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Précis of *Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition*

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Abstract

In this précis of *Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition*, I highlight the main lines of argument in the book and provide an outline of each of the book's three parts. I explain how: Part I lays out an argument for radical skepticism and objects to one of the two main ways of responding to it; Part II presents my version of the other main way of responding to that skeptical argument (a version that relies heavily on epistemic intuition); and Part III defends epistemic intuition (and, thereby, my response to radical skepticism) from several important objections.

Keywords

commonsense–intuition–particularism–seemings–skepticism–underdetermination

Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition (Bergmann 2021) is a presentation and defense of a commonsense response to radical skepticism—a response inspired by the great eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, Thomas Reid. The book consists of three parts, which I will first summarize succinctly and then unpack in more detail that will include explanations of some of the terminology used in the initial brief summary.

Part I is called “Underdetermination and Inferential Anti-Skepticism” because (i) it presents the framework of the book in terms of an *underdetermination* argument for radical skepticism, to which the two most popular responses are inferential anti-skepticism and noninferential anti-skepticism, and (ii) it explains why *inferential anti-skepticism* fails as a response to radical skepticism. Having shown, in Part I, why inferential anti-skepticism should be set aside, Part II (“Particularist Noninferential Anti-Skepticism”) turns to the other main response to radical skepticism—i.e., *noninferential anti-skepticism*—and lays

out and defends an intuitionist *particularist* version of it. (The particularism in question is the sort that Roderick Chisholm [1982] contrasts with methodism.) This intuitionist particularist version of the noninferential anti-skeptical response to radical skepticism relies explicitly on epistemic intuitions, which are treated as having significant evidential weight. (Epistemic intuitions are like moral intuitions except that they are about epistemic matters rather than moral matters.) Part III is called “Skepticism about Epistemic Intuition” and it considers and responds to reasons for skepticism about epistemic intuition, the belief source on which the reply to radical skepticism in Part II so heavily relies. In what follows, I’ll say a little more about each of the book’s three parts.

Part I consists of Chapters Two through Five.¹ Chapter Two, on skepticism about perception, explains the rationale for focusing on *underdetermination* arguments for such skepticism, rather than on other kinds of arguments for it. (What’s distinctive about underdetermination arguments is that they begin by emphasizing that our evidence *underdetermines* the truth of our beliefs insofar as it is consistent with their falsity. These skeptical arguments then say that such beliefs aren’t justified unless that entailment gap—between evidence and belief—can be bridged via good nondeductive reasoning. They conclude that, because we aren’t aware of any such reasoning, the beliefs in question aren’t justified.) Chapter Two emphasizes that, because our sensory experience evidence doesn’t entail the truth of our perceptual beliefs, the two main ways to resist the underdetermination argument against perception are noninferential anti-skepticism and inferential anti-skepticism. The latter says that even though our evidence doesn’t *entail* the truth of our perceptual beliefs, we are able to infer their truth via good *nondeductive* reasoning from the existence or occurrence of our sensory-experience evidence for them. Chapter Three considers various attempts to lay out such reasoning and argues that they all fail. Chapters Four and Five show how this same dynamic—where underdetermination arguments for skepticism are inadequately addressed by inferential anti-skepticism—plays out similarly, not only where one would expect it to (i.e., with memory skepticism), but also where one wouldn’t expect it to, namely, with skepticism about the *a priori*, skepticism about introspection, skepticism about reasoning, and global skepticism. (Each of these kinds of skepticism is a version of *radical* skepticism insofar as it suggests that a large number of beliefs that most people take for granted are unjustified.)

Part II, which consists of Chapters Six through Ten, takes the failure of inferential anti-skepticism (discussed in Part I) as a partial reason for looking to noninferential anti-skepticism for help in responding to underdetermination

¹ Chapter One is the Introduction.

arguments for radical skepticism. According to noninferential anti-skepticism, our noninferential perceptual, memory, *a priori*, and introspective beliefs can be justified despite the fact that we can't see (independently of accepting those beliefs) how the evidence on which they are based entails them or makes them probable via good nondeductive reasoning. The version of noninferential anti-skepticism laid out in Chapters Six through Eight is, as I mentioned above, *intuitionist particularism*. It's a version of particularism insofar as it rejects the methodist approach of giving more weight to attractive general epistemic principles laying out what is required for a belief to be justified (i.e., to a *method* for determining whether our beliefs count as justified) than to immediate judgments about the epistemic status of *particular* beliefs as justified or as unjustified. Instead, it gives more weight to our immediate judgments about the epistemic status of particular beliefs than to intuitively plausible general epistemic principles, which are often used as premises in skeptical arguments. Particularists (unlike methodists) are not persuaded by skeptical arguments relying on such principles and aimed at showing that beliefs we usually think of as justified are, in fact, not justified. Instead, particularists reject such skeptical arguments (and the epistemic principles that are their premises) because their conclusions conflict with our more plausible immediate judgments about the justification of particular beliefs.

I've just explained the sense in which intuitionist particularism is particularist. What makes it intuitionist is that it says the evidence on which both particularists and methodists rely, in making their characteristic judgments, consists of epistemic intuitions. Epistemic intuitions are seemings about epistemic matters just as moral intuitions are seemings about moral matters. Seemings are experiences of things seeming to us a certain way. They're distinct from both beliefs and inclinations to believe, which can be based on or caused by seemings. As William Tolhurst puts it, "seemings have the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things are" (Tolhurst 1998: 298–299). This revelatory phenomenology makes them what John Bengson (2015: 708) calls "presentational" states—i.e., states that feel like they are presenting reality to us as being a certain way.²

Thus, intuitionist particularist noninferential anti-skepticism rejects underdetermination arguments for radical skepticism by relying on particularist epistemic intuitions conflicting with their conclusions. These particularist epistemic intuitions are treated as having greater evidential weight than the methodist epistemic intuitions supporting the general epistemic principles serving as premises in those skeptical arguments. And,

² In Chapter Seven, I defend this talk of seemings against various objections.

as I explain in the latter part of Chapter Eight, this intuitionist particularist noninferential anti-skepticism can be endorsed by both internalists and externalists in epistemology, although they will develop it in different ways. The final two chapters in Part II (Chapters Nine and Ten) defend my intuitionist particularist version of noninferential anti-skepticism against four common objections. The first two objections argue that my favored response to radical skepticism leads to bad results such as approving of problematic epistemic circularity and of ridiculous beliefs. The second two objections argue that my proposed response to radical skepticism promotes epistemic irresponsibility and wrongly supposes that we can have good evidence for the falsity of radical skepticism. In each case, I respond by showing that any epistemic intuitions we have in support of these four objections are outweighed by stronger epistemic intuitions to the contrary.

The book closes with the three chapters constituting Part III, in which I defend the sort of epistemic intuition on which I rely in Part II from three skeptical objections. The first objection is an underdetermination argument against epistemic intuition. The second objection is based on the existence of disagreement when it comes to epistemic intuition. And the third is based on work in experimental philosophy that allegedly casts doubt on the reliability of epistemic intuition. In each case, I conclude that the skeptical objection in question is unsuccessful.

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