

Skepticism Is Wrong for General Reasons

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Abstract: According to Michael Bergmann’s “intuitionist particularism,” our position with respect to skeptical arguments is much the same as it was with respect to Zeno’s paradoxes of motion prior to our developing sophisticated theories of the continuum. We observed ourselves move, and that closed the case in favor of the ability to move, even if we had no general theory about that ability. We observe ourselves form justified beliefs, and that closes the case in favor of the ability to form justified beliefs, even if we have no general theory about that ability. I think this is a mistake. Our position with respect to skeptical arguments is like our *current* position with respect to Zeno’s paradoxes. Mathematics shows where Zeno’s reasoning goes wrong and provisions explanations of the ability to move. Epistemology shows where the skeptic’s reasoning goes wrong and provisions explanations of the ability to form justified beliefs.

1. Introduction

Zeno’s paradoxes of motion challenge belief in our ability to move. Skeptical arguments challenge belief in our ability to form justified beliefs. According to Michael Bergmann’s “intuitionist particularism,” our position with respect to skeptical arguments is much the same as it was with respect to Zeno’s paradoxes prior to our developing sophisticated theories of the

continuum (116 and 127).¹ We observed ourselves move, and that closed the case in favor of the ability to move, even if we had no general theory about that ability. We observe ourselves form justified beliefs, and that closes the case in favor of the ability to form justified beliefs, even if we have no general theory about that ability.

I think this is a mistake. Our position with respect to skeptical arguments is like our *current* position with respect to Zeno's paradoxes. Mathematics shows where Zeno's reasoning goes wrong and provisions explanations of the ability to move. Epistemology shows where the skeptic's reasoning goes wrong and provisions explanations of the ability to form justified beliefs. We still observe ourselves move, but such observations do not constitute our best response to Zeno's paradoxes. Similarly, we can observe ourselves form justified beliefs, but such observations do not constitute our best response to the skeptical arguments.

Here is the plan. I've gestured toward skeptical arguments, but there are many in the literature and each has its own ambitions and guiding principles. Our concern is global skepticism which denies that we can form any justified beliefs. It will suffice, however, to focus on perceptual beliefs about contingent matters (e.g., here is a hand) and intuitive beliefs about necessary connections (e.g., $1 + 1 = 2$). Skeptical challenges to them are sufficiently representative for present purposes. Intuitionist particularism is tailored to undermine a specific group of guiding principles that occur in a specific group of skeptical arguments. In (§2) I explain what these groups are, and I raise doubts about Bergmann's attempt to find some unity in them. In (§3) I consider both the template version of intuitionist particularism set out in Chapter 6 and Bergmann's implementation of it in responding to skepticism about perceptual belief in Chapter 8. I give reasons to think intuitionist particularism is neither mandatory nor attractive,

¹ All page references are to (Bergmann 2021).

and I express puzzlement about why Bergmann insists on pressing his response to skepticism about perception into its mold. In (§4) I consider Bergmann's response to skepticism about intuition. I suggest that neglecting differences in the skeptical arguments pointed out in (§2) prevents him from properly diagnosing what goes wrong in the challenge to intuitive belief. The proper diagnosis supports an "internalist-sounding thought" which Bergmann rejects (166).

2. Skeptical Arguments and Principles

You have a perceptual experience as of a flickering light. You take your perceptual experience at face value and thereby come to believe that the light is flickering. Your belief is based on your perceptual experience. Is it justified?

Here's a familiar line of skeptical reasoning. Merely having an experience as of a flickering light does not guarantee that the belief based on it by taking it at face value is true. You could have had the same experience even if there were no flickering light. Further, you are in no position to support your belief by giving a good argument for it starting from the premise that you are having an experience as of a flickering light. Philosophers have tried this sort of thing and it doesn't work. So, your belief that the light is flickering isn't justified. And if it isn't justified, then no perceptually formed beliefs about contingent matters are justified.

This is an underdetermination argument for skepticism about perceptual beliefs. Bergmann wouldn't dispute any of the explicitly stated steps. He rejects an underdetermination principle I've left implicit, and which he formulates as follows:

UP: If the existence or occurrence of the evidence E on which S's belief B is noninferentially based does not entail B's truth, then S's belief is justified in a way that is dependent on E only if S is able to infer B via good reasoning from the existence or occurrence of E. (28)

I suspect there is more amiss with the underdetermination argument than UP, but I will follow Bergmann in focusing anti-skeptical scrutiny on it. Before doing that, however, let us consider what Bergmann takes to be an analogous underdetermination argument for skepticism about intuitively formed beliefs about necessary connections.

You have an intuition experience as of opposite angles being equal. You take your intuition experience at face value and thereby come to believe that opposite angles are equal. Your belief is based on your intuition experience. Is it justified?

If there is an underdetermination argument for a negative answer, then it does not start with a premise to the effect that there is a possible case in which you have the same intuition experience and opposite angles are not equal. Since opposite angles are necessarily equal, there is no such possible case, so merely having an experience as of opposite angles being equal *does* guarantee (i.e., necessitate) that the belief based on it by taking it at face value is true. Even so, Bergmann suggests, this intuition experience is felt with the same "compellingness and strength" (88) as actual or possible intuition experiences with false contents. For example, you might have had an equally compelling and strong intuition experience as of there being more rational numbers than natural numbers.

This gets the skeptic going. Merely having an experience as of opposite angles being equal does not "subjectively guarantee" (88 – 89) that the belief based on it by taking it at face

value is true. Though no metaphysical possibility, there is a subjective possibility that your experience is one of the mistaken intuition experiences. Further, you are in no position to support your belief by giving a good argument for it starting from the premise that you are having an intuition experience as of opposite angles being equal. The prospects here are no better than they were for perception. So, your belief that opposite angles are equal isn't justified. And if it isn't justified, then no intuitively formed beliefs about necessary connections are justified.

As with the underdetermination argument for skepticism about perceptual beliefs, there is an implicit principle at work, which Bergmann formulates as follows:

UP* If S cannot see independently (of justifiedly believing that B's content is necessarily true) that the existence or occurrence of the evidence E on which S's belief B is noninferentially based entails B's truth, then S's belief B is justified in a way that is dependent on E only if S is able to infer B via good reasoning from the existence or occurrence of E.

What does it mean for S to "see...that the existence or occurrence of the evidence E...entail's B's truth?" For UP* to serve as the implicit principle backing the skeptical argument, it must mean that having E subjectively guarantees B's truth for S, that in having E there is no subjective possibility for S that B is mistaken. For example, you see that your intuition experience as of opposite angles being equal entails the truth of your belief that opposite angles are equal just in case having your experience subjectively guarantees the truth of your belief. Understanding UP*, then, depends on understanding what might ground the lack of such a subjective guarantee. The grounds Bergmann cites are your own reflections on the possibility that your intuition experience

is one of the mistaken intuition experiences. You have the intuition experience, you reflect that there are intuition experiences of equal “compellingness and strength” with false contents, and that reflection is what makes your having the intuition experience fail to subjectively guarantee the truth of your belief (89).

UP is simply false; something like UP* might be true; both skeptical arguments fail; but they fail for different reasons. So, UP and UP* are very different principles backing very different skeptical arguments. I disagree with Bergmann’s claim that “the key idea behind both is the same” (91). Here is the key idea he has in mind:

If you can’t independently see that the evidence entails the belief’s truth (perhaps because you can see that it *doesn’t* entail it), you need to be able to infer the belief’s likely truth from that evidence if that belief is to be justified. (91)

Maybe this is a key idea behind UP*, but it doesn’t bear the same relationship to UP. The skeptical reasoning that UP backs starts from the *fact* that sensory experiences can be misleading. It says nothing about the subjective uptake of this fact. The key idea behind it is that if some evidence fails to ensure true belief, then it needs supplementation by an argument to secure justified belief. The skeptical reasoning that UP* backs, on the other hand, starts from the *subjective possibility* that your intuition experience is one of the misleading ones. The key idea behind it is that if you have reason, or are somehow caused, to think some evidence fails to ensure true belief, then it needs supplementation by an argument to secure justified belief. I find

it odd to think of this as a kind of underdetermination argument at all. It concerns epistemic defeat or psychological destabilization. I return to this point in (§4).²

3. Intuitionist Particularism and Skepticism About Perception

Reflecting on your experience as of a flickering light, both the following might seem true. First, you have *prima facie* justification for believing that the light is flickering. Second, if you have a perceptual experience as of *p*, then you thereby have *prima facie* justification for believing that *p*. The first is a particular epistemic intuition. The second is a general epistemic intuition.

In Chapter 6, Bergmann gives the following template version of intuitionist particularism.

First, it involves having strong epistemic intuitions that particular beliefs we have (typically, those in which we are *most* confident) are justified or instance of knowledge.

Second, it involves treating these strong epistemic intuitions as evidence on which we base our rejection of epistemic principles employed in skeptical arguments (i.e. principles that lead to skeptical conclusions implying that those particular beliefs—just mentioned in the previous sentence—aren't justified or instances of knowledge). (126 – 127)

² Bergmann might try to restore parity by replying that it is the mere *fact* that there are mistaken intuition experiences of equal “compellingness and strength” as your own which explains why your intuition experience fails to subjectively guarantee the truth of your belief, and that what you make of this fact is strictly irrelevant. But this move depends on the idea that the subjective guarantee provided by an intuition experience is a function of its “compellingness and strength” alone and not its full content. Bergmann is free to stipulate his own meaning for his own term, but including this stipulation drains the resulting notion of much interest and renders UP* *obviously* mistaken.

There is a contest of strength between particular intuitions favoring commonsense and general intuitions favoring skepticism. The particular intuitions win. This is supposed to be “like the conflict between Zeno’s argument and our commonsense view that things do move” (127).

Maybe this describes a position some possible, and actual, thinkers rationally occupy with respect to skepticism. The position it describes, however, is neither mandatory nor attractive. It is unattractive in the way that any resolution of a conflict by means of force is unattractive. Here are some reasons why it is not mandatory.

First, general intuitions favoring skepticism are not saddled on us. UP, for example, does not seem true to me. Bergmann tries to motivate it earlier in the book, and he never explains why those motivations fail, so perhaps his view is that they do not fail. When properly assimilated they enable a general intuition that UP is true which never goes away but which should be resisted when compared with stronger particular intuitions in favor of propositions inconsistent with UP. This is dubious. The earlier motivations for UP are faulty. Consider the case of Bill and Phil (31). I think that I saw Bill commit a murder, then learn that he has an identical twin Phil, and have no way to establish that it really was Bill rather than Phil. Continuing to think it was Bill is unjustified. This case provides no support for UP. One simple and general reason is that the possibility of error is not the same as the probability of error. Consider the Novice and the Expert (32). Suppose they have the same experience of an object with respect to which they have differing levels of expertise. Only the expert has justification for making a classification based on the experience because only the expert can infer the classification via good reasoning from the occurrence of the experience. This case also provides no support for UP. One simple and general reason is that it rests on the false presupposition that novices and experts have the same experiences of objects with respect to which they have differing levels of expertise.

A second misgiving I have about intuitionist particularism is that general intuitions favoring commonsense over principles such as UP are readily available. Consider the following:

- (1) If you have an experience as of p, then you thereby have *prima facie* justification for believing that p.
- (2) If your *prima facie* justification for believing that p is undefeated, then it constitutes outright justification for believing that p.
- (3) If you have a perceptual experience as of p, then you thereby have a route to forming a belief that p based on it just by taking it at face value.
- (4) If your route to forming a belief that p based on an experience just by taking it at face value is not blocked (e.g., by lack of concepts, or presence of doubts), then it constitutes an ability to form such a belief.

While I think some of these claims are at best only approximately true, each strikes me as intuitively correct. They are contents of general intuitions that collectively favor commonsense over principles such as UP. They imply that your belief that the light is flickering is justified. It is justified because your experience is undefeated and your route to forming a belief based on it is unblocked. The general intuitions also imply that UP is mistaken about what is required for justified belief. It is mistaken because it requires impossibility of error or supplementation with argument.

This response to skepticism about perceptual belief is a version of what Bergmann calls “noninferential anti-skepticism about perception,” which he endorses in Chapter 8 (151 – 157).

What I find puzzling is that Bergmann insists on basing his version of such a response on intuitionist particularist grounds, where that means it is based on

Placing greater weight on the very strong epistemic intuitions that the particular beliefs in which we are most confident...are justified than on the much weaker epistemic intuitions in support of the epistemic principles (such as underdetermination principles) used as premises in skeptical arguments for the conclusions that those particular beliefs aren't justified. (159)

This strikes me as unsatisfying, and here I mean unsatisfying for our own non-skeptical selves. I am not concerned with “proselytizing” to (145 – 147) or otherwise “engaging” with (147 – 150) skeptics. The problem can be clarified by foreclosing a possible solution. It derives from the mistaken idea that reasoning cannot improve intuitions but can only provide grounds for resisting them. Like Bergmann, I think that it is possible for you to continue to have an intuition experience as of p even if reasoning convinces you that p is false. But possibility is not the same as necessity. On one way of thinking about series, it is intuitive that an infinite series of positive terms cannot add up to a finite sum. On a better way of thinking about series, it is intuitive that an infinite series of positive terms can add up to a finite sum. Improving the way that you think about series improves your intuition experiences with respect to series. Intuition matures.³ Once this better alternative is available, then it would be backwards to hang onto the first way of thinking about series, or to avoid relying on the better way, in responding to Zeno's paradoxes of

³ This phenomenon is in some ways similar to and in other ways different from the changes in perceptual experience noted above in relation to the Novice and the Expert. For extended discussion of both phenomena and their significance for philosophy see (Chudnoff 2021).

motion. What I'd like is some account of why the intuitionist particularist response to skepticism isn't open to the same criticism.

4. Epistemic Internalism and Skepticism About Intuition

The epistemic intuitions expressed by (1) – (4) in the previous section apply to both perceptual experiences and intuition experiences. So, Bergmann and I agree that some form of noninferential anti-skepticism about intuition is correct (157). He suggests it can be recruited in responding to the UP* backed skeptical challenge to intuitive belief in a way that is “obvious” in light of the response to the UP backed skeptical challenge to perceptual belief (158).

I do not find this so obvious. Return to your intuition experience as of opposite angles being equal. UP* requires that you see how your experience entails that opposite angles are equal. According to the skeptical challenge to intuitive belief, you cannot meet this requirement because you can reflect on the fact that there are other intuition experiences of equal “compellingness and strength” as your own but with false contents.

Bergmann's idea is to reject the requirement that you see how your experience entails that opposite angles are equal. He thinks that merely having an intuition experience as of p falls short of seeing how your experience entails that p . He conceives of UP* as demanding more than merely having an intuition experience, and that is why he thinks noninferential anti-skepticism about intuition is incompatible with it. I'm inclined to accept the requirement that you see how your experience entails that opposite angles are equal. I think that merely having an intuition experience as of p can include seeing how your experience entails that p . When it does so, you see how your experience entails that p just because your intuition experience includes awareness

of yourself having an intuition experience showing you that p . So, I do not conceive of UP* as demanding more than merely having an intuition experience, and that is why I think noninferential anti-skepticism about intuition is compatible with it.

I've suggested that if having an intuition experience as of p includes seeing how your experience entails that p , then it does so because it includes awareness of yourself having an intuition experience showing you that p . Intuition experiences are conscious states. Some philosophers think that all your conscious states include awareness of yourself being in them. I don't need to rely on anything so strong as this. All I need is the claim that some of your conscious states, and among these some of your intuition experiences, include awareness of yourself being in them. The self-awareness is not a separate experience. It is an aspect of the intuition experience itself. Whenever you are aware of something you are aware of it as being some way. It follows that when you are aware of your own intuition experience as of p you are aware of it as being some way. I've suggested you are aware of it as showing you that p . There are different ways of spelling this out, but the details will not matter here. If you are aware of your experience as showing you that p , then you thereby see how it entails that p . Something cannot show you that p unless p . Further, being aware of your intuition experience as showing you that p demands nothing more than what one would expect from the sort of self-awareness that might be included in having an experience. It just requires being aware of the experience's content and the way in which that content is presented.

If it isn't UP*, then what goes wrong with the specific skeptical challenge to intuitive belief that Bergmann considers? It is true that sometimes when we have an intuition experience as of p , we fail to see how it entails that p . Bergmann illustrates this with cases in which we consider the possibility that our own intuition experience is one of the mistaken intuition

experiences. In these cases, however, we fail to meet requirements on which UP* and noninferential anti-skepticism about intuition can agree. Our reflections on the possibility of error might epistemically defeat our *prima facie* justification, in which case a requirement accommodated by (2) above is violated. Or our reflections might psychologically destabilize us in ways that block taking our experience at face value, in which case a requirement accommodated by (4) above is violated. The fact that there are such cases, however, does not imply that merely having an intuition experience as of p fails to include seeing how your experience entails that p in other cases. The skeptical challenge to intuitive belief goes wrong in assuming otherwise.

It follows that there is no need to back off the “internalist-sounding thought” Bergmann expresses with:

IST: If we aren't *aware* that our evidence entails our beliefs or of how it is that our evidence implies our beliefs via good reasoning, then our beliefs aren't justified. (166, italics in original)

The case Bergmann makes against IST rests on the idea that it conflicts with “our stronger particularist epistemic intuitions that our most strongly held perceptual, memory, a priori, and introspective beliefs are justified” (166). The foregoing shows that IST is compatible with the particularist epistemic intuitions about a priori (i.e., intuitively) justified beliefs. I think parallel considerations would show that IST is also compatible with the other particularist epistemic intuitions Bergmann mentions, but I will not pursue the matter here.

5. Conclusion

Here's a recap. First, I've expressed doubts about Bergmann's attempt to unify skeptical challenges to perceptual belief and intuitive belief. Either the skeptical arguments are very different, or the skeptical argument challenging intuitive belief is too obviously mistaken to be of interest. Second, I've given reasons to be dissatisfied with intuitionist particularism as a response to skepticism. We non-skeptics are in an intellectual position to do better for ourselves. There is as little reason to remain mystified by justified belief as there is to remain mystified by motion. Third, I've indicated an alternative response to the skeptical challenge to intuitive belief. The alternative response has independent interest because it supports an attractive "internalist-sounding thought" Bergmann thinks we are forced to reject.

Bibliography

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