

## **Metaskepticism: Meditations in Ethno-Epistemology**

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### **Epistemology as Ethnography**

One of us has long been intrigued by the possibility that different groups of people might have very different epistemic intuitions (Stich, 1988, 1990), and a few years ago we learned of two research projects in cross-cultural psychology which suggested that systematic diversity in epistemic intuitions was more than a mere possibility. In one of these projects, Richard Nisbett and his collaborators (Nisbett, 2001) have found large and systematic differences between East Asians and Westerners<sup>6</sup> on a long list of quite basic cognitive processes including perception, attention and memory. These groups also differ in the way they go about describing, predicting and explaining events, in the way they categorize objects and in the way they revise beliefs in the face of new arguments and evidence. Nisbett and his colleagues maintain that these differences “can be loosely grouped together under the heading of holistic vs. analytic thought.” Holistic thought, which predominates among East Asians, is characterized as “involving an orientation to the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships.” Analytic thought, the prevailing pattern among Westerners, is characterized as “involving detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object in order to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object’s behavior.” (Nisbett et al. 2001, p. 293) Westerners also have a stronger sense of agency and independence, while East Asians have a much stronger commitment to social harmony. In East Asian society, the individual feels “very much a part of a large and complex social organism ... where behavioral prescriptions must be followed and role obligations adhered to scrupulously.” (Nisbett et al. 2001, pp. 292-293) As a result of these differences, Nisbett and his colleagues maintain, there is considerable cultural variation in the epistemic practices in these two cultural traditions – people in the two cultures form beliefs and categories, construct arguments, and draw inferences in significantly different ways. Of course, this does not show that there are also cross-cultural differences in epistemic intuitions. But it does suggest that it is a serious empirical possibility, and that it might be worth finding out whether these differences in epistemic practices are associated with parallel differences in epistemic intuitions.

The second research project that attracted our attention looked explicitly at intuitions, though they were moral rather than epistemic intuitions. In an intriguing series of studies, Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators explored the extent to which moral intuitions about events in which no one is harmed track judgments about disgust in people from different cultural and socioeconomic groups (Haidt et al. 1993). For their study they constructed a set of brief stories about victimless activities that were intended to trigger the emotion of disgust. They presented these stories to subjects using a structured interview technique designed to determine whether the subjects found the activities described to be disgusting and also to elicit the subjects’ moral intuitions about the

activities. For instance, in one story, a family's dog is run over and killed by a car, and the family decides to eat the dog. The interviews were administered to both high and low socio-economic status (SES) subjects in Philadelphia and in two cities in Brazil. Though the cultural differences were relatively small, Haidt and colleagues found large differences in moral intuitions between social classes. Low-SES subjects tend to think that eating your dog is seriously morally wrong; high SES subjects don't. Much the same pattern was found with the other scenarios used in the study.

Though neither of these studies directly addresses the issue of group differences in epistemic intuition, the results they reported led us to think that the following pair of hypotheses might well be true:

Hypothesis 1: Epistemic intuitions vary from culture to culture.

Hypothesis 2: Epistemic intuitions vary from one socioeconomic group to another.

For the last two years, we have been conducting a series of experiments designed to test these hypotheses. In designing our experiments, we wanted our intuition probes – the cases that we would ask subjects to judge – to be similar to cases that have actually been used in the recent literature in epistemology. Would different groups show significantly different responses to standard epistemic thought experiments? The answer, it seems, is yes. While the results we have so far are preliminary, they are sufficient, we think, to suggest that there are substantial and systematic differences in the epistemic intuitions of people in different cultures and socioeconomic groups. In Weinberg, Nichols & Stich (forthcoming), we present a detailed account of our studies and results. For present purposes, it will suffice to sketch a few of the highlights.

The internalism/externalism debate has been central to analytic epistemology for decades. Internalism with respect to some epistemically evaluative property (e.g., knowledge) is the view that only factors within an agent's introspective grasp can be relevant to whether the agent's beliefs have that property. Other factors beyond the scope of introspection, such as the reliability of the psychological mechanisms that actually produced the belief, are epistemically external to the agent. In our experiments, we included a number of "Truetemp" cases inspired by Lehrer (1990), designed to explore whether externalist/internalist dimensions of our subjects' intuitions differed in subjects with different cultural backgrounds. Here is one of the questions we presented to our subjects:

One day Charles is suddenly knocked out by a falling rock, and his brain becomes re-wired so that he is always absolutely right whenever he estimates the temperature where he is. Charles is completely unaware that his brain has been altered in this way. A few weeks later, this brain re-wiring leads him to believe that it is 71 degrees in his room. Apart from his estimation, he has no other reasons to think that it is 71 degrees. In fact, it is at that time 71 degrees in his room. Does Charles really know that it was 71 degrees in the room, or does he only believe it?

REALLY KNOWS

ONLY BELIEVES

In this intuition probe, Charles' belief is produced by a reliable mechanism, but it is stipulated that he is completely unaware of this reliability. This makes his reliability epistemically external. Therefore, to the extent that a subject population is unwilling to attribute knowledge in this case, we have evidence that suggests that the group's 'folk epistemology' is internalist. Since the mechanism that leads to Charles' belief is not shared by other members of his community, Nisbett's work suggests that East Asians (EAs), with their strong commitment to social harmony, might be less inclined than individualistic Westerners (Ws) to count Charles' belief as knowledge. And, indeed, we

found that while both EAs and Ws tended to deny knowledge, EA subjects were much more likely to deny knowledge than were Ws.

Another category of examples that has had a tremendous impact on analytic epistemology are “Gettier cases,” in which a person has a true belief for which she has good evidence, though, as it happens, the evidence is false, or only accidentally true, or in some other way warrant-deprived. By their very construction, these cases are in many ways quite similar to unproblematic cases in which a person has good and true evidence for a true belief. Nisbett and his colleagues have shown that EAs are more inclined than Ws to make categorical judgments on the basis of similarity; Ws, on the other hand, are more disposed to focus on causation in describing the world and classifying things. (Norenzayan, Nisbett, Smith, & Kim 1999; Watanabe 1998 & 1999). In many Gettier cases, there is a break in the causal link from the fact that makes the agent’s belief true to her evidence for that belief. This suggests that EAs might be much less inclined than Ws to withhold the attribution of knowledge in Gettier cases. And, indeed, they are. The intuition probe we used to explore cultural differences on Gettier cases was the following:

Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen, and he is also not aware that Jill has replaced it with a Pontiac, which is a different kind of American car. Does Bob really know that Jill drives an American car, or does he only believe it?

#### REALLY KNOWS ONLY BELIEVES

This probe produced a striking difference between the groups. While a large majority of Ws give the standard answer in the philosophical literature, viz. “Only Believes,” a majority of EAs have the opposite intuition – they said that Bob really knows.

The data we’ve presented so far suggests that Westerners and East Asians have significantly different epistemic intuitions. What about people in other cultures? We know of no experimental studies of cross cultural differences in epistemic practices that are as rich and detailed as those of Nisbett and his colleagues. However, for some years Richard Shweder and his colleagues have been assembling evidence indicating that the thought processes of some groups of people on the Indian sub-continent are quite different from those of Westerners. (Shweder, 1991) In some respects, the account of Indian thought that Shweder offers is rather similar to the account that Nisbett offers of East Asian thought – holism looms large in both accounts – though in other respects they are quite different. So one might suspect that the epistemic intuitions of people from the Indian sub-continent (SCs) would be in some ways similar to those of EAs. And indeed they are. Like the EA subjects, SC subjects were much more likely than W subjects to attribute knowledge in a Gettier case.

When we first analyzed these data, we found them quite unsettling, since it seemed perfectly obvious to us that the people in Gettier cases don’t have knowledge. But the results from our studies suggest that an important part of the explanation of our own clear intuitions about these cases is the fact that we were raised in a Western culture. Nisbett was likewise surprised by his findings of cross-cultural differences in epistemic practices. In a recent review article, Nisbett and colleagues write:

Almost two decades ago, Richard E. Nisbett wrote a book with Lee Ross entitled, modestly, *Human Inference* (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Roy D’Andrade, a distinguished cognitive anthropologist, read the book and told ... Nisbett he thought it was a “good ethnography.” The author was shocked and dismayed. But we now wholeheartedly agree

with D'Andrade's contention about the limits of research conducted in a single culture. Psychologists who choose not to do cross-cultural psychology may have chosen to be ethnographers instead (Nisbett et al. 2001, p. 307).

Our results suggest that philosophers who rely on their own intuitions about matters epistemic, and those of their colleagues, may have inadvertently made a similar choice. They too have chosen to be ethnographers; what they are doing is ethno-epistemology.

### **The Core Epistemology Hypothesis**

If epistemic intuitions are indeed culturally local, it poses a threat to the claim that skepticism is "primitive and inevitable." For to the extent that Western skepticism relies on culturally local intuitions, its appeal will also be culturally local. But the evidence reported in Section 2 poses only an indirect threat to arguments for skepticism, for while that evidence indicates that some epistemic intuitions may be culturally local, we have not yet offered any evidence about the sort of skeptical intuitions that play a crucial role in arguments for skepticism. Philosophers who think that skepticism's appeal is universal might suggest that while Gettier intuitions and Truetemp intuitions are culturally local, skeptical intuitions are less variable. Indeed, for all we have said, skeptical intuitions might be part of a universal core of epistemic intuitions, a core shared by just about everyone.

The hypothesis that there may be a core set of universal epistemic intuitions is one that we think deserves careful empirical scrutiny. In our own studies, we found that on one crucial probe, there were no statistically significant differences among any of the groups we looked at. For all of our subject groups we included a question designed to determine whether subjects treat mere subjective certainty as knowledge. The question we used was the following:

Dave likes to play a game with flipping a coin. He sometimes gets a "special feeling" that the next flip will come out heads. When he gets this "special feeling", he is right about half the time, and wrong about half the time. Just before the next flip, Dave gets that "special feeling", and the feeling leads him to believe that the coin will land heads. He flips the coin, and it does land heads. Did Dave really know that the coin was going to land heads, or did he only believe it?

REALLY KNOWS                      ONLY BELIEVES

There was no significant difference between the Western and East Asian subjects on this question; similarly, in our studies of socio-economic groups, we found no difference on this question between high and low SES groups. In all groups almost none of our subjects judged that this was a case of knowledge.

Though obviously much more research is needed, these results are compatible with the hypothesis that some epistemic intuitions are universal.

### **The Ethnography of Skeptical Intuitions**

If there is a universal core of epistemic intuitions, are skeptical intuitions among them? In this section we'll offer evidence suggesting that, for some skeptical intuitions at least, the answer is no". In one of previous sections, we set out three hypotheses about potential sources of diversity in epistemic intuitions. We proposed that epistemic intuitions might vary as a function of culture and SES. Data we have recently collected indicates that skeptical intuitions vary as a function of all of these factors.

These data indicate that there are significant differences between SES groups in their tendencies toward skeptical intuitions, and both findings are compatible with the hypothesis that high SES groups cleave to higher minimum standards of knowledge than low SES groups.

In our cross-cultural studies, we presented students with this variant:

Mike is a young man visiting the zoo with his son, and when they come to the zebra cage, Mike points to the animal and says, “that’s a zebra.” Mike is right — it is a zebra. However, as the older people in his community know, there are lots of ways that people can be tricked into believing things that aren’t true. Indeed, the older people in the community know that it’s possible that zoo authorities could cleverly disguise mules to look just like zebras, and people viewing the animals would not be able to tell the difference. If the animal that Mike called a zebra had really been such a cleverly painted mule, Mike still would have thought that it was a zebra. Does Mike really know that the animal is a zebra, or does he only believe that it is?

REALLY KNOWS    ONLY BELIEVES

Using this probe, we found a significant difference between Western and Subcontinental subjects. One possible explanation of these data is that SCs, like low SES Westerners, regard knowledge as less demanding than do High SES Westerners. SC and Low SES subjects thus appear to be significantly less susceptible to skeptical intuitions, at least in these cases. These findings contrast sharply with our evidence on EAs. We did not find significant differences between EAs and High SES Ws on the Zebra case.

### **Some Meta-Skeptical Conclusions**

What conclusions can be drawn from these studies? The first and most obvious conclusion is that, though the empirical exploration of epistemic intuitions, and of philosophical intuitions more generally, is still in its infancy, the evidence currently available suggests that all of our initial hypotheses may well be true. Epistemic intuitions, including skeptical intuitions, appear to vary systematically as a function of the cultural background and the socio-economic status. We want to emphasize that all the results we have reported should be regarded as quite preliminary. To make a suitably rich and compelling case for our hypotheses, it will be important to replicate and extend the findings we have reported. But our data thus far certainly lend support to the claim that there is a great deal of diversity in epistemic intuitions, and that a substantial part of that diversity is due to differences in cultural background and SES.

If that’s right, and if, as we contended in section 1, the defense of many of the premises used in arguments for skepticism comes to rest on an explicit or implicit appeal to intuition, then we can also conclude that the appeal of these skeptical arguments will be much more local than many philosophers suppose. For if people in different cultural and SES groups do not share “our” intuitions (i.e. the intuitions of the typical analytic philosopher who is white, Western, high SES and has had lots of philosophical training) then they are unlikely to be as convinced or distressed as “we” are by arguments whose premises seem plausible only if one has the intuitions common in our very small cultural and intellectual tribe. Pace Stroud there is no reason to think that skepticism “appeals to something deep in our nature.” Rather, it seems, its appeal is very much a product of our culture, our social status and our education!

We do not, of course, deny that some people (ourselves included!) find it very hard to loosen the grip of skeptical intuitions. Along with most high SES Western philosophers, we find many skeptical intuitions to be obvious and compelling. However, we are inclined to think that the lesson to be drawn from our cross-cultural studies is that,

however obvious they may seem, these intuitions are simply not to be trusted. If the epistemic intuitions of people in different groups disagree, they can't all be true. The fact that epistemic intuitions vary systematically with culture and SES indicates that these intuitions are caused (in part) by culturally local phenomena. And there is no reason to think that the culturally local phenomena that cause our intuitions track the truth any better than the culturally local phenomena that cause intuitions that differ from ours. Our predicament is in some ways analogous to the predicament of a person who is raised in a homogeneous and deeply religious culture and finds the truth of certain religious claims to be obvious or compelling. When such a person discovers that other people do not share his intuitions, he may well come to wonder why his intuitions are any more likely to be true than theirs. On second thought, our situation is a bit worse. The religious person might rest content with the thought that, for some reason or other God has chosen to cause his group to have religious intuitions that track the truth. Few philosophers will rest content with the parallel thought about their epistemic intuitions.

We are not, we should stress, defending a generalized skepticism that challenges the use of all intuitions in philosophy. Rather, our skepticism is focused on those intuitions that differ systematically from one social group to another. There is, of course, a sense in which the philosophical literature on skepticism also supports the conclusion that some of our epistemic intuitions are not to be trusted, since, as the quote from Cohen in Section 1 illustrates, much of that literature is devoted to showing that our epistemic intuitions appear to support a logically inconsistent set of propositions, and to arguing about which of these intuitions should be ignored. But our findings raise a quite different problem. For even if some individual or group had a completely consistent set of intuitions, the fact that these intuitions are determined, to a significant degree, by one's cultural, SES and educational background, and the fact that people in other groups have systematically different intuitions, raises the question of why the folks who have these consistent intuitions should trust any of them.

One way in which a philosopher might resist our contention that the systematic cultural variation in epistemic intuitions indicates that these intuitions are not to be trusted would be to argue that intuitive differences of the sort that we've reported are an indication that the people offering the intuitions have different epistemic concepts. In his recent book, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, Frank Jackson clearly endorses the view that people whose epistemic intuitions differ on philosophically important cases should be counted as having different epistemic concepts.

I have occasionally run across people who resolutely resist the Gettier cases. Sometimes it has seemed right to accuse them of confusion... but sometimes it is clear that they are not confused; what we then learn from the stand-off is simply that they use the word 'knowledge' to cover different cases from most of us. In these cases it is, it seems to me, misguided to accuse them of error (unless they go on to say that their concept of knowledge is ours). (Jackson, 1998, 32)

So for Jackson, (unconfused) East Asians or Indians who insist that the people described in Gettier cases do have knowledge are not disagreeing with those of us who think they don't. Rather, they are simply using the term 'knowledge' to express a different concept. And, in all likelihood, an East Asian or Indian is right to insist that (as he uses the term) people in Gettier cases do have knowledge, just as, in all likelihood, we are right to insist that (as we use the term), they don't. Though Jackson focuses on the example of Gettier cases, we think it is clear that he would say much the same about people who react differently to the sorts of skeptical intuition probes. Those people, too, if they are not simply confused, should be viewed as having different epistemic concepts.

Thus there is no real disagreement between people who react differently to skeptical intuition probes, and in all likelihood their intuitions are all true.

One important consequence of this assumption is that it undermines our attempt to argue from the results of our cross cultural studies of epistemic intuition to the conclusion that those intuitions are not to be trusted. Crucial to our argument was the claim that, since epistemic intuitions of people in different groups disagree, they can't all be true. But if Jackson is right about concepts, then our subjects are not really disagreeing at all; they are simply using the word 'knowledge' (or 'know') to express different concepts. So their intuitively supported claims about knowledge (or, to be more precise, about what they call 'knowledge'), including those claims used in arguments for skepticism, can all be true, and as Jackson would have it, in all likelihood they are.

But while Jackson's account of concept individuation makes it easier to maintain that the premises of skeptical arguments are true, it makes it harder to see why the conclusions of those arguments are interesting or worrisome. To see the point, we need only note that, if Jackson is right about concepts and if we are right about the influence of culture and SES on epistemic intuitions, then it follows that the term 'knowledge' is used to express lots of concepts. East Asians, Indians and High SES Westerners all have different concepts; High and Low SES Westerners have different concepts.

In the philosophical tradition, skepticism is taken to be worrisome because it denies that knowledge is possible, and that's bad because knowledge, it is assumed, is something very important. On Plato's view, "wisdom and knowledge are the highest of human things," (Plato (1892/1937, 352) and many people, both philosophers and ordinary folk, would agree. But obviously, if there are many concepts of knowledge, and if these concepts have different extensions, it can't be the case that all of them are the highest of human things. If Jackson is right about concepts, then the arguments for skepticism in the philosophical tradition pose a serious challenge to the possibility of having what High SES, white Westerners with lots of philosophical training call 'knowledge'. But those arguments give us no reason to think that we can't have what other people – East Asians, Indians, Low SES people, or scientists who have never studied philosophy – would call 'knowledge'. And, of course, those skeptical arguments give us no reason at all to think that what High SES white Western philosophers call 'knowledge' is any better, or more important, or more desirable, or more useful than what these other folks call 'knowledge', or that it is any closer to "the highest of human things." Without some reason to think that what white, Western, High SES philosophers call 'knowledge' is any more valuable, desirable, or useful than any of the other commodities that other groups call 'knowledge' it is hard to see why we should care if we can't have it.

Let us close with a brief review of the main themes of the paper. Arguments for skepticism have occupied a central place in Western philosophy. And it's easy to see why.

Skeptical arguments threaten dramatic conclusions from premises that are intuitively compelling to many philosophers, including the three of us. A number of Western philosophers maintain that the intuitions invoked in skeptical arguments have nothing to do with being Western or a philosopher. Rather, these intuitions are regarded as intrinsic to human nature and cross-culturally universal. We've argued that our evidence poses a serious challenge to this universalist stance. Our data suggest that some of the most familiar skeptical intuitions are far from universal – they vary as a function of culture, SES, and educational background. We find that this evidence generates a nagging sense that our own skeptical intuitions are parochial vestiges of our culture and education. Had we been raised in a different culture or SES group or had a different educational background, we would have been much less likely to find these intuitions compelling. This historical arbitrariness of our skeptical intuitions leads us to be skeptical that we can trust these intuitions to be true; for we see no reason to think that our cultural and

intellectual tribe should be so privileged. One might, as we've noted, maintain that different cultural, SES and educational groups simply have different concepts of knowledge, and that on our concept of knowledge, the skeptical intuitions are true. Although this response is available, it saps the drama from the skeptical conclusion. It's not clear that skepticism would have held such a grip over the minds of epistemologists if the skeptic is reduced to the claim that the external world can't be "known", according to the concept of knowledge used by the relatively small cultural group to which we happen to belong. As one of us wrote some years ago, "The best first response to the skeptic who maintains that we cannot achieve certainty, ...knowledge or what have you, is not to argue that we can. Rather, it is to ask, so what?" (Stich, 1990, 26)