
Tomoji Shogenji’s book is an ambitious attempt to provide a solution to the problem of Cartesian skepticism. This form of skepticism maintains that we cannot exclude the possibility that reality is radically different from what our sense experiences make us believe. Shogenji’s paradigm challenge is the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, $h_{BIV}$, according to which we are brains kept alive in a vat and wired to a supercomputer. The supercomputer sends signals to our brain causing in us exactly those experiences that make us believe the normal-world hypothesis, $h_{NW}$, according to which we are ordinary human beings walking around in the normal world (etc.). The two hypotheses are empirically equivalent, i.e., both predict exactly the same actual and possible experiences, whence none of the two can be epistemically preferable, so the skeptical argument goes.

Shogenji rejects objections against $h_{BIV}$ that are based on intuition, because the reliability of human intuitions is doubtful: after all, many of the theories of contemporary science violate or refute human intuitions and are nevertheless highly successful. More generally speaking, Shogenji’s epistemological approach can be called scientifically minded, insofar as it does not base the justification of its theses on pre-theoretical intuitions, but rather on arguments based on the epistemic success of competing epistemological hypotheses or models.

Shogenji’s book is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 1 (“Skepticism and the Method of Meliorative Epistemology”), Shogenji introduces the general framework of meliorative epistemology, an epistemological program that intends to improve the epistemic practice of people. For this purpose, meliorative epistemology must not base its principles on pre-theoretical intuitions, because they are unreliable and often enough in mutual conflict. Shogenji admits that pre-theoretical intuitions may play a role in the context of discovery, but they should not figure as evidence in the context of justification. Shogenji also rejects the method of “reflective equilibrium”: this method helps making intuitions coherent, but the coherence of intuitions doesn’t increase their reliability (10). As an example, Shogenji mentions the lasting debate on the so-called Gettier counterexamples that has not led to a clear consensus because it is based on unclear intuitions concerning the “right” definition of knowledge.

Shogenji’s meliorative program is a bold account. Presumably, a majority of contemporary epistemologists do support an intuition-based account of
epistemology. However, Shogenji’s account has also a plentitude of supporters, for example in formal epistemology, philosophy of science, and cognitive science (cf. Bishop and Trout 2005, Schurz 2019).

According to Shogenji, the epistemic evaluation of our beliefs should not be based on intuitions, but on scientific knowledge, more precisely, on the beliefs of the better informed experts. With this proposal, Shogenji argues in favor of a semi-external and semi-internal notion of ‘justified belief’, according to which a belief (of some person) is justified if it is arguably reliable according to the methods and standards of the epistemic experts. The account is external insofar as the epistemic evaluation need not be accessible to the subject of the belief. However, reliability is not understood as a purely external notion, possibly inaccessible to every person, as in Goldman’s (1979) account, because cognitively inaccessible conditions of reliability cannot be meliorative (12; for a similar critique cf. Schurz 2018a). Shogenji’s position, which he calls “social internalism” (17), corresponds closely to the “third person internalism” in Schurz (2008).

Chapter 2 (“Truth as Correspondence”) is devoted to the correspondence-theoretic conception of truth and its epistemic presuppositions. Since this chapter is not as important for Shogenji’s major problem as the other chapters, it is passed over.

In Chapter 3 (“The Myth of Epistemic Circularity”), Shogenji presents his solution to the problem of epistemic circularity. His major example is the psychological argument for the hypothesis of the reliability of visual perception—call this hypothesis h. Hypothesis h is based on scientific observations according to which there are information-preserving paths in the physiological process of the human visual system—call these observations the scientific evidence e. Of course, the evidence e is itself based on the perception of the psychologists and assumes that their perception is reliable. Thus e entails h, i.e., the acceptability of the premise of the argument presupposes that its conclusion is true, which means that the argument is epistemically circular.

Shogenji analyzes the circularity of the argument as follows (53f.). The evidence e can be analyzed as the conjunction of e_int ∧ h, where “e_int” describes the purely internal or introspective part of the psychologists’ evidence—i.e., e_int asserts that it visually appears to the psychologist that there are information-preserving paths in the physiological process of the human visual system—and h is the hypothesis that visual perception is reliable. Shogenji now proposes to transform the seemingly circular confirmation argument (where P is the experts’ probability function conditionalized on their ‘background knowledge’ b)