Is this a Truth-Maker which I See Before Me? Comments on Eli Chudnoff's *Intuition*

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Intuition is a rare book of philosophy in being both as careful as it is bold, and in being breathtakingly bold. Put with less than perfect care on my part, the central claim Chudnoff defends is the Platonic thesis that intuition, when it gives us knowledge, involves the phenomenological presentation of the very aspects of abstract reality that make our intuitive judgments true. Let me repeat: Intuition, when it gives us knowledge, involves the phenomenological presentation of the very aspects of abstract reality that make our intuitive judgments true. Intuitions generally are experiences that seem to be of this sort. I now pause to let that sink in a bit.

Notice the implications of this view: There is indeed an abstract reality, and not just a concrete material one; it consists in part of truth-makers for our judgments; we can have in intuition direct contact with such abstract truth-makers; and moreover, the mode of contact is phenomenological awareness. Further, though abstract, this reality is rich enough to contain truth-makers not just for what might seem to be the less controversial possible objects of intuitive knowledge, like propositions of mathematics, plausibly made true by set-theoretic structures, but for ethical and philosophical propositions that can be known intuitively as well. What is more, Chudnoff supports this view by arguing that matters with intuition are much as they are with sensory perception. So he takes on board, defends, and exploits the thesis that perception, when it gives us knowledge, involves the phenomenological presentation the very aspects of perceptible reality that make our perceptual judgments true.

These sorts of claims are indeed bold in an age of scientistic philosophy parading itself under the vague but always honorific banner of naturalism, in which nominalist tendencies have dominated for a century and empiricist and representationalist tendencies have dominated for longer than that, and in which the ideas of ethical and philosophical truth, let alone abstract ethical and philosophical truth-makers, can seem, well, utterly off the table—right out, as it were. It is to the book's credit that (save for a four page introductory section urging the hopeless inadequacy of empiricism) it does not dwell defensively upon, or even much acknowledge, the dominant prejudices that it flouts. Chudnoff spends his energies making the positive case.

As I said, *Intuition* is as careful as it is bold. The argumentation, though dense, is exceptionally clear and crisp, engaging deeply with contemporary literature without getting bogged down. There are fine distinctions galore, but always perspicuous and drawn to an end. The examples

are clever and well-chosen also. There is a wealth of material here well worth discussing, but of course I cannot discuss all, or even much of it. So I intend to go to what I think is the heart of the matter: the claim that intuitions have presentational phenomenology. For once that claim is made plausible and defended, the remainder of Chudnoff's job is to show how intuition, so understood, figures in justification, inference, and knowledge. All of this is interesting and worth attending to. But none of it matters unless the claim that intuitions present us with phenomenal awareness of abstract truth-makers is sustained. That claim by itself is plenty controversial and, if true, has metaphysical and epistemological consequences that are substantial, to say the least. I add at the start that the sorts of worries I will raise are for the most part explicitly taken up and dealt with in the book. As I said, the book is careful; the obvious objections have been addressed.

It is of course a truism (and true, contra Dennett, for one) that perception has phenomenology. And it is at least plausible that this phenomenology is sometimes what Chudnoff calls "presentational." One's perceptual experience has presentational phenomenology with respect to a propositional content p if it both makes it perceptually seem that p and makes it seem that one is aware of a truth-maker for p. This view of perception is thus a version of direct realism, in which the very entities that some of our perceptual judgments concern, and that *make* them true when they are true, are present in the contents of the perceptions themselves. Note that the truth-makers for at least some perceptual judgments are plausibly propositional in structure; Chudnoff agrees. So the thesis is that we are phenomenologically presented in perception, not just with particulars with properties in relations, but with propositionally structured entities such as facts or states of affairs—with particulars *as having* properties and being in relations.

Here is an interesting question that pertains to the presentational phenomenology of perception: What is the scope of perceptual judgments whose truth-makers are possible objects of presentational awareness? Are the concepts involved in the contents of those propositions of whose truth-makers we can be made aware in experience limited, for example, to concepts of the proper sensibles (such as colors, shapes and sounds)? Or can we be aware in perception of truth-makers for propositions employing what might be thought of as more theoretical concepts? Chudnoff suggests that we can employ the notion of presentational awareness to help characterize the dispute between those who do, and those who do not, think that perception has high-level contents (natural and artificial kind properties, causal relations, etc.) in addition to low-level contents (color, shape, texture, etc.).[1] The suggestion is that we can finesse the disagreement by saying that perceptual experience has both low- and high-level content, but that it phenomenologically presents only low-level content. I am not quite sure that Chudnoff firmly accepts that only low-level content has perceptual presentational phenomenology; perhaps he is only offering a suggestion that might allow a rapprochement for the parties to the debate. But if he does accept it, then I am worried. The

suggestion would have the consequence that when I perceive that there is a cat on the mat, I am presented with a truth-maker for the low-level proposition, for example, that a thing of a certain shape (albeit one that I could not possibly describe independently of the concept CAT), with a certain color, say orange, is on a quadrilaterally shaped thing of a different color and texture, but I am not presented with a truth-maker for the high-level proposition that the cat is on the mat. That just seems phenomenologically off key to me—a concession to an unduly phenomenalistic conception of the content of experience that has a dubious empiricist and reductionist ancestry, and plays into the Myth of the Given. For those who think the observable/theoretical distinction is confused and pernicious, or even just fluid, the apparent suitability of the idea of presentational phenomenology to help underwrite the distinction might seem like an invitation to revive a confusion well lost.[2]

That said, it is clear enough that perceptual experience has phenomenology, and, since I think direct perceptual realism of some form correct and indeed mandatory, I find it plausible that perceptual experience has presentational phenomenology. What is less clear is that *intuition* has phenomenology, much less presentational phenomenology. It is a main burden of Chudnoff's book to argue that it does.

A popular alternative is to claim that intuitions are, or bring about, inclinations to believe.[3] An immediate appeal of such doxastic views is that they involve minimal commitments. They do not commit the theorist to giving a distinctive account of the content of intuitive experiences and they do not invite the idea that intuitions are made true by abstract reality; minimalists about truth could be happy with doxastic theories of intuition. We ought ordinarily prefer less committal positions to more committal ones. So to motivate his own view, on which intuitions are a kind of sui generis and pre-doxastic experience, Chudnoff must reject doxastic views.

His dialectical strategy is to reiterate what have been thought largely successful arguments against the parallel thesis about perception (viz., that perceptual experiences are beliefs or inclinations to believe), and then to claim that analogous arguments are available and just as sound in the case of intuition. Just as it is possible to perceive that p without believing or being inclined to believe that p, it is possible, he argues, to have an intuition that p without believing or being inclined to believe that p. For example, consider the naïve comprehension axiom: for every condition, there is a set containing just those objects meeting that condition. Chudnoff reports that George Bealer claims to know that the axiom is false, and to have no inclination whatever to believe it true when he considers it. However, Bealer nonetheless reports having the intuition that the axiom is true. And Chudnoff reports of himself that, though he has no inclination to believe the proposition that there is a set containing all the ordinal numbers, he nonetheless has the intuition that that proposition is true. (I really don't know what to make of such reports, except to remark that I am not too big on

first-person authority generally, let alone respecting such subtle distinctions of state as that between intuiting that something is true and having a felt propensity to believe that it is.)

Chudnoff realizes that this does not establish that intuitions are more than judgments or inclination to make judgments. Perhaps they are yet less than that, events or items that do nothing more than make a contribution to yielding such judgments or inclinations to judge when supplemented the right way. So Chudnoff must argue against this view, which we can call the "yet less than judgments" view of intuitions.[4] The argument he offers concludes that intuitions have presentational phenomenology. Since judgments and inclinations to judge lack presentational phenomenology, states falling short of being even these also lack presentational phenomenology. So the conclusion, if earned, would defeat the "yet less than judgment" view of intuitions. And this is where the rubber really hits the road: the positive argument for the claim that intuitions have presentational phenomenology.

Chudnoff's argument proceeds by way of examples intended to get the reader to consider their own intuition experiences as they come to grasp abstract truths. I will rehearse two of the several he offers at the start. Consider the following claim: Every concave figure can be filled out into a convex figure with a greater area and smaller perimeter than the original. This seems pretty obvious. But suppose it were not. How would you persuade yourself that it is true? You might draw or visualize some concave figures and then fill them out. Suppose that after providing yourself a few samples, you become convinced that every such example would conform to the claim. Of course, no finite set of samples drawn or visualized could itself be adequate to underwrite the general claim. But your conclusion does not seem to rest on a mere hasty induction. Indeed, it doesn't seem to be an induction at all. Noting that a plausible truth-maker for this claim would be a many-many mapping from concave figures to convex figures that associates each concave figure with those convex figures that bound a greater area in a smaller perimeter, Chudnoff asks what in your experience could make it seem to you as if you are aware of such a mapping. Here is his answer:

> Plausibly, it is your imaginative endeavor. You imagine rounding out a concave figure into a convex figure that bounds a greater area in a smaller perimeter. In the context of your overall experience of reflecting on the proposition that every concave figure can be rounded out to a convex figure that bounds a greater area in a smaller perimeter, this imaginative endeavor amounts to more than merely imagining one such transformation. In this context, your imaginative endeavor assumes a greater import; in it, you do not just idly play around with figures in your mind's eye; rather, in it, you render an infinite, abstract mapping present to the mind by visualizing a partial, concrete realization of it.[5]

So via imaginative endeavor in visualizing a finite and concrete partial map, we "make present to the mind" and abstract infinite map. And mind you: we do not just *think* of such a map; we become aware as a phenomenological presence of the actual infinite mapping, taking us from every concave figure to every possible convex figure that rounds it out.

I grant that such a mapping would be a truth-maker for the claim, and that my conviction that such a mapping exists would lead me to believe the general proposition. But as I ponder the case, while I do (or anyway think I do) have an intuition that the claim is true, I cannot say that I find such a mapping presented to awareness in my mind. Indeed, I confess I do not really know what it would be to find such a thing presented in awareness to my mind.

A second example: Consider the propositions that $(a+b)^2 \geq 4ab$ and $(a+b)^2=4ab$ just when $a=b$. By means of a clever figure in which $(a+b)^2$ is represented by a square whose sides measure $(a+b)$, and $4ab$ is represented by four rectangles inside that square whose opposite sides measure a and b respectively, one can be made to see that the areas of the square and of the sum of the four rectangles will coincide just in case $a=b$. That will yield belief in the proposition. Here is how Chudnoff describes the process:

> Your imaginative manipulation of the figure illustrates the way the difference between $(a+b)^2$ and $4ab$ changes as a and b change. It illustrates the function $f(a,b)=(a+b)^2-4ab$, and, I would say, your intuition experience makes it seem as if you are aware of this function and some of its properties – even if this is not how you are immediately inclined to describe your experience.[6]

Here what is supposedly made present to the mind is a function from uncountably infinite pairs of numbers to uncountably infinite values, along with some properties of it—in particular, the property that the value is zero when and only when the arguments are identical.

As before, I accept that such a function is a truth-maker for the proposition, and that my beliefs that there is such a function and that it has that property, and that the function represents the relation that the proposition expresses, would lead me to believe the proposition. But it seems to me understatement to claim that I would not immediately describe my experience of coming to be convinced by my imaginative consideration of the figure as one in which I am phenomenologically presented with such a function and some of its properties. Again, I am not at all sure that I can conceive what such an experience would be like.

Now of course Chudnoff has a response to this kind of worry. He addresses it in part under the heading "the absent intuition challenge." Timothy Williamson, Chudnoff notes, denies that he has any intellectual seeming that would amount to presentational phenomenology when he considers

the naïve comprehension axiom and the Gettier problem, though he reports the inclination to accept them both (though knowing better, he resists the inclination in the former case). Faced with this denial, Chudnoff does not rest content with the dull thud of clashing intuitions (to borrow Bigelow and Pargetter's memorable phrase). Rather, he claims that Williamson does indeed have such intuitions, and simply fails to recognize them for what they are, because he has a mistaken view of what they would have to be (or be like). If you conceive of presentational intuitions as self-standing, discrete elements of the stream of consciousness, then you will not find them. But Chudnoff argues that all intuition experiences are constituted by other elements of the stream of consciousness (e.g., by experiences such as conscious thoughts, imaginings, etc., just as lumps of clay may constitute a statue). Doxastic theorists believe that those elements exist, and that they allow us to direct our thinking towards abstract objects. Chudnoff holds that those elements exist, but that in the right combination, they constitute new entities with their own properties, which entities can *be* abstract truth-makers (like functions of uncountably infinite arguments).

It does seem plausible to me that truth-makers might be constituted objects, though the idea that they might have as constituents anything that has merely psychological being, like images or visualizations (as opposed, for example, to Fregean thoughts) strikes me as highly problematic. But the worry I want to press here is that, in what I think of as typical cases of constitution, the constituted objects are every bit as obviously presented in a presentation of what constitutes them as are the constituents. This is true of the examples Chudnoff offers: statues from clay, a bicycle from its parts, a model Eiffel tower from a sum of tinker toys. It would be odd indeed for someone to say with candor that they see the unified lumps of clay but not the statue they constitute, or the bicycle parts in relation, but not the bicycle, or the toys in the construction, but not the tower. Even if they do not see them *as* a statue or a bicycle or a model Eiffel tower, still they surely see them as distinct objects, and not just mereological sums. But it does not seem at all odd for Williamson (or me) to deny that he is aware of any seeming truth-maker for the or naïve comprehension axiom or the Gettier proposition, though he is aware of the elements from which Chudnoff supposes them (seemingly) constituted. Why then are the truth-makers allegedly constituted of other elements of the stream of consciousness not as obvious to consciousness as those elements?

Chudnoff has more to say about this. In particular, he concedes that presentational phenomenology can be elusive, in the sense of being hard to capture in focused introspective attention, especially in light of the rich phenomenology of imagining, thinking, visualizing, etc., that go along with and constitute it.[7] In addition, intuitive presentational phenomenology can be hard to describe because one's awareness of the presented seeming truth-maker might be obscure. As regards both elusiveness and obscurity, Chudnoff remarks that intuitive presentational phenomenology is like presentational perceptual phenomenology. So they should count against the

intuitive case no more than they do against the perceptual. And no less, one might add. But I think the burden ought to lie squarely with the proponent of intuitive presentational phenomenology here, since it seems so easy to deny intuitive presentational phenomenology altogether, as many do, and so hard to deny perceptual presentational phenomenology, as so few do.

Chudnoff does more than just this to try to overcome the absent intuition challenge. In particular, the book is rich with examples that are designed explicitly to make particular points that arise along the way, but serve the implicit function of getting the reader to focus on the experience of coming to see in a particular manner that a claim is true—purportedly making her aware of why it is true—so that she will actually have the intuition experiences that Chudnoff claims have presentational phenomenology. Some of these examples, and I wish I had time to go into them, are exceedingly clever. Many of them are mathematical (and I confess that I would like to have had more examples involving ethical and generally philosophical intuitions, where the idea of the sort of abstract object that might be a truth maker for a claim has a bit less, well, intuitive, grip than it does in the mathematical case—not that Chudnoff is silent on this: read the book). Yet I confess I was never completely convinced that my being aware of why this or that claim is true either had to be or was best described as a matter of my being presented phenomenologically with the truth-maker. Even when I keep in mind that intuited truth-makers will not be found as self-standing elements of the stream of consciousness, but rather as constituted of other elements, and even when I do my best to focus and overcome their elusive obscurity, I do not find, when I peer within, as, for example, when I come to intuit that $(a+b)^2=4ab$ just when $a=b$ with the aid of Chudnoff's clever diagram, what makes them true.

My inability to convince myself by concerted introspection that my own conscious life involves intuitive presentational phenomenology could at best lead to a standoff with Chudnoff. I want to close by adumbrating a couple of considerations that might be brought to bear in attempting to achieve a more definitive resolution. The first pushes against Chudnoff's view. The second suggests perhaps a way to argue in its favor.

I mentioned at the start that *Intuition* boldly flouts many contemporary and recent philosophical prejudices: scientistic naturalism, nominalism, representationalism, etc. It flouts another contemporary philosophical obsession as well: the obsession with language. The roles of language and meaning in mediating between the world, abstract or concrete, and our understanding of it, are pretty much off stage in *Intuition*. (Understanding does figure heavily in the chapter discussing understanding-based accounts of intuition, but there understanding is treated as a matter of grasping concepts, rather than of understanding language.) I can well conceive what it would be like to represent to myself, or to have represented to me, the function from pairs of numbers to the difference between the square of their sums and 4 times their product. I would do so—I just did

so—by means of language or symbols. Of course I must understand the language or symbols in order to know that that is the function being represented. I am no Kripkensteinian skeptic about the possibility of such understanding. But the idea that such understanding might on occasion consist in or require the presentation to phenomenal consciousness of an abstract object invites familiar skeptical worries. How could my understanding of the thought I express in articulating the function consist in, or be determined by, my awareness or grasp of such an object (i.e., one present to my mind as a seeming truth-maker for it)? In what could my confidence that that object before my mind was what my words mean, or determined the content of the thought I expressed, be grounded? To run the Wittgensteinian trope, suppose the object before my mind varies without my noticing that it does. Then I will sustain my belief that it gives the content of the thought I expressed (would be a truth-maker for the proposition) despite the change. But then there will be no evident difference between the claim that the presented object is a seeming truth-maker for the claim I expressed—represents my understanding of it—and the claim that I am convinced that it seems to be so to me. The role of the putatively presented object will drop out. And this has always been the deep worry about phenomenology: that it necessarily lapses into psychologism, leaving no room for normativity. Of course I have not properly or precisely formulated how the private language and rule following considerations might be brought to bear on the specific theses and positions Chudnoff advocates in *Intuition*. The considerations directly concern meaning and language. As I said, these topics are pretty well off stage in the book. But they, and the Wittgensteinian considerations, seem to me to be waiting in the wings, and to deserve a part in the play.

My second consideration addresses an alternative mode of argumentation by means of which one might reach Chudnoff's conclusion that abstract truth-makers are presented to consciousness in intuition. In light of the fact that at least some truth-makers of intuited propositions are propositionally structured, Chudnoff discusses what he calls "the alignment challenge." This is the challenge to the idea that truth-makers are presented in experience, based on the idea that the objects of awareness are not propositionally structured, as truth-makers presumably are. Chudnoff deals with this challenge, successfully in my view, in part by claiming that one can have non-epistemic awareness (awareness that is not awareness-as) of propositionally structured objects. Now certainly, if there is such a thing as non-epistemic awareness, the propositional structure of an object of non-epistemic awareness will not be evident to the subject of the awareness. But that's OK. At least in the case of non-epistemic awareness, those aspects of it that are transparent or accessible to the subject need not exhaust the character of the object of which one is aware. But in such cases, whatever reasons we might have for supposing the object to have such a character—in particular, that of being propositionally structured—will not be found in the phenomenology of that sort of awareness.

Bearing this in mind, turn now to the dispute between John McDowell and Mark Johnston, to which Chudnoff adverts as motivation for taking up the alignment challenge. This is the dispute over whether the truth-makers disclosed to us in perceptual experience are propositionally structured. At least in *Mind and World,*[8] McDowell held that they are propositionally structured—facts. But his reasons for holding this view were not phenomenological at all. Rather, they were transcendental: Unless we conceive of perception as a mode in which the world exercises rational constraint on us in the form of providing reasons for belief, we are not entitled to the idea of intentional thought—thought—at all. On pain of falling into the Myth of the Given, those reasons provided by the world must be conceived as concept-involving, and, as of the time of *Mind and World*, McDowell thought that this required that they be conceived as propositional.[9] Since we do after all think, we should conclude that perception discloses worldly facts. In reaching this conclusion, it is not as if McDowell did an inspection of his perceptual consciousness and found propositional items in it; nor did he check to see whether he was right by confirming their presence, as if the upshot of his argument were a prediction. Nor does he expect his readers to undertake such inspection or confirmation. Much of the resistance to McDowell's argument has come from people who take the phenomenology of perceptual consciousness to be inconsistent with the idea that perceptual contents can be made out to be concept-involving. But except to point out that the resistors have an impoverished view of our stock of concepts, McDowell hasn't been much perturbed by these worries. Transcendental considerations trump the limitations of phenomenological description.

My point, it should be clear, is this: If we had some argument, akin to McDowell's, that shows that only if the world of abstract truth-makers is revealed to us in intuition can we maintain an entitlement to some non-optional understanding of our cognitive and practical lives, then the fact that I personally do not find what I can recognize as such things on inspection of my intuition experiences would not deter me from believing that they are there anyway. As I have said, I'm not too big on first-person authority, my own included. But absent such an argument, I'm afraid he who lives by phenomenology must die by phenomenology; or anyway, be deadlocked in stalemate.

Notes

[1] Elijah Chudnoff, *Intuition* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 38-39.

[2] Another question is this: what does the perceptual seeming amount to? Does the seeming characterize the content of the experience directly (i.e., the experience is a perceptual seeming that *p*), or does it characterize the attitude of the subject towards that content (i.e., as a content she is inclined to endorse, or at least to entertain on the basis of the experience)? For it seems to me that a perception could be either one without being the other. Thus, a duck-rabbit representation seems to be a duck, but may not so seem to someone to whom it seems to be a rabbit, who may be induced to no attitude at all towards the proposition that it presents a duck. And a subject could react to an experience as if it perceptually suggests to her or inclines her to believe that there is a cat on the mat even when the perceptual content of the experience is not of a seeming cat on a mat. Chudnoff denies that perceptions are believings or inclinations to believe, in part because one can have a perception representing that p without being the least inclined to believe that p. But that doesn't settle this issue, since there are attitudes towards contents (entertaining, wondering whether, refusing to accept that) that are neither beliefs nor inclinations to believe. I am not sure what if anything hangs on the question how we are to understand what it is for a perception to make it perceptually seem to one that p, but I'd prefer to know just the same.

[3] Another alternative is understanding-based views of intuition, which Chudnoff also discusses in detail, but which limitations of space regrettably prohibit my addressing.

[4] I confess I find his dialectic here a bit perplexing. Chudnoff claims that to refute the "yet less than judgments" view, it would suffice to refute (DoxI2):

> DoxI2: Necessarily: if x judges, or has an inclination to judge, that *p*, then x has an intuition that *p*.

I do not see how that would refute the yet less than judgments view. As I understand it, the view is that when one has an intuition that p, then, suitably supplemented, one will judge or be inclined to judge that p. That doesn't seem to be or to entail the claim that all judgments or inclinations to judge must follow from intuitions. Moreover, as Chudnoff remarks, DoxI2 is easy to refute. I might be inclined to believe p for any number of reasons without having the intuition that p. And even if we were narrow the scope of DoxI2 to eliminate inclinations to judge whose etiologies lie in memory, perception, testimony, even brainwashing, chemistry, or a knock on the head, I don't see why the only other possible etiology would have to be intuition. But I don't see what that has to do with the

claim of the yet less than judgment view that intuitions, when they occur, and less than judgments and at most contribute to their etiology. Perhaps the reason Chudnoff directs his argument he offers officially at Dox I2 is to preserve a structural parallel between the arguments against the doxastic views of perception and intuition. But in any event, it seems clear that the real target of the argument is the yet less than judgment view.

[5] Chudnoff, *Intuition*, 49.

[6] Chudnoff, *Intuition*, 50.

[7] I note here a possible tension between this remark and Chudnoff's later discussion (§§7.2ff) of differentiation—the way in which what is presented in presentational intuitive phenomenology, like what is presented in presentational perceptual phenomenology, is foregrounded against the backdrop of what accompanies it. It is worth noting in any event that the discussion of differentiation can't be used to rebut my worries that the supposed truth-makers are not actually present to phenomenological awareness. That discussion concerns the process by which they could become so when they do; that there is a way of understanding how objects could become foregrounded, hence noticed, does nothing to support the claim that they are in fact foregrounded when they are not noticed.

[8] John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

[9] In "Avoiding the Myth of the Given," McDowell reports a change of mind about this, claiming that experiential contents are concept involving but not propositional. Instead, they are specifically intuitional contents, in which the concepts involved are not discursively articulated, as they are in (and by) judgment. John McDowell, "Avoiding the Myth of the Given" in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 256-272.