

Class 13 - Epistemic Relativism  
Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions"

I. Divergent Intuitions and Theory-Construction

Weinberg, Nichols and Stich (WNS) examine variations in intuitions relevant to the construction of epistemological theories.

In particular, they are interested in the normative aspect of epistemology, as opposed to what they call descriptive, evaluative, or ameliorative projects.

Epistemology has a normative aspect in that we are interested in what people should believe given the evidence they have.

The other aspects of epistemology, concerning what we do believe, how to compare what we believe with what we should believe, and how to improve our beliefs, are all philosophically subordinate to the normative aspect.

We have seen evidence for variation in people's beliefs about inference and in their inferential practices. Some philosophers take this evidence to support the claim that human beings are irrational. Among the questions we should raise about the evidence for irrationality is whether the tendency to make faulty inductive inferences has any ramifications for philosophy proper.

One 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 undermine claims that philosophers can reach universally valid moral theories.

WNS imply that the divergence of moral intuitions has important consequences for theories of ethics.

If intuitions were taken as infallibly-true data, then divergent intuitions would be highly destructive.

But the defender of the method of reflective equilibrium accepts, even embraces, the existence of divergent intuitions at the beginning of moral reasoning.

They are supposed to form defeasible starting points in the quest for reflective equilibrium.

Some initially-intuitive 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 affect 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 phenomenon is called epistemic relativism.

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

As evidence, they present a variety 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.

I discuss difficulties with this standard view in the next section of these notes.

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 Rays and the Cardinals each won the last regular-season games they played this year.

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

In contrast, if I were to claim to know that Katy Perry 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.

If I am to know some claim, or if I am to have a JTB about some proposition, I should be aware of, or be able to 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: it holds 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](#) or in [The Stanford Encyclopedia](#).

For the more ambitious, see 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. Smith believes that claim 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. Smith believes that claim because 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.

Gettier presents cases in which a person has a JTB but does not know. Thus, the JTB account of knowledge falls short. Note that the Gettier cases differ from the Springfield case. I do know, we may suppose, that Springfield is the capital of Illinois. I just can't access the reason for my belief. 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. Among these additional conditions are a proposed causal criterion: the justification must be causally related to the belief in the right way. Such criteria 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. 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. J-rules are criteria for epistemic guidance, setting epistemic norms. There might be variations among different people's J-rules, so we need a criterion for choosing the proper ones. These criteria depend on our intuitions just as reflective equilibrium does.

The correct criterion of rightness is the one that comports with the conception of justification that is "embraced by everyday thought and language." To test a criterion, we consider the judgments it would entail about specific cases, and we test these judgments against our "pretheoretic intuition" (WNS 21; the quotes are from Goldman and cited in WNS.)

Any epistemological theory which gives a significant role to our intuitions about what we know is brought into question by data on variation among intuitions.

In Idiotfest and the Stich and Nisbett article, we saw evidence that individuals' inductive inferential practices vary.

The data on divergent inferential practices is taken by many people to show that human beings are irrational.

One of Cohen's responses to that data was to deny that it showed any divergence in our inferential competence.

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

One possible response to such claims is to deny, with Cohen, the phenomena.

One might question whether there really is evidence for differences in epistemic 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 have their brains rewired by a radioactive meteor.

For all three subjects, when they form beliefs about the temperature, their beliefs are true even though they do not know that they are true.

Charles, John, and Kal have all formed a superpower.

But they do not know that they have this superpower.

Subjects in the WNS studies (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.

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.

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, any 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?

WNS consider divergent epistemic intuitions as data and conclude that IDR strategies lead to an unacceptable epistemic relativism.

That conclusion depends on whether such variations in intuitions lead to variations in epistemological theories.

WNS's conclusion assumes that the differences in output are sensitive to the differences in input.

In contrast, it may be the case that cultural differences in epistemic intuitions do not yield epistemic relativism.

We should evaluate the evidence and how it functions to see if differences in intuitions lead to different epistemological theories.

In response to the question of whether variations in the untutored intuitions of subjects support a repugnant epistemic relativism, 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).

Cohen claimed that subjects who make performance errors will abandon their errant strategies when they are shown the proper inferences.

Cohen argued that we can experience defeasible cognitive illusions.

Consider the following case, from Miller and McFarland, and cited in the Shafir article in our Depaul and Ramsey collection.

Subjects were presented with descriptions of a victim who had lost the use of his right arm as a result of a gunshot wound suffered during a robbery at a convenience store.

Some subjects were told that the robbery was at the victim's regular store.

Others were told that the robbery was at a store he rarely frequented, to which he went only because his usual store was unexpectedly closed.

The latter subjects awarded higher compensation; abnormal events (the closed store) raise greater sympathetic responses.

There was a difference of \$100,000 compensation when the cases were considered in isolation from each other.

But, as Kahneman later found, when respondents were presented with the two versions concurrently, ninety percent thought that the victims should not be awarded different compensations.

If Cohen is correct, then we might expect the same kind of response to work in the epistemic cases.

We iron out the inconsistencies among our intuitions and our theories in practice.

Intuitions, especially of untutored subjects, can vary without resulting in variations among ideal epistemological theories.

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 tutored 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.

The very existence of different epistemic theories is evidence that intuitions vary.

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

There has to be some basis for the different theories.

The whole point of philosophizing is to weigh these various intuitions against each other and against various systematizations (or theories) to restore consistency when conflict arises.

WNS's claim that different intuitions lead to different theories is more reasonable in the Gettier case.

They provide 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.

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.

Kitcher suggests that the intuitions that matter are what he calls Austinian intuitions, intuitions that are developed after philosophical reflection.

WNS deny that reflection would alter the intuitions of the subjects of their tests.

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?