

Epistemic Angst, Epistemic Disagreement, and Religious Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I sketch Pritchard's account of the structure of reason, that stems from his treatment of the skeptical challenge. I argue that his proposal might lead to an unpalatable and counter-intuitive form of epistemic incommensurability.

1. The Cartesian skeptical paradox and Pritchard's anti-skeptical strategy

In *Epistemic Angst* (2015), Pritchard offers a compelling anti-skeptical proposal, informed by Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* (henceforth OC) and his version of epistemic disjunctivism. In this section, I will briefly sketch Pritchard's strategy and his account of the structure of reason. I will then present some of the worries that an "hinge epistemology" so construed has to face.

The feature of Cartesian style arguments is that we cannot know certain empirical propositions (such as 'Human beings have bodies', or 'There are material objects') as we may be dreaming, hallucinating, deceived by a demon or be "brains in the vat" (BIV), that is, disembodied brains floating in a vat, connected to supercomputers that stimulate us in just the same way that normal brains are stimulated when they perceive things in a normal way.¹ Therefore, as we are unable to refute these skeptical hypotheses, we are also unable to know propositions that we would otherwise accept as being true if we could rule out these scenarios.

Cartesian arguments are extremely powerful as they rest on the *Closure principle for knowledge*. According to this principle, knowledge is "closed" under known entailment. Roughly speaking, this principle states that if an agent knows a proposition (e.g., that she has two hands), and competently deduces from this proposition a second proposition (e.g., that having hands entails that she is not a BIV), then she also knows the second proposition (that she is not a BIV). More formally:

¹ See Putnam (1981).

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The "Closure" Principle

If S knows that p , and S competently deduces from p that q , thereby coming to believe that q on this basis, while retaining her knowledge that p , then S knows that q ².

Let's take a skeptical hypothesis, SH, such as the BIV hypothesis mentioned above, and M, an empirical proposition such as "Human beings have bodies" that would entail the falsity of a skeptical hypothesis. We can then state the structure of Cartesian skeptical arguments as follows:

- (S1) I do not know not-SH
- (S2) If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M
- (SC) I do not know M

Considering that we can repeat this argument for each and every one of our empirical knowledge claims, the radical skeptical consequence we can draw from this and similar arguments is that our knowledge is impossible.

With this points in mind, we can now turn our attention to Pritchard's anti-skeptical strategy. To understand his proposal, consider the following remark of OC:

If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either [...] If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty (OC 114-115).

As per Pritchard, here Wittgenstein would claim that the same logic of our ways of inquiry presupposes that some propositions are excluded from doubt; and this is not irrational or based on a sort of blind faith, but rather belongs to the way rational inquiries are put forward (see OC 342)³. As a door needs hinges in order to turn, any rational evaluation would require prior commitment to an unquestionable proposition/set of 'hinges' in order to be possible at all.

A consequence of this thought (2015, 102) is that any form of universal doubt such as the Cartesian skeptical one is constitutively impossible⁴; there is simply no way to pursue an inquiry in which nothing is taken for granted. In other words, the same generality of

² This is essentially the formulation of the Closure principle defended by Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005, 29).

³ Cfr OC 342: [...] it belongs to the *logic of our scientific investigations* that certain things are indeed not doubted.

⁴ See OC 450: "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt".

the Cartesian skeptical challenge is based on a misleading way of representing the essentially *local* nature of our enquiries.

A proponent of Cartesian skepticism looks for a universal, general evaluation of our beliefs; but crucially there is no such thing as a general evaluation of our beliefs, whether positive (anti-skeptical) or negative (skeptical), for all rational evaluation can take place only in the context of 'hinges' which are themselves immune to rational evaluation.

An important consequence of Pritchard's proposal is that it will not affect Closure. Each and every one of our epistemic practices rests on 'hinges' that we accept with a certainty that is the expression of what Pritchard calls "hinge' commitment': an a-rational commitment toward our most basic belief that, as we mentioned above, is not itself opened to rational evaluation and that importantly *is not a belief*.

As we have seen, this commitment would express a fundamental a-rational relationship toward our most basic certainties, a commitment without which no knowledge is possible. Crucially, our basic certainties are not subject to rational evaluation: for instance, they cannot be confirmed or dis-confirmed by evidence; accordingly, *they are not beliefs at all*. This can help us retain both the Closure principle and our confidence in our most basic certainties. Recall the reformulation of the Closure principle we have already encountered *supra*:

The Competent Deduction Principle

If S knows that *p*, and S competently deduces from *p* that *q*, thereby coming to believe that *q* on this basis, while retaining her knowledge that *p*, then S knows that *q*

The crucial aspect of this principle to note (2015, 90- 102) is that it involves an agent *forming a belief* on the basis of the relevant competent deduction; the idea behind Closure is in fact that an agent can come to acquire new knowledge via competent deduction, where this means that the belief in question is based on that deduction. Accordingly, if we could not rule out a skeptical scenario such as the BIV one, we would be unable to know Moore's 'obvious truisms of the commonsense' such as, 'Human beings have bodies' or 'There are external objects' and thus, given Closure, we would be unable to know anything at all.

But our most basic certainties are not beliefs; rather, they are the expression of *a-rational, commitments*. Thus, the skeptic is somewhat right in saying that we do not know Moore's 'obvious truisms of the common sense' and that, also, we cannot know whether we are victim of a SH or not; but this will not lead to skeptical conclusions, for our 'hinge commitments' are not beliefs so they

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cannot be objects of knowledge. Therefore, the skeptical challenge is misguided in the first place⁵.

2. Pritchard's hinge epistemology and epistemic relativism

In a previous exchange (Salvatore, 2018), I have raised a couple of objections against Pritchard's proposal. Here, I will focus only on some relativistic implications of his anti-skeptical account. Consider the following entries of OC:

I could imagine Moore being captured by a wild tribe, and their expressing the suspicion that he has come from somewhere between the earth and the moon. Moore tells them that he knows etc. but he can't give them the grounds for his certainty, because they have fantastic ideas of human ability to fly and know nothing about physics...(OC 264).

Is it wrong for me to be guided in my actions by the propositions of physics? Am I to say I have no good ground for doing so? Isn't precisely this what we call a 'good ground'? Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? - If we call this "wrong" aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs? And are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings. Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with on another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic (OC 608-611).

In the 'Moore and the Wild tribe' example mentioned above, the agents do not disagree over a particular thesis but rather on the very concept of 'evidence' and of what is epistemically relevant to the dispute. Moore believes in modern physics and more generally in the, so to say, scientific view of the world; the tribe does not consider physics as a telling reason and consults oracles instead. In Pritchard's jargon, Moore and the tribe belong to different epistemic communities in which different 'local hinge commitments' are in play.

⁵ It should be noted that Pritchard's reflections on 'hinges' are only a part of a more complex anti-skeptical framework.; the other part is called epistemological disjunctivism, that while primarily meant to address the underdetermination-based skeptical challenge and not the Closure-based one, does nonetheless support his treatment of Cartesian skepticism. To present and discuss the merits of Pritchard's epistemological disjunctivism would go beyond the scope of this essay and is thus not a task I shall set myself here.

As per Pritchard (2010, 2018) his account of hinge commitment' would also represent a viable solution to the dispute between 'Moore and the Wild Tribe' and more generally between communities committed to different world-views; this is because, he argues, given the local nature of our enquiries, all our epistemic disputes occur within a shared backdrop of basic 'hinge commitments' (such as 'Human beings have bodies' and 'There are external objects'), and also because our commitments toward our most basic 'hinges' can nonetheless change, for instance when new information arise.

Still, even if both Moore and the Tribe share 'hinge commitments' such as 'There are external objects' and 'Human beings have bodies' (which would at least prevent disagreements on these 'basic certainties') they are nonetheless committed to different 'local' commitments; Moore considers physics as a telling reason while the tribe does not.

But crucially, as our 'hinge commitments' are nothing but a-rational certainties not opened to epistemic evaluation of any sort, we would have no rational basis to solve the epistemic disagreement between Moore and the tribe and more generally between communities with different 'Local hinge commitments'. Thus, the 'hinge commitment' strategy would lead to the *epistemic incommensurability thesis*, that can be states as follows:

Epistemic Incommensurability thesis

Is it possible for two agents to have opposing beliefs which are rationally justified to an equal extent where there is no rational basis by which either agent could properly persuade the other to revise their view (Pritchard, 2010, 5)

That is to say, if our epistemic practices are all based on a-rational commitments, than every epistemic community could legitimately hold its own practices, as they all rest on commitments that are both unquestionable and a-rational, thus outside any form of epistemic evaluation; accordingly, this proposal would license a form of *epistemic relativism* for which it would be impossible to solve disagreement between epistemic agents with radically different worldviews; a conclusion that is not more reassuring than skepticism itself.

3. Hinge commitments and religious epistemology

In his reply to my previous criticisms Pritchard (2018) argues that my conclusion, namely that an "hinge epistemology" so construed will license a malignant form of epistemic relativism, is too quick. To the contrary, he maintains that his Wittgenstein inspired

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account of the structure of reason could help us to cast new light on a number of apparent *prima facie* cases of unsolvable epistemic disagreement. As he writes at some point:

Take the dispute between evolutionary theorists and creationists. Once we recognise that the source of this disagreement are very fundamental prior commitments, it becomes clear that there is simply no point in either side trying to convince the other 'head on'. That is only going to lead to lots of hot air and neither side budging an inch. Rather, the way to deal with such disagreements is to go 'side-on'. What I mean by this is that one should seek out areas of agreement and work on maximising that. In doing so, one can gradually inch one's adversary towards one's side. Of course, this won't be an easy process, and the practical impediments might be insuperable. But I think that this is entirely to be expected – whoever thought that rationally resolving such deep disagreements would be easy? The key point, however, is that the practical difficulty of rationally resolving deep disagreements is philosophically miles apart from the claim that Salvatore is trying to pin on my view—viz., that such disagreements could never, even in principle, be rationally resolved (2018, 153).

I am not entirely convinced, especially in light of what Pritchard has to say with regard to the epistemology of religious beliefs.

In a number of recent works (see for instance 2017, forthcoming), Duncan has applied his account of the structure of reason to the problem of the epistemic status of religious beliefs. As we have seen, following his proposal all rational evaluation presuppose a number of a-rational, hinge commitments. This is also true, he argues, when it comes to religious beliefs; they presuppose a-rational *religious convictions* (2017, 11) that, similarly to our hinge commitments, are not open to epistemic evaluation of any sort and thus are not beliefs at all.

Accordingly, as the "hinges commitments" of our epistemic inquiries (i.e. Human beings have bodies, The external world exists, etc.) are safe from radical skepticism as they are not beliefs, religious convictions (i.e. deeply held "Theistic hinge commitments" such as " God exists", "The Bible is the Word of God" etc.) are safe from a "local " form of skepticism, namely religious skepticism; this is so because, according to Pritchard, basic Theistic beliefs are not beliefs at all, but rather a-rational religious convictions that, similarly to our other "hinge commitments", cannot be based on evidence and reasons and are thus not in the market for propositional knowledge.

As per Pritchard, this move will allow a Theist to defend his deeply held religious commitments. These convictions are not, and most importantly *can not*, be based on evidence or reasons, as they are not beliefs. But crucially also the "hinge commitments" that lie at the

bottom of our epistemic practices are not and can not be based on evidence or reasons; and as it is not irrational to take for granted a-rational “hinge commitments” such as “There are external objects”, “The world existed long before my birth” etc., it is not irrational to held religious convictions such as “God exists” and “The Bible is the Word of God”, even if these certainties are not and can not be evidentially based.

With this points in mind, we can go back to a somewhat modified version of Creationists vs Evolutionist case mentioned above. Take the case of someone that believes, on the basis of the geological empirical evidence available, that the Earth is approximately 4.543 billion years old, and a proponent of Young Earth Creationism (YEC), namely the view based on a literalist reading of the Bible which holds that the universe, Earth, and all life on Earth were created by direct acts of God less than 10,000 years ago.

If the account of the structure of reason proposed by Pritchard is correct, then it is hard to see how these agents could resolve their dispute; not only from a practical, but also and more importantly from an *epistemological* point of view. It seems to me that following this account, our agents are in a sense “epistemic pairs”; both their belief system and practices rest on a number of different, but equally a-rational, hinge commitments. Hence, even if our agents, *qua* human beings, have a number of “hinge commitments” in common, they crucially can not *rationally* address, let alone solve, the dispute at issue, at least by using rational means such as evidence or reasons. After all, as we have seen above, “hinge commitments” are more basic than any evidence or reason we can use to support or undermine them.

This is not to say that a proponent of the “Old Earth Theory” can not settle the dispute with his YEC opponent (or vice versa): this disagreement can practically be settled, but in a somewhat “epistemically unsatisfactory” way. Recall the following remarks of OC we have already encountered supra:

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic. (OC: 611)

I said I would 'combat' the other man - but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.) (OC: 612)

Pritchard himself (2018, 155) suspects that following his account of the structure of reason there can be true unsolvable disagreement between agents with radically different a-rational “religious convictions”. I agree. Unfortunately, I am afraid that this

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disagreement, once read in light of his account of the structure of reason, will have a number of counter-intuitive consequences. Are the view according to which the Earth is approximately 4.543 billion years old and YEC both equally plausible, as they rest on unsupported "hinge commitments" not open to epistemic evaluation? Is a proponent of YEC being epistemically rational, when he disregards the huge amount of empirical evidence against his deeply held, a-rational religious convictions? Can "persuasion", which for Wittgenstein is based on nothing more than "all sorts of slogans (OC 610) rather than on evidence and reason, be the only way to settle the dispute between a proponent of YEC and the Theory of Evolution? Hardly. However, I am afraid that Pritchard's "hinge epistemology" might lead to these somewhat implausible conclusion.

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have argued that Pritchard's account of 'hinge-commitments', might lead to a form of unpalatable unsolvable epistemic disagreement. Furthermore, I have argued that this will in turn license a number of "fringe" doctrines such as Young Earth Creationism, that will be almost impossible to address with "reputable" epistemic practices, for instance by appealing to empirical evidence or reasons⁶.

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⁶ For a general evaluation of a number of contemporary 'Wittgenstein-inspired' anti-skeptical proposals, see also Salvatore (2016, 2017).

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