

## ON HINGE EPISTEMOLOGY

**Duncan Pritchard**

University of California, Irvine & University of Edinburgh  
*Email:* dhpritch@uci.edu

**Abstract:** Hinge epistemology is concerned with a particular approach to certain central epistemological questions that is inspired by Wittgenstein's remarks on knowledge, certainty, and related notions in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*. I here describe the version of hinge epistemology that I have articulated in recent work, along with its relevance to some fundamental epistemological topics. These topics include the problem of radical scepticism, the nature of epistemic vertigo and its relationship to Wittgensteinian quietism, epistemic relativism, and quasi-fideism regarding the epistemology of religious belief.

### 1 Hinge epistemology

Broadly speaking, *hinge epistemology* is the research programme that is inspired by Wittgenstein's (1969) impressionistic remarks in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty* (=OC).<sup>i</sup> In these notebooks Wittgenstein articulates a novel account of the structure of rational evaluation, one that has certain fundamental 'hinges' at its heart. These are normally known in the literature as hinge propositions, but I prefer to call them *hinge commitments*, as what's important about them on my view (as we will see) is not the specific propositional content that is in play (which can be variable), but rather the distinctive kind of commitment one has to them. Wittgenstein's idea is that these hinge commitments are required in order for rational evaluation to occur at all. As such, however, they are themselves immune to rational evaluation, and hence there is a class of fundamental commitments that are vital for rational evaluation to occur but which do not themselves enjoy rational support, and so are not in the market for knowledge.

Such a proposal is already radical enough, but what makes the view even more dramatic is the kind of examples that Wittgenstein offers of our hinge commitments. These concern those everyday claims of which we are optimally certain, such as the certainties enumerated by G. E. Moore (e.g., 1925; 1939), including, most famously, 'I have hands'. Nothing is more certain in normal circumstances than that one has hands, which Moore takes as indicating that it enjoys a special epistemic status. In contrast, Wittgenstein contends that its optimal certainty means that it has no rational status whatsoever, as the hinge certainty associated with it is what needs to be in place in order for rational evaluations to occur. The same holds for the rest of our Moorean certainties, such as that one's name is such-and-such (e.g., OC, §486), that one is speaking English (e.g., OC, §158), that one has never been to the moon (e.g., OC §117), and so on.<sup>ii</sup>

The challenge facing any proponent of a hinge epistemology has always been to spell-out this basic idea—which is merely sketched in the notebooks we have

from Wittgenstein—in such a way as to turn it into a credible epistemological proposal. In particular, one might initially think that this idea ultimately collapses into either radical scepticism or epistemic relativism. The former, because if one's most basic certainties are completely lacking in rational support, then how are any of one's beliefs supposed to amount to knowledge? The latter, because it seems entirely plausible for people to have different sets of hinge commitments, such as when they are raised in very different cultural milieus. But doesn't this imply that there can be distinct systems of rational evaluation, and thereby lead to epistemic relativism?

We will return to both of these challenges below. But first let me set out how I understand hinge epistemology.<sup>iii</sup> At the heart of my proposal is a certain view about the nature of hinge commitments. My account takes seriously how Wittgenstein describes these commitments, such that the certainty that is associated with our hinge commitments is visceral and pre-rational: 'animal', 'primitive'. (OC, §359, §475) I argue that there is a distinctive kind of propositional attitude in play here. In particular, while our hinge commitments are beliefs in a loose everyday sense of that term, whereby it just picks out a general endorsement of a proposition, they are not beliefs in the specific sense of belief that is of interest to epistemologists—*viz.*, that propositional attitude that is a constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge. Call this more restrictive notion of belief *K-apt belief*. K-apt belief has some distinctive properties, not least that it has some base-level conceptual connections to truth and reasons. In particular, to have a K-apt belief in a proposition is to have a reasons-responsive commitment to the truth of that proposition at least in this minimal sense: one cannot simultaneously have a K-apt belief while recognizing that one has no rational basis for the truth of the target proposition. If one continues to be committed to the truth of the target proposition regardless, then one's propositional attitude is not one of K-apt belief, but rather a different propositional attitude entirely (such as wishful thinking, etc.).

Crucially, however, given the way that Wittgenstein describes our hinge commitments, they clearly fail this test for K-apt belief. (Henceforth, for ease of expression, by 'belief' I will specifically have K-apt belief in mind). One's hinge certainty, in normal circumstances, that one has hands would not be the least bit affected by the recognition that one has no rational basis for the truth of this proposition. (Of course, one might *say* that it is affected, but Wittgenstein's point is that one's actual certainty, completely unchanged from before, would be manifest in your actions). This reflects the fact that, for Wittgenstein, such commitments are not rooted in ratiocination at all. Indeed, this is manifest in how we acquire our hinges. We are not explicitly taught them, but rather 'swallow them down' (OC, §143) with everything that we are explicitly taught, as part of the worldview that is thereby acquired. No-one teaches you that you have hands, for example; you are rather taught to do things with your hands, which presupposes their existence. (OC, §374)

Notice that on my view the kind of propositional attitude in play as regards our hinge commitments is *sui generis*, as it doesn't fall into any other category of propositional attitude that we are currently familiar with. For example, our hinge commitments are not acceptances, hypotheses, or assumptions, as these are all propositional attitudes that are consistent with agnosticism about the truth of the target proposition, and yet that cannot be true of our hinge commitments given that we are optimally certain of them. More generally, on my view (which I take to be capturing what Wittgenstein intended on this score), there is nothing remotely strategic about our hinge commitments either, in contrast to how they are understood by some versions of hinge epistemology.<sup>iv</sup>

While most accounts of hinge commitments emphasize the apparent relativity of our hinge commitments (to person, place, epoch, circumstances, and so on), I aim to show that all hinge commitments have a common core. For what all of our hinge commitments express is an overarching commitment that I call the *über hinge commitment*—*viz.*, the certainty that one is not radically and fundamentally in error.<sup>v</sup> The basic idea is that the optimal certainty that is associated with the everyday Moorean certainties (in normal conditions), such as that one has hands, is an expression of this more general optimal certainty. The apparent variability in our hinge commitments is thus explained in terms of how the overarching *über hinge commitment*, in concert with different circumstances, and thus a different set of beliefs, gives rise to specific hinge commitments with more concrete propositional contents, such as that one has hands. It is thus the *über hinge commitment*, strictly speaking, that is presupposed in our believing, with specific hinge commitments a function of this general commitment manifest in concrete ways via one's particular set of beliefs.

There are numerous advantages to this account of hinge commitments, even aside from the obvious boon that it demystifies what has hitherto been a rather enigmatic notion. One chief advantage is that it can account for two features of hinge commitments that on the face of it are in direct tension with one another. On the one hand, hinge commitments are completely unresponsive to rational considerations, in the sense that they are commitments that we would retain, and be no less certain of, even if we became aware of the fact that we have no rational basis for their truth. In particular, our continued certainty in them would be manifest in our actions, so that even if we might claim to doubt them, this 'doubt' would be in an important sense fake. On the other hand, however, hinge commitments clearly can change over time, and change in ways that seem to be at least superficially rational. Indeed, the very same proposition can be at one time a hinge commitment and another time an ordinary belief, where this change seems to involve a rational response to changed circumstances. But if hinge commitments are unresponsive to reasons in the specific way just described, then how can they change at all, much less change via a rational response to changed circumstances?

My account can explain what is going on here. Take the hinge commitment that one has never been to the moon. What holds this in place is that, given one's system of beliefs (bearing in mind that we are here distinguishing beliefs and hinge commitments), this commitment is an expression of one's commitment to the *über hinge*. But one's beliefs can change over time, and in rational ways. Imagine now a child born today who over a long lifetime becomes aware of the increasing ease of space travel, to such an extent that it becomes the kind of activity that one could partake in without being aware of it. At some point the child's beliefs about space travel will change to such an extent that it is no longer a hinge commitment that she has never been to the moon, but rather becomes instead a belief of the familiar kind (akin to my belief that I've never been to certain towns in England). As one's beliefs change in response to changed circumstances, so which particular propositions manifest the *über hinge commitment* will alter accordingly. We can thus explain how one's specific hinge commitments can change over time, and in rational ways, even though the commitment is not itself directly responsive to reasons (in the specific sense set out above).

Or consider a proposition which is at one time a hinge commitment but at other times an ordinary belief. For example, that one has two hands is no longer a hinge commitment in the abnormal conditions where one is coming around in hospital after a major car accident. Indeed, in such circumstances, it could make perfect sense to base one's beliefs on the fact that one sees them, where this would simply be unintelligible in normal conditions. (OC, §125) Moreover, this change in

one's commitments seems to be a rational response to a change in circumstances. On my view there is nothing puzzling about this, just as there is nothing puzzling, on closer inspection, about the person in the previous example who lives long enough to lose her hinge commitment to having never been to the moon. The change in circumstances, to the abnormal conditions specified, will lead to a change in one's set of beliefs, and hence will also alter which specific propositions codify the über hinge commitment.

Notice that on this account of hinge commitments it doesn't follow that any propositional attitude of complete certainty is thereby a hinge commitment, as it depends on whether the propositional attitude is a manifestation of the über hinge commitment. I think that's a welcome result, as we don't want any pathological certainty to thereby be a hinge commitment. Relatedly, it's not possible on this view for one's hinge commitments to be in tension with one's beliefs (as a pathological certainty is likely to be), since their content is determined by one's set of beliefs.<sup>vi</sup>

Another consequence of my account of hinge commitments that I think we should welcome is that philosophical claims like 'There is an external world' do not count as hinge commitments. This is because they are not manifestations of one's über hinge commitment (compare one's conviction that one has hands in this regard), but rather theoretical claims that we are led to make as a result of a philosophical investigation. This feature of my view is quite contrary to standard hinge epistemology proposals, which are content to treat all manner of philosophical claims of this kind as hinge commitments.<sup>vii</sup> But I think this is mistake. Indeed, it seems clear to me that Wittgenstein treated these philosophical claims very differently to the everyday Moorean certainties, in that the former are simply nonsense.<sup>viii</sup> In any case, on my view hinge commitments are deeply rooted in our everyday practices in a way that simply doesn't apply to the theoretical claims of philosophy.

### **2 Radical skepticism: resolving epistemic *angst***

Like many epistemologists, one of my principal interests in engaging with hinge epistemology is to work out how it might be applicable to the contemporary problem of radical scepticism. My thesis in this regard is that hinge epistemology, properly understood, is the antidote to one prominent version of the contemporary radical sceptical puzzle that turns on the closure principle.<sup>ix</sup> According to this formulation, radical scepticism is a putative paradox that exposes deep tensions within our own epistemological concepts.

We can express this putative paradox in terms of the following supposedly inconsistent triad, where throughout knowledge is to be understood as rationally grounded knowledge:<sup>x</sup>

#### *The Closure-Based Radical Sceptical Paradox*

- (I) We have lots of everyday knowledge.
- (II) The closure principle.
- (III) We are unable to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses.

By 'everyday knowledge', I just mean the kind of rationally grounded knowledge that we routinely ascribe to ourselves. As such (I) is essentially just the

denial of radical scepticism as a position (i.e., radical scepticism, *qua* position rather than paradox, would involve the rejection of (I)), and so ought to be uncontroversial. (III) is also widely accepted, at least provided that our focus is on rationally grounded knowledge. For what rational basis could one possibly offer to exclude such a deception? To take a familiar example, what possible reason could one have to exclude, for example, the possibility that one is a brain-in-a-vat who is being ‘fed’ deceptive experiences?

The closure principle, and thus (II), is meant to bring these two claims into direct conflict. I argue that for closure to be independently plausible it needs to be interpreted diachronically as a competent deduction principle, whereby one gains a belief in the consequent proposition that is based on the relevant competent deduction from one’s rationally grounded knowledge in the antecedent proposition.<sup>xi</sup> So construed, the closure principle ought to be unobjectionable. How could what results from such a paradigmatically rational process as competent deduction that draws on rationally grounded knowledge of the antecedent fail to be rationally grounded knowledge of the consequent? But the problem should now be apparent, as evidently a lot of everyday claims that one takes oneself to know entail the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, and hence if the latter can never be known, then neither, it seems, can the former, at least while the closure principle is accepted. We thus have an inconsistent triad, and so one of these highly intuitive claims needs to go.

I think that Wittgenstein sets out the essentials of an *undercutting* anti-sceptical strategy that is applicable to this putative paradox, where by this I mean a proposal that demonstrates that what looks like a paradox is in fact nothing of the kind. In particular, an undercutting response to a putative paradox involves showing that the puzzle in question illicitly trades on contentious theoretical ideas under the guise of common sense such that, with these contentious claims removed, the problem disappears. (The contrast is with *overriding* strategies, which grant that there is a genuine paradox in play, but argue nonetheless that a particular element in the paradox should be rejected. Overriding responses to paradoxes are thus essentially revisionary in a way that undercutting responses are not).<sup>xii</sup> This is where the account of hinge commitments that I offer (following Wittgenstein) comes in.

If Wittgenstein is right about our hinge commitments, then they are necessary features of our rational practices. That is, it is not an option that one has these commitments, as if they are assumptions that could be rationally discharged. Instead, it is essential to being a citizen of the realm of reasons at all that one has such commitments. One immediate consequence of this idea is that the very notion of there being universal rational evaluations, whereby all of one’s commitments are rationally evaluated all at once, is simply incoherent. I refer to this claim as the *universality of rational evaluation thesis*, and maintain that it is the source of closure-based radical scepticism. For the role of the closure-based inference in the radical sceptical argument is precisely to get us to undertake a universal rational evaluation, by considering how the rational basis we have for our everyday beliefs can suffice to exclude radical sceptical hypotheses where we are radically in error. One might antecedently think that such universal rational evaluations are innocuous, as they are simply extensions of the localised rational evaluations we undertake in our everyday epistemic practices. Crucially, however, Wittgenstein is alerting us to how the locality of our everyday rational evaluations is not an incidental feature of these practices, as if we were merely lacking in time or imagination, but rather essential to what it is to undertake a rational evaluation. This is why Wittgenstein is undercutting the putative sceptical paradox, by showing that it rests on a dubious theoretical claim that is not rooted in our



everyday epistemic practices (the universality of rational evaluation thesis), and which we should discard.

Still, one might be puzzled as to how, exactly, the Wittgensteinian undercutting line relates to our formulation of the radical sceptical problem set out above. Is the idea that the proponent of a hinge epistemology should deny the closure principle? It can certainly initially look that way. One has rationally grounded knowledge of propositions which one knows entail hinge commitments, and yet one is unable to know the latter. How then could the denial of the closure principle be avoided?<sup>xiii</sup> In contrast, I argue that hinge epistemology, properly understood, does not need to deny the closure principle.

Remember that I have claimed that the closure principle, if it is to be employed in the formulation of the radical sceptical puzzle, needs to be understood as a diachronic competent deduction principle (as otherwise it is implausible for independent reasons). This means that it is built into the principle that one is acquiring a belief in the entailed proposition via a paradigmatically rational process. Moreover, the notion of belief in play here is clearly of the K-apt kind, given that it is meant to enable the subject to gain rationally grounded knowledge of the entailed proposition. So understood, however, the closure principle is simply inapplicable to our hinge commitments. In particular, one cannot use closure in order to acquire a K-apt belief in a hinge commitment, since one cannot have such a belief in a hinge commitment, much less via a paradigmatically rational route. Remember that the commitment is already in play, and has properties which ensure that it is a propositional attitude that cannot qualify as K-apt belief.

It follows that the proper response for the hinge epistemologist to make to the puzzle set out above is to deny that it amounts to an inconsistent triad. The closure principle is not the problem; the problem is rather the universality of rational evaluation thesis. Once the latter is rejected then the closure principle can be retained and shown to be as harmless as it first appears. The point is that the closure principle is simply a means by which one can acquire (K-apt) beliefs via competent deduction from one's rationally grounded knowledge, and thereby come to have further rationally grounded knowledge. But that is not going to be a process that is applicable to our hinge commitments, as they are not in the market for K-apt belief in the first place.

One contemporary formulation of radical scepticism is thus definitively dealt with. Notice, however, that I only say 'one formulation'. There is a good reason for this, as one of my core claims about contemporary radical scepticism is that it is not a single problem, but rather two logically distinct problems that have been run together. In particular, in addition to the closure-based formulation that we have already considered, there is also the underdetermination-based formulation that is usually taken to be at least roughly equivalent, if not simply equivalent *tout court*, with the closure-based formulation. I have argued, however, that these formulations of the sceptical problem are importantly different, for not only are they logically distinct but they trade on distinct sources.<sup>xiv</sup> Whereas the closure-based formulation of the problem turns on the universality of rational evaluation thesis, as we saw above, the underdetermination-based formulation trades on a different idea, which I have called the *insularity of reasons thesis*. This is the claim that the rational support that one's beliefs enjoy, even in the very best case, is always compatible with the widespread falsity of one's beliefs.

The details of underdetermination-based scepticism and how I solve it need not detain us here, as they take us some way away from hinge epistemology. The short version is that I claim we need to endorse *epistemological disjunctivism* in order to undercut the underdetermination-based formulation of the radical sceptical

problem. This is an account of perceptual knowledge such that the rational support it enjoys in paradigmatic conditions is *factive*—i.e., it entails the target proposition.<sup>xv</sup> As such epistemological disjunctivism uniquely offers us the philosophical basis to understand why the insularity of reasons thesis is not only false but also in tension with our everyday epistemic practices. The reason is that those practices are shot-through with a commitment to factive reasons, and yet factive reasons are clearly inconsistent with the insularity of reasons thesis. Once we understand why there is nothing amiss with the conception of factive reasons embedded in our everyday practices, then this opens the door to an undercutting response to the underdetermination-based radical sceptical puzzle.

Moreover, this is not a response that can be extracted from a Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology alone because this only tells us about the structure of rational evaluation (i.e., that it essentially involves arational hinge commitments), but tells us nothing about the kind of rational support that our beliefs enjoy. Accordingly, the structure of rational evaluation could be essentially local as Wittgenstein maintains *and* one's rational support could be essentially insular in a way that leads to underdetermination-based radical scepticism. We thus need epistemological disjunctivism to block the latter claim.<sup>xvi</sup>

I argue that the dual nature of the sceptical problem that I have identified means that we should seek an integrated dual response to the problem, what I refer to as a *biscopic* response. To this end, I claim that hinge epistemology and epistemological disjunctivism are not just compatible anti-sceptical proposals (at least once one understands what their respective sceptical targets are), but also mutually supporting. The basic idea is that each proposal is more plausible when combined with the other view. So, it is easier to live with the essential locality of rational evaluation that hinge epistemology entails if one is also able to demonstrate that paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge involve factive rational support. And it is easier to live with the idea that paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge involve factive rational support, as epistemological disjunctivism maintains, if one embraces the essential locality of rational evaluation (because one is not thereby committed to the epistemic immodesty of supposing that one can have a factive rational basis for dismissing radical sceptical hypotheses). Note too the extent to which these proposals are in the same spirit, in that they both offer us undercutting treatments of the sceptical “paradox.”

### 3 Epistemic vertigo and Wittgensteinian quietism

Although the biscopic proposal completely undercuts contemporary radical scepticism, and hence is the cure for epistemic *angst*, I claim that nonetheless a perfectly natural epistemic anxiety might remain, one that is specifically related to the hinge epistemology aspect of the proposal. I call this phenomenon *epistemic vertigo*.<sup>xvii</sup> As the name suggests, this is meant to capture an essentially phobic response to one's epistemic predicament, such that one might experience the epistemic vertigo even while being fully aware that the problem of radical scepticism has been neutralised. 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 scepticism has been resolved, and hence the epistemic *angst* generated 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. To employ a phrase memorably used by Stanley Cavell (1988) in this context, that which is most ordinary becomes ‘uncanny’ once it is made explicit to one.

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 fail to recognize that our everyday practices of giving reasons for and against particular claims is local, as we surely do recognize this, at least implicitly. 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 *unnatural*. We have, as it were, epistemically ‘ascended’ and adopted a vantage point that we would not normally adopt. From this unnatural vantage point, where one is aware that one's most basic certainties are groundlessly held, 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 sceptical solution of radical scepticism. But as with any engagement with a deep philosophical problem, things are not left entirely as they were before.

I have argued elsewhere that epistemic vertigo is important not only for understanding the nature of our engagement with the problem of radical scepticism, but more generally for understanding the nature of Wittgensteinian quietism. Unlike a straightforward form of philosophical quietism—of a kind that is usually attributed to Wittgenstein, in fact—the idea is precisely not that the role of philosophy is simply to undo the damage caused by faulty philosophical theorising and return us back to a state of philosophical innocence, before we engaged with the faulty philosophy. In particular, while Wittgenstein endorses the quietist idea that there is nothing essentially amiss with our everyday practices (nothing that philosophy can fix or improve upon anyway), it also seems clear that there is no return to our everyday practices once one has embarked on the philosophical journey. One cannot simply continue with one's epistemic practices as before once one is aware of the arational nature of one's hinge commitments. There is thus no return to epistemic innocence.

In this sense, the goal of philosophy is not to simply undo philosophical mistakes, but rather to offer one a way of making sense of the philosophical stance one is now obliged to take on one's practices. Wittgenstein's philosophical quietism



is thus quite different from the plain form of philosophical quietism that is often attributed to him, in that philosophy has a kind of transformative role to play even despite the fact that our everyday practices are not subject to philosophical critique in the way that we might suppose.<sup>xviii</sup>

Elsewhere, I have argued that this Wittgensteinian quietism, particularly as it is exemplified in his hinge epistemology and the associated notion of epistemic vertigo, can help us to understand the undoubted influence of Pyrrhonian scepticism on Wittgenstein's thinking.<sup>xix</sup> Some of the parallels are straightforward, such as the way that Wittgenstein is suspicious of the idea of philosophy establishing distinctively philosophical claims, and, relatedly, that Wittgenstein clearly views philosophy as more of an activity than a body of doctrine. His hinge epistemology brings with it further points of contact, not least in how it exposes commitments on our part that are immune to sceptical doubt, not because of any philosophical justification that they possess but simply due to their role in our practices.

More generally, the idea that there are no universal rational evaluations is very much in the spirit of the kind of perpetual inquiry embodied by the Pyrrhonian sceptic, whereby one aims to avoid the dogmatic conclusions of the (Academic) sceptic and the traditional anti-sceptic, both of whom are effectively attempting a universal rational evaluation of our beliefs (one that is negative and one that is positive, respectively, but both of them dogmatic according to the Pyrrhonian). The transformative aspect of epistemic vertigo is also relevant here, in that arguably the Pyrrhonian is also trying to find a way of gaining intellectual peace from within the philosophical perspective that they have ended up adopting, rather than trying to do the impossible and return back to a prelapsarian state where one engages in one's everyday practices unreflectively and without being moved by philosophical concerns.<sup>xx</sup>

#### 4 Epistemic relativism

One of the advantages of my interpretation of hinge epistemology is the manner in which it gives us the resources to resist epistemic relativism. We noted the broad contours of the issue above, which concerns the possibility of people having distinct sets of hinge commitments, and thereby having distinct epistemic systems, each perfectly valid. Doesn't that possibility directly lead to epistemic relativism? I think this conclusion can be resisted, at least to the extent that we are concerned with a form of epistemic relativism that is philosophically problematic.

Let's take this last claim first. That there might be people who have distinct hinge commitments might well entail that they employ distinct, but equally valid, epistemic systems, and hence that epistemic relativism of some variety is true. But notice that the foregoing is quite compatible with the subjects concerned having overwhelmingly similar hinge commitments. In that case, while there might technically be distinct epistemic systems in play, there isn't any obvious reason why disagreements between the two parties could not be rationally resolved by appealing to the epistemic common ground that they share.

The point is that what really concerns us about epistemic relativism is not the mere possibility of there being distinct, but equally valid nonetheless, epistemic systems, but rather the further claim that as a result of this there is no rational way of resolving disagreements between the two parties. Call this latter claim *epistemic incommensurability*. Epistemic incommensurability is surely a concern, since if disagreements cannot be rationally resolved, even in principle, then how are they

to be resolved? Big sticks perhaps? This is an issue that Wittgenstein was certainly aware of in *On Certainty*, as he explicitly raises the question of epistemic incommensurability in the context of the hinge epistemology that he is exploring, such as in his remarks on how missionaries convert natives. (OC, §611-12) The big question, however, is whether hinge epistemology entails a strong form of epistemic relativism that involves epistemic incommensurability or merely a weak form that doesn't.<sup>xxi</sup>

Standard construals of hinge commitments tend to walk right into the epistemic incommensurability worry since they embrace the superficially heterogeneous nature of our hinge commitments.<sup>xxii</sup> After all, our hinge commitments do seem on the surface of things to be highly relative, whether to individuals (e.g., my name is such-and-such), to one's cultural milieu (e.g., that one is speaking English), or to one's epoch (e.g., that one has never been to the moon). Accordingly, one might naturally hold that there is potentially a great deal of divergence in one's hinge commitments, and hence one would expect there to be epistemically incommensurate epistemic systems as a result.

On my account of hinge commitments, however, this surface heterogeneity disguises an underlying homogeneity. At the heart of this proposal, recall, is the idea that everyone shares the same fundamental hinge commitment—the über hinge commitment—where our hinge commitments that have specific contents are merely manifestations, given our set of beliefs, of our über hinge commitment. Once we understand that this is how the specific hinge commitments are generated, then it becomes clear that most of the apparent divergence in hinge commitments that we witness is entirely superficial. For example, consider the fact that it is a hinge commitment for me that I am speaking English, while someone in another country, such as Portugal, will have the hinge commitment that they are speaking a different language (Portuguese). Rather than this representing a substantive difference in one's hinge commitments, however, it instead simply seems to capture the fact that for most of us it is a hinge commitment that one is speaking the language that one is raised with. Many of our apparent differences in our hinge commitments are like this, such as that it is hinge commitment for me that my name is Duncan Pritchard, while your corresponding hinge commitment obviously picks out a different content (but we share a common hinge commitment regarding one's name).

In order for there to be a difference in hinge commitments that is deep and significant, as opposed to being merely superficial, the individuals involved would need to have radically different sets of beliefs. Only then would we find that the über hinge commitment would manifest itself in hinge commitments with specific contents that are fundamentally different across cases. But Wittgenstein was alert to this possibility, and foreclosed it.

Although the hinge metaphor is the one that has proved dominant in the ensuing philosophical literature, it is perhaps not as effective in communicating what Wittgenstein had in mind as another metaphor that he employed: that of the riverbed. (OC, §§96-99) What is apt about the hinge metaphor is the idea of something standing fast (the hinge commitment) in order for something else to occur (rational evaluation). But the metaphor is imperfect because hinges can be moved at will, when this is clearly not what Wittgenstein had in mind when it came to our 'hinge' commitments. This deficiency is avoided in the riverbed analogy, where the hinges direct the course of inquiry (the river of belief), but where, over time, what is at one point part of the riverbed could become part of the river (and *vice versa*). As opposed to suggesting optionality, this metaphor emphasizes commonality (we are clearly all being swept along with the river together) and the necessity that change in one's hinge commitments is a gradual process that takes

place over time, often imperceptibly. (Think, for example, of how the hinge commitment that one has never been to the moon can change over time, as described above).

This point about our shared practices generating common hinge commitments was also stressed by Wittgenstein in other remarks he makes regarding the difficulty of even making sense of radical disagreement. As he puts it:

The truth of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements. That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them. (OC, §§80– 81)

And later:

In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind. (OC, §156)

But if we cannot make sense of radical divergences in our beliefs, then that would exclude the possibility that our shared über hinge commitment could generate significant differences in our hinge commitments with specific contents in virtue of us having radically different sets of beliefs.

The upshot of the foregoing is that if we take Wittgenstein's account of the nature of hinge commitments seriously, then there isn't any prospect of this leading to a worrying form of epistemic relativism that entails the philosophically problematic epistemic incommensurability thesis. All we get instead is the weaker form of epistemic relativism that lacks this further aspect. Note that it doesn't follow that there can't be significant differences in the hinge commitments that people hold—indeed, we will consider one such possible divergence in a moment, regarding religious conviction—only that these differences cannot be so significant as to lead to epistemic incommensurability.

## 5 Quasi-fideism

This brings me to the final point that I would like to make about my version of hinge epistemology, which is how it relates to the question of the rationality of religious belief. I've argued elsewhere that it is important to interpret *On Certainty* through the lens of this question. The reason for this is that a significant influence on the notebooks that comprise this work were the religious writings of John Henry Newman, particularly his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1979 [1870]), in which Newman defends the rationality of religious belief by appealing to the arational role that certain basic everyday certainties play in our practices.<sup>xxiii</sup> One could plausibly regard Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* as working through the general implications of this idea outside of the specific context of religious belief, and in particular trying to determine why this idea doesn't collapse into either a version of radical scepticism or else lead to an unacceptable epistemic relativism. In any case, given what else we know about Wittgenstein's religious concerns, particularly towards the end of his life, it is entirely credible that he would be interested in understanding what it would mean for basic religious conviction to function as a hinge commitment.

I call the resulting view *quasi-fideism*, to explicitly differentiate it from the straightforward fideism that Wittgenstein is more often associated with.<sup>xxiv</sup> On this proposal, while Wittgenstein is claiming that religious conviction, at its root, is to be understood along arational lines as a hinge commitment (this is the fideistic part), he is not thereby arguing that all religious belief is to be understood arationally; indeed, one's non-fundamental religious beliefs may well on this view enjoy a positive rational standing (which is why the view is not a straightforward version of fideism). Moreover, the idea is that religious belief is no different from ordinary non-religious belief in this regard, in that *all* belief, religious or otherwise, presupposes fundamental arational commitments.

It is on this last front that the hinge epistemology comes in, since it enables the quasi-fideist to offer a version of what is known in the epistemology of religion as a *parity argument*. The parity arguments that we are familiar with in this domain proceed by claiming that religious belief meets the same kind of epistemic standard that we apply to familiar kinds of belief, such as perceptual belief, which are ordinarily held to be epistemically unproblematic. The upshot is that scepticism about the rationality of religious belief is illicitly raising the epistemic standards for this kind of belief.<sup>xxv</sup> The parity argument offered by quasi-fideism is rather different, however. The claim is not that ordinary belief is rationally grounded through-and-through, and that religious belief is similarly grounded. Instead, it is argued that while religious belief has arational religious hinge commitments at its core, this can't be grounds for treating religious belief as epistemically problematic as *all* belief has arational hinge commitments at its core. A general hinge epistemology is thus appealed to in order to make the parity argument in defence of quasi-fideism stick.

This is not the place to undertake a detailed defence of quasi-fideism, so let me close instead by briefly describing some of its key attractions.<sup>xxvi</sup> Quasi-fideism has the benefit of avoiding some of the core concerns that face straightforward forms of fideism, such as the worry that it effectively places religious belief in an epistemic ghetto, whereby it is treated in a completely different way, from an epistemic perspective, to all other kinds of belief. According to quasi-fideism, in contrast, the system of religious belief isn't fundamentally different in terms of its rational structure than belief more generally.

It is also significant that quasi-fideism represents an underexplored region of logical space with regard to the debate regarding the epistemology of religious belief, since it is significantly different to all the main proposals currently in play. More generally if hinge epistemology in general is appealing, then it would be natural to apply it to religious case, particularly if one is convinced, in line with my remarks in the previous section, that doing so won't result in a troublesome form of epistemic relativism.

The general plausibility of the hinge epistemology framework is also relevant to the suggestion that quasi-fideism offers an especially good account of the phenomenology of religious conviction. In particular, it is often noted that religious conviction bears a very different relationship to reasons than ordinary belief. The version of hinge epistemology that I develop is able to give expression to this idea in virtue of the claim that there is a distinctive propositional attitude associated with our hinge commitments, one that is distinct from the (K-apt) notion of belief that is particularly relevant to epistemological debates.

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- <sup>i</sup> For some of the core texts relevant to hinge epistemology, see Strawson (1985), McGinn (1989), Williams (1991), Wright (2004), Coliva (2010; 2015), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For two surveys of this literature, see Pritchard (2011*b*; 2017*b*).
- <sup>ii</sup> For further discussion of the contrast between Moore and Wittgenstein on this front, see Coliva (2010) and Pritchard (*forthcomingd*).
- <sup>iii</sup> I develop my own version of hinge epistemology in a number of works, but see especially Pritchard (2015*a*). See also Pritchard (2005*a*; 2005*c*; 2012*b*; 2014*a*; 2016; 2018*a*; 2018*c*; 2019*b*).
- <sup>iv</sup> This is especially so of the entitlement account of hinge commitments offered by Wright (2004) and the related extended rationality account offered by Coliva (2010; 2015). See also endnote 6, where I explain why hinge commitments are no aliefs.
- <sup>v</sup> Just to clear, in calling the über hinge a *commitment* I am not suggesting that it is something that one needs to have ever explicitly considered. That one has this commitment is rather manifest in one's actions. (This is true of all our hinge commitments, but for many of them it is plausible that one has explicitly considered the target proposition at some point).
- <sup>vi</sup> This is one reason why the propositional attitude involved in a hinge commitment is not an *alief*, in the sense articulated by Gendler (2008). This is because one's aliefs can be in tension with one's (K-apt) beliefs, as in phobic reactions (e.g., as when one is afraid of snakes, and so has an alief that one is in danger, even while knowing, and thus K-apt believing, that there's no danger).
- <sup>vii</sup> Indeed, for many such theories this is explicitly cited as a virtue of the position. See, for example, Wright (2004) and Coliva (2010; 2014).
- <sup>viii</sup> See especially OC, §§35-36. In this regard I follow some other commentators—such as Williams (2004)—in regarding the first notebook that makes up *On Certainty* (OC, §§1-65) as having very different concerns to the other three notebooks. In particular, it is largely focused on Moore's (1939) 'proof' of an external world, and hence with his response to idealism, rather than with Moore's more general treatment of everyday certainties, as found for example in Moore (1925).
- <sup>ix</sup> See, especially, Pritchard (2015*a*, *passim*). See also Pritchard (2018*a*).
- <sup>x</sup> I argue in some detail in Pritchard (2015*a*, part one) that this is the focus of the radical sceptical argument, at least if we wish to consider the problem in its strongest formulation. (As I also explain there, in making this point one is not thereby claiming that all knowledge is rationally grounded knowledge).
- <sup>xi</sup> This is essentially the formulation of the closure principle that is advocated by Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005, 29).
- <sup>xii</sup> For further discussion of undercutting and overriding responses to radical scepticism, and their significance, see Pritchard (2014*b*; 2015*a*, part one). In this regard, see also the therapeutic/theoretical distinction presented by Williams (1991, ch. 1), and the obstacle-removing/obstacle-overcoming distinction described by Cassam (2007).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wittgenstein seems to be alert to something like this issue—see, e.g., OC, §183.
- <sup>xiv</sup> This claim goes back to earlier work of mine, especially Pritchard (2005*a*, ch. 4; 2005*b*).
- <sup>xv</sup> This proposal is rooted in the work of McDowell (e.g., 1995). I articulate my own rendering of epistemological disjunctivism in Pritchard (2012*a*). See also Pritchard (2008).
- <sup>xvi</sup> For an opposing view in this regard, see Schönbaumsfeld (2019), who argues that Wittgenstein's hinge epistemology also involves a commitment to epistemological disjunctivism.

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- <sup>xvii</sup> The pedantic among us should feel free to rename it *epistemic acrophobia*, but I personally prefer to follow everyday usage in (incorrectly) treating ‘vertigo’ as the name for a fear of heights.
- <sup>xviii</sup> For further discussion of Wittgensteinian quietism in this regard, see McDowell (2009) and Pritchard (*forthcomingc*).
- <sup>xix</sup> See Pritchard (2011*a*; 2019*c*; 2019*d*; *forthcomingc*). Wittgenstein was in fact heavily influenced throughout his work by the Austro-Hungarian intellectual Fritz Mauthner, who adopted a distinctive kind of Pyrrhonism. (Mauthner receives the rare honour of being mentioned by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*—see Wittgenstein (1922, §4.0031)). For a very useful discussion of the influence of Mauthner’s work on Wittgenstein, see Sluga (2004).
- <sup>xx</sup> I further discuss the phenomenon of epistemic vertigo, and its philosophical implications, in Pritchard (2019*c*; 2019*d*; *forthcominga*; *forthcomingc*). For a related position, which also draws on my notion of epistemic vertigo, see Gutschmidt (2019).
- <sup>xxi</sup> I explore this distinction in more detail in Pritchard (2018*d*). See also Pritchard (2009; 2010; 2019*a*).
- <sup>xxii</sup> See, for example, Williams (2005; 2007).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> For further discussion of the relationship between Newman and Wittgenstein on this front, see Barrett (1997), Kienzler (2006), and Pritchard (2015*b*).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> See Pritchard (2011*b*; 2015*b*; 2017*a*; 2018*b*; *forthcomingb*). Wittgenstein seems to clearly endorse fideism in his earlier work, especially Wittgenstein (1966). For some key discussions of Wittgensteinian fideism, see Nielsen (1967) and Philips (1976).
- <sup>xxv</sup> Parity arguments of this kind are usually associated with reformed epistemology. For some key defences of this view, see Alston (1982; 1986; 1991), Plantinga (1983; 2000), and Wolterstorff (1983).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> I offer such a defence of quasi-fideism in Pritchard (*forthcomingb*), where I respond to some recent critiques of the view, such as that offered by de Ridder (2019). For further critical discussion of quasi-fideism, see di Ceglie (2017) and Gascoigne (2019).