

# **A Defense of Epistemic Intuitions**

**Helen Zhao**  
**Johns Hopkins University**

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## A Defense of Epistemic Intuitions

Since the very beginning, intuitions have played a crucial role in philosophical inquiry. When Socrates asks, “What is justice?” he appeals to an innate source of knowledge that inexplicably recognizes examples of justice, even those falling outside the constraints of a definition. Intuition, as this purportedly omniscient source has been deemed, appears not only to exist universally among people, but also to hold some sort of special weight in the evaluation of normative claims—i.e. what the definition of justice *should* be. Likewise, epistemology in the analytic tradition employs intuitions in its conceptual analysis of knowledge. However, recent work in experimental philosophy, an emerging field that impresses the necessity of empirical data, threatens to overturn the foundations of traditional philosophy by proposing the unreliability of intuitions. According to data gathered by Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich in their paper “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions,” intuitions are *not universal* and are subject to 1) cultural variation, 2) socioeconomic variation, 3) previous philosophical exposure, and 4) variation based on the order in which cases are presented—that is, they are dependent on situational factors. Therefore, intuitions cannot be trusted to make normative epistemic claims. However, I plan to counter Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich by referencing the *transparency of intuitions*, proposed by Frank Jackson in his paper “On Gettier Holdouts,” in order to reconstruct an understanding of intuitions that does not threaten epistemology in the analytic tradition and, furthermore, can be reconciled with experimental philosophy.

First, I will deconstruct Weinberg et al.’s argument that intuitions fail to satisfy the Normative Project—the division of epistemology dedicated to illuminating how knowledge *should* be understood—through their discussion on how intuitions vary. Second, I will explain

Jackson's notions of transparent intuitions, representational structures, and the "intuition module." The last sections of this paper will be dedicated to responding to Weinberg et al. and exploring the implications of experimental philosophy on the Descriptive and Normative Projects of epistemology.

#### "NORMATIVITY AND EPISTEMIC INTUITIONS"

In their introduction, Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich enumerate two aims of their paper: 1) to establish the Normativity Problem, and 2) to reference empirical data that confirm the Normativity Problem. First, they describe the state of epistemology, currently founded upon a tradition of "epistemic romanticism," named as such by Weinberg et al. in order to reflect the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic belief that "our real selves, the essence of our identity, is implanted within us." According to them, these epistemic romanticists take as input epistemic intuitions—"judgment[s] for which the person making the judgment may be able to offer no plausible justification"—and produce as output normative epistemic claims.<sup>1</sup> They claim that this is flawed since if intuitions vary, norms will vary—but *norms cannot vary*. As a result, Weinberg et al. propose that variable intuitions provide excellent cause to reject epistemic romanticism and doubt epistemic norms composed using intuition-driven strategies.

They focus largely on establishing the variability of intuitions by proposing four hypotheses, the first of which comprises the main focus of their paper and which I will examine here. According to Weinberg et al., *epistemic intuitions vary from culture to culture*, confirmed by surveys conducted between East Asians and Westerners, whose methods of reasoning are suspected to differ. It is believed from a previous study conducted by Richard Nisbett and his colleagues that East Asians employ "holistic thought," involving "attention to relationships

between a focal object and the field, and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships.” On the other hand, Westerners are dominated by “analytic thought,” believed “to focus on attributes of the object in order to assign it to categories.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, these two cultures differ in the importance they assign to certain traits, such as social harmony (East Asians) and individualism (Westerners), a disparity that, according to Weinberg et al., manifests itself in different responses to intuition probes—surveys tailored to emphasize one trait over another. For instance, in the Truetemp cases, three different scenarios are presented to undergraduates at Rutgers University. They describe a person who, due to some incredible event, gains the ability to predict temperature exactly, and asks the students whether this person has knowledge or only believes. As the cause of the person’s power changes in its degree of social sanction from a falling rock to a team of well-meaning scientists sent by elders, and the effects of the event expand from one person to an entire community, so do East Asians attribute knowledge more willingly, reflected in increased numbers of “really know” responses. These systematic changes appear to mirror the tendencies of “holistic thought,” evidence according to Weinberg et al. that culture affects thought patterns and thus the formation of intuitions. Contrasting responses to Gettier cases between East Asians and Westerners, and South Asians and Westerners, seem to further prove that intuitions, influenced by cultural factors, are far from the reliable inputs that epistemic romanticists would have us believe.

Moreover, Weinberg et al. hypothesize that *epistemic intuitions vary from one socioeconomic group to another*, exemplified by different responses to Gettier Cases between subjects of high and low socioeconomic statuses. According to their data, subjects of high socioeconomic status are much more likely to choose “only believes,” perhaps because they react to weaker “knowledge-defeaters”—conditions under which knowledge is not justified—while

subjects of low socioeconomic status accept lower standards for knowledge. Given these results, most epistemic strategies would prescribe different “doxastic states” depending on socioeconomic status, even though, as iterated before, *norms should not vary*.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, according to Weinberg et al., surveys administered to subjects of differing socioeconomic status are additional indication that intuition-driven epistemic strategies fail to satisfy the Normative Project of epistemology.

Unlike the former two, the latter two hypotheses are not supported by empirical data. Instead, the authors motivate the third hypothesis—*epistemic intuitions vary as a function of how many philosophy courses a person has had*—using anecdotes of students adopting mainstream intuitions as their philosophical exposure increases. Likewise, the authors do not provide data to support the fourth hypothesis—*epistemic intuitions depend, in part, on the order in which cases are presented*—although this claim may be otherwise justified by a growing body of research that suggests the path-dependence of neural networks (i.e. gestalt images, the door-in-the-face technique, and the foot-in-the-door technique). In any case, the purpose of Weinberg et al. is not to enumerate all the ways in which intuitions can differ. Rather, by proving intuitions to vary among groups, they argue that their studies have effectively shifted the burden of proof onto those who would stubbornly cling to intuition-driven strategies in the formation of epistemic norms.

#### JACKSON’S INTUITIONS

For its argument to possess any weight, “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions” requires one to accept the uniqueness of intuition, the existence of some quality that sets intuition apart from common belief. Otherwise, their statement regarding the variability of intuitions is one

without teeth. It is common fact that beliefs vary among and even within groups—why else is there contention among the philosophical elite despite its demographic homogeneity? Thus, to weaken Weinberg et al.’s claim against epistemic intuitions, one need only conclude that there is nothing special about the “intuition module” and that, in fact, Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich have demonstrated nothing we do not already know.

This is precisely what Jackson does in his interpretation of *transparent intuitions*. Philosophers are mistaken, he says, when they regard intuitions as “the deliverances of a kind of ‘intuition module’ in the brain.” Rather, intuitions are nothing more than forms of belief, an examination of the case and not our response to the case. In the context of epistemology, they simply reflect our concepts and putative understanding of what knowledge is. If so, one might ask why the term “intuition” is employed at all; why not simply ask for the subject’s belief? Jackson’s reply is that intuitions are distinct in one of two ways: 1) they either represent the subject’s own response, or 2) they represent an “inclination to believe.”<sup>3</sup> The first is necessary in surveys to direct subjects to respond to a case on the basis of their own reflection and not as a result of another’s persuasion. The second type refers to the gut-reaction whose pull one feels even after rational consideration. For example, one might be asked such a question:

Mary just bought a penlight and pen for 1 dollar and 10 cents. If the penlight costs 1 dollar more than the pen, how much does the pen cost?

One’s intuition or “inclination to believe” compels one to conclude that the pen costs 10 cents. However, after reflecting longer on the case (and a little algebra), one may compute that the pen in fact costs 5 cents, and our intuitions regarding the answer to this question are simply wrong. According to Jackson, the word “intuition” is therefore necessary to direct subjects to

appeal to beliefs lacking justification—although, Jackson cautions, this does not indicate that the response is anything more than simple belief formation at work.

In addition, Jackson proposes a new understanding of the structure of concepts, which he would describe, akin to chemical compounds, to be dependent on the combination of various “representational atoms and modes of composition.” In other words, the formation of concepts is a function of the types of building blocks employed—i.e. English letters—and the ways in which the blocks are combined—i.e. *a* followed by *b* followed by *c*. For example, the sentence “the sky is blue” only means such given the representational content that English speakers have attributed to the alphabet and the words: “the,” “sky,” “is,” and “blue.” This explains why “is blue sky the” means nothing. Moreover, it demonstrates how a statement such as “flowers are pretty” can be problematic. This sentence has no singular interpretation given variations in the concepts of “pretty” and even “flowers.” Since concepts require the unique confluence of sundry factors, such as cultural patterns and personal experiences, there can be little wonder that significant variation would exist among understandings of knowledge. Despite their conviction, Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich will have shown us nothing new if we are to accept Jackson’s claim on representational structures and the transparency of intuitions.

#### RESPONSE TO “NORMATIVITY AND EPISTEMIC INTUITIONS”

After considering two positions, I will now reply to Weinberg et al.’s argument that intuition-driven strategies in epistemology are severely weakened by empirical proof of the variability of intuitions. It is my belief that Jackson’s position effectively negates the evidence gathered in “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions” for the following reasons:

First, Weinberg et al. provide no support for the claim that intuitions are somehow different from common beliefs. They appear to assume that people unconsciously make this distinction when asked to provide an intuitive response, although they neither demonstrate nor explain how their surveys glean intuitions rather than beliefs. As Jackson says, surveys do not ask their subjects, “I’m not interested in what you believe; I am collecting instead something we philosophers call ‘intuitions’.”<sup>3</sup> By this example, one may see how a distinction between intuitions and beliefs appears almost nonsensical. Therefore, experimental philosophers have not been gathering data on some unique “intuition module.” Rather, the varying responses accumulated by Weinberg et al. have simply mirrored the varying concepts that people possess—a far less impressive discovery.

The varying concepts of knowledge evaluated in “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions” may also be adequately explained by Jackson’s representational structures. Perhaps “holistic thought” and “analytic thought” are indeed culturally distinct patterns of reasoning. When East Asians and Westerners examine the intuition probes, their responses may be unconsciously influenced by their cultural backgrounds because of differing representational structures for their respective concepts of knowledge. An East Asian, due to increased appreciation for social harmony, may view knowledge to be a true justified belief that furthermore is corroborated by consensus; whereas a Westerner, in his emphasis on individuality, may consider knowledge to be a true justified belief confirmed by the individual’s internal understanding of the causes. However, differing representational structures do not suggest some innate fundamental differences among people’s “intuition modules.” It is highly plausible that an East Asian who was raised by a Western family and enmeshed in Western culture all his life would emphasize individuality and respond accordingly to the cases because his representational structure of

knowledge would have developed using Western representational atoms and modes of composition. Likewise, the argument may be applied to subjects of high and low socioeconomic statuses, whose different standards for knowledge may simply result from *different concepts of knowledge* derived from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.

Second, I agree with Jackson that “it isn’t a species of chauvinism for analytical philosophers to insist that their concept [of knowledge] is better.”<sup>3</sup> Privileging the intuitions or concepts of experts is not only rational, but also commonly done, such as when one asks a doctor for his professional opinion or appeals to a consultant for financial help. The layman’s intuitions are often wrong, such as in the previous math problem or, even more frequently, in the consideration of physics problems. Here is a popular example:

George has attached a ball to a piece of string and is now swinging the ball in circles over his head. If the ball suddenly detaches from the string and flies into the air, will it travel in a curve or a straight line?

Most people would intuit or be inclined to believe that the ball will travel in a curve. However, anyone who has taken an introductory level physics course would know that under ideal circumstances, the ball will travel in a straight line. One would expect to encounter variation in responses, contingent upon the number of physics courses the subjects have taken. Nevertheless, one would not conclude that intuitions regarding physical events fail to produce normative claims—on the contrary, the intuitions of a physicist who is well-versed in tangential motion are very reliable. Similarly, Weinberg et al.’s third hypothesis that epistemic intuitions vary as a function of philosophical exposure falters if one simply bites the bullet: Yes, epistemic

intuitions vary. However, some intuitions will simply be *wrong*, while the epistemic intuitions of subjects who have taken more philosophical courses will more likely be correct.

Finally, I wish to mention the possibility of defective surveys. I do agree with Jackson that more time is needed for respondents to answer the questionnaires. The short time frame is conducive to testing inclinations to believe, the “quick-and-dirty ways of thinking,” as Jackson puts it.<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, these responses are more subject to external factors such as the order of cases and wording because they glean impulses, not carefully justified beliefs. Consequently, in contrast to the opinions of Weinberg et al., I do not think that increased response time would widen the gap between the responses of different groups. Rather, since cultural and socioeconomic influences are subconscious and therefore more likely to impact impulsive replies, extending the time frame and requesting short-answer justification might in fact have *reduced* the effects of cultural and socioeconomic discrepancies on responses, leading to less variation in the data.

#### THE IMPLICATIONS OF EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY ON EPISTEMOLOGY

Since it appears quite clear that intuitions are no longer special expressions of an “intuition module” in the brain but instead different forms of belief, one might ask what the implications of experimental philosophy are for the Descriptive and Normative Projects in epistemology. Intuitions, says Jackson, reflect “nothing more than the possible case’s being putatively such and such.”<sup>3</sup> That is, they are simply the manifestations of our concepts—how we putatively regard something to be. In this case, surveys done by experimental philosophers are more effective in illuminating the psychologies of their subjects rather than effective in defining the concepts themselves. Work of this kind could allow philosophers to glean insight into the

different representational structures employed by humans, a useful step in understanding, as Jackson calls it, the “folk materials” from which we build epistemic theories—the Descriptive Project.

However, I disagree with Jackson in his belief that “anything that casts light on the descriptive question is a good first step.” Specifically, I remain unconvinced that one should offer “defeasible credence” to all intuitions, even those proposed by the layman who is unacquainted with philosophy.<sup>3</sup> We should evaluate with an open yet critical mind primarily those beliefs of the philosophical community. For the same reason that physical laws are considered the domain of physicists, it is not unreasonable to assign priority to the epistemic beliefs of experienced philosophers. Their concepts of knowledge more closely resemble the philosophical concepts in question—wherein knowledge represents the highest standard of understanding, the peak of epistemic power—and are less vulnerable than the layman’s concepts to influences such as wording and the order of cases. After all, we are not concerned with the folk concept of knowledge—we wish to understand it as a character in epistemology. Discussion and research aiming to define knowledge *as it should be defined* should therefore focus on the epistemic concepts of its philosophers rather than on the non-philosophical, often colloquial uses of knowledge.

There still remains to be addressed the quandary of varying beliefs. One recalls that Weinberg et al. have shown concepts to be functions of peoples’ cultural, social, and economic histories. Thus, a concept could vary depending on the society in question. For instance, one may reasonably assume that the present “knowledge” is employed differently from the “knowledge” of five hundred years ago given cultural and socioeconomic transformations that have occurred. Likewise, who can say with certainty that the “knowledge” defined today will

retain its definition after another five hundred years? Even if intuitions are transparent, how can one formulate epistemic norms from beliefs that are subject to societal and temporal pressures? It would appear that the results of experimental philosophy interpreted in this way compel us to adopt a relative concept of knowledge, similar to that of contextualism, in which the concept of knowledge would vary depending on the setting in which it was invoked.

However, if one desires to avoid any form of epistemic relativism, it seems that one would have to resort to an *a priori* definition of knowledge which, as of yet, appears unattainable. For this reason, the use of intuition-driven strategies does not seem to be a choice, but rather a necessity. There is nothing unusual in this methodology if one simply recognizes that these intuition-driven strategies are belief formation at work, employed across almost all branches of philosophy. Even if it is inevitable that these beliefs will be colored by external influences, it makes little sense to reject them given that without beliefs, one cannot formulate epistemic normative claims at all.

## CONCLUSION

When Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich published “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions,” they imagined their results would subvert a thousand-year philosophical tradition. However, if one accepts Jackson’s transparent intuitions, rejects the existence of an “intuition module,” and accepts the inevitability of variation, their work is rendered far less significant. Intuition-driven strategies are no longer vulnerable. Rather, the question arises: What can be understood from granting these various epistemic intuitions defeasible credence? A posteriori meta-analysis might allow us to discover certain universal traits among patterns of knowledge recognition, such as truth and justification to a certain extent. These commonalities could then be compiled to

construct a skeletal framework upon which we could devise certain norms. However, future work will be necessary to clarify exactly how empirical data would lead us to a normative understanding of knowledge.

## REFERENCES

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