
Introspection and Intuition

A Reply to Maximilian H. Engel

Tim Bayne

This paper is a response to Maximilian H. Engel's commentary on my target paper, in which I provided a critical examination of pessimism accounts of the trustworthiness of introspection. Engel's focuses on the distinction that I drew between two kinds of introspective judgments, scaffolded judgments and freestanding judgments, and suggests that this distinction might fruitfully illuminate the epistemology of intuitive judgments. I present some doubts about whether the distinction can be transferred to intuition in this way, and also sketch a more fundamental contrast between introspective judgments and intuitive judgments.

Keywords

Free-standing judgments | Introspection | Intuition | Scaffolded judgments

Author

[Tim Bayne](#)

tim.bayne@manchester.ac.uk

The University of Manchester
Manchester, United Kingdom

Commentator

[Maximilian H. Engel](#)

M.H.Engel.1@student.rug.nl

Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Groningen, Netherlands

Editors

[Thomas Metzinger](#)

metzinger@uni-mainz.de

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität
Mainz, Germany

[Jennifer M. Windt](#)

jennifer.windt@monash.edu

Monash University
Melbourne, Australia

1 Introduction

Let me begin by thanking Maximilian H. Engel for his commentary. I take the heart of his paper to consist in the suggestion that the distinction between freestanding and scaffolded judgments which Maja Spener and I ([Bayne & Spener 2010](#)) developed in connection with introspection can be usefully applied to the epistemology of intuition. I will start by revisiting the freestanding/scaffolded distinction, before turning to Engel's proposal.

The epistemology of introspection is that it is not flat but contains peaks of epistemic security alongside troughs of epistemic insecurity. Any attempt to understand the epistemology of

introspection needs to take this landscape into account, for although our pretheoretical views concerning the epistemology of introspection are not sacrosanct they do form a useful constraint on theorizing about introspection. Any account of introspection should explain why some introspective judgments strike us as highly secure whereas others seem to be insecure.

This is where the distinction between scaffolded and freestanding judgments comes in. Both types of judgments have as their intentional objects current conscious states that one takes oneself to be in. (The notion could also be applied to judgements concerning the states

that one is not in.) An introspective judgment is scaffolded when the subject is disposed to make a first-order judgment whose content bears a rough correspondence to that of the introspective judgment. For example, the judgment that one is experiencing a red light in front of one is scaffolded by the disposition to judge that there is a red light in front of one, whereas there is no such first-order disposition corresponding to the introspective judgment that one is merely imagining or thinking about a red light. Experiences that are the intentional objects of scaffolded judgments are themselves employed in world-directed first-order judgments, whereas that is not the case where free-standing judgments are concerned. Contrary to what Engel suggests, there is no commitment here to the idea that only scaffolded judgments are epistemically trustworthy. The idea, rather, is that scaffolded judgments have a certain kind of first-person warrant that free-standing judgments tend to lack.

2 From introspection to intuition?

Engel argues that the distinction between scaffolded and free-standing judgments can also be applied to the kinds of judgments deployed in debates about philosophical intuitions, and also suggests that most such judgments—or at least, those which are of central philosophical interest—are best regarded as free-standing, and thus lack the kind of warrant that we might want for them.

Although I welcome Engel's attempt to extend the distinction between scaffolded and free-standing judgments beyond the domain of introspection, I am not convinced that it does much to illuminate the epistemology of intuition. The first issue that needs to be addressed is the fact that intuitive judgments don't form a single, well-behaved class. One kind of intuitive judgment that is of philosophical interest concerns the modal structure of the world, as when one judges that it is necessarily true that $2+2=4$ or that it is only contingently true that Aristotle was a philosopher. But as far as I can tell, Engel is not concerned with intuitive judgments of this kind, but with what we might call intuitions of concept ap-

plication. Such judgments are concerned with the question of whether a certain concept (such as <knowledge>) ought to be applied to a certain state of affairs.

In explaining how the contrast between scaffolded and free-standing judgments might apply to intuitive judgments Engel writes:

Again taking the intuition about knowledge, what makes this intuition, even though not universal, so astonishingly stable among Western philosophers? I argue that this is due to the close match between the content of the intuition (i.e. “she doesn't know!”) and the rules one learns to use [regarding] the concept of knowledge in our cultural niche (i.e.: “Only ascribe knowledge if a person is appropriately justified in believing a proposition!”). So in the context of Western philosophy, the intuitive judgment can be regarded as a scaffolded and thus reliable judgment. ([this collection](#), p. 6)

It is certainly true that an individual's use of a concept is scaffolded by the practices of the culture in which they are embedded. As Kant pointed out, we learn how to apply concepts by noting how they are applied by those around us. Kant (A134/B174) described examples as the “*Gängelwagen* of thought”, where a *Gängelwagen* is a walking frame or go-kart that is harnessed to an infant in order to help it learn to walk. But although this form of support is indeed a kind of scaffolding, it differs in important ways from the kind of scaffolding that I had in mind. In the sense of the term that Spener and I had in mind, a scaffolded judgment is a judgment that is underpinned by a disposition to make a first-order judgment whose content roughly corresponds to the content of the scaffolded judgments. As far as I can see, intuitive judgments are not scaffolded in this sense, in part because intuitive judgments are already “first-order”. So, although I would certainly agree that the possession of such concepts as <knowledge> is supported by one's cultural niche, it doesn't follow that the intuitive judgments about when it is and isn't appropriate to apply this concept are scaffolded.

3 Intuitive disagreement

In closing, let me mention an important background issue concerning which Engel and I appear to have different views. Engel, I take it, holds that the disagreement in intuitive judgments regarding concept application should be regarded as epistemically troublesome in much the way that disagreement about introspective judgment is regarded as epistemically troublesome. The idea is that in both cases there are objective facts of the matter, and the existence of widespread disagreement indicates that significant numbers of individuals are systematically mistaken about what those facts are.

Although I am inclined to accept this diagnosis when it comes to many introspective disagreements, I do not find it particularly plausible when it comes to disagreements concerning intuitions of concept application. Here's why. Suppose that Weinberg and his collaborators are right when they suggest that low-socioeconomic status individuals are disposed to apply the concept <knowledge> in contexts where high-socioeconomic status (SES) individuals are disposed to withhold it (Weinberg et al. 2001). Would it follow (as Engel seems to assume) that at least one of these groups is mistaken about a matter of objective fact? I don't think so. It seems to me more plausible to assume that low-SES subjects and high-SES subjects simply have different concepts (or "conceptions", if you prefer) of knowledge, and each of them is applying its own concept correctly. The two concepts are similar enough to be both associated with the single word "knowledge", but there is no case for regarding one of these concepts as superior to the other, or for thinking that only one of them truly captures the essence of knowledge. They are simply different concepts.

If this is right, then apparent disagreement between the judgments of low-SES subjects and high-SES subjects about whether or not S knows that P is not substantive in the way in which most introspective disagreement appears to be. Moreover, it seems to me that something similar should be said concerning many (if not all) disputes about the application of other central philosophical concepts. (One needs to

take the possibility of performance errors into account here, but such problems will typically be minimized in philosophical contexts.) But I wouldn't want to commit myself to this account of *all* intuitive disputes. In particular, it seems to me that introspective disputes concerning modal matters are likely to be substantive in a way in which disagreements about intuitions regarding concept application are not.

4 Conclusion

In his commentary Engel suggests that the contrast between scaffolded and freestanding judgments that Spener and I applied to introspection might also be usefully applied to intuition. Although I welcome Engel's attempt to extend the distinction between scaffolded and freestanding judgments beyond its original sphere of application, I have suggested that such a move might not be quite as straightforward as Engel takes it to be, for there don't appear to be any first-order judgments that might scaffold intuitive judgments in the way that first-order perceptual judgments scaffold certain kinds of introspective judgments. But although I cannot see how the distinction between scaffolded and freestanding judgments might apply to intuition, I certainly share Engel's conviction that "comparing and contrasting" the epistemology of introspection with that of intuition is a fruitful exercise, for both domains pose the puzzle of how we might reconcile individual certainty and apparent self-evidence with intersubjective disagreement.

References

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