

Knowledge and Representations: Explaining the Skeptical Puzzle

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Abstract

This paper provides an explanation of the skeptical puzzle. I argue that we can take two distinct points of view towards representations, mental representations like perceptual experiences and artificial representations like symbols. When focusing on what the representation represents we take an *attached* point of view. When focusing on the representational character of the representation we take a *detached* point of view. From an attached point of view, we have the intuition that we can know that p simply by *using* the representation and without having prior knowledge about the reliability of the source that delivers the representation. When taking a detached point of view, we tend to think that we must have this kind of prior knowledge. These two conflicting intuitions about knowledge and representations provide the basis for our intuition of immediate perceptual knowledge on the one hand and for the skeptical intuition of underdetermination on the other hand.

1. The Immediate-Knowledge Intuition and the Intuition of Underdetermination

The skeptical problem is usually regarded as a puzzle about conflicting intuitions. First, we are convinced that we have perceptual knowledge about the external world, second, the intuition is persisting that we do not know that the skeptical hypotheses are false, and, third, we think that if we know the first then we know the second. Each of these three intuitions seems plausible, but together they are inconsistent. The skeptical and the anti-skeptical intuition that I will focus on here are the intuition of immediate perceptual knowledge about the external world on the one hand, and the underdetermination view that all our evidence equally supports the real-world-hypothesis and the skeptical hypothesis on the other hand.

According to our natural and pre-philosophical understanding of knowledge external world knowledge via perception is simple and immediate. Intuitively, we attribute knowledge about the surrounding to infants before they acquire concepts of reliability, trustworthiness or of skeptical hypotheses and we attribute *additional* knowledge to them when they acquire these concepts. This is the *immediate-knowledge-intuition*. This intuition is compatible with numerous knowledge accounts, such as process reliabilism, dogmatism as put forward by Pryor (2000 and 2004) or Sosa's (2007) concept of animal knowledge.

The intuition of underdetermination is one of the most persisting anti-skeptical intuition. It states that our evidence does not favor the real-world-hypothesis that the world is broadly the way we believe it to be to a skeptical hypothesis that we are systematically deceived in falsely believing. We can formulate this intuition as follows.

The intuition of underdetermination

Our evidence does not favor the real-world-hypothesis over the skeptical hypotheses.

The skeptical argument based on this intuition is often called the argument of underdetermination, which is the argument that we do not have any perceptual knowledge because our evidence underdetermines the real-world-hypothesis given that it does not favor it over some skeptical hypothesis.

Let me reflect on the skeptical intuition of underdetermination in more detail. For example, S's experience as of a computer in front of her underdetermines the hypothesis that there actually is a computer in front of her because it does not favor this hypothesis over the skeptical hypothesis that S is a BIV deceived in falsely believing that there is a computer in front of her. S experiences as of p but there are two competing hypotheses about the origin of S's experience, the real-world-hypothesis and a skeptical hypothesis. S's knowledge about her experiences and beliefs does not favor the real-world-hypothesis over the skeptical hypothesis. Hence, S's belief in the real-world-hypothesis is evidentially underdetermined.

It is important to note that the intuition of underdetermination is not only characterized by what we do *not* know and why we do not know, but also by what we do know. S does know that she experiences as of p . Thus, it is assumed that S has knowledge about her own current mental states, most plausibly via introspection. S just does not know what caused her experiences.

2 Liberalism and Conservatism

Pryor (2004) introduced the terminology of liberalism and conservatism for referring to two rival accounts on perceptual justification. According to Pryor (2004, 355) liberals and conservatives diverge about the role of non-perceiving hypotheses which are "(known to be) incompatible with one's experiences being genuine perceptions" like the hypothesis that I am hallucinating right now. Conservatives about perception like Wright (2002 and 2004) defend the following claim.

Conservatism

S is justified to believe that p based on her experiences as of p , only if S has prior justification to believe that any non-perceiving hypothesis is false.

Liberalism is the denial of conservatism. Liberals like Pryor (2000, 520) hold that "not only can we have perceptual knowledge and justified perceptual belief, we might have it without being in a position to cite *anything* that could count as ampliative, non-question-begging evidence for those beliefs." Liberals treat non-perceiving hypotheses only as underminers, i.e. evidence for non-perceiving hypotheses tends to undermine our perceptual justification. However, in the absence of any evidence for or against non-perceiving hypotheses, we have prima facie perceptual justification.

Hence, the conflict between liberals and conservatives is one about the architecture of knowledge. Liberals accept that perceptual knowledge can be immediate and non-inferential. This view is accordance with our natural and non-philosophical understanding that perceptual knowledge is simple and immediate. Conservatives deny the immediacy of perceptual knowledge or at least have to explain why it is immediate despite not being fundamental.

3 Knowledge and Representations

In this section, I will argue that the conflicting intuitions of liberalism and conservatism rely on two distinct concept of knowledge via representations, first, knowing simply by *using* a representation (or by being confronted with a representation) and, second, knowing by *reflecting* on the representation and on its representational character from a more detached point of view. I understand representations as *mental* representations like experiences and beliefs or *artificial* representations like symbols, signals or texts.

When confronted with representations we can, first, acquire knowledge about what the representation represents and, second, about the representation itself. We can acquire knowledge that p , when having an experience as of p ,

when reading in a textbook that p or when being told that p . This is knowledge about what the representation represents based on the representation. Moreover, we can acquire knowledge *about* representations and their representational character, for example that I have an experience as of p , that the textbook says that p or that S asserts that p . There is no tension between the two kinds of knowledge, i.e. between knowledge via representations about the facts represented and knowledge about the representations themselves. The crucial point is that we can have conflicting intuitions about the *relations* between knowledge that p based on representations that p and knowledge about these representations. The first intuition is one about knowledge when *using* representations (or when being confronted with representations). The second is one about knowledge when *reflecting* about representations.

(a) The intuition of knowledge from an attached point of view (I_A)

From an attached point of view, we think that we can come to know that p simply by being confronted with a representation that p , but without knowing much or even anything about the representation or its source. In this case, we simply use a representation for acquiring knowledge but without doing much prior reflection work on it. We can distinguish between a strong claim and a weak claim about knowledge from an attached point of view.

I_A -strong

When S is confronted with a representation R that p , then S can know that p simply by forming a belief that p on the basis of R (i.e. without knowing that R is a representation that p and without knowing that R is delivered by a reliable source.)

I_A -weak

When S is confronted with a representation R that p and when S knows that R is a representation that p , then S can know that p simply by forming a belief that p on the basis of R (i.e. without knowing that R is delivered by a reliable source.)

I_A -weak is weaker than I_A -strong, because I_A -strong allows knowledge via a representation R that p without even knowing that R is a representation that p . Process reliabilism defends I_A -strong since it claims that a belief that p is justified, if the belief-forming process is reliable which is the case, if the representation is delivered by a reliable source, no matter whether S has knowledge about the representational nature of the representation involved. Furthermore, Sosa (2007) presumably defends this strong claim with respect to animal knowledge and Pryor (2000, 520) plausibly accepts this view with respect to experiences and perceptual knowledge. Various intermediate versions of I_A are possible, e.g. that S must implicitly believe that R is a representation or that S must be in a position to know that R is a representation. We assume that a version of I_A is true if we make knowledge ascriptions of the following kind: The infant knows that there is a red ball in front of her because she sees a red ball in front of her. I know that the Giants won their last game because I read it in the NYT.

(b) The intuition of knowledge from a detached point of view (I_D)

When focusing our attention on the representational character of the representation rather than on what the representation represents we take a detached point of view towards the representation. The resulting intuition about knowledge via the representation can be characterized as follows. When S is confronted with a representation that p , e.g. a travel report in a newspaper or the output of a measurement device such as a thermometer, then it is naïve to assume that S can know that p without knowing anything about the reliability of the newspaper or the measurement device. In order to know that p , S must have knowledge about the reliability of the representation

delivering source, for example by comparing the reports of the newspaper to reports of other newspapers, by acquiring background information about the newspaper, by comparing the output of the thermometer to the output of other thermometers or by acquiring background information about the company that produces the thermometer. For having knowledge that p when confronted with a representation that p , we must have this kind of *prior* knowledge about the reliability of the representation. If S does not have this prior knowledge, S only knows that *the newspaper says that p* or that *the thermometer indicates that p* , but S does not know that p itself. We can summarize this intuition from a detached point of view (I_D) as follows.

I_D

If S is confronted with a representation R that p , then S can know that p via R only if S knows that R is a representation that p and if S has prior knowledge that R is delivered by a reliable source.

Note that I_D not only state that S does not know that p when confronted with R, if S has knowledge or reasons to believe that R is *not* reliable. Rather I_D is the stronger claim that without any prior evidence about the reliability of R, S does not know that p on the basis of R. This view captures the skeptical intuition of underdetermination. The two intuitions I_A and I_D contradict each other. I_A states that S can know that p via R without having prior knowledge about the reliability of R. I_D precisely denies this.

How can we explain why these two conflicting intuitions arise? They are based on *shifts of attention* which support two different points of view that we can take towards representations. On the one hand, we can primarily use representations for acquiring knowledge about the world without doing much or even any reflection work about the representation. In this case, we focus our attention on what the representation represents and take an *attached* point of view towards the representation. On the other, we can take a *detached* point of view towards representations and focus our attention on the representational character of a representation R, i.e. on the fact that R is a *representation* that p .¹ When taking a detached point of view, the representational character of R becomes *salient* to us. From that point of view, it seems plausible that we only know that R is a representation that p , unless we have prior evidence that R is delivered by a reliable source. The two conflicting intuitions I_A and I_D are motivated in the following way.

When focusing our attention on *what* R represents, we take an *attached* point of view towards R that supports I_A .

When focusing our attention on the *representational character* of R, we take a *detached* point of view towards R that supports I_D .

It is important to note that I do not argue here that one of these intuitions is accurate and the other one not. They both seem legitimate. I only want to explain how they arise. Moreover, I do not claim that when confronted with a representation R, we take *and maintain* either an attached or a detached point of view. Rather we can switch between the points of view by shifting our attention between what R represents and R's representational character. Furthermore, I do not think that we can only take one point of view at one moment of time. Rather we can hold both points of view, but one is *dominant* and the other *recessive*, depending on what we focus on, and accordingly, one intuition is dominant and the other recessive.

¹ Bilgrami (2006) uses the concept of a detached point of view in a similar way, but regarding values in the world.

According to the presented view, there is a cognitive difference between primarily using a representation that p for coming to believe that p and primarily believing that something is a representation that p . In this sense, representations are *Janus faced*. On the one hand, we can use them for forming beliefs; on the other hand, we can focus on their representational character. I think that this Janus-faced nature explains at least one type of skeptical intuitions, namely the intuition of underdetermination.

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