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978-1-107-00423-8 - The Sensitivity Principle in Epistemology
Edited by Kelly Becker and Tim Black
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THE SENSITIVITY PRINCIPLE IN EPISTEMOLOGY

The sensitivity principle is a compelling idea in epistemology and is typically characterized as a necessary condition for knowledge. This collection of fourteen new essays constitutes a state-of-the-art discussion of this important principle. Some of the essays build on and strengthen sensitivity-based accounts of knowledge and offer novel defences of those accounts. Others present original objections to sensitivity-based accounts (objections that must be taken seriously even by those who defend enhanced versions of sensitivity) and offer comprehensive analysis and discussion of sensitivity's virtues and problems. The resulting collection will stimulate new debate about the sensitivity principle and will be of great interest and value to scholars and advanced students of epistemology.

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Preface

In the fall of 1991, while working as a financial analyst for a large insurance company and preparing applications for graduate school, I audited John Dolan's epistemology seminar at the University of Minnesota. We read Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations*, which struck me as such a misguided reply to skepticism that I dedicated my application's writing sample to saying exactly why (which I no longer recall). Fast forward to 2001 (because in the interim I studied almost no epistemology whatsoever), when I was an Assistant Professor at Centre College in Kentucky and Sandy Goldberg invited me to participate in a reading group at the University of Kentucky to discuss DeRose and Warfield's (1999) *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*. My task was to present Nozick's epistemology, and I was surprised to find myself not only explaining but also endorsing it.

I began doing research in contemporary epistemology and defending Nozick's idea that, in order to know that *p*, it must be the case that one would not believe that *p* if it were false. But the more I investigated work on this so-called 'sensitivity' principle, the more I found that it had really taken a beating in the literature. This led me to think that someone ought to put together a book on sensitivity and give philosophers a chance to rethink the counterexamples and criticisms, defend and elaborate the sensitivity principle, perhaps reinterpret it, all with a view to resuscitating the centerpiece of Nozick's theory of knowledge. My reading led me to several papers by Tim Black that were sympathetic to Nozick, but also took Nozick's basic idea in new directions, some of which I didn't want to follow, but which clearly constituted original thinking on some well-known problems. In no time we were collaborating on this book. I thank Tim for agreeing to work with me, and for helping to make this book far better than it otherwise would have been. Tim and I are grateful to those at Cambridge University Press and its affiliates for their diligence and support, especially Hilary Gaskin, Lucy Gibson, Anne Lowe, Christopher Feeney, and Emma Wildsmith.

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I want also to thank all the contributors to this volume. Without exception, they took up the challenge of explicating, extending, poking, prodding, and recasting sensitivity in ways that, I hope and trust, will make this book an important contribution to epistemology. I want to thank Sandy Goldberg and Duncan Pritchard in particular for getting me started on a career in epistemology and for being amazingly supportive ever since. I could say a lot more about these two gentlemen, but everyone who knows them knows what I am talking about.

KB

I came to the sensitivity principle indirectly, not through the work of Nozick or Fred Dretske or Alvin Goldman, but through the work of Keith DeRose, who makes use of the principle in his epistemological contextualism. I was then – and am now – convinced that contextualism is not to be preferred over certain invariantist alternatives, and so I set out to show that one could make use of the very same principle, the sensitivity principle, in constructing an invariantism that is just as plausible as, if not more plausible than, contextualism. In trying to construct a sensitivity-based invariantism, I encountered a disheartening number of negative appraisals of sensitivity as a condition for knowledge. As I began to examine these, however, I realized just how many of them were either criticizing too rudimentary a notion of sensitivity or objecting that sensitivity violates a much too simple version of the epistemic closure principle. One of the main virtues of this volume, then, is that it gives some very talented epistemologists a chance to build on and strengthen the sensitivity principle that we inherited from Nozick, as well as the chance to defend sensitivity-based accounts against objections that I think of as misguided. It is also a virtue of this volume that it gives some very talented epistemologists a chance to say why they (continue to) object to sensitivity-based accounts, even when those accounts have been strengthened and expanded as they have been over the past forty years or so.

Along with Kelly, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all of the contributors to this volume; it has been a pleasure to work with them and to learn from their contributions. I thank, as always, Albert Casullo for his help and guidance as a mentor in epistemology and in philosophy. I also want to thank Peter Murphy, one of the very best epistemologists I know, for his support and collaboration. It is an absolute joy to work with him, to learn from him and to see, from watching him work, how one can find success in epistemology through an uncompromising dedication to the discovery of the truth. Finally, I thank Kelly Becker,

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with whom I have had the utter pleasure of editing this volume. Kelly works harder than almost any philosopher I know; he is extraordinarily patient and understanding; and I have learned a great deal from him, both about epistemology and about how to see a project through. I hope that our collaboration, in addition to all the work done by the contributors to this volume, makes for a rewarding and important contribution to epistemology.

TB