

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition

BY MICHAEL BERGMANN

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Précis

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Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition (henceforward *RS&EI*)¹ is about radical scepticism, which is extreme insofar as it involves serious doubts about large swaths of beliefs that almost everyone takes for granted. The book's main task is to develop and defend an account of what, in my view, is the best response to radical scepticism – one that is inspired by the great 18th century commonsense philosopher, Thomas Reid, and that consciously relies heavily on *epistemic intuitions*, which are intuitions about the requirements for and the presence or absence of epistemic goods, such as knowledge and rationality.

RS&EI is divided into three parts. Part I is called 'Underdetermination and Inferential Anti-Scepticism'. The focus there is on *underdetermination* arguments for radical scepticism and inferential anti-sceptical responses to them. Let me explain both. Underdetermination arguments highlight the fact that our evidence underdetermines the truth of the beliefs based on it and concludes from this that, apart from good arguments showing that the evidence in question makes these beliefs true or at least probable – arguments we seem not to have – these beliefs are not justified. Inferential anti-sceptical responses say that our ordinary beliefs about the external world are (often) justified, even though such justification requires that these beliefs are *defensible inferentially* via good arguments. I begin Part 1 by explaining why I will be setting aside certain sceptical arguments (i.e. all those other than underdetermination arguments) and certain responses to sceptical arguments (those that underestimate or overestimate the appeal of radical scepticism). I then develop a series of underdetermination arguments for radical scepticism not only about perception and memory, but also, more surprisingly, about a priori intuition and introspection (and even in support of global scepticism).

1 Bergmann (2021).

And I argue that the inferential anti-sceptic's responses to these sceptical arguments are unsuccessful.

This leaves us with *non-inferential* anti-sceptical responses to radical scepticism, which are taken up in Part II. Non-inferential anti-sceptical responses say that our ordinary beliefs threatened by the challenge of radical scepticism (including our perceptual, memory and introspective beliefs) are justifiedly held *non-inferentially*, even if they are not based on, or defensible via, any available good arguments. I begin by explaining the *particularist tradition*, starting with Thomas Reid in the 18th century and continuing through G.E. Moore and Roderick Chisholm in the 20th century. Particularism embodies the methodology I employ in working out my own non-inferential anti-sceptical response to scepticism. Then, in the core chapters of *RS&EI* (i.e. 6–8), I do two things. First, I lay out my favoured version of this particularist method of dealing with radical scepticism – a version I call ‘intuitionist particularism’ because it is spelled out in terms of *epistemic intuitions* (which are seemings about epistemic value, just as moral intuitions are seemings about moral value). Second, I use this intuitionist particularist methodology to develop a non-inferential anti-sceptical response to the underdetermination arguments for radical scepticism from Part I. In presenting this response to radical scepticism, I highlight its advantages over other responses, as well as the ways in which it can be adopted by both internalists and externalists in epistemology. In the final two chapters of Part II, I respond to several objections to the intuitionist particularist response to radical scepticism presented earlier in Part II.

In the final part of *RS&EI*, Part III, I take up sceptical challenges to epistemic intuition – the belief source that plays such a significant role in my particularist non-inferential anti-sceptical response in Part II to the underdetermination arguments for radical scepticism developed in Part I. In addition to facing some of the same challenges that are directed at my response to radical scepticism about perception and memory, my response to radical scepticism about epistemic intuition also faces objections from disagreement and from experimental philosophy. All of these challenges to epistemic intuition are addressed in the final part of the book.

Thus, the overall narrative of *RS&EI* can be summarized succinctly as follows. In Part I we learn two things. First, the tempting intuitions supporting underdetermination arguments for radical scepticism tell us that we are forced to endorse radical scepticism unless inferential anti-scepticism provides an effective way of escape. Second, although inferential anti-scepticism seems to offer a way of escape, that way turns out to be a hopeless dead end. In Part II we see that *particularist* epistemic intuitions rationally assure us that radical scepticism is a mistake and, therefore, that (i) the seductive intuitions in support of underdetermination arguments are incorrect, and that (ii) the right response to those arguments is non-inferential anti-scepticism. In Part III, I argue that sceptical concerns about epistemic intuition as a belief

source are overblown and, in the end, are not a sufficient basis for any lingering worries about the conclusions of Part II.

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Responding to How Things Seem: Bergmann on Scepticism and Intuition

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Michael Bergmann's important new book on scepticism is attractively systematic and thorough. He places familiar ideas under an exceptionally bright spotlight, exposing features we might not have noticed on casual survey. He draws out hidden consequences of his starting points with admirable courage, even when these consequences look like trouble for him. Before getting into this trouble, and some differences in how I would tackle it, I will begin by highlighting some ground we share.

First, I like Bergmann's fundamental epistemic optimism in the face of the sceptical challenge. When the radical sceptic suggests that close attention to our natural epistemic self-trust should erode it, I'll agree with Bergmann that closer attention can vindicate it. Indeed, my optimism about epistemology extends all the way to holding that scrutiny of our instinctive epistemic self-trust can refine it, by alerting us in advance to some odd situations in which these natural instincts of ours can be expected to fail, and giving us a solid, non-sceptical understanding of just why this is so. Back on the positive side, I agree warmly with Bergmann that, in general, perceptual judgement and epistemic intuition are in good shape: our sensory faculties really do yield extensive knowledge of the world, and, moving up a level, our natural capacities for mindreading do yield extensive knowledge of the wide range of states of knowledge we possess (and, derivatively, states of justified belief