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SYMPOSIUM

Explanationist Seeking Agreement with Bergmann

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Abstract
This paper expresses extensive agreement with Michael Bergmann's position in *Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition*, but (i) offers a simpler response to the skeptic, (ii) takes issue with Bergmann's strong claim that an "evil demon" hypothesis is as good an explanation of our sensory experiences as is the natural realist explanation, and (iii) corrects a misunderstanding about explanationists' canons of theory preference.

Keywords: skepticism; explanationism; evil demon; theory preference; conservatism; neatness; testability

Mike Bergmann (2021) makes it very hard to disagree with any of his main claims. His book is very carefully, meticulously argued, on nearly every front I can think of. But I shall tout an anti-skeptical advantage of the competing background epistemology I favor, and then strongly dispute one of Bergmann's lesser claims.

1. Agreements

I'll begin by acknowledging some of our many points of agreement:

1. Skepticism is a global issue; it is not just about perception and belief in the external world. It arises for beliefs of any type, with any modal status, and for any basis or source of support. Beliefs based directly on memory, inference, a priori intuition, and introspection are all subject to skeptical challenge.[1]
2. Skepticism about memory undercuts some standard responses to more common skepticisms (Ch. 4). In fact, it is more insidious than perceptual skepticism.[2]
3. Skepticism about introspection is defensible on "underdetermination" grounds (Ch. 5, Sec. 2). Just as perception and memory do, it admits what Bergmann throughout calls an "evidence-truth gap."

N.b., even today, we see some near-Cartesian credulity about introspection, among epistemologists who do not know enough philosophy of mind.

[1]I believe Lehrer (1971) was the first epistemologist of the past half-century to have made that point.

Descartes took perceptual skepticism so seriously that he had to prove the existence of God to answer it, appealing for his premises to be "clear and distinct ideas." (To be fair, he at least saw the need to say why clarity and distinctness make a belief trustworthy.) Introspective skepticism would have made no sense to him.

[2]For example, all instances of induction rely on premises about the past. For that matter, even a simple deductive inferring takes a measurable amount of time, so the justification of the conclusion depends on memory (however short-term) of the premises (p. 80).

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4. The "New Evil Demon" thesis (23–24): a phenomenological twin of yours, who is a victim of the Demon, has exactly the same evidence as you do, and her/his beliefs are just as well justified as yours. (But in Section 2 below, I shall insist on an important qualification.)

New Evil Demon is happily incompatible with any simple form of reliabilism. Neither Bergmann nor I are reliabilists.[3]

5. Particularism, in Chisholm's terminology, as opposed to "methodism" (Ch. 6): the practice of "giv[ing]…more weight to judgments about the epistemic status of particular beliefs… [than] to judgments about epistemic principles" (119). Chisholm and Bergmann have Reid and Moore in mind. I am a militant Moorean against skeptics and eliminative idealists and have developed a version of Moore's common sense method that withstands all the standard objections to it (Lycan, 2019, Chs. 1 and 2).[4]

However, I also agree with Bergmann that even the Moorean must take skepticism seriously in a way that s/he need not take idealism seriously, much less Zeno's arguments against motion.

6. Intuitions, in the special sense the term has in contemporary philosophy, are intellectual seemings,[5] on which beliefs are sometimes based but which are distinct from beliefs or even inclinations to believe. (I think Bergmann uses the term a bit more widely than I do; I usually restrict "intuition" to seemings that are, on whatever topic, *verdictive* with regard to particular cases.)
7. More importantly, intuitions are pieces of evidence. That is, the *contents* of intuitions, what Sellars would call the "intuit*ed*s" as opposed to the occurrent psychological events of intuit*ing*, are empirical data to be respected as such—a highly controversial claim.[6]

And Bergmann makes a good point (159), that Moore's method against skepticism and idealism relies on normative epistemological intuitions; these intuitions are methodologically more fundamental.[7]

8. Justification is a matter of conforming to a norm. However, to be justified in holding a belief, one need not state or even be able to state the relevant norm, much less defend it or even discuss it. (Indeed, it could not be that every norm is reducible to a declarative universal

[3]Surprisingly, arch-reliabilist Alvin Goldman (1986) grants the New Demon thesis, but he offers a way of accommodating it, involving the notion of a "normal possible world."

[4]I myself have emphasized Moore rather than Reid because I do not buy into Reid's containing system of "first principles," innate belief production mechanisms, et al., none of which apparatus is needed to license Moore's own anti-skeptical move; but I applaud Bergmann's attention to Reid.

[5]In that, Bergmann and I follow Bealer (1998).

[6]That is, when the thesis is that intuitions justify veritistically, supporting the corresponding beliefs as being substantively and factually true (as opposed to merely being reasonable rather than inappropriate or pigheaded or crazy, as an emotion might be). Bergmann goes on in Part III to defend the claim against several sophisticated challenges. (He does not defend it against the older standard challenges in the literature, but that's OK—I'd squelched those (2019, 102–10).)

In fact, there is a source of anti-realism about epistemic intuitions and epistemic value that I have never seen discussed or even mentioned: What if one is an *expressivist* about all norms, or at least about epistemic ones alongside moral ones? (Jay Rosenberg, 1994 takes a version of that anti-realist position.) There is an exact parallel with the issue of moral realism versus expressivism, and Moore affords no defense against the sophisticated expressivist. I believe epistemic intuitions and moral intuitions are perfectly alike in this regard (2019, 110).

[7]Moore himself: Having said (1959/1962) "I agree with Russell that (1), (2) and (3) *are* true; yet of no one even of those three do I feel *as* certain as that I do know for certain that this is a pencil," he continues, "Nay more [than that he has that feeling]: I do not think it is *rational* to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, as of the proposition that I do know that this is a pencil…" (222, all italics original).

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generalization; like Huemer (2016), Bergmann cites Lewis Carroll's famous observation about regress in inference rules (105n44).) To hold justified beliefs, ordinary people need not be epistemologists.

9. "Epistemic circularity" (as technically defined in Ch. 9) is not *per se* unacceptable. (Cf. Lycan, 2019, 28–30.)

But Bergmann's concern is far deeper than the issues just listed: as his title indicates, it is for *radical* skepticism—and not just challenges to knowledge claims but doubt as to whether our beliefs are even justified at all (what during the "new skeptical" movement of the 1970s was called "*J*-skep."). Now, for a simple Moorean, that should not be a problem: if it is a "Moorean fact" that I know that I have hands and that I am holding a pencil, then certainly it is a Moorean fact that those beliefs of mine are justified.[8]

Actually, I think there is a gulf here. I've agreed (point 5 above) that traditional skepticism ("K-skep") must be taken seriously[9] and that, as Bergmann insists in Ch. 1, we must not underestimate its appeal. But I discern no such appeal, much less urgency, in J-skep.

However, all that is beside the point of Bergmann's epistemological project. As everyone should agree, it is one thing to be convinced by Reid and Moore that skepticism (of whichever scope and strength) is false, but it is quite another to explain *how* beliefs are justified and how some of them attain the status of knowledge. Though Moorean defense is independent of philosophical epistemology—and that is a crucial fact about it—epistemology is important! So let us get on with that.

It is still hard for me to find a *dis*agreement that would take the form of a direct objection to Bergmann's position or his defense of it, which is powerful and convincing. But I do differ with him in background epistemology and on some of his assumptions.

2. Why Insist on Justification by Sensory Experiences?

I am an explanatory coherentist, "explanationist" for short (Lycan, 1988, 2012, 2019). And I believe that explanationism does better in each of several ways than Bergmann's foundationalism. Roughly, it is the doctrine that what justifies an ampliative inference, or more generally the formation of any new belief, is that that doxastic move improves the subject's explanatory position overall and/or increases the explanatory coherence of the subject's global set of beliefs. In particular, the explanationist holds that many or most beliefs are indeed justified by inference to the best explanation (IBE). What is coherentist about the view is that any doxastic move, including forming a perceptual belief, can be normatively judged only by reference to the subject's entire belief system.

Now, in response to Keith Lehrer's (1974) objection from the asymmetry of the "explains" relation and the need for an ultimate database of "explained unexplainers," I have granted that certain beliefs are justified (albeit only to the tiniest degree) simply by being held.[10] They are the

[8]Or well-supported, rational, reasonable, whatever. But here's an oddity, though it does not affect the Moorean point: "know" is much more *familiar* to ordinary folk than are "justified," "warranted" and such philosophical terms.

[9]But see my deflationary hint regarding it on page 35 of Lycan (2019). I mean to write up that idea in a separate paper.

[10]For that reason, Bergmann (2022a) bridles at my calling myself a coherentist: If I appeal to beliefs whose justifiedness does not depend on any relation to any other beliefs, and I maintain that other beliefs are justified by their relations to those, does that not make me a foundationalist? Fair enough; I can be called a foundationalist, of a very weak and unorthodox sort. But my view differs strongly from any traditional foundationalism, and in several ways each of which gallops toward coherentism. (i) The spontaneous beliefs are as defeasible as it is logically possible for a belief to be. (ii) The explanatory virtue (conservatism) in light of which they are justified is of a piece with the other familiar explanationist virtues. (To say that the spontaneous beliefs are justified "simply by being held" does not imply that there is no argument as to why that is so; see page 162 of Lycan (1988) for a deductive proof based on the conservatist canon of theory preference.) (iii) They may be on any topic whatever. And (iv) they are typically *not* about mental states of any sort. For my fuller reply to Bergmann on this, see pp. 594–95 of Lycan (2022).

Notice, too, that spontaneous beliefs are, again, those we *find ourselves* holding. They are not intentionally made up and adopted. For that reason, I do not have the Problem of Ridiculous Beliefs that Bergmann discusses in Sec. 1 of Ch. 10.

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"spontaneous" beliefs with which we simply find ourselves, not the results of discernible inference or other doxastic moves. Some are caused by perceivings, some by memories, some by random thoughts, some by instinctive prejudices, some by moments of craziness; and some of them simply come out of nowhere. They are on topics of all sorts, including the most abstract and unearthly, and they are not often about any of our own mental states. In particular, they are hardly ever about our own sensory states or experiences (though occasionally we do notice and have beliefs about our own sensory states).

The underdetermination argument that Bergmann identifies as forcing us to take perceptual skepticism seriously derives skepticism from the evidence-truth gap between the subject's sensory experience and her/his beliefs about the external world. And Bergmann's anti-skeptical theory, as presented, is an answer to that sort of "bridging" challenge. (He does not assert that the underdetermination argument is the only or even the strongest case for perceptual skepticism, but he highlights it as "a serious intellectual challenge…worthy of extended philosophical reflection and discussion" (27).)

In any case: I reject the idea that a justified perceptual belief has to be based, in any significantly direct way, on a sensory experience. In fact, I do not believe that our ordinary beliefs about the external world *are epistemically* based on sensory states at all, though many of them have sensory states as direct partial causes.[11]

(I *especially* reject the sensory-basing assumption if "experience" means a *conscious* sensory state; consciousness continues to be assumed or at least mentioned in the book and in later works, e.g., Bergmann, 2022b.) I cannot tell how important that is to his overall case—I do not see that much hangs on it—but it is odd, at least if "conscious" means "state" consciousness, a mental state being conscious in that sense if its subject is internally aware of it as such. Statistically few mental states, events, and processes are "state"-conscious, including perceptual and other sensory states, beliefs, and inferences. In fact, it seems clear that the whole global issue of skepticism could be posed, discussed, and resolved even for creatures none of whose mental states are ever conscious.

And actually I must qualify my agreement point 4 above, New Evil Demon. Bergmann speaks of a *phenomenological* twin. I would say just, a *narrow-mental* twin ("narrow" as opposed to "wide" in the Twin-Earth sense). It matters, because phenomenological twins need not be narrow-mental twins. Phenomenal twins may differ in their narrow mental states, particularly in perceptual and memory ones, and so some of their respective beliefs may be better or worse justified. In fact, that's a counterexample to New Evil Demon as stated.)

And so I myself reject premise 2 in the underdetermination argument ("Our perceptual beliefs are noninferentially based on sensory-experience evidence" (29))[12].

More generally, it is a virtue of my explanationist picture that I am simply not subject to the epistemological problem of the external world. I do not have the task of "getting to" the external world from behind my sense organs. The vast majority of my spontaneous beliefs, and those of yours and Bergmann's, are already about the external, physical world, and they are very well justified on grounds of coherence.

The spontaneity also obviates the particular objection offered by Christensen (1994, 74) against conservatism as a canon of theory preference, involving a deliberate coin toss; see Lycan, 2019, 113-14n4.

Actually, Ram Neta (2024) has urged that my theory does not, after all, require that spontaneous beliefs themselves explain nothing and so get no support from what they explain. He argues insightfully that every belief content either does explain or would explain some other proposition. Were I so moved, I could buy into that, but I like my overall position as is.

[11]Austin (1962) too denied that everyday beliefs about physical objects need justifying on the basis of inference from current sense experiences; see also Greco (2002).

[12]A further disagreement, not particularly important or relevant here (136-37fn14), is over the doctrine Huemer (2001) has called "phenomenal conservatism," roughly that if it seems to S that p, then S thereby has some degree of justification for believing that *p*. See Bergmann's and my respective contributions to Tucker (2013).

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Hold on: I granted that spontaneous beliefs, as such and solely in virtue of being held, are justified only to the tiniest degree. But those that are about the physical objects in my proximal environment are as well justified as a contingent belief can be; the objects are *known* to exist and to be much as they appear. What bridges *that* gap?

Surprise! What gives the good spontaneous beliefs their gigantic boost is, overwhelming coherence. Their initial smidgen of justification tacks the believed propositions in place just long enough for them to serve as data for explanation. Once they are rationally thus available, they immediately acquire a kind of coherence that is constituted by a proposition's being explained, and of course, they start explaining other things.

What justifies my pencil belief so strongly once it has been "swept up into a coherent explanatory structure" (Lycan, 1988, 168) is a complex confluence and network of coherence-enhancing factors: consistency and more substantive explanatory fit with my larger belief structure, regarding in particular my current environment, recent past, and mode of access to the pencil, along with some more general beliefs about the world and tacit metabeliefs concerning the reliability of my sense organs (1988, 167–68).[13] None of that is conscious, of course. And neither, normally, is there unconscious inferring or any other doxastic *move*; my reference to "sweeping up" was misleading in that respect. Coherence relations merely obtain.

A parallel story applies to the epistemology of memory, where skepticism starts with the evidence-truth gap between "memory seemings" (Ch. 4, p. 75) and the beliefs produced directly by memory. It does not apply to the a priori, to nondeductive inference, or deductive inference, because the point about spontaneous beliefs' already being about the external world and/or the past does not apply, at least not as vividly, to a priori mathematical, metaphysical, or inferential beliefs. Beliefs of those kinds attain maximal coherence on their own, there being no analogues of being "swept up" and connected to all the environmental states of affairs.[14]

3. Explanatory Inference (IBE) and the External World

Though I maintain that (ordinarily) beliefs about the external world are not justified or even held on the epistemic basis of perceptual states, I tend to agree with Russell (1912) that the beliefs *could* be justified in that way.[15] My being seated at my desk holding my pencil would neatly explain my being variously appeared to exactly as if I am seated at my desk and holding a pencil.[16] And in fact, I have argued (2019, 124–31) that Russellian inference, if made, would itself rationally favor my everyday belief over the loony competing demon, brain-in-vat, Matrix et al. hypotheses.

Here, at last, I do have a sharp disagreement with and a direct objection to a claim of Bergmann's, for he iconoclastically contends (Ch. 3, Sec. 4) that the straightforward realist explanation is *not* a

[13]N.b., as I have had to emphasize over and over, the metabeliefs are *beliefs* only and need not be true. I am not a reliabilist. Rather, I think this element of coherence captures what is attractive about reliabilism.

Some spontaneous beliefs will be very quickly rejected due to their failure to square with the empirical predictions proceeding from other, firmer bodies of perceptual and memory data and/or under logical pressure from fairly low-level justified explainers.

[14]But, full disclosure: My story of the boosting of good spontaneous beliefs does not apply to introspection either. That remained a dirty little secret until it was outed, and shown to be a problem for my overall view, by Earl Conee (2022). As yet I do not have a very good answer to the objection.

[15]Quite a few others have suggested it; Bergmann lists some on pp.41–43. But only a few besides myself, notably Vogel (1990) and McCain (2014), have pursued it by citing detailed canons of theory preference.

[16]*Just possibly* I have performed this inference unawares. The positing of unconscious inference is hardly a crime, but here it would also imply an unusual cognitive success, viz., my representing an extensive and diachronic swath of my own sensory states.

Neta (2004, 301–2) argues that the latter position is problematic. In particular, characterizing sensory states in "as if" terms will not work, because, Neta suggests, I could not have acquired the real-world concepts occurring in "as if" clauses without already relying epistemically on beliefs about the external world. I am unconvinced, but I have not pursued that issue.

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sufficiently better explanation than the Demon hypothesis. I think the realist explanation, which Bergmann (28) calls the Standard Hypothesis, is *obviously* far better, so this is a refreshing disagreement, and in the face of Bergmann's discussion, I must review why it is better.

How does the Standard theory (STANDARD) do, then, versus DEMON, in terms of the usual and (n.b.) independently defended pragmatic canons of theory preference? Those include testability, especially making more observational predictions; simplicity, of several kinds; power, i.e., explaining more and/or a greater variety of data, without ad-hoc-ness; conservatism (coherence with what we already believe); neatness (raising fewer unanswered questions); and fecundity (fruitfulness in suggesting further related hypotheses).[17] In the present contest of STANDARD versus DEMON, what looms largest are conservatism and neatness, plus one aspect of testability.

Conservatism: According to STANDARD, reality is much as you or I commonsensically think it is, a world of physical objects and people that behave in regular ways, and right now various things of familiar sorts are going on in our environment (and, for anyone who cares, many of those things are explainable by high-school physics, chemistry, and biology). But according to DEMON, reality is not *at all* like that, but is supernatural and entirely mysterious; the world we just described is not real but is an illusion, deliberately produced for whatever bizarre reason by Mr. M. Genie. DEMON's conservatism score: `way below zero, by a great many value points—hundreds? thousands?[18]

Neatness: Bergmann rightly points out (48–49) that STANDARD *leaves* many questions unanswered. But leaving is not *raising*. If an oracle were to assure us that DEMON is true, we would indeed still have all the already unanswered questions about the physical and psychological worlds, but in addition, we would have a great mass of unanswerable new questions about the nature of Mr. Genie, where he came from, why on earth (so to speak) he would be doing such deceiving, and much more. (Bergmann points out that we or the DEMON proponent could make up answers to some of those questions—e.g., "the demon simply wants to be highly amused (this is a basic desire it has) and…it just happens to find deceiving me in a convincing way highly amusing…" (49)—but such made-up answers would be simply and arbitrarily *made up*. How about, "The demon wants a turkey sandwich on whole wheat and believes one of his minions will serve him one if he deceives me in just this convincing way?")[19] Neatness score: again *minus*—more thousands? hundreds of thousands?

[17]About internalism versus externalism: I am neither an internalist nor an externalist; I have no stake in that debate. One or more of the explanatory virtues may be or have an external component. Bird (2017) even separates them into "internal" and "external" virtues, with the latter specifically concerning the relation between the hypothesis and the worldly data; see also Roche (2006). But I will remain agnostic.

Bergmann is a firm externalist, because he endorses a "proper function" account of justification, roughly that a belief is justified when and only when it is produced by properly (teleo-)functioning cognitive faculty. As a great fan of teleofunctional norms, I applaud that focus (and I insist that truth is not the only goal of cognition (2019, 119–20)). But I see the appeal to proper function, not as itself justifying, but rather as accounting after the fact for the explanatory virtues' being virtues (1988, Ch. 7, Sec. III).

[18]Conservatism has been criticized even by some who accept the other explanatory virtues as justifying, notably Christensen (1994), so it needs a little more backing. (Possibly this is because, more than simplicity, power, neatness, and the rest, it sounds flatly question-begging or at least like grabbing something for free.) Besides defending it at some length in Lycan (1988), I have replied in some detail to Christensen (Lycan, 2019, 113-14n4).

[19]Also, notice that DEMON itself has a lot of competition. Lycan (2019):

[T]here are uncountably many other competitors that would never be noticed, much less taken seriously: for example, that the environment is as it appears, except for an outsize bright green bowling ball slowly transiting the room in front of me, but I am prevented from being appeared to bowling-ball-ishly by a team of mini-demons that cover-up by manipulating my experiences in such a way as to avoid that particular swath of perturbations. (We could add that one of the demons is motivated by the desire to get through a period of indentured servitude—and…, and…, and….) It would be positively irrational to accept such an explanation because the extra posits are *gratuitous*; they do explain, but they are far more daring than is needed to explain the regularities. (121)

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Testability per se does not distinguish, since by hypothesis Mr. Genie is working to make the world appear to us exactly as it does and/or would if it were real. But our STANDARD assumptions about the world afford voluminous day-to-day predictions of multifarious and indispensable kinds. Of course, the DEMON theorist could make the same predictions, via the additional "as if" clause (that Mr. G.'s project is to make it continue to seem to us that things go on happening exactly as they would if STANDARD were true), but that, being entirely parasitic on STANDARD, would be *flagrantly* ad hoc.

Contrast the case in which I have *some positive reason* however slight to think there may be a deceiving demon at work. Say, just once for three seconds, I seem to see the clouds part; a sardonically grinning demon-face appears and booms, "Enjoying the show?" Or then suppose this happens more than once, even regularly. And then, much better, suppose others report having the same experience. The explanatory contest would become more and more serious, because there would be a cost in coherence to writing off the demonish appearances as hallucinations, and my neatness score would drop and drop.[20]

In several spots, Bergmann suggests that STANDARD is burdened with factual or at least theoretical assumptions of its own. On one of those ideas, he may need a reminder about the nature of explanatory virtues. P. 50: "Notice what proponents of IBE appear to take for granted.… The idea seems to be that…loveliness [the pragmatic attractiveness of a 'better' explanation] is indicative of likeliness—that is loveliness and likely truth go hand in hand." Now, "likely" has a weak and innocuous meaning, of just *reasonable*, rational, or justified, themselves, but that cannot be what Bergmann means here, or his notion of "hand in hand" would be redundant. More strictly, "likely" refers to something more demanding and technical, to do with probability theory or what formal epistemologists call "credence" or something with greater probity and status than mere pragmatic appeal. But IBE proponents are certainly not assuming that "loveliness" is *indicative of* any such thing. For us, "loveliness" *is* the fundamental epistemic value. And to insist that we *need* to defend some connection with a more demanding value would simply beg the question in favor of a competing epistemological theory.[21]

That concludes my explanatory inference of the external world from sensory appearings. But again, remember that since I do not agree that my everyday beliefs either need to be or are in real life justified by doxastic moves based on my sensory experiences, I do not even begin to grant the Underdetermination argument's premise 2 in the first place.

The claim of Bergmann's I have attacked in this section is not a big part of his monumental case! Nor is the disagreement momentous. But I felt a need to find an objection or direct disagreement somewhere.

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[20]Whether or not this quick account of the betterness convinces, let me bandy an epistemic intuition of my own: I think it's more certain that the Demon hypothesis is (were we to try to take it seriously) a very poor, yea negligible, candidate, than that Bergmann's or my own set of canons of theory preference is adequate.

[21]I here ignore, and will continue to ignore, *reductive* explanationism, according to which the explanatory virtues, though real, are to be identified with more technical underlying properties such as Bayesian probabilities (e.g., Poston, 2014; Sober, 2015; van Fraassen, 1989).

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