

Metaskepticism: Meditations in Ethno-Epistemology^[1]

Throughout the 20th century, an enormous amount of intellectual fuel was spent debating the merits of a class of skeptical arguments which purport to show that knowledge of the external world is not possible. These arguments, whose origins can be traced back to Descartes, played an important role in the work of some of the leading philosophers of the 20th century, including Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein, and they continue to engage the interest of contemporary philosophers. (e.g., Cohen 1999, DeRose 1995, Hill 1996, Klein 1981, Lewis 1996, McGinn 1993, Nozick 1981, Schiffer 1996, Unger 1975, Williams 1996) Typically, these arguments make use of one or more premises which the philosophers proposing them take to be intuitively obvious. Beyond an appeal to intuition, little or no defense is offered, and in many cases it is hard to see what else *could* be said in support of these premises. A number of authors have suggested that the intuitions undergirding these skeptical arguments are *universal* – shared by everyone (or almost everyone) who thinks reflectively about knowledge. In this paper we will offer some evidence indicating that they are *far* from universal. Rather, the evidence suggests that many of the intuitions epistemologists invoke vary with the cultural background, socio-economic status and educational background of the person offering the intuition. And this, we will argue, is bad news for the skeptical arguments that rely on those intuitions. The evidence may also be bad news for skepticism itself – not because it shows that skepticism is *false*, but rather because, if we accept one prominent account of the link between epistemic intuitions and epistemic concepts, it indicates that skepticism may be much less *interesting* and much less *worrisome* than philosophers have taken it to be.

Here's how we propose to proceed. In Section 1, we'll begin by characterizing and offering a few examples of the sorts of skeptical arguments that are the targets of our critique. We will also assemble a few quotes from leading philosophers which suggest that they think the intuitions on which the arguments rely are, near enough, universal. In Section 2, we'll present some evidence indicating that intuitions of the sort that have loomed large in the philosophical literature for the last forty years vary systematically with culture and socio-economic status. The examples we'll focus on in Section 2 typically do not play a role in skeptical arguments, and it might be suggested that intuitions which do play a role in skeptical arguments are less subject to cultural variation. Indeed, it might be thought that they form part of a universal core of epistemic intuitions. We think the hypothesis that there is such a universal core deserves to be explored seriously, and in Section 3 we will present some evidence that is compatible with that hypothesis. However, as we'll show in Section 4, there is good reason to think that if there is a universal core, it does not include a number of the intuitions that play a central role in skeptical arguments. In Section 5, we'll argue that the evidence we've presented suggests that the appeal of skeptical arguments is culturally local and that this fact justifies a kind of "meta-skepticism" since it suggests that crucial premises in the arguments for skepticism are not to be trusted. We'll also take up one possible response to our argument for meta-skepticism. This response maintains that differences in epistemic intuitions are evidence for differences in epistemic concepts. If that's right, then the fact that people in other cultures don't share our skeptical intuitions does not cast any doubt on the truth of our intuitions, since their intuitions aren't really about what we call 'knowledge' at all. But this response, we'll argue, engenders another kind of meta-skepticism. For while it may fend off the challenge to the premises of skeptical arguments, it raises serious doubts about the importance of the conclusions.

1. Skeptical Arguments, Skeptical Intuitions and Universality

The kind of skeptical argument on which we'll be focusing might be called *Cartesian*.^[2] These arguments rely essentially on an intuition that we do not, or perhaps even cannot, know that some skeptical hypothesis does not obtain.^[3] What makes the hypothesis skeptical is that its truth is inconsistent with some propositions we ordinarily would take ourselves to know, although the hypothesis seems to be consistent with all our evidence for those propositions. The intuition serves as a major premise in a skeptical argument to the effect that we do not, or perhaps even cannot, have knowledge of the propositions that we ordinarily take ourselves to have. The ur-example of the sort of skeptical hypothesis we have in mind is the evil genius of *Meditations I*, while in contemporary epistemology the most widely discussed example may be the brain-in-vat hypothesis discussed below. We'll use the term *skeptical intuition* for an intuition that we do not know the falsity of such a skeptical hypothesis. We believe that these skeptical intuitions are the driving force behind the modern concern with this brand of skepticism.^[4]

An example of the sort of skeptical argument we have in mind is stated with characteristic succinctness by Stephen Schiffer.

- (1) I don't know that I'm not a BIV (i.e., a bodiless brain in a vat who has been caused to have just those sensory experiences I've had).
 - (2) If I don't know that I'm not a BIV, then I don't know that I have hands.
-
- (3) I don't know that I have hands (Schiffer 1996, 317; numbering added).

Schiffer does not pause to offer any reasons to accept either of the premises, presumably because he thinks they are intuitively obvious. Keith DeRose, in his discussion of the argument, is only slightly more forthcoming. To convince us of the plausibility of the premises of the BIV argument, DeRose rephrases the premises and adds a pair of rhetorical questions aimed at bringing out the intuition that the premises are obviously true.

[H]owever improbable or even bizarre it may seem to suppose that I am a BIV, it also seems that I don't know that I'm not one. How *could* I know such a thing?.... [I]t also seems that if, for all I know, I am a BIV, then I don't know that I have hands. How could I know that I have hands if, for all I know, I'm bodiless (and therefore handless)? (DeRose 1995, p. 2.)

Elsewhere, DeRose's appeal to intuition is more explicit. In the *Introduction* to a collection of essays on skepticism, he sketches the *Argument from Skeptical Hypothesis* as follows:

1. I don't know that not-H.
 2. If I don't know that not-H, then I don't know that O
- So,
- C. I don't know that O.

And he goes on to say that "the skeptical argument really is powerful... The argument is clearly valid... and *each of its premises, considered on its own, enjoys a good deal of intuitive support*" (DeRose 1999, 2-3; emphasis added).

The following passage from Stewart Cohen (1999) provides another example of the sort of skeptical argument we have in mind. It is also a clear illustration of the central role that appeal to

intuition has played in recent discussions of skepticism.

Suppose, to use Dretske's example, that you are at the zoo looking at the Zebra exhibit. Consider the possibility that what you see is not a zebra but rather a cleverly-disguised mule. Though you may have some reason to deny you are looking at a cleverly-disguised mule, it seems wrong to say you know you are not looking at a cleverly-disguised mule. After all, that's just how it would look if it were a cleverly disguised mule.

The skeptic then appeals to a deductive closure principle for knowledge:

(C) If S knows P and S knows that P entails Q, then S knows Q.

This principle has considerable intuitive force. Now, let P be some proposition I claim to know and let H be a skeptical alternative to P. Then from the closure principle, we can derive

(1) If I know P, then I know not-H

Put this together with

(2) I do not know not-H

and it follows that

(3) I know P.

is false....

To respond to the deductive closure argument, a fallibilist must deny either premise (1) or premise (2). *The problem ... is that both of these premises are intuitively quite appealing. Then again, many instances of (3), the denial of the conclusion of the argument, seem intuitively compelling.* This has led some to argue that we can reject one premise of the skeptical argument by appealing to the conjunction of (3) and the other premise. Some proponents of the relevant alternatives theory argue that our strong intuitions supporting (2) and (3) just show that (1) (and therefore the closure principle) is false. As Dretske has argued, the fact that it is very intuitive both that I know that I see a zebra, and that I fail to know I do not see a cleverly-disguised mule just shows that the closure principle is false.... *Each view we have considered attempts to exploit intuitions favorable to it. The skeptic appeals to (1) and (2) to deny (3). The relevant alternatives theorist appeals to (2) and (3) to deny (1). And the Moorean appeals to (1) and (3) to deny (2).* (Cohen 1999, 62, emphasis added).

In the philosophical literature on skepticism, it is often suggested that both skeptical intuitions and the skeptical conclusions they apparently entail are universally shared. In *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Barry Stroud maintains that skepticism

appeals to something deep in our nature and seems to raise a real problem about the human condition. It is natural to feel that either we must accept the literal truth of the conclusion that we can know nothing about the world around us, or else we must somehow show that it is not true (Stroud 1984, 39).

Similarly, Colin McGinn takes skepticism to be a universal feature lurking in human thought:

Common sense takes knowledge to be both possible and widespread, simply part of life. People (and some animals) are assumed to know a great many things across a broad range of subject-matters... But it takes very little reflection, or prompting, to cast all this into serious doubt: we quickly come to feel that the concept lacks the kind of broad and ready application we earlier took for granted. Skeptical thoughts occur readily and with considerable force, soon leading us to declare that, after all, we know little or nothing. The concept strikes us as containing the seeds of its own destruction, by requiring the satisfaction of conditions that are palpably unsatisfied. Ontogenetically, the concept of knowledge comes into play during the first three or four years, but it is apt to lose its moorings during adolescence, when reflection intrudes. Then it is commonly asserted, with the air of the platitudinous, that of course nobody ever really *knows* anything. How

could they, given the content of the concept and the facts of epistemic life? Philosophical scepticism thus seems endemic to the use of epistemic concepts: to reflect on the concept of knowledge is immediately to question its application. Not surprisingly, then, scepticism arose early in the history of philosophical thought and has continued to exercise a powerful hold on it. It is a hazard the anthropological conjecture that every culture has its sceptics, silent though they may be. There is something primitive and inevitable about sceptical doubt. It runs deep in human thought. The question is whether it can be overcome, and by what means (McGinn 1993, 107-8).

McGinn not only thinks that skepticism is “primitive and inevitable” he also claims that the skeptical challenge is so overwhelming that we must be cognitively incapable of finding a satisfactory reply.

(1993; see also Nagel 1986).^[5] Clearly, many philosophers think that the epistemic intuitions that underlie skeptical arguments are widely shared, and this is an important part of the reason that the skeptical arguments are supposed to have such an enduring importance.

2. Epistemology as Ethnography

One of us has long been intrigued by the possibility that different groups of people *might* have very different epistemic intuitions (Stich, 1988, 1990), and a few years ago we learned of two research projects in cross-cultural psychology which suggested that systematic diversity in epistemic intuitions was more than a mere possibility. In one of these projects, Richard Nisbett and his collaborators (Nisbett, 2001) have found large and systematic differences between East Asians and Westerners^[6] on a long list of quite basic cognitive processes including perception, attention and memory. These groups also differ in the way they go about describing, predicting and explaining events, in the way they categorize objects and in the way they revise beliefs in the face of new arguments and evidence. Nisbett and his colleagues maintain that these differences “can be loosely grouped together under the heading of holistic vs. analytic thought.” Holistic thought, which predominates among East Asians, is characterized as “involving an orientation to the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships.” Analytic thought, the prevailing pattern among Westerners, is characterized as “involving detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object in order to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object’s behavior.” (Nisbett et al. 2001, p. 293) Westerners also have a stronger sense of agency and independence, while East Asians have a much stronger commitment to social harmony. In East Asian society, the individual feels “very much a part of a large and complex social organism ... where behavioral prescriptions must be followed and role obligations adhered to scrupulously.” (Nisbett et al. 2001, pp. 292-293) As a result of these differences, Nisbett and his colleagues maintain, there is considerable cultural variation in the *epistemic practices* in these two cultural traditions – people in the two cultures form beliefs and categories, construct arguments, and draw inferences in significantly different ways. Of course, this does not show that there are also cross-cultural differences in epistemic *intuitions*. But it does suggest that it is a serious empirical possibility, and that it might be worth finding out whether these differences in epistemic practices are associated with parallel differences in epistemic intuitions.

The second research project that attracted our attention looked explicitly at *intuitions*, though they were moral rather than epistemic intuitions. In an intriguing series of studies, Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators explored the extent to which moral intuitions about events in which no one is harmed track judgments about disgust in people from different cultural and socioeconomic groups (Haidt et al. 1993). For their study they constructed a set of brief stories about victimless activities that were intended to trigger the emotion of disgust. They presented these stories to subjects using a structured interview technique designed to determine whether the subjects found the activities described to be disgusting and

also to elicit the subjects' moral intuitions about the activities. For instance, in one story, a family's dog is run over and killed by a car, and the family decides to eat the dog. The interviews were administered to both high and low socio-economic status (SES) subjects in Philadelphia and in two cities in Brazil. Though the cultural differences were relatively small, Haidt and colleagues found large differences in moral intuitions between social classes. Low-SES subjects tend to think that eating your dog is seriously morally wrong; high SES subjects don't. Much the same pattern was found with the other scenarios used in the study.

Though neither of these studies directly addresses the issue of group differences in epistemic intuition, the results they reported led us to think that the following pair of hypotheses might well be true:

Hypothesis 1: Epistemic intuitions vary from culture to culture.

Hypothesis 2: Epistemic intuitions vary from one socioeconomic group to another.

Another hypothesis was suggested by anecdotal rather than experimental evidence. It has often seemed to us that students' epistemic intuitions change as they take more philosophy courses, and we have often suspected that we and our colleagues were, in effect, teaching neophyte philosophers to have intuitions that are in line with those of more senior members of the profession. Or perhaps we are not modifying intuitions at all but simply weeding out students whose intuitions are not mainstream. If either of these is the case, then the intuitions that we use in our philosophical work are not those of the man and woman in the street, but those of a highly trained and self-selecting community. These speculations led to:

Hypothesis 3: Epistemic intuitions vary as a function of how many philosophy courses a person has had.

For the last two years, we have been conducting a series of experiments designed to test these hypotheses. In designing our experiments, we wanted our intuition probes – the cases that we would ask subjects to judge – to be similar to cases that have actually been used in the recent literature in epistemology. Would different groups show significantly different responses to standard epistemic thought experiments? The answer, it seems, is yes. While the results we have so far are preliminary, they are sufficient, we think, to suggest that there are substantial and systematic differences in the epistemic intuitions of people in different cultures and socioeconomic groups. In Weinberg, Nichols & Stich (forthcoming), we present a detailed account of our studies and results. For present purposes, it will suffice to sketch a few of the highlights.

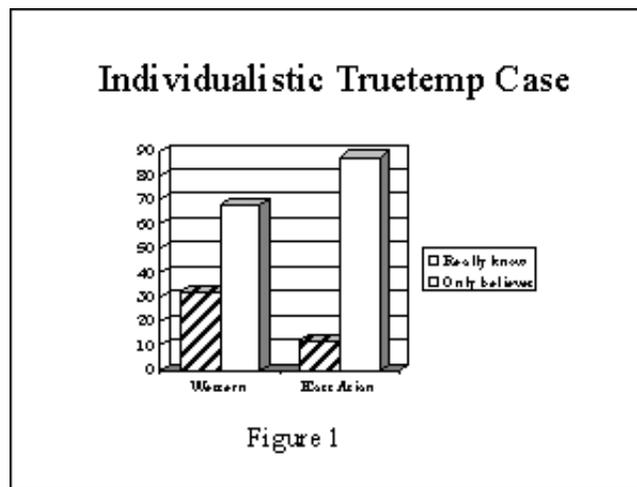
The internalism/externalism debate has been central to analytic epistemology for decades. Internalism with respect to some epistemically evaluative property (e.g., knowledge) is the view that *only* factors within an agent's introspective grasp can be relevant to whether the agent's beliefs have that property. Other factors beyond the scope of introspection, such as the reliability of the psychological mechanisms that actually produced the belief, are epistemically external to the agent. In our experiments, we included a number of "Truetemp" cases inspired by Lehrer (1990), designed to explore whether externalist/internalist dimensions of our subjects' intuitions differed in subjects with different cultural backgrounds. Here is one of the questions we presented to our subjects:

One day Charles is suddenly knocked out by a falling rock, and his brain becomes re-wired so that he is always absolutely right whenever he estimates the temperature where he is. Charles is completely unaware that his brain has been altered in this way. A few weeks later, this brain re-wiring leads him to believe that it is 71 degrees in his room. Apart from his estimation, he has no other reasons to think that it is 71 degrees. In fact, it is at that time 71 degrees in his room. Does Charles really know that it was 71 degrees in the room,

or does he only believe it?

REALLY KNOWS ONLY BELIEVES

In this intuition probe, Charles' belief is produced by a reliable mechanism, but it is stipulated that he is completely unaware of this reliability. This makes his reliability epistemically external. Therefore, to the extent that a subject population is unwilling to attribute knowledge in this case, we have evidence that suggests that the group's 'folk epistemology' is internalist. Since the mechanism that leads to Charles' belief is not shared by other members of his community, Nisbett's work suggests that East Asians (EAs), with their strong commitment to social harmony, might be less inclined than individualistic Westerners (Ws) to count Charles' belief as knowledge. And, indeed, we found that while both EAs and Ws tended to deny knowledge, EA subjects were much more likely to deny knowledge than were Ws (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .02$). The results are shown in Figure 1. [\[7\]](#)



Another category of examples that has had a tremendous impact on analytic epistemology are "Gettier cases," in which a person has a true belief for which she has good evidence, though, as it happens, the evidence is false, or only accidentally true, or in some other way warrant-deprived. By their very construction, these cases are in many ways quite *similar* to unproblematic cases in which a person has good and true evidence for a true belief. Nisbett and his colleagues have shown that EAs are more inclined than Ws to make categorical judgments on the basis of similarity; Ws, on the other hand, are more disposed to focus on causation in describing the world and classifying things. (Norenzayan, Nisbett, Smith, & Kim 1999; Watanabe 1998 & 1999). In many Gettier cases, there is a break in the causal link from the fact that makes the agent's belief true to her evidence for that belief. This suggests that EAs might be much less inclined than Ws to withhold the attribution of knowledge in Gettier cases. And, indeed, they are.

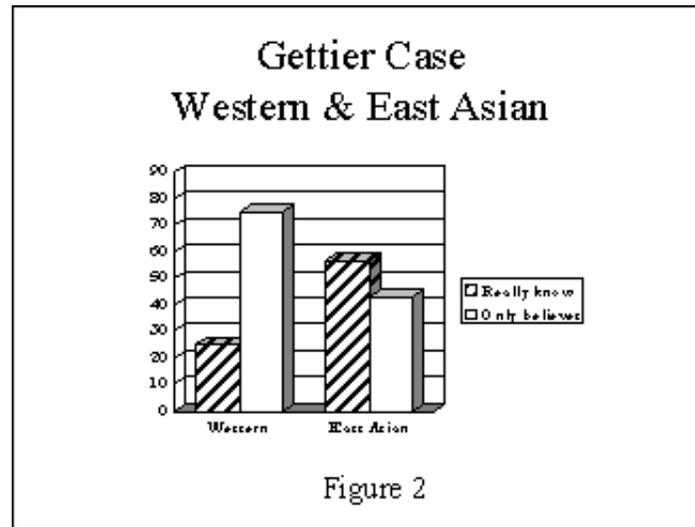
The intuition probe we used to explore cultural differences on Gettier cases was the following:

Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen, and he is also not aware that Jill has replaced it with a Pontiac, which is a different kind of American car. Does Bob really know that Jill drives an American car, or does he only believe it?

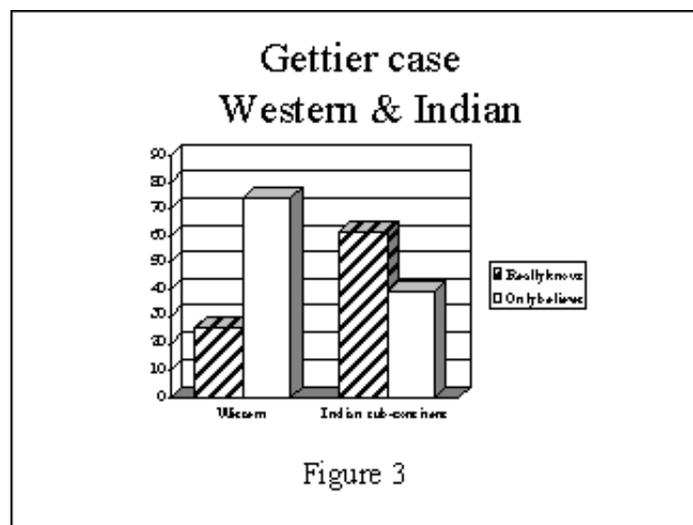
REALLY KNOWS

ONLY BELIEVES

This probe produced a striking difference between the groups (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .006$). While a large majority of Ws give the standard answer in the philosophical literature, viz. “Only Believes,” a majority of EAs have the *opposite* intuition – they said that Bob really knows. The results are shown in Figure 2.



The data we’ve presented so far suggests that Westerners and East Asians have significantly different epistemic intuitions. What about people in other cultures? We know of no experimental studies of cross cultural differences in epistemic *practices* that are as rich and detailed as those of Nisbett and his colleagues. However, for some years Richard Shweder and his colleagues have been assembling evidence indicating that the thought processes of some groups of people on the Indian sub-continent are quite different from those of Westerners. (Shweder, 1991) In some respects, the account of Indian thought that Shweder offers is rather similar to the account that Nisbett offers of East Asian thought – holism looms large in both accounts – though in other respects they are quite different. So one might suspect that the epistemic intuitions of people from the Indian sub-continent (SCs) would be in some ways similar to those of EAs. And indeed they are. Like the EA subjects, SC subjects were much more likely than W subjects to attribute knowledge in a Gettier case (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .002$). The SC results on the Gettier case are shown in Figure 3.



When we first analyzed these data, we found them quite unsettling, since it seemed perfectly

obvious to us that the people in Gettier cases *don't* have knowledge. But the results from our studies suggest that an important part of the explanation of our own clear intuitions about these cases is the fact that we were raised in a Western culture. Nisbett was likewise surprised by his findings of cross-cultural differences in epistemic practices. In a recent review article, Nisbett and colleagues write:

Almost two decades ago, Richard E. Nisbett wrote a book with Lee Ross entitled, modestly, *Human Inference* (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Roy D'Andrade, a distinguished cognitive anthropologist, read the book and told ... Nisbett he thought it was a "good ethnography." The author was shocked and dismayed. But we now wholeheartedly agree with D'Andrade's contention about the limits of research conducted in a single culture. Psychologists who choose not to do cross-cultural psychology may have chosen to be ethnographers instead (Nisbett et al. 2001, p. 307).

Our results suggest that philosophers who rely on their own intuitions about matters epistemic, and those of their colleagues, may have inadvertently made a similar choice. They too have chosen to be ethnographers; what they are doing is *ethno-epistemology*.

3. The Core Epistemology Hypothesis

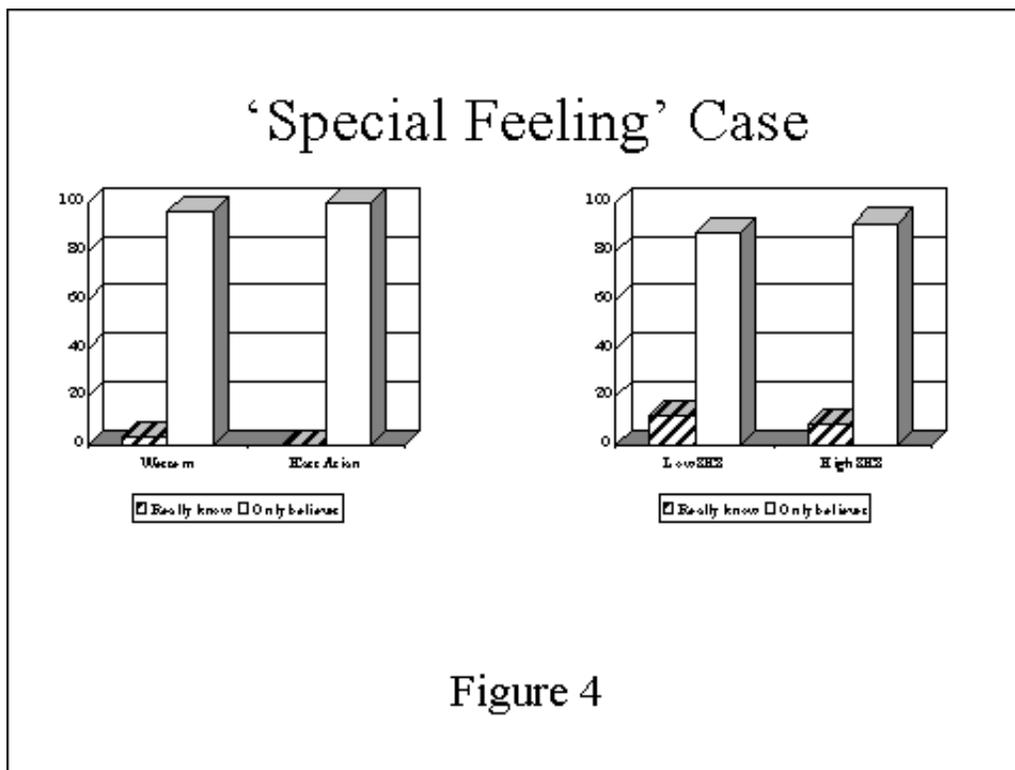
If epistemic intuitions are indeed culturally local, it poses a threat to the claim that skepticism is "primitive and inevitable." For to the extent that Western skepticism relies on culturally local intuitions, its appeal will also be culturally local. But the evidence reported in Section 2 poses only an indirect threat to arguments for skepticism, for while that evidence indicates that *some* epistemic intuitions may be culturally local, we have not yet offered any evidence about the sort of *skeptical intuitions* that play a crucial role in arguments for skepticism. Philosophers who think that skepticism's appeal is universal might suggest that while Gettier intuitions and Truetemp intuitions are culturally local, skeptical intuitions are less variable. Indeed, for all we have said, skeptical intuitions might be part of a universal core of epistemic intuitions, a core shared by just about everyone.

The hypothesis that there may be a core set of universal epistemic intuitions is one that we think deserves careful empirical scrutiny. In our own studies, we found that on one crucial probe, there were no statistically significant differences among *any* of the groups we looked at. For all of our subject groups we included a question designed to determine whether subjects treat mere subjective certainty as knowledge. The question we used was the following:

Dave likes to play a game with flipping a coin. He sometimes gets a "special feeling" that the next flip will come out heads. When he gets this "special feeling", he is right about half the time, and wrong about half the time. Just before the next flip, Dave gets that "special feeling", and the feeling leads him to believe that the coin will land heads. He flips the coin, and it does land heads. Did Dave really know that the coin was going to land heads, or did he only believe it?

REALLY KNOWS ONLY BELIEVES

As shown in Figure 4, there was no significant difference between the Western and East Asian subjects on this question (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .78$); similarly, in our studies of socio-economic groups, we found no difference on this question between high and low SES groups (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .294$). [8] In all groups almost none of our subjects judged that this was a case of knowledge.



Though obviously much more research is needed, these results are compatible with the hypothesis that *some* epistemic intuitions are universal.

4. The Ethnography of Skeptical Intuitions

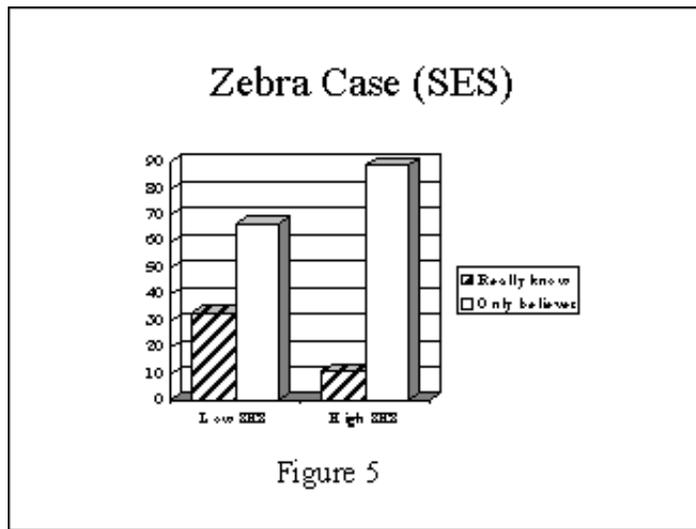
If there is a universal core of epistemic intuitions, are skeptical intuitions among them? In this section we'll offer evidence suggesting that, for some skeptical intuitions at least, the answer is *no*". In section 2, we set out three hypotheses about potential sources of diversity in epistemic intuitions. We proposed that epistemic intuitions might vary as a function of *culture*, *SES*, and *philosophical training*. Data we have recently collected indicates that skeptical intuitions vary as a function of *all* of these factors.

We will begin with the data on different SES groups. For these studies, the experimenter approached adults near various commercial venues in downtown New Brunswick, New Jersey, and offered adults a fast food restaurant gift certificate for participating in the study. Following Haidt (and much other research in social psychology), we used years of education to distinguish low and high SES groups. One of the probes given to these subjects was based on the example from Fred Dretske's work that Cohen mentions in the passage we quoted earlier.

Pat is at the zoo with his son, and when they come to the zebra cage, Pat points to the animal and says, "that's a zebra." Pat is right — it is a zebra. However, given the distance the spectators are from the cage, Pat would not be able to tell the difference between a real zebra and a mule that is cleverly disguised to look like a zebra. And if the animal had really been a cleverly disguised mule, Pat still would have thought that it was a zebra. Does Pat really know that the animal is a zebra, or does he only believe that it is?

REALLY KNOWS ONLY BELIEVES

Although a majority of both groups maintained that Pat “only believes,” Low SES subjects were significantly more likely to say that Pat “really knows” (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .038$). The results are shown in Figure 5.



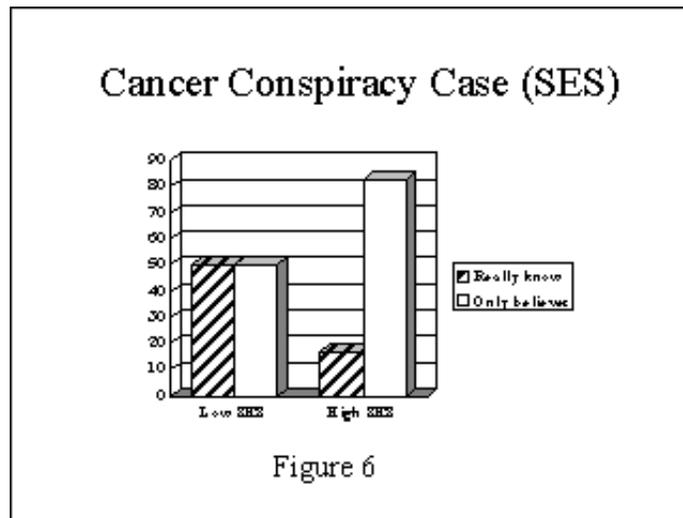
This finding suggests that there is an important difference in the extent to which skeptical intuitions can be found in different SES groups. One possible explanation of this difference is that high SES subjects are willing to accept much weaker “knowledge-defeaters” than low SES subjects because low SES subjects have lower minimum standards for knowledge. This explanation is supported by another result we obtained. We presented low and high SES subjects with a scenario in which a person has a true belief, though the evidence he relied on might have been fabricated. The probe goes as follows:

It’s clear that smoking cigarettes increases the likelihood of getting cancer. However, there is now a great deal of evidence that just using nicotine by itself without smoking (for instance, by taking a nicotine pill) does not increase the likelihood of getting cancer. Jim knows about this evidence and as a result, he believes that using nicotine does not increase the likelihood of getting cancer. It is possible that the tobacco companies dishonestly made up and publicized this evidence that using nicotine does not increase the likelihood of cancer, and that the evidence is really false and misleading. Now, the tobacco companies did not actually make up this evidence, but Jim is not aware of this fact. Does Jim really know that using nicotine doesn’t increase the likelihood of getting cancer, or does he only believe it?

REALLY KNOWS

ONLY BELIEVES

Once again, we found that responses vary significantly as a function of SES (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .007$). The results are shown in Figure 6.



These data, like the data in Figure 5, indicate that there are significant differences between SES groups in their tendencies toward skeptical intuitions, and both findings are compatible with the hypothesis that high SES groups cleave to higher minimum standards of knowledge than low SES groups.

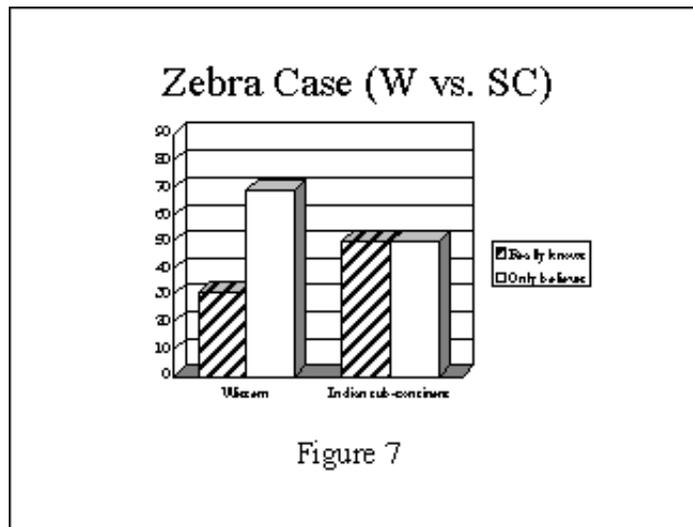
In our cross-cultural studies, we presented students with another variant of Dretske’s zebra case:

Mike is a young man visiting the zoo with his son, and when they come to the zebra cage, Mike points to the animal and says, “that’s a zebra.” Mike is right — it is a zebra. However, as the older people in his community know, there are lots of ways that people can be tricked into believing things that aren’t true. Indeed, the older people in the community know that it’s possible that zoo authorities could cleverly disguise mules to look just like zebras, and people viewing the animals would not be able to tell the difference. If the animal that Mike called a zebra had really been such a cleverly painted mule, Mike still would have thought that it was a zebra. Does Mike really know that the animal is a zebra, or does he only believe that it is?

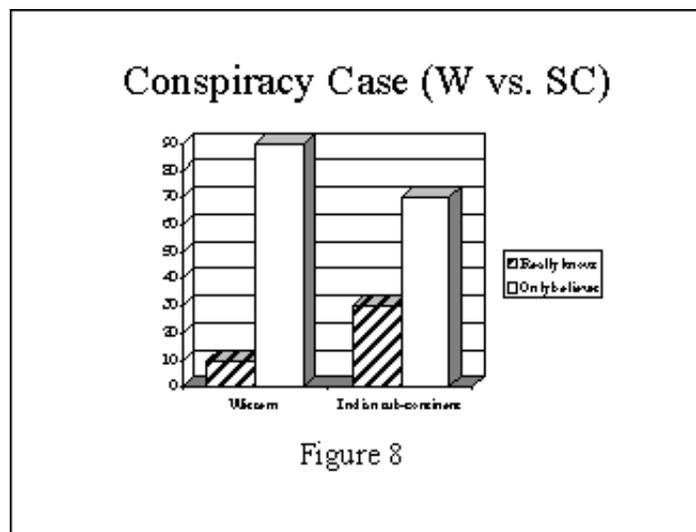
REALLY KNOWS

ONLY BELIEVES

Using this probe, we found a significant difference between Western and Subcontinental subjects. (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .049$) (Figure 7).



One possible explanation of these data is that SCs, like low SES Westerners, regard knowledge as less demanding than do High SES Westerners. And in fact we found that SC subjects were also more likely than Ws to attribute knowledge in the conspiracy case (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .025$). The results are shown in Figure 8.



SC and Low SES subjects thus appear to be significantly less susceptible to skeptical intuitions, at least in these cases. These findings contrast sharply with our evidence on EAs. We did *not* find significant differences between EAs and High SES Ws on either the Zebra case or the Conspiracy case. [\[9\]](#)

In section 2, we proposed, as our third hypothesis, that epistemic intuitions might vary as a function of the number of philosophy courses one had taken. Though no data relevant to this third hypothesis was presented in our earlier paper on epistemic intuitions (Weinberg, et al., forthcoming) we have recently completed a study that provides some support for this hypothesis. In that study we presented subjects with a series of epistemic intuition probes, and we divided the subjects into two groups: subjects who had taken few philosophy courses (2 or less) and subjects who had taken many philosophy courses (3 or more). There were 48 students in the “low philosophy” group and 15 in the “high philosophy” group. One of the probes we presented was a Brain-in-a-vat scenario. The probe reads as follows:

George and Omar are roommates, and enjoy having late-night ‘philosophical’ discussions. One such night Omar argues, “At some point in time, by, like, the year 2300, the medical and computer sciences will be able to simulate the real world very convincingly. They will be able to grow a brain without a body, and hook it up to a supercomputer in just the right way so that the brain has experiences exactly as if it were a real person walking around in a real world, talking to other people, and so on. And so the brain would believe it was a real person walking around in a real world, etc., except that it would be wrong – it’s just stuck in a virtual world, with no actual legs to walk and with no other actual people to talk to. And here’s the thing: how could you ever tell that it isn’t really the year 2300 now, and that you’re not really a virtual-reality brain? If you were a virtual-reality brain, after all, everything would look and feel exactly the same to you as it does now!”

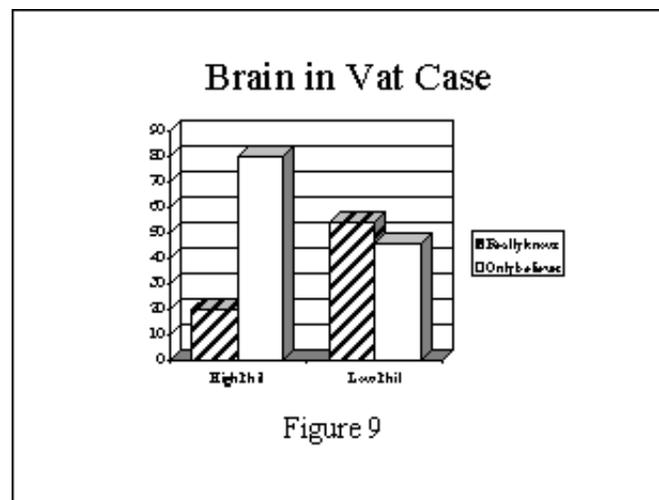
George thinks for a minute, and then replies: “But, look, here are my legs”. He points down to his legs. “If I were a virtual-reality brain, I wouldn’t have any legs really – I’d only really be just a disembodied brain. But I know I have legs – just look at them! – so I must be a real person, and not a virtual-reality brain, because only real people have real legs. So I’ll continue to believe that I’m not a virtual-reality brain.”

George and Omar are actually real humans in the actual real world today, and so neither of them are virtual-reality brains, which means that George’s belief is true. But does George know that he is not a virtual-reality brain, or does he only believe it?

REALLY KNOWS

ONLY BELIEVES

We found a quite significant difference between Low & High Philosophy groups on this probe (Fisher Exact Test, $p = .016$). The evidence indicates that students with less philosophy are more likely to claim that the person knows he’s not a brain in a vat. The results are presented in figure 9.



This suggests that the propensity for skeptical intuitions varies significantly as a function of exposure to philosophy. Indeed, so far this skeptical intuition case is the *only* probe on which we have found significant differences between students as a function of how many philosophy classes they have had.

5. Some Meta-Skeptical Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from these studies? The first and most obvious conclusion is that, though the empirical exploration of epistemic intuitions, and of philosophical intuitions more generally, is still in its infancy, the evidence currently available suggests that all three of our initial hypotheses may well be true. Epistemic intuitions, including skeptical intuitions, appear to vary systematically as a function of the cultural background, the socio-economic status and the number of philosophy courses taken by the person whose intuitions are being elicited. We want to emphasize that all the results we have reported should be regarded as quite preliminary. To make a suitably rich and compelling case for our hypotheses, it will be important to replicate and extend the findings we have reported. But our data thus far certainly lend support to the claim that there is a great deal of diversity in epistemic intuitions, and that a substantial part of that diversity is due to differences in cultural background, SES and philosophical training.

If that's right, and if, as we contended in section 1, the defense of many of the premises used in arguments for skepticism comes to rest on an explicit or implicit appeal to intuition, then we can also conclude that the appeal of these skeptical arguments will be much more local than many philosophers suppose. For if people in different cultural and SES groups and people who have had little or no philosophical training do not share "*our*" intuitions (i.e. the intuitions of the typical analytic philosopher who is white, Western, high SES and has had *lots* of philosophical training) then they are unlikely to be as convinced or distressed as "*we*" are by arguments whose premises seem plausible only if one has the intuitions common in our very small cultural and intellectual tribe. *Pace* McGinn's "anthropological conjecture," skepticism is neither primitive nor inevitable. And *pace* Stroud there is no reason to think that skepticism "appeals to something deep in our nature." Rather, it seems, its appeal is very much a product of our culture, our social status and our education!

We do not, of course, deny that some people (ourselves included!) find it very hard to loosen the grip of skeptical intuitions. Along with most high SES Western philosophers, we find many skeptical intuitions to be obvious and compelling. However, we are inclined to think that the lesson to be drawn from our cross-cultural studies is that, however obvious they may seem, these intuitions are simply not to be trusted. If the epistemic intuitions of people in different groups disagree, they can't all be true. The fact that epistemic intuitions vary systematically with culture and SES indicates that these intuitions are caused (in part) by culturally local phenomena. And there is no reason to think that the culturally local phenomena that cause *our* intuitions track the truth any better than the culturally local phenomena that cause intuitions that differ from ours. Our predicament is in some ways analogous to the predicament of a person who is raised in a homogeneous and deeply religious culture and finds the truth of certain religious claims to be obvious or compelling. When such a person discovers that other people do not share his intuitions, he may well come to wonder why his intuitions are any more likely to be true than theirs. On second thought, our situation is a bit worse. The religious person might rest content with the thought that, for some reason or other God has chosen to cause his group to have religious intuitions that track the truth. Few philosophers will rest content with the parallel thought about their epistemic intuitions.

We are not, we should stress, defending a generalized skepticism that challenges the use of *all* intuitions in philosophy. Rather, our skepticism is focused on those intuitions that differ systematically from one social group to another. There is, of course, a sense in which the philosophical literature on skepticism also supports the conclusion that some of our epistemic intuitions are not to be trusted, since, as the quote from Cohen in Section 1 illustrates, much of that literature is devoted to showing that our epistemic intuitions appear to support a logically inconsistent set of propositions, and to arguing about which of these intuitions should be ignored. But our findings raise a quite different problem. For even if some individual or group had a completely consistent set of intuitions, the fact that these intuitions are determined, to a significant degree, by one's cultural, SES and educational background, and the fact that people in other groups have systematically different intuitions, raises the question of why the folks who

have these consistent intuitions should trust any of them.

One way in which a philosopher might resist our contention that the systematic cultural variation in epistemic intuitions indicates that these intuitions are not to be trusted would be to argue that intuitive differences of the sort that we've reported are an indication that the people offering the intuitions *have different epistemic concepts*. In his recent book, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, Frank Jackson clearly endorses the view that people whose epistemic intuitions differ on philosophically important cases should be counted as having different epistemic concepts.

I have occasionally run across people who resolutely resist the Gettier cases. Sometimes it has seemed right to accuse them of confusion... but sometimes it is clear that they are not confused; what we then learn from the stand-off is simply that they use the word 'knowledge' to cover different cases from most of us. In these cases it is, it seems to me, misguided to accuse them of error (unless they go on to say that their concept of knowledge is ours). (Jackson, 1998, 32)

So for Jackson, (unconfused) East Asians or Indians who insist that the people described in Gettier cases *do* have knowledge are not disagreeing with those of us who think they don't. Rather, they are simply using the term 'knowledge' to express a different concept. And, in all likelihood, an East Asian or Indian is *right* to insist that (as he uses the term) people in Gettier cases *do* have knowledge, just as, in all likelihood, we are right to insist that (as we use the term), they *don't*. Though Jackson focuses on the example of Gettier cases, we think it is clear that he would say much the same about people who react differently to the sorts of skeptical intuition probes discussed in section 4. Those people, too, if they are not simply confused, should be viewed as having different epistemic concepts. Thus there is no real disagreement between people who react differently to skeptical intuition probes, and in all likelihood their intuitions are all true.

There is, of course, a substantial literature on concepts and concept individuation (see, for example, Margolis & Laurence, 1999), and many of the leading contributors to that literature would strongly disagree with Jackson's claim that people who have different intuitions about Gettier cases have different concepts of knowledge. (See, for example, Fodor 1998) We have no allegiance to any theory of concepts or to any account of concept individuation. But we think it is of considerable interest to simply *assume*, for argument's sake, that Jackson is right, and to ask what follows.

One important consequence of this assumption is that it undermines our attempt to argue from the results of our cross cultural studies of epistemic intuition to the conclusion that those intuitions are not to be trusted. Crucial to our argument was the claim that, since epistemic intuitions of people in different groups disagree, they can't all be true. But if Jackson is right about concepts, then our subjects are not really disagreeing at all; they are simply using the word 'knowledge' (or 'know') to express different concepts. So their intuitively supported claims about knowledge (or, to be more precise, about what *they* call 'knowledge'), including those claims used in arguments for skepticism, *can* all be true, and as Jackson would have it, in all likelihood they *are*.

But while Jackson's account of concept individuation makes it easier to maintain that the premises of skeptical arguments are true, it makes it harder to see why the *conclusions* of those arguments are interesting or worrisome. To see the point, we need only note that, if Jackson is right about concepts and if we are right about the influence of culture, SES and philosophical training on epistemic intuitions, then it follows that the term 'knowledge' is used to express *lots of concepts*. East Asians, Indians and High SES Westerners all have different concepts; High and Low SES Westerners have different concepts; people who have studied lots of philosophy and people who have studied no philosophy have different concepts. And that, no doubt, is just the tip of the iceberg. Moreover, these concepts don't simply differ in *intension*, they differ in *extension* – they apply to different classes of actual and possible cases.

In the philosophical tradition, skepticism is taken to be worrisome because it denies that knowledge is possible, and that's bad because knowledge, it is assumed, is something very important. On Plato's view, "wisdom and knowledge are the highest of human things," (Plato (1892/1937, 352) and many people, both philosophers and ordinary folk, would agree. But obviously, if there are many concepts of knowledge, and if these concepts have different extensions, it can't be the case that *all* of them are the highest of human things. If Jackson is right about concepts, then the arguments for skepticism in the philosophical tradition pose a serious challenge to the possibility of having what High SES, white Westerners with lots of philosophical training call 'knowledge'. But those arguments give us no reason to think that we can't have what other people – East Asians, Indians, Low SES people, or scientists who have never studied philosophy – would call 'knowledge'. And, of course, those skeptical arguments give us no reason at all to think that what High SES white Western philosophers call 'knowledge' is any better, or more important, or more desirable, or more useful than what these other folks call 'knowledge', or that it is any closer to "the highest of human things." Without some reason to think that what white, Western, High SES philosophers call 'knowledge' is any more valuable, desirable, or useful than any of the other commodities that other groups call 'knowledge' it is hard to see why we should care if we can't have it.

Let us close with a brief review of the main themes of the paper. Arguments for skepticism have occupied a central place in Western philosophy. And it's easy to see why. Skeptical arguments threaten dramatic conclusions from premises that are intuitively compelling to many philosophers, including the three of us. A number of Western philosophers maintain that the intuitions invoked in skeptical arguments have nothing to do with being Western or a philosopher. Rather, these intuitions are regarded as intrinsic to human nature and cross-culturally universal. We've argued that our evidence poses a serious challenge to this universalist stance. Our data suggest that some of the most familiar skeptical intuitions are far from universal – they vary as a function of culture, SES, and educational background. We find that this evidence generates a nagging sense that our own skeptical intuitions are parochial vestiges of our culture and education. Had we been raised in a different culture or SES group or had a different educational background, we would have been much less likely to find these intuitions compelling. This historical arbitrariness of our skeptical intuitions leads us to be skeptical that we can trust these intuitions to be true; for we see no reason to think that our cultural and intellectual tribe should be so privileged. One might, as we've noted, maintain that different cultural, SES and educational groups simply have different concepts of knowledge, and that on our concept of knowledge, the skeptical intuitions are true. Although this response is available, it saps the drama from the skeptical conclusion. It's not clear that skepticism would have held such a grip over the minds of epistemologists if the skeptic is reduced to the claim that the external world can't be "known", according to the concept of knowledge used by the relatively small cultural group to which we happen to belong. As one of us wrote some years ago, "The best first response to the skeptic who maintains that we cannot achieve certainty, ...knowledge or what have you, is not to argue that we can. Rather, it is to ask, so what?" (Stich, 1990, 26)

Shaun Nichols
College of Charleston

Stephen Stich
Rutgers University

Jonathan M. Weinberg
Indiana University

References

- Burnyeat, M. 1982. "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed". *Philosophical Review*, 91, 3-40.
- Cohen, S. 1999. "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons". In J. Tomberlin (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 57-90.
- DeRose, K. 1995. "Solving the Skeptical Problem". *Philosophical Review*, 104, 1-52.
- DeRose, K. 1999. "Introduction: Responding to Skepticism". In K. DeRose & T. Warfield (eds.) *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dretske, F. 1970. "Epistemic Operators." *Journal of Philosophy*, 67(24), 1007-1023.
- Fodor, J. 1998. *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haidt, J., S. Koller & M. Dias 1993. "Affect, Culture and Morality," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 65, 4, 613-628.
- Hill, C. 1996. "Process Reliabilism and Cartesian Skepticism". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 56, 567-581.
- Jackson, F. 1998. *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defense of Conceptual Analysis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Klein, P. 1981. *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lehrer, K. 1990. *Theory of Knowledge*. Boulder and London: Westview Press and Routledge.
- Lewis, D. 1996. "Elusive Knowledge". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74, 549-567.
- Margolis, E. and Laurence, S. 1999. *Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- McGinn, C. 1993. *Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nagel, T. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nisbett, R. and Ross, L. 1980. *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Nisbett, R. E., K. Peng, I. Choi and A. Norenzayan. 2001. "Culture and Systems of Thought: Holistic Versus Analytic Cognition". *Psychological Review*, vol. 108, no. 2, p. 291-310.
- Norenzayan, A., Nisbett, R. E., Smith, E. E., & Kim, B. J. 1999. *Rules vs. similarity as a basis for*

reasoning and judgment in East and West. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Nozick, R. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pinker, S. 1997. *How the Mind Works*. New York: Norton.

Plato (1892/1937). *The Dialogues of Plato* translated by B. Jowett. New York: Random House.

Schiffer, S. 1996. "Contextualist Solutions to Skepticism". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 96, 317-333.

Shweder, R. 1991. *Thinking Through Cultures: Explorations in Cultural Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stich, S. 1988. "Reflective Equilibrium, Analytic Epistemology and the Problem of Cognitive Diversity," *Synthese*, 74, 391-413.

Stich, S. 1990. *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation*. Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books / MIT Press.

Stroud, B. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Unger, P. 1975. *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Watanabe, M. 1998. "Styles of reasoning in Japan and the United States: Logic of Education in two cultures." Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, August, 1998.

Watanabe, M. 1999. *Styles of reasoning in Japan and the United States: Logic of education in two cultures*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University.

Weinberg, J., Nichols, S. and Stich, S (forthcoming). "Normativity & Epistemic Intuitions." *Philosophical Topics*.

Williams, M. 1996. *Unnatural Doubts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[1] We are grateful to Gary Bartlett for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[2] Though we take no stand on what exactly Descartes had in mind. For some relevant discussion see Burnyeat (1982).

[3] As we use the notion, an *intuition* is simply a spontaneous judgment about truth or falsity of a proposition – a judgment for which the person making the judgment may be able to offer little or no further justification. For ease of exposition, we will also often use the term 'intuition' for the proposition judged to be true or false.

[4] Note that we are not here concerning ourselves with what has been called 'Pyrrhonian' or 'Agrippan' skepticism. Such skepticism does not rely on an intuition involving skeptical hypotheses, but rather generates a paradox through the three plausible-sounding principles that (i) we may not rationally stop

reasoning at an arbitrary point; (ii) we may not rationally believe based on circular reasoning; and (iii) we may not rationally believe on the basis of an infinite regress of reasons. The upshot of this paradox is that we cannot believe rationally at all. Arguments like this also depend on intuitions to support each principle of the trilemma. But none of the data we will be presenting below is directly relevant to that type of intuition. Nonetheless, those concerned with this brand of skepticism may well want to worry that something similar to the argument we are about to launch against the Cartesian might at some later date find a Pyrrhonian target.

[5] Steven Pinker follows McGinn down this path (1997, 559).

[6] The East Asian subjects were Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Some of the experiments were conducted in Asia, others used East Asian students studying in the United States or first and second generation East Asian immigrants to the United States. The Western subjects were Americans of European ancestry.

[7] Our subjects in all the ethnic group studies were undergraduates at Rutgers University. All of them were fluent in English. In classifying subjects into ethnic groups we relied on the same ethnic identification questionnaire that Nisbett and his colleagues had used. We are grateful to Professor Nisbett for providing us with a copy of the questionnaire and for much helpful advice on its use.

[8] The methods used in the SES studies are discussed in section 4.

[9] Note that our results in Zebra case and the Conspiracy case do not *directly* demonstrate cross-cultural diversity with respect to skeptical intuitions. For the subjects were asked whether the characters in the stories knew, not the falsity of a skeptical hypothesis, but the truth of an ordinary claim inconsistent with that hypothesis. For example, we did not ask whether Mike really knew that the animal was not a painted mule – we only asked whether he knew that it was a zebra. The experimental materials, in suggesting the presence of uneliminated skeptical hypotheses, clearly invite the subjects to engage in skeptical reasoning, and our data strongly indicate significant diversity in the willingness of members of different groups to engage in such thinking. Further research is needed to determine *why* different groups tend to give different answers in the experiments we've reported. However, in the experiment we are about to recount, we *did* directly test a skeptical intuition – indeed, we tested the skeptical intuition *par excellence*.