents of Centrality exaggerate the extent and centrality of ‘intuition’-talk in philosophical texts. That said, there is, undeniably, quite a bit of such talk. I gave some examples above and I will give more below. However, even when we are faced with argumentatively significant occurrences of ‘intuitive’, it will turn out that the most charitable interpretation of such talk provides no support for Centrality. The role of this term is not to denote any kind of mental state or event that plays the kind of role Centrality ascribes to intuitions. In Part II of the book I put aside the question of how to interpret ‘intuition’-talk and focus instead on the second argument for Centrality: the Argument from Philosophical Practice. I look at whether we can find evidence for Centrality in the philosophical practice of appealing to cases or thought experiments. The question of whether the method of appealing to cases relies on intuitions is an empirical question. It can only be settled by looking carefully at what philosophers do when they appeal to cases. The central chapter of Part II consists of a careful study of various philosophical cases or thought experiments from different areas of philosophy. In none of them is there a reliance on judgments that have any of the features that are supposed to be hallmarks of intuitions. I conclude that it is not true that philosophers who employ cases appeal to anything intuition-like. In sum: both of the arguments for Centrality are complete failures. While contemporary philosophers might be reasonably accused of using ‘intuition’-terminology too promiscuously, they should be excused from the charge of doing anything that’s reasonably described as ‘relying on intuitions’.
Even though Centrality is widely accepted in contemporary metaphilosophical debates, it is not universally so. Timothy Williamson’s book *The Philosophy of Philosophy* is a sustained and forceful attack on what he calls ‘philosophical exceptionalism’. My argumentative emphasis in this book is different from Williamson’s and I’ll highlight several points of disagreement along the way; still, the overall aim is closely aligned with Williamson’s. While Williamson is the most salient recent ally, he is not the only one. A pair of recent papers by Max Deutsch (2009, 2010) complements (and in part inspired) the kind of case studies that constitute the core of Part II of this book.\(^\text{17}\) In other words, Centrality is by no means a universally accepted metaphilosophical view, and if there is at least the beginning of a movement that opposes it, think of this book as a contribution to it.

I find the rejection of Centrality liberating for the field of metaphilosophy. The rejection has significant implications: it allows us to finally put behind us the elements of what I call ‘methodological rationalism’ (see Chapter 6). It also makes the kind of research that is pursued by experimental philosophers more or less completely irrelevant to philosophical practice. Methodological rationalists (such as Bealer, Pust, and BonJour) and experimental philosophers (such as Stich, Weinberg and others)\(^\text{18}\) are, as I see it, joined at the hips by a commitment to Centrality. Once Centrality is rejected, both methodological rationalism and experimental philosophy can be left behind.

A Centrality-purged philosophy of philosophy will be a very different field. In the philosophy of biology, the key questions arise in connection with specific subfields of biology. The key issues are specific to molecular biology, evolutionary biology, developmental biology, etc. Similarly, in the philosophy of physics: there are issues specific to special and general relativity, to quantum theory, etc. In the same way, a Centrality-purged philosophy of philosophy will be focused on methodological issues that arise within specific subfields. Such questions will arise in connection with work done in philosophy of language, theory of induction, political philosophy, theory of causation, etc. We will find, I’ll suggest, that the best practitioners of those fields are already deeply engaged in those very debates—it’s one of the chief characteristics of much good philosophy that

\(^{17}\) Another recent paper that provides complementary arguments is Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009.

it is methodologically self-conscious. In this respect, good philosophers are
different from good biologists, physicists and mathematicians. There is no
correlation between the top practitioners of these subjects and those best at
thinking about the methodology of biology, physics, and mathematics, but
in philosophy the correlation between those best at doing first-order and
second-order philosophy is strong.

Endorsement of Centrality has made it seem plausible to some methodol-
ogists that philosophical methodology can be done at a very abstract level,
disconnected from deep argumentative engagement with specific philo-
sophical subfields. The thought goes something like this: if we are all relying
on intuitions and something called ‘the method of cases’, then we can discuss
the nature of intuitions and the method of cases in the abstract, more or less
independently of direct engagement with the questions that philosophers
working in specific subfields grapple with on a daily basis. In this way, one
might succeed in convincing oneself that there is an autonomous field
of philosophical methodology. I think if Centrality were true, this line of
argument would be somewhat promising. But Centrality is false. The falsity
of Centrality undermines this picture and redirects methodology to the
appropriate level—it should be done in direct engagement with the work
done in specific subfields. The debate within philosophy of language and
linguistics about how to detect context sensitivity of various kinds provides a
good illustration. This is an issue philosophers of language and linguists have
worked hard on over the last century. A plethora of tests and diagnostics have
been proposed, criticized and refined.\textsuperscript{19} We now know much more at least
about the various options and their respective weaknesses. Those of us who
have worked on those issues have in effect been engaged in philosophical
methodology—and done so at the appropriate level. It is unlikely in the
extreme that an ‘intuition-expert’ with minimal training in linguistics,
semantics and philosophy of language can make a constructive contribution
to these debates. Constructive methodological reflections typically arise from
inside the field and require deep understanding of specific subject matters.

\textit{Don’t aspire to a theory of philosophical evidence}

Those who defend Centrality and the use of intuitions in philosophy tend
to present their views as an account of what unifies philosophy as a whole.

\textsuperscript{19} For an overview of the contemporary views, see e.g. Stanley and Szabó (2000), Recanati
The various philosophical subdisciplines have at least this much in common: they are a kind of armchair activity that relies essentially on an appeal to intuitions about cases or thought experiments. I have no such unifying story to tell. But I also don’t think it’s a goal worth aspiring to. The various activities that get classified together as ‘philosophy’ today are so classified as the result of complex historical and institutional contingencies, not because philosophy has an essence that ties it all together as a natural kind. There are, of course, partially overlapping questions, methods, and interests, but there is no reason to think that a philosopher working on the semantics of quotation is more closely intellectually aligned with someone working on interpreting Plato’s Protagoras or the ethics of eating meat, than to someone working in computer science or formal semantics. Of course, people who work in philosophy departments and have graduate degrees in philosophy will very often have overlapping interests because they went through similar training and spend time around each other. But this is not a reason to have as a goal to come up with a positive account of philosophical evidence, even if granting that this could be ‘pluralistically disjunctive’ (as suggested by an anonymous referee for OUP). There is literally nothing interesting to be said in general about the common ‘evidential sources’ of applied ethics, formal semantics, theories of perception, philosophy of quantum mechanics, etc.

Hintikka’s question: why Centrality now?

Jaakko Hintikka asks:

Where does the current popularity of appeals to intuitions come from? . . . Before the early 1960s, you could scarcely find any overt references, let alone appeals, to intuitions in the pages of philosophical journals and books in the analytic tradition. After the mid-1960s, you will find intuitions playing a major role in the philosophical argumentation of virtually every article or book. Why the contrast? (1999, p. 127)

For those who endorse Centrality, this is a good question. More generally, and without endorsing Centrality as Hintikka seems to do in
this passage, we can ask: what intellectual traditions and influences made Centrality into a form of received wisdom at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries? How did we end up in an intellectual environment in which Centrality was in the common ground among more or less all those analytic philosophers thinking about meta-philosophy and philosophical methodology?

I am inclined to put weight on what I think of as a verbal tick (or virus): philosophers started to use expressions such as ‘Intuitively, BLAH’ a lot. The fact that philosophers started using such locutions created the illusion that Centrality is true. A key point of Part I is that when properly interpreted, such usage provides no support for Centrality. However, I do think such usage misleads metaphilosophers (and others) into endorsing Centrality. It is worth emphasizing that according to this diagnosis, the usage itself is not motivated by (or anchored in) any substantive philosophical commitments or views about intuitions or philosophical methodology—it’s simply a verbal tick without any interesting philosophical foundation. There might be an interesting question to be answered about where this verbal tick originated and what allowed it to spread. These questions will be briefly addressed below, but I have no answer that I find satisfactory.

I don’t think this verbal virus is the only explanatory factor, and I’m open to more substantive diagnostics as complements. Hintikka answers his own question as follows:

The answer is simple. Intuitions came into fashion in philosophy as a consequence of the popularity of Noam Chomsky’s linguistics and its methodology. According to a widespread conception, generative linguists like Chomsky were accounting for competent speakers’ intuitions of grammaticality by devising a grammar, that is, a set of generative rules that produces all and only such strings that are intuitively accepted by these speakers. This kind of methodology was made attractive by the tremendous perceived success of Chomsky’s theories in the 1960s and 1970s. (1999, p. 127)

This I take to be an interesting suggestion, but no more than that. To make it substantive, one would need to show that Chomsky’s theories and work done on transformational grammar actually had direct influence on philosophers in moral philosophy, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, epistemology, etc., and not just in philosophy of language and linguistics. Hintikka does not back up his hypothesis with a more detailed historical investigation. The only example he discusses at any length is Kripke’s
Naming and Necessity, and even in that case, no direct evidence of Chomsky’s influence is presented. Hintikka mentions a few sentences in which Kripke uses ‘intuition’-terminology, but he does not show that in those sentences Kripke was using ‘intuition’ in the way Chomsky did (or that the use was inspired by Chomsky’s). That said it does seem plausible that Chomsky’s work in linguistics (and the success of that work) played a role in the widespread endorsement of Centrality. If so, we have two explanatory elements: the verbal tick-diagnosis and Chomsky’s influence.

To these two influences a number of others should no doubt be added. First, ordinary language philosophy and various trends influenced by the later Wittgenstein tended to emphasize ‘what we would say’ about various topics (and treated that as some kind of evidence). Some philosophers tend to move smoothly from ‘We would say that $p$’ to ‘Intuitively, $p$’ and so those who put weight on ‘what we would say’ could be construed as putting weight on intuitions. A second and related influence can be traced back to G. E. Moore. As emphasized in Part I, ‘intuitive’ has one use that is close to ‘pre-theoretic’. Moore’s philosophy put a great deal of emphasis on the pre-theoretic, and so, on one construal, on the intuitive. More generally, the various anti-theory traditions in twentieth-century philosophy—including the ordinary language movement and other philosophers influenced by the later Wittgenstein—tend to emphasize the pre-theoretic, and hence (on at least one construal), the intuitive. Yet another influence can be traced to Rawls’ A Theory of Justice (and Goodman 1955, pp. 65–8, which it relies on). At crucial points in that work (and later papers), Rawls assigns a central role to something he calls ‘intuitions’. It is not unlikely that Rawls’ way of speaking influenced people outside political philosophy in a way analogous to Chomsky’s alleged influence beyond the sphere of philosophy of linguistics.

These are but some brief initial indications of how Hintikka’s question might be answered. I mention it here simply to emphasize that this book is not an attempt at a serious historical investigation into the question of why Centrality is such a widespread assumption in contemporary philosophy. The main goal is to show that Centrality is false, not to explain why it became so widely accepted.

Brief remarks about how to read this book

The two parts of this book can be read more or less independently of each other. If you are already disposed to think that the Argument from
‘Intuition’-Talk is a poor argument, but you are inclined to think the Argument from Philosophical Practice is important, it might make sense to read Part II first. That said, one of the underlying themes of the book is that understanding ‘intuition’ and its use among philosophers is an indispensable steppingstone for understanding intuitions and their role in philosophy. And there are crucial components of Part II that rely on claims about ‘intuition’ that I take myself to have established in Part I.

In Part I, the central chapter is Chapter 4. Chapter 2 is a somewhat detailed introduction to the use of ‘intuitive’ and ‘seem’ in English, and those impatient to get to what I think about philosophers’ use of ‘intuitive’, can feel free to skip it. Chapters 3–5 all concern the interpretation of ‘intuitive’ and cognate terms as they occur in philosophical texts. In Chapter 4, I present the substance of my positive view of how to interpret such talk.

In Part II, the central chapters are 7 and 8, and the latter in particular. Chapter 6 provides a bit of background material, and Chapters 9–11 draw out some of the consequences of the arguments presented in 7 and 8.