

Philosophy 2<sup>2</sup>3<sup>3</sup>: Intuitions and Philosophy  
Fall 2009  
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1pm - 2:15pm  
Library 209

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## Class 11 - Epistemic Relativism

### I. Worries about differing intuitions

Weinberg, Nichols and Stich (WNS) examine the construction of epistemological theories in the light of worries related to the ones we have seen.

We have already discussed much of the material at the beginning of their article, including the normative aspect of epistemology and the general worries about intuitions and rationality.

Among the questions we have raised about the evidence for irrationality we have seen is whether the tendency to make faulty inductive inferences has any ramifications for philosophy.

Such evidence supports the broad claim that people are necessarily rational.

But as we saw, that claim was never very plausible.

The obvious place to look for philosophical ramifications of differences in intuitions is in value theory, especially moral philosophy.

In ethics, our intuitions about right and wrong seem to play an especially prominent role.

WNS present a result from Haidt et al. regarding sexual behavior with chickens.

Across cultures, people with lower socio-economic status find that behavior morally reprehensible.

People with higher socio-economic status find that behavior amoral.

Such differences may, but need not, undermine claims that philosophers can reach universally valid moral theories.

One possibility is that they form defeasible starting points in the quest for reflective equilibrium, and that one or other of the claims will be abandoned in a mature moral theory.

Still, it seems reasonable to ask consider the evidence about differing moral intuitions, and to ask whether it has any effect on our moral theories.

We will return to the question of how differences in moral intuitions effect ethics, which is not the concern of the WNS article.

WNS present the sex-with-chickens case as evidence for differences in the ways that people form beliefs. Their goal is to support the claim that standard approaches to epistemology lead to different theories for different people or groups.

This phenomenal is called epistemic relativism.

WNS further argue that some resulting versions of epistemic relativism are unacceptable.

They present a variety of evidence of cultural and socio-economic variations in epistemic intuitions.

In order to assess their claim that standard approaches lead to an unacceptable epistemic relativism, we ought to have some background on the epistemological issues under consideration: the debate between internalism vs externalism, and the claim that knowledge is justified true belief.

### II. Epistemology: internalism and externalism

For the purposes of distinguishing between epistemological internalism and externalism, consider the standard view, which traces as far back as Plato, that knowledge is justified true belief.

We will discuss difficulties with this standard view, in §III.

An epistemological internalist says that in order to know something, one must have either awareness of, or at least access to, one's justification for that belief.

For example, I know that the Giants and the Jets each won their games this past weekend.

I came to know it by watching parts of those games, and reading about them.

In contrast, if I were to claim to know that Madonna has a secret stash of Milky Ways in the back of her freezer, you would be right to doubt my claim unless I could explain how I came to know about the candy bars.

It seems essential to claims both that I know something and that I have a JTB about something that I am aware of, or can come to be aware of, my grounds for knowing or having a JTB.

Internalism is thus closely allied with what has come to be known as the KK thesis: to know something, one must know that one knows it.

Internalism is a broader claim, for it holds even for justified beliefs, even if they fall short of knowledge.

One problem with internalism is that we sometimes lack access to the actual grounds for our beliefs.

For example, if asked what the capital of Illinois is, I am likely to reply, "Springfield."

I have never been to Springfield.

I don't know why I know that it is the capital.

One could suppose that I received this piece of information through reliable testimony: reading it in a book, or doing a state-capital jigsaw puzzle.

My belief is justified and true, and it seems like I know that fact.

But, I have no access to the grounds of that belief.

In response to that worry about internalism, externalists drop the requirement that the knower (or JTB holder) have access to the justification.

An externalist holds on to the claim that to know something, we have to be justified.

But, we need not remember, or have the ability to remember, why we are justified.

For more on externalism and internalism, see entries in the Internet Encyclopedia:

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/int-ext/>

The Stanford Encyclopedia: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-intext/#Bib>

And, for the more ambitious, Hilary Kornblith's book, *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*. Cambridge. MIT Press, 2001.

### III. Epistemology: Gettier

The internalism/externalism debate arose in the wake of Edmund Gettier's short but influential 1963 paper on [whether knowledge is justified true belief](#).

The Gettier paper presents two examples of justified true beliefs that we would not want to call knowledge.

In the first case, Smith believes that the man who will get a job has ten coins in his pocket because he believes (on good evidence) that Jones will get the job and he also believes that Jones has ten coins in his pocket (because he counted them).

Smith does not know how many coins he has in his own pocket.

It turns out, though, that Smith will get the job, and that Smith has ten coins in his pocket.

So, Smith's belief is true, and justified, but not knowledge.

In the second case, Smith believes that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona, since he believes that Jones owns a Ford and he knows the logical rule of addition.

He does not know where Brown is, but he has good evidence that Jones owns a Ford.

It turns out, though, that Jones is just leasing his Ford, but Brown is, in fact, in Barcelona.

So, his disjunctive belief is true, and justified, but not knowledge.

Since Gettier has presented cases in which a person has a JTB but does not know, it seems likely that the JTB account falls short.

Note that the Gettier cases differ from the Springfield case.

I do know that Springfield is the capital of Illinois, I just can't access the reason for my belief.

But, in the Gettier case, Smith doesn't know the claims that he believes.

In the years since Gettier's paper, additional conditions were proposed to fix the JTB account.

These need not concern us, here.

#### IV. Intuition-Driven Romanticism

WNS present data to undermine a strategy they call Intuition Driven Romanticism (IDR) for discovering or testing epistemic norms.

(You can tell they don't like the position, since they give it a funny name.)

IDR is a family of strategies for justification with the following characteristics:

- i. They take intuitions as input.
- ii. They produce normative epistemic claims.
- iii. The output is sensitive to the input; variations in input will produce variations in output.

Our focus has been on one particular version of IDR: the strategy of seeking reflective equilibrium.

WNS also discuss Goldman's work on J-rules, which, for our purposes, is relevantly similar.

Any epistemological theory which gives a significant role to our intuitions about what we know is in question.

In the Stich and Nisbett and Shafir articles, we saw evidence that individual's inductive inferential practices varied.

But, we worried that such evidence had little philosophical import.

Stich claimed that it is possible that variations in epistemic intuitions could lead to epistemic relativism.

One possible response to such claims is to deny the phenomenon, to argue that there is no evidence for such differences in intuitions.

WNS consider the position of this interlocutor as a motivation for the current paper.

While it may well be logically possible that there are groups of people whose reasoning patterns and epistemic intuitions differ systematically from our own, there is no reason to suppose that it is nomologically or psychologically possible (22).

WNS write the article to provide evidence for Stich's claim, to respond to such a critic.

## V. The evidence

In the Truetemp cases, Charles, John, and Kal have their brains rewired so that they are reliable indicators of ambient temperature, even though they do not know that they are.

Charles receives the rewiring by a falling rock.

John is an unwitting subject in an experiment sanctioned by his community's elders.

Kal is a member of a community all of whose members are rewired by a radioactive meteor.

When they form beliefs about the temperature, they are true, even though they do not know this fact.

Subjects (Westerners and East Asians) are asked to report on whether Charles, John, and Kal know the temperature, or only believe it.

Since none of the three know that their beliefs about the temperature are reliably true, epistemic internalists will resist the claim that they know the temperature.

In contrast, externalists will attribute knowledge to them, because we know that the process by which Charles, John, and Kal come to their beliefs is reliable.

In all three cases, the majority of people reported that Charles, John, and Kal only believed, and did not know, the temperature.

Internalism is more popular, in each region, than externalism.

But, East Asian subjects were significantly more internalist than Western subjects in Charles's case.

That significant difference disappeared in the cases of John, where the ability was the result of a socially sanctioned intervention, and Kal, where the ability was a widespread phenomenon.

Differences in intuitions about internalism and externalism seem to depend, to some degree, on social factors.

In the Gettier cases, the reason we standardly withhold knowledge ascriptions to Smith is that the cause of his relevant belief is disconnected from the reason it is true.

Western subjects, agreeing with the standard philosophical literature, withhold ascriptions of knowledge. East Asians and people from the Indian Subcontinent were more likely than not to ascribe knowledge in Gettier-style cases.

Again, intuitions about epistemological theses seem to vary with culture.

Other significant differences between Westerners and people from the Indian subcontinent were found in the cancer conspiracy case and the zebra in the zoo case.

And, significant differences were also found between people of high and low socio-economic status in those two cases.

Since epistemic theories are in part normative, describing what beliefs a person should hold, the resultant epistemic relativism seems undesirable.

It looks as if IDR may be committed to epistemic norms which differ among cultures, and socio-economic classes.

If we are right about epistemic intuitions, then the version of relativism to which IDR strategies lead would entail that the epistemic norms appropriate for the rich are quite different from the epistemic norms for the poor, and that the epistemic norms appropriate for white people are different from the norms appropriate for people of color. And that we take to be quite a preposterous result (35).

## VI. Does the evidence support the hypothesis?

Cultural differences in epistemic intuitions need not yield epistemic relativism.

For, the differences in intuition may not lead to differences in theories.

One question is whether reflective equilibrium satisfies iii.

Are the differences in output sensitive to the differences in input?

What evidence do we have that the differences in intuitions lead to different epistemological theories?

In response to that question, WNS play philosophy volleyball:

The mere fact that Ws EAs, and SCs have different epistemic intuitions is enough to make it plausible that IDR strategies which take these intuitions as inputs would yield significantly different normative pronouncements as output. And this, we think, puts the ball squarely in the court of the defenders of IDR strategies. They must either argue that intuitive differences of the sort we've found would not lead to diverging normative claims, or they must argue that the outputs of an IDR strategy are genuinely normative despite the fact that they are different for different cultures (32).

Shafir's work, though, makes the claim that different intuitions yield different theories less plausible.

In cases of faulty inductive inference, the prominence of basic principles of equity overrode odd preference reversals.

People made inferential errors, but quickly abandoned them upon reflection.

In the robbery case, for example, people decided to compensate both victims equally when the two cases were seen together.

The disjunction effect disappears when it is made apparent.

These observations indicate that what is relevant to philosophical theorizing are not the untutored intuitions of laypersons, but the tutored intuitions of those who think about these matters.

The worry about such intuitions is that, rather than refined, they are corrupted by experience.

WNS worry that epistemic intuitions are dependent on how many philosophy courses one has taken.

Further, it may be the case that there will be different ways to refine/corrupt one's intuitions, so that the results we see here may repeat themselves within communities of philosophers.

This possibility, as WNS state, is subject to further research.

Their goal, in this paper, was modest: to show that such intuitions might diverge, and to make clear that the question is one that demands research:

Our goal has not been to establish that IDR strategies *will* lead to very different (putatively) normative conclusions, but simply to make it plausible that they *might*. The assumption that they won't is an empirical assumption; it is not an assumption that can be made without argument (40).

It is difficult to see what the relevance of this kind of research is, actually.

While it is an empirical question whether there are conflicting epistemological theories, there is no question that there are such conflicts.

There are internalists, and there are externalists.

It is not clear that this difference arises from a flawed, pernicious methodology.

There must be some basis for the different theories.

WNS's claim that different intuitions lead to different theories is more reasonable in the Gettier case. They provided evidence that some groups of people are more willing to ascribe knowledge in situations which are standardly taken, *ex hypothesi*, as not knowledge.

But, making knowledge ascriptions in the Gettier cases does not seem to lead to a different epistemological theory.

Even if we take Smith to have knowledge in those cases, there is an undeniable difference between his status and my status regarding Springfield, and G.E. Moore's status when he claims to know that there is a hand.

Perhaps there is a role in epistemology for the states in which Smith finds himself in the two cases.

But, we don't need much empirical evidence to determine that.

We are looking for the best, most satisfying theory of belief acquisition and justification.

There will be differences among our beliefs.

And, there will likely be differences of opinions about such questions, differences that may be resolved or debated.

WNS seem to think that the mere fact of thinking about these cases somehow corrupts philosophers' abilities to say anything significant about them.

It may well be that upper-middle-class Westerners who have had a few years of graduate training in analytic philosophy do indeed all have strong, modality-linked intuitions about Gettier cases. But since most of the world's population apparently does not share these intuitions, it is hard to see why we should think that these intuitions tell us anything at all about the modal structure of reality or about epistemic norms or indeed about anything else of philosophical interest (38).

But, what besides our intuitions about epistemic norms, along with theories of those norms constructed according to the best principles of theory construction, could tell us anything of philosophical interest?