When we do philosophy we are often arguing over judgments, over the application of concepts: e.g., is such and such a case of knowledge? Is such and such immoral? Is such and such properly described as a right or a privilege? In trying to answer these questions people rely on their intuitions – a term which, in this context, means a basic tendency to judge that this particular instance *is* a case of knowledge, or that this particular instance *is* a case of the immoral, etc. When people discuss such questions and find they cannot agree on these basic judgments they often feel forced to simply acknowledge the fact that they disagree and declare themselves to be at an impasse. They may then admit that – at this point in the discussion – all they are really doing is trading intuitions.

One traditional way of avoiding this impasse is by inventing new situations – imaginary scenarios – which provide us with intuitions which favour a certain disputed interpretation of a familiar concept. For example Descartes’ evil demon presents an imaginary scenario in which our intuitions about what we can know are coerced in a certain direction (Dennett calls such stories “intuition pumps” [1992, p. 398]). In this paper I shall investigate the legitimacy of this method of arguing.

Parfit, for one, uses this method frequently. He defends it as a method of discovery (1984, p. 200) but he recognizes that the method is not above suspicion. He mentions that both Wittgenstein and Quine regarded it as illegitimate. He quotes Quine as follows:

The method of science fiction has its uses in philosophy, but . . . I wonder whether the limits of the method are properly heeded. To seek what is ‘logically required’ for sameness of person under unprecedented circumstances is to suggest that words have some logical force beyond what our past needs have invested them with. (1984, p. 200)

Wittgenstein puts the point more generally in *Zettel*:

It is as if our concepts involved a scaffolding of facts. That would presumably mean: If you imagine certain facts otherwise, describe them otherwise than the way they are, then, you can no longer imagine the application of certain concepts, because the rules for their application have no analogue in the new circumstances. A law is given for human beings, and a jurisprudent may well be capable of drawing consequences for any case that ordinarily comes his way; thus the law evidently has its use, makes sense. Nevertheless its validity presupposes all sorts of things, and if the being that he is to judge is quite deviant from ordinary human beings, then e.g., the decision whether he has done a deed with evil intent will become not difficult but (simply) impossible. (1967, §350 p. 64e)

Wiggins in *Sameness and Substance* also expresses some reservations about the value of thought experiments:

The possibilities of possible possibilities corresponding to these thought experiments may or may not be inconceivable *modulo* the basic or derived laws of the physical world; but they disrupt the expectations on which individuation depends and they disturb the application of the generalizations about the relation of animal and environment whose instantiation by substances sustains definitely their status as persons. (1980, p. 178, note 34)

In the same vein Wiggins notes that:

For me, or for anyone who is willing to be party to the doctrine of individuation that the naturalistic conception of persons makes possible, it seems immensely important that, at the limit, such thought experiments denature the human subject, and create the prospect that, in place of an animal organism with a clear principle of individuation, we shall find some day that we have an entity whose identity has become a matter not of discovery but of interpretation (or even stipulation). (Ibid)

Dennett also inveighs against imaginary cases which are presented as if the situation which they describe were possible in principle. In the case of the brain-in-a-vat he makes the following point:

In the standard thought experiment, it is obvious that the scientists would have their hands full providing the nerve stumps from all your senses with just the right stimulations to carry off the trickery, but philosophers have assumed for the sake of argument that however technically difficult the task might be, it is 'possible in principle'. One should be leery of these possibilities in principle. It is possible in principle to build a stainless steel ladder to the moon, and to write out in alphabetical order, all intelligible English conversations consisting of less than a thousand words. But neither of these are remotely possible in fact and sometimes an impossibility in fact is theoretically more interesting than a possibility in principle, as we shall see. (1992, p. 4)

Wittgenstein, Quine, Wiggins and Dennett warn against this style of argument but, despite these warnings, there is a lot of it about. Clearly this method of arguing is one of the mainstays of philosophical debate.

3. CRITICIZING THE METHOD: TWO APPROACHES

Quine and Wittgenstein favour the view that the method is faulty because it asks us to apply a concept in a novel setting. They argue that once we