Chapter 7  The Troubles with SAE
In light of the preceding chapters B&T revisit SAE to provide a deeper analysis of its problems.

You will recall that one of the basic features of SAE is the “stasis requirement,” which is the requirement that any theory of epistemic justification have as one of its results that almost every belief we currently believe to be justified turns out to be justified.

Although this sounds like a strange requirement the first time you hear it, in fact it is sensible given the method of reflective equilibrium that SAE employs. Recall the picture:

Although B&T do not do it in this chapter, it is worth asking whether science itself operates with some kind of stasis requirement. The answer is that it does, but it is not as restrictive.
Scientific stasis

- In physics, for example, the stasis requirement might be that any theory of motion must have as one of its results that our current basic beliefs about how objects move turn out to be true. For example, we might require that a theory of motion preserve the belief that:
  - an object that moves on a path from point A to point B must pass through every point on that path; or
  - objects removed in space and time can not directly influence each other.
- In fact, both of these have been very strong assumptions in physics, and theories that contradict them have been met with a great deal of skepticism for this very reason.
- However, in the end they are not simply rejected as absurd, because in science there is more to testing a theory then simply measuring how well it fits with our fundamental preconceptions about how the world works.
- Specifically, a scientific theory can defeat the stasis requirement if it can be used to significantly improve our epistemic situation by correctly predicting phenomena that we had no knowledge of, or access to, using theories that fit our preconceptions.
- The only phenomena that an SAE theory ever gets to “predict” is how it will fit with our intuitions. The key difference, then, is that in science we bump up against data that are not generated from within our own minds.
A defense of strong stasis in SAE

- Of course, we are just talking about the difference between science and SAE. One could respond that since the task of SAE is not to develop empirical theories, but rather theories about how such theories are to be formulated and verified, then a stronger commitment to stasis is justified.

- In other words, the more fundamental the principles involved, the more difficult it should be to undermine them.

- In fact, this is pretty sensible. But, of course, there is an enormous difference between difficult and impossible. If our epistemic judgments are to be subject to some degree of falsification, then it seems that philosophical theorizing cannot be entirely sealed off from the outside world.
Are philosophers experts or weirdos?

- One possible way of dealing with skepticism about the method of SAE is to note that philosophers, like scientists, are experts in their discipline. Just like scientists, well-trained philosophers have developed and mastered a difficult technical vocabulary for dealing with the problems in their field. So it is reasonable to treat the considered judgments and intuitions of philosophers differently than those of laypeople.

- B&T reply predictably:
  - In the natural sciences...hypotheses are typically tested against the world. But in SAE, hypotheses are tested against the well-considered judgments of other (similarly trained) philosophers.

- Their point, of course, is the one we made previously, just writ a little larger. The community of SAE philosophers is itself a kind of group mind that is sealed off from the external world.

- The question arises, then, what sort of experts are philosophers, really? Clearly, B&T note, they are not experts on how normal people think about justification, for philosophers are not normal people and generally don’t have much patience with or interest in the way laypeople think.

- If philosophers themselves were people whose exceptionally flourishing lives could somehow be attributed to their superior grasp of epistemic matters, then this would be some reason to treat philosophers as experts.

- This doesn’t appear to B&T to be a theory much worth investigating.
So this is what B&T thinks SAE actually accomplishes:
- “SAE tells us about the reflective epistemic judgments of a group of idiosyncratic people who have been trained to use highly specialized epistemic concepts and patterns of thought... The conservative goals and methods of SAE are suited to the task of providing an account of the considered epistemic judgments of (mostly) well-off Westerners with Ph.D.’s in Philosophy. This is a thoroughly descriptive endeavor.” p. 107. (my emphasis)

The point here is while SAE does have normative aspirations, these aspirations have no normative implications. It is an open question whether the fact that a particular group of people think this way is a reason that they, or others, ought to think this way.

When we think of the considered judgments of SAE philosophers as simply facts about the world, then it becomes interesting to compare them to the considered judgments of other people, e.g., people of different cultures or different socioeconomic levels.

B&T discuss some scientific research that gives some evidence that intuitions about these matters are not at all stable across these different reference classes. (For example, East Asians did not seem to have the same intuitions as Westerners about Gettier-type examples.) Another study examined intuitions between socioeconomic classes and concluded that there were some statistically significant differences there as well.

These studies are interesting in their own right, but B&T’s main purpose in citing them is to buttress their suspicion that SAE is best viewed as a kind of cultural anthropology, collecting data about the epistemic judgments of a fairly strange group of people. The question is: what normative significance does this really have?
The glass house of SAE

- Ultimately, B&T want to claim that SAE’s argument that naturalism abandons the normative aims of philosophy applies *a fortiori* to SAE.

- The standard criticism of naturalized epistemology is that mere descriptions of how people do think can’t generate prescriptions about how people ought to think.

- But once we see SAE as simply a description of how certain people think, we can make the same point about it: Nothing about the way SAE philosophers actually think follows about how they or others ought to think.

- The point here is that traditional SAE and naturalistic philosophers are in the same boat. Both owe some account of how to “bridge the is-ought divide”. SAE doesn’t get a free pass simply because they try to deal with ought questions directly. Their answer to these questions are still just facts about them until we have been given some reason for giving the prescriptive significance.
The a priori naturalized

- As you know from Kornblith, the SAE response to this line of inquiry is to take refuge in the *a priori*. Philosophers are *a priori* experts. So when they claim that a certain judgment is *a priori* true, you should pay attention. The claim that certain epistemic judgments are true *a priori*. That is why you can not simply treat them as facts about people who think in strange ways. And because these judgments are also normative in nature, that is why they have normative significance.

- Predictably, B&T are unmoved. They note that when philosophers make *a priori* judgments they are simply forming their beliefs in a particular way; i.e., without reference to experience. But these *a priori* beliefs are still just facts about them. We still need some reason to think of them as actual knowledge. We have prima facie good reasons to doubt this claim, since philosophers disagree so widely on their *a priori* beliefs.

- The only real basis for taking SAE philosophers seriously as exerts in the a priori would be a documented track record of success. This, after all, is what we require of anyone else claiming to have expertise in a subject. But there is no such record.
Strategic reliabilism: modest but real

- As we already know, strategic reliabilism claims a different relationship to the normative. The focus is not on divining irrefutable truths from the abyss, but of providing improved reasoning strategies that normal people can use.
- From the reliabilist perspective, an improved reasoning strategy is not one that gives us the a priori fuzzies, but rather one that allows to make consistently better predictions and decisions.