

Précis of *Epistemic Angst*

Duncan Pritchard

(University of California-Irvine & University of Edinburgh)

Email: dhpritch@uci.edu

Epistemic Angst (Princeton University Press, 2015) is the culmination of many years of engaging with the problem of radical scepticism. In earlier work—especially *Epistemic Luck* (Oxford University Press, 2005)—I tried to meet the difficulty head-on, by offering a form of neo-Mooreanism that was motivated by epistemic externalism and situated within a research program I referred to as *anti-luck epistemology*.¹ The careful reader of this book will have spotted, however, that I was not fully persuaded, in that the anti-skeptical proposal on offer starts to look very much like a “skeptical solution” once the details are unpacked. Indeed, I found myself arguing in effect that a form of radical scepticism that is aimed specifically at the rational standing of our beliefs was pretty much correct.

Over the years, my response to radical scepticism became increasingly bifurcated. On the one hand, I developed an anti-skeptical theory (the essentials of which were already present in *Epistemic Luck*) that was inspired by Wittgenstein’s (1969) remarks on the structure of rational evaluation in *On Certainty* [=OC].² Simultaneously, I also advanced a separate proposal, inspired by John McDowell’s (e.g., 1995) work, which was cast along epistemological disjunctivist lines.³ On the face of it, these two proposals are radically different, and as a result are normally regarded as competing anti-skeptical theses. Nonetheless, I was convinced that they belonged together, though it took me a while to work out the details.

Very roughly, epistemological disjunctivism is the view that when it comes to paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge, the rational support available to the subject is both reflectively accessible and factive. In particular, one’s reflectively accessible rational basis for knowing that *p* can be that one *sees that p*, where seeing that *p* entails *p*. As far as epistemological orthodoxy goes, such a position is straightforwardly incoherent. The goal of my book, *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford University Press, 2012), was to explain why this view, far from being the utterly mad proposal that many in contemporary epistemology suppose it to be, is in fact perfectly defensible. This point is crucial because, as I also argued in this book, epistemological disjunctivism is a stance that is rooted in our ordinary epistemic practices, and would be highly desirable if true. Accordingly, if the philosophical reasons why we have rejected this natural position turn out to be dubious, such that it is a live

theoretical option after all, then a powerful case can be made that we should embrace it.

Since epistemological disjunctivism is such a contentious position, one of the self-imposed constraints I operated under in that monograph was that I would defend the view by appealing only to further claims that ought to be acceptable to all epistemologists. This meant that when I got to the point in the book where I demonstrate the anti-skeptical potential of the view, it simply wasn't an option to bring in Wittgenstein's radical account of the structure of rational evaluation, as most epistemologists would regard such a view as highly contentious. Instead, epistemological disjunctivism was obliged to stand on its own two feet. The result was a new kind of neo-Mooreanism, this time set within a provocative form of non-classical epistemic internalism rather than epistemic externalism. But I was acutely aware by this point that the anti-skeptical story I was telling was incomplete in a fundamental way, and that the full solution lay in integrating epistemological disjunctivism with the Wittgensteinian proposal.

In order to understand why, we need to revisit a debate that occurred in the literature just over a decade ago, and which I was fortunate to play a (relatively minor) part in. This concerned the logical structure of radical skeptical arguments, and in particular whether the formulation of radical skepticism that turns on a closure-style principle is logically distinct from a superficially very similar formulation of radical skepticism that turns on what is known as an underdetermination principle. My own contribution to this debate was to defend the claim that these epistemic principles are logically distinct, and that this may have important implications for the debate regarding radical skepticism.⁴ It was only when I was writing *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, however, that I came to the view that the logical difference between these two epistemic principles is in fact profoundly important for our understanding of the two formulations of the skeptical argument.

In particular, I came to realize that this logical difference reveals that these two formulations of radical skepticism, while superficially similar, are in fact arising out of different sources. Underdetermination-based radical skepticism is trading on a specific point about what I call the *insularity of reasons*—roughly, how the rational support our worldly beliefs enjoy, even in the best case, is compatible with their widespread falsity. In contrast, closure-based radical skepticism trades on a very different claim, which is what I call the *universality of rational evaluation*—roughly, that there are no in principle limits on the extent to which our beliefs can be rationally evaluated, such that universal rational evaluations are entirely possible. Once one understands how these two formulations of the skeptical argument arise out of different sources, then it becomes

apparent why the logical differences between the two epistemic principles on which they turn are so important. In particular, what one discovers is that these two formulations of the skeptical argument really constitute distinct skeptical problems that require distinct solutions.

By recognizing this point, I was able to get a handle both on just what is right and what is unsatisfying about epistemological disjunctivism from the perspective of radical skepticism. This proposal confronts the insularity of reasons thesis head-on, and demonstrates that such a thesis, far from being common sense, is in fact the product of dubious philosophical theory. As such, epistemological disjunctivism is the antidote to underdetermination-based radical skepticism. But if one applies this idea, unadorned with Wittgenstein's insight about the structure of rational evaluation, to closure-based radical skepticism, then one gets an extremely epistemically immodest (and hence unpalatable) proposal, one that contends that we can have a factive rational basis for dismissing radical skeptical hypotheses.

How does the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of rational evaluation help on this score? Well, the core thought in this account is that the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation—whether of a negative (i.e., radically skeptical) or a positive (i.e., traditional anti-skeptical, such as Moorean) nature—is simply incoherent. Instead, Wittgenstein argues that it is in the very nature of a system of rational evaluation that it takes certain basic commitments—the “hinge” commitments, as he called them (e.g., OC, §343)—as immune to rational evaluation. Surprisingly, these hinge commitments can be regarding such apparently mundane propositions as that one has two hands. According to Wittgenstein, it is only with these hinge commitments in the background that rational evaluation is even possible. The upshot is that rational evaluation is an essentially local phenomenon. Moreover, this is not because of some incidental lack on our part (e.g., a lack of imagination or consistency), but rather reflects the very nature of what is involved in rational evaluation. As Wittgenstein expressed the matter, his point was about the “logic” (e.g., OC, §342) of rational evaluation.

The challenge posed by the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of rational evaluation is to explain what purchase, exactly, it offers us on the skeptical problem. On my reading of Wittgenstein, the thought is that it gains us a very good grip on closure-based radical skepticism by offering us principled grounds for rejecting the universality of rational evaluation thesis. Crucially, however, my reading of Wittgenstein enables us to reject the universality of rational evaluation thesis without in the process rejecting the closure principle, thereby ensuring that the view can retain all of our

commonsense epistemological commitments. As I argue, our hinge commitments, properly understood, are simply not the kind of propositional attitude to which the closure principle (again, properly understood) is applicable. It follows that the Wittgensteinian rejection of the universality of rational evaluation is entirely consistent with the closure principle, since the latter simply does not apply to our hinge commitments.

This point is very important to the undercutting credentials of this form of anti-skepticism. Wittgenstein was certainly very keen to offer a response to the radical skeptical problem that demonstrated that it was a puzzle that was arising out of dubious philosophical claims that are masquerading as common sense. According to Wittgenstein, the radical skepticism problem is really a product of faulty philosophical theory, rather than representing a genuine paradoxical tension in our most fundamental epistemic commitments. The skeptical 'paradox' is thus undercut, in that it is shown to not be a *bona fide* paradox at all (this is as opposed to the paradox being *overridden*, which is when a genuine paradox is resolved by offering a plausible form of philosophical revisionism). If the closure principle is a highly intuitive principle, then it is all to the good as far as an undercutting anti-skeptical proposal goes that it does not involve the denial of this principle.

We can now see how the Wittgensteinian proposal, when understood in the right way, can help epistemological disjunctivism with its response to radical skepticism. Whereas epistemological disjunctivism is focused on the underdetermination-based formulation of radical skepticism, which trades on the underlying insularity of reasons thesis, the Wittgensteinian proposal is instead aimed at the closure-based formulation of radical skepticism, which trades on the underlying universality of rational evaluation thesis. The crux of the matter is that if we can combine these proposals, then potentially we can offer a unified treatment of radical skepticism that deals with both formulations of the problem.

Can we combine these proposals? On the face of it, they look very different; indeed, they look antithetical, and competing (and are often taken to be so, as noted above). Whereas the Wittgensteinian proposal emphasizes the locality of rational evaluation, and hence the locality of rational support, the McDowellian proposal emphasizes the strength of the rational support that is available to us in paradigm conditions, in that it is factive. But these differences are superficial. In fact, these proposals work very well with each other, in that they are not only compatible, but also mutually supporting and philosophically in the same spirit.

The compatibility claim is just the idea that the supposed tension between these views is merely superficial. There is nothing in the idea of rational evaluation being essentially local that precludes

the possibility of factive rational support in the perceptual case. And there is nothing in the idea of factive rational support that excludes the possibility that all rational evaluation is local. Once one recognizes the compatibility of these two theses, then one can see how they might be combined, and how, in particular, they might be employed to support each other. The basic idea is that each proposal is more plausible when combined with its sister view. So, it is easier to live with the essential locality of rational evaluation if one is also able to demonstrate that paradigm cases of perceptual rational support are factive. And it is easier to live with the idea that paradigm cases of perceptual rational support are factive if one embraces the essential locality of rational evaluation (i.e., because one is not thereby committed to the epistemic immodesty of supposing that one can have a factive rational basis for dismissing radical skeptical hypotheses). Note too the extent to which these proposals are in the same spirit. We have already seen that the Wittgensteinian proposal is an undercutting treatment of the skeptical 'paradox.' But note that this also applies to epistemological disjunctivism, in that the guiding idea behind this view is that we have been seduced, on faulty theoretical grounds, into regarding a dubious theoretical claim (regarding the insularity of reasons) as an item of mere common sense. Both of the formulations of the skeptical problem in play, whether closure-based or underdetermination-based, are thus shown to be merely pseudo-problems.

I call the unified defense against radical skepticism the *biscopic* proposal. It is, admittedly, an ugly name—I have tried hard to find a better moniker but without success. But, despite its ugliness, it does convey the bare essentials of the proposal. This is that we have, completely unbeknownst to us, been looking at this problem through, as it were, only one eye—only one eye at a time anyway—and that we need to use both of our philosophical 'eyes' in order to see the problem aright. Only then can we gain the right perspective on the problem and thereby recognize what the correct solution to the problem must be.

A final comment is in order about the very notion of epistemic *angst*. The problem of radical skepticism has always been a very real existential issue for me, and so I do not use this terminology lightly. Discovering that the skeptical problem has no clear answer is something that should unsettle any responsible inquirer. Note, though, that while I believe the solution I offer to the skeptical problem genuinely is a remedy for epistemic *angst*, this is not to say that the anxiety in question will be entirely removed. This is because I think there is an inevitable psychological vestige of skeptical doubt that remains even once the solution has been embraced (albeit not one that is now tracking a genuine epistemic *angst* about one's epistemic situation).

I call this psychological state *epistemic vertigo* (or *epistemic acrophobia*, if one wants to be pedantic), in order to capture the idea that it is essentially a kind of phobic reaction to one's epistemic predicament. Just as one can suffer from vertigo when high up, even while fully recognizing that one is not in any danger, so I think that even after the problem of radical skepticism has been resolved, and hence the epistemic risk posed by this problem is defused, it can nonetheless be the case that one feels a residual unease about one's epistemic situation. The reason for this disquiet is embedded in the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of rational evaluation itself. For what Wittgenstein alerts us to is how one's apparently very ordinary commitments—such as that one has two hands—can be playing a quite striking role in the system of rational evaluation. Wittgenstein wrote that our hinge commitments “lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry.” (OC, §88) He means that the question of their rational standing simply never arises in normal conditions, and so we are unaware that these ordinary commitments play an extraordinary epistemic role. Once one has inquired into their rational standing, however—and the stimulus for this inquiry will almost certainly be philosophical in nature—then it is hard not to continue to be struck thereafter by their peculiarity.

Another way of putting this point is that while in everyday life we do not take it as given that universal rational evaluations are possible—indeed, we don't consider the issue at all—neither do we recognize that they are impossible. That's not to say that we don't recognize that our everyday practices of giving reasons for and against particular claims is local, as we surely do recognize this. The crux of the matter is rather that our practices of rational evaluation, while local, also seem to be entirely open to indefinite broadenings of scope. That is, there seems no inherent limits to the scope of rational evaluation, even if in practice it is always local in nature. That there is such an inherent limit—that a fully general rational evaluation, one that encompassed even our hinge commitments, is impossible—is a philosophical discovery. Moreover, in discovering it, we also realize that our everyday epistemic practices disguise this fact. It is thus unsurprising, then, that even once epistemic *angst* has been removed, epistemic vertigo might well remain, for we now have a perspective on our practices of rational evaluation that is in a certain sense completely unnatural. We have, as it were, epistemically 'ascended' and adopted a vantage point that we would not normally adopt. From this unnatural vantage point, epistemic vertigo is a natural response.

My point is that one can accept that there is a genuine phenomenon of epistemic vertigo without thereby conceding anything of substance to the radical skeptic. Epistemic *angst* is averted—this is no skeptical solution of radical skepticism. But as

with any engagement with a deep philosophical problem, things are not left entirely as they were before⁵.

References

McDOWELL, J. (1995). 'Knowledge and the Internal', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, 877-93.

PRITCHARD, D. H. (2005a). *Epistemic Luck*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—— (2005b). 'The Structure of Sceptical Arguments', *Philosophical Quarterly* 55, 37-52.

—— (2007). 'Anti-Luck Epistemology', *Synthese* 158, 277-97.

—— (2012a). 'Anti-Luck Virtue Epistemology', *Journal of Philosophy* 109, 247-79

—— (2012b). *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—— (2012c). 'Wittgenstein and the Groundlessness of Our Believing', *Synthese* 189, 255-72.

—— (2015a). 'Anti-Luck Epistemology and the Gettier Problem', *Philosophical Studies* 172, 93-111.

—— (2015b). *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

—— (2016). 'Epistemic Risk', *Journal of Philosophy* 113, 550-71.

—— (2017). 'Anti-Risk Epistemology and Negative Epistemic Dependence', *Synthese* [Online First, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1586-6>]

—— (Forthcominga). 'Anti-Risk Virtue Epistemology', *Virtue Epistemology*, (ed.) J. Greco & C. Kelp, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—— (Forthcomingb). 'Wittgensteinian Epistemology, Epistemic Vertigo, and Pyrrhonian Scepticism', *Epistemology After Sextus Empiricus*, (eds.) J. Vlasits & K. M. Vogt, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Précis of *Epistemic Angst*

PRITCHARD, D. H., Millar, A., & Haddock, A. (2010). *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1969). *On Certainty*, (eds.) G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, (tr.) D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell.

NOTES

¹ I submit that anti-luck epistemology is still going strong, even though I now realize that it doesn't contain the materials to deal with radical scepticism. That is, I now realize that the project of offering a theory of knowledge is orthogonal to the philosophical challenge of showing whether, *contra* the radical skeptic, we have any knowledge. In any case, I claim that anti-luck epistemology is adequate to the former task, as part of a wider view I call *anti-luck virtue epistemology* (or, more recently, *anti-risk virtue epistemology*). For more on anti-luck epistemology in general, see Pritchard (2005a; 2007; 2015a). For more on anti-luck virtue epistemology, see Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, chs. 1-4) and Pritchard (2012a). For more on anti-risk virtue epistemology, along with the subtle (though important) ways that it diverges from anti-luck epistemology, see Pritchard (2016; 2017; *forthcominga*).

² See especially Pritchard (2012c).

³ See especially Pritchard (2012b).

⁴ See Pritchard (2005a, pt. 1; 2005b).

⁵ For a recent discussion of the notion of epistemic vertigo, in the context of Pyrrhonian scepticism, see Pritchard (*forthcomingb*). This précis is an abbreviated version of the introduction to *Epistemic Angst*.

Sképsis
2019