

# On the Nature of Hinge Commitments

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## 1. Introduction

In his new book, *Epistemic Angst* (2015), Duncan Pritchard provides us a diagnosis of radical skepticism as relying on two independent philosophical theses, namely, the *universality of rational evaluation thesis* and the *insularity of reasons thesis*. To properly understand Pritchard's response to skepticism, it is crucial to identify the philosophical character of these two theses. They are supposed to be the outcome of fault philosophical theory about our ordinary epistemic concepts. This means that, in his view, the skeptical problem is not a genuine paradox. Thus, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, a good diagnosis of the origins of such fault philosophical theory may be enough to clarify that these theses have no basis, freeing us then from the attraction of radical skepticism. Pritchard calls this strategy *an undercutting response* to radical skepticism.

In line with this dual origin of radical skepticism, Pritchard proposes that we should distinguish between two radical skeptical paradoxes. One appeals to the universality of the rational evaluation thesis, *the closure-based radical skeptical paradox*, and a second turns on the insularity of the reasons thesis, *the underdetermination-based radical skeptical paradox*. Pritchard sets himself the task of showing why those two theses are based on faulty theoretical grounds. The first thesis trades on commitments that are not justified once one has a correct picture of how the rational evaluation of beliefs works. Based on Wittgenstein's comments about the structure of rational evaluation, "the picture that emerges is thus one in which all rational evaluation is essentially local." (Pritchard 2015, 66) In other words, every rational evaluation presupposes some fundamental commitments that are themselves immune to rational evaluation. In the literature, these fundamental commitments are called *hinge propositions*. Pritchard contends that these commitments are not beliefs and, as we will see, this is essential to finding our way out of the closure-based radical skeptical paradox. As to the insularity of reason thesis, which underpins the second paradox, it receives support from an unjustified prior commitment to the so-called new evil demon intuition. Pritchard appeals to epistemological disjunctivism in order to undermine this intuition. By combining Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology with epistemological disjunctivism, Pritchard aims to provide an undercutting response to both radical skeptical paradoxes.

This is a critical commentary. In Section 2, I present the closure-based radical skeptical paradox. Then in Section 3, I sketch Pritchard's undercutting response to this paradox. Finally, in Section 4, I put forward two concerns about Pritchard's response and I also propose a reading of hinge

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commitments, the *ability reading*, that might put some pressure on Pritchard's own reading of these commitments.

## 2. The Closure-based Radical Skeptical Paradox and the Universality of Rational Evaluation Thesis

The closure-based formulation of the radical skeptical paradox is constituted by three apparently intuitive claims that are inconsistent when taken together. In his book, Pritchard presents and discusses many versions of this paradox. I will start with the version that has an internalist view of knowledge as its target, since versions that trade on externalist views of knowledge simply seem to beg the question against the skeptic. We thus have the following closure-based paradox:

- (S<sub>2</sub>1) One cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that one is not a BIV.
- (S<sub>2</sub>2) If one cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that one is not a BIV, then one cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that E.
- (S<sub>3</sub>3) One has rationally grounded knowledge that E. (Pritchard 2015, p. 22)

"E" in this formulation stands for a proposition that expresses perceptual knowledge such as "I am presently sitting at my desk" (Pritchard 2015, p. 12). The first claim expresses the intuition that we cannot have rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses. The third claim conveys the intuition that we have perceptual knowledge at least of some propositions. The second claim is a bridging principle that establishes the clash between the first and the third claims. It is motivated by a version of the closure principle tailored for rationally grounded knowledge. Pritchard calls it *The Closure<sub>rk</sub> Principle*, which is stated as follows:

If S has rationally grounded knowledge that p, and S competently deduces from p that q, thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining her rationally grounded knowledge that p, then S has rationally grounded knowledge that q. (Pritchard 2015, p. 23)

The idea behind the closure principle is simply that rationally grounded knowledge is preserved across competent deductions. competent deductions must preserve knowledge. It's a very appealing and intuitive principle. Thus, although the closure principle may be restricted to avoid radical skepticism, as is suggested by Dretske, a solution to the paradox that preserves this principle in its universal form seems to be preferable, all other things being equal. The problem here is that commitment to the closure principle makes it very easy to extend the scope of one's rational evaluations, so that in the end there is no limit on what can be rationally evaluated. To take one of Pritchard's examples, suppose "one has rationally grounded knowledge that Napoleon won the

Battle of Austerlitz in 1805” (Pritchard 2015, p. 72). Based on this knowledge, one may competently deduce that the universe did not come into existence five minutes ago. By the closure principle, one would then acquire rationally grounded knowledge that the universe did not come into existence five minutes ago, which is the denial of a radical skeptical hypothesis. Conversely, if one does not know that this hypothesis is false, then one also does not know that Napoleon won the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805. If the scope of rational evaluation may be extended in this way, then in principle any propositional commitment could be rationally evaluated. This is what is claimed by the *universality of rational evaluation thesis*.

### 3. The Wittgensteinian Account of the Structure of Rational Evaluation

According to Pritchard’s reading of Wittgenstein’s account of the structure of rational evaluation, there is a limit to what can be rationally evaluated because rational evaluation itself occurs on a backdrop of commitments that are not open to rational evaluation. These commitments, which henceforth will be called *hinge commitments*, structure and make possible a process of rational evaluation. They are, therefore, presuppositions of one or another procedure of rational evaluation. Moore’s claim that he knows that he has two hands or that the world did not come into existence five minutes ago is mistaken because by saying that he knows these things he implies that they could be justified, but they can’t. There is nothing more certain and immune from doubt than, for instance, the commitment that I have two hands. If I were to justify this commitment by looking at my hands, it’s not clear what I should conclude if I do not see them. As Wittgenstein clearly puts it: “For why shouldn’t I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? What is to be tested by what?” (OC, §125) Commitments that structure a procedure of rational evaluation are the things we take as the most certain and, therefore, cannot themselves be justified. If these comments about the structure of rational evaluation are correct, then the *universality of rational evaluation thesis* is false. Rational evaluation is inherently local, “in that it takes place relative to fundamental commitments that are themselves immune to rational evaluation, but that need to be in place in order for a rational evaluation to occur” (Pritchard 2015, p. 66).

The next step is to show how this new picture of the structure of rational evaluation may help to dissolve *the closure-based radical skeptical paradox*. After all, acknowledging that hinge commitments cannot be rationally evaluated is at first sight water to the mill of the skeptic. Something needs to be said about why we take these commitments as certain. At this juncture, it is crucial to discuss the nature of hinge commitments. In this regard, Pritchard considers many ways of construing hinge commitments: the externalist reading, the entitlement reading, the nonpropositional reading, and the nonbelief reading, the last of which is his own take on the issue. I will focus on Pritchard’s reading and the nonpropositional reading. I start now with the latter.

### 3.1. The Nonpropositional Reading

The nonpropositional reading of hinge commitments essentially asserts that they are not propositional attitudes of any sort, but they are instead ways of *acting*. So, although hinge commitments apparently have the form of empirical propositions, they do not express any fact about the world. Pritchard thinks this is one of the best readings of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* (Pritchard 2015, p. 86). It makes sense of passages such as this one:

204. Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (Wittgenstein 1969, p. 25).

Since hinge commitments are not propositions, they are not in the market for knowledge. This means that they cannot be the target of inferences based on the closure principle. Assuming for now that "I am not a BIV" is a hinge commitment, the point is that a bridging principle such as "If one cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that one is not a BIV, then one cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that E" should be resisted, not because we have restricted the scope of the closure principle but because this is an inappropriate attempt to apply the closure principle to what is not a proposition at all. Without that bridging principle, *the closure-based radical skeptical paradox* does not arise in the first place.

Pritchard has two reservations regarding the nonpropositional reading. The first is that it needs to appeal to a theory of meaning that explains why it is not possible to adopt a propositional attitude toward hinge propositions. In a dispute with the skeptic, this is a very contentious move. The second reservation is that it seems that it would always be possible to convert a way of acting to a corresponding propositional attitude. One may reason from one's rationally grounded knowledge that Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz occurred in 1805 to the entailment that the world did not come into existence five minutes ago. What was just a way of acting, namely, taking some data as evidence for a certain claim, is now converted into a commitment to a proposition.

### 3.2. The Nonbelief Reading

The nonbelief reading argues that hinge commitments are propositional attitudes distinct from beliefs. Like beliefs, these commitments are incompatible with agnosticism about the truth of the target proposition (Pritchard 2015, 101). Unlike beliefs, hinge commitments are taken as true

despite the fact that there is no rational basis for believing them. Hinge commitments are not responsive to rational considerations. Because of that, hinge commitments cannot be rationally grounded, therefore, they are not in the market for knowledge. So, like the nonpropositional reading, the nonbelief reading also predicts that it's not possible to obtain knowledge of a hinge commitment by competently deducing it from a piece of rationally grounded knowledge. However, unlike the nonpropositional reading, the nonbelief reading allows for the possibility of a such deduction. Thus, according to the nonbelief reading, it is possible to competently deduce but not to know a hinge commitment. When one competently deduces a hinge proposition from one's rationally grounded knowledge, what one acquires is not a belief but a special type of propositional attitude. Therefore, closure<sub>rk</sub> principle can be preserved in its unrestricted form since it's tailored exclusively to beliefs (Pritchard 2015, 92). The unknowability of hinge propositions, even when they are competently deduced from rationally grounded knowledge, is not a violation of the closure<sub>rk</sub> principle.

Now, something needs to be said about what hinge propositions express. According to Pritchard, a hinge proposition excludes a possibility of error. Hinge commitments together codify “the entirely general hinge commitment that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs. Call this commitment the *über hinge commitment*, and call the proposition endorsed by the *über hinge commitment* the *über hinge proposition*” (Pritchard 2015, p. 95).

## 4. Criticisms

In what follows, I will put forward two critiques about Pritchard's response to the radical skeptic closure based paradox. First, I will raise some doubts about his criticism of the nonpropositional reading and about the propositional attitude envisaged by the nonbelief reading. Then I will sketch a version of the nonpropositional reading that, I think, may put pressure on Pritchard's view.

### 4.1. Some Concerns about the Nonbelief Attitude Regarding Hinge Commitments

It is not clear that the nonpropositional reading needs to appeal to a contentious theory of meaning to sustain the idea that hinge commitments are not propositions. The claim that hinge commitments must have a role different than that fulfilled by empirical propositions may be substantiated on the oddness of uttering them in normal contexts. We do not need an explicit criterion of meaningfulness to identify senseless assertions. In fact, it's the other way around; whatever this criterion may be, it must be acknowledged that in normal contexts assertions such as “I have two hands” and “The world didn't come into existence five minutes ago” are senseless. These are paradigmatic cases of senseless assertions. In his defense, Pritchard claims that one might have a propositional attitude

toward a hinge commitment because one could competently deduce it from one's rationally grounded knowledge. He also says that acknowledging the oddness of uttering a hinge commitment is, in principle, compatible with having a propositional attitude toward that commitment. As he puts it, "If the kind of model of meaningfulness being canvassed in support of the nonpropositional reading were feasible, then such an assertion would indeed be senseless. But would it follow that the subject didn't have the propositional attitude in question?" (Pritchard 2015, 87). However, given the undeniable oddness of asserting a hinge commitment, it's Pritchard's burden to defend the possibility of the propositional attitude he envisages. A defender of the nonpropositional reading, without having to assume any theory of meaning, could simply deny that one can competently deduce a hinge commitment from one's rationally grounded knowledge. It's as odd to deduce a hinge commitment as to assert it. Besides, what kind of deduction can start with a piece of rationally grounded knowledge and, therefore, a belief, and end with a propositional attitude that is not a belief? Faulty philosophical theory may lead one to think that there is a real possibility here. But *prima facie* there is none.

A related complaint is that Pritchard does not say enough about the propositional attitude that he thinks one could have toward hinge commitments. In Chapter Four, he gives a general characterization of this kind of attitude: "it involves a commitment to the target proposition that is incompatible with an attitude of agnosticism about its truth" (Pritchard 2015, 101). At the same time, this attitude is not in principle responsive to rational evaluation. Let's call this attitude the *nonbelieving propositional attitude*. But then, given these two constraints, is there any reason to think that this is a possible and stable propositional attitude? In fact, the skepticism Pritchard himself raised against rational trust could now be raised as validly against the nonbelieving propositional attitude:

Is that it is hard to see how an agent who is fully aware that she has no rational basis for regarding the target proposition as true could be anything but agnostic about that proposition. After all, isn't the recognition that this rational basis is lacking simply tantamount to being agnostic about the truth of this proposition? How could it be otherwise? (Pritchard 2015, 82)

He cannot say that one regards the target proposition as true because of prudential or practical reasons, since he has already acknowledged that this kind of attitude is compatible with agnosticism about the truth of the target proposition (Pritchard 2015, 81). The point is that a propositional attitude that aims at the truth of propositions must be governed by some kind of normativity. It has to be possible to assess how well a subject fulfills the aim of the nonbelieving propositional attitude. What kind of normativity structures this attitude? It is neither prudential nor moral normativity. Is it

epistemic? If so, how could it not also be responsive to epistemic reasons? The situation is even more delicate because the normativity at issue is not only the normativity of the attitude of aiming at the truth but also the normativity of the attitude of aiming at the truth *without any doubt*. Again, how should we understand the normativity that structures this kind of attitude? It doesn't seem that Pritchard has provided enough evidence to show that the propositional attitude he envisages is coherent or possible.

#### 4.2. The Ability Reading

In what follows, I will put forward a proposal on how to construe hinge commitments. However, I'm not concerned whether it captures what Wittgenstein meant to articulate in *On Certainty*. I want to say something along the lines of the nonpropositional reading without committing myself to the idea that there is no meaningful way to convey hinge commitments in propositions. However, even if one finds a way to convey one's hinge commitments, maybe in the form of rules or normative propositions, these propositions cannot assume the role played by hinge commitments. This is because propositions cannot capture the practical dimension involved in hinge commitments. In short, my proposal is that hinge commitments are ways of acting entrenched in abilities that structure procedures of rational evaluation. In a Rylean spirit, I submit that our rational evaluations and, therefore, our rationally grounded knowledge are underpinned by abilities and skills that cannot themselves be reduced to propositional attitudes. I call this proposal the *ability reading*.

Thus, I agree with the nonpropositional reading in that hinge commitments are ways of acting. For instance, the hinge commitment that the world did not come into existence five minutes ago corresponds, in part, to one's disposition to take certain documents, pictures, and testimonies as evidence that a certain event, Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz, happened more than two hundred years ago. Of course, this hinge commitment does not correspond to that particular way of acting alone but to a wide set of similar ways of acting founded on abilities of historical inquiry. These ways of acting are acquired by learning how to gather and assess historical evidence. They are associated with a special sort of ability to inquire.

Hinge commitments are to be identified only with ways of acting that are constitutive of an assessment ability or, more generally, a cognitive ability. I am interested in abilities that we take for granted, like those that give us access to reality or provide us a cognitive contact with the world. Perceptual discriminatory abilities fit the bill, but I think that abilities to assess evidence in a particular subject-matter can also give us access to evidential relations and, therefore, are also instances of the kind of ability I have in mind. Abilities of this kind have two features that are relevant for the ability reading: (I) they are reliably successful; and (II) they are manifested only

when successful. As to the first feature, abilities satisfy what Alan Millar called *the strong reliability requirement*. As he puts, “to count as having the ability to  $\Phi$  one must be reliably successful at  $\Phi$ ing in that in the absence of impediments one would nearly always  $\Phi$  if one were to act with the intention of  $\Phi$ ing” (Millar 2016, 67). The acquisition of an ability is the outcome of a long process of attunement between organism and its environment. Ways of acting that constitute, for instance, the ability to  $\Phi$  were selected because they have been shown to be the best ones for achieving  $\Phi$ . This may also help to explain why these ways of acting are performed with strong confidence, producing the attitude of certainty that is normally associated with hinge commitments.

By identifying hinge commitments with ways of acting of a special sort, the current proposal also does justice to the idea that hinge commitments should be conceived as “something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal” (Wittgenstein 1969, 43). The certainty embodied in a hinge commitment is not a kind of propositional attitude but a way of being-in-the-world, namely, our being-in-the-world as skillful agents.

Like the nonpropositional reading, the current proposal also predicts that hinge commitments are not in the market for knowledge. Fundamentally, they are dispositions or ways of acting that constitute abilities. So, it’s inappropriate to attempt to plug them into bridging principles derived from the closure principle. The closure-based paradox, therefore, does not even get off the ground. However, unlike the nonpropositional reading, the current proposal does not claim that it’s impossible to capture hinge commitments in propositions. A way of acting that constitutes an ability may be expressed in a rule or in a prescription that states how one should act in order to exercise that ability. However, these propositions do not do full justice to the role played by hinge commitments, now conceived as ways of acting. This is due to the fact that abilities are not reducible to a set of propositions (Ryle 1945-46, 10). On the contrary, unless these rules are embodied in an ability, they will not produce the right actions, nor will they structure a procedure of inquiry or rational evaluation in a way that is ready to be employed. Talking about hinge commitments only in terms of propositions is too intellectualist and runs the risk of obscuring the animal and pre-predicative dimensions of hinge commitments.

The ability reading also has the advantage of offering a unified response both to the universality of rational evaluation thesis and to the insularity of reasons thesis. This is possible because of the second feature of abilities, namely, that they are manifested only when successful. Let’s see how this may be further articulated. According to Pritchard, our hinge commitments codify “that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one’s beliefs” (Pritchard 2015, 95). However, he does not explain why this would be the case. According to the ability reading, one is not radically mistaken in one’s beliefs because of one’s abilities to access reality. One’s abilities are attuned to



one's local environment. This has consequences for how we should conceive reasons that are accessible to reflection. Reasons for beliefs are anchored in one's cognitive contact with the world, a contact which is established and sustained by one's cognitive abilities. As I will argue soon, reasons that lean on cognitive abilities of this sort are factive. However, because Pritchard does not construe hinge commitments as ways of acting that constitute abilities, he does not see potential in the hinge framework to also address the insularity of reasons thesis. In this regard, he says:

That all rational evaluation is essentially local is entirely compatible, after all, with it also being "insular" in the manner set out in part 1— namely, such that the rational support one's everyday beliefs enjoys is compatible, even in the best case, with those beliefs being radically in error. (Pritchard 2015, 114)

According to this view, hinge commitments can secure that one is not radically mistaken in one's beliefs, but these commitments do not secure that one's accessible reasons rule out the possibility that one's beliefs are false. Hinge commitments, therefore, do not suffice to deny the insularity of reasons thesis. However, I submit that we have a different outcome if we think of hinge commitments not as propositional attitudes but as ways of acting. Construed as ways of acting that constitute an ability that provides access to reality, hinge commitments also undermine the insularity of reasons thesis. This is because there is no gap between the results of ways of acting and success in achieving the aim of the ability that is constituted by these ways of acting. If one exercises an ability and, therefore, performs the ways of acting that constitute that ability, then one will succeed in achieving its aim. Alan Millar call this thesis *the success thesis*. As he puts it, "people exercise the ability to do something only if they do, or are doing, that thing." (Millar 2016, p. 63). I subscribe to the notion that this is the right way to think about an ability that provides cognitive contact with reality. Anything short of the success thesis does not secure cognitive contact.

One may worry whether the same ways of acting that constitutes an ability could not be performed or manifested in a skeptical scenario. No, they cannot. Actions cannot be individuated independently of what they accomplish. You cannot catch a ball if there is no ball to be caught. Your movements may be similar, but what you are doing is a completely different thing. At best, you are trying to catch a ball, but this is not the same as catching a ball. Similarly, you cannot take some documents or pictures as evidence that Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz was in 1805 if there are no pictures or documents, or if the pictures or documents were forged. Your behavior may be similar, but what you are doing is not an act of assessing evidence. Disjunctivism is a consequence of the proposed construal of abilities. Either one exercises one's ability and achieves its aim, or one has failed to exercise that ability and, therefore, did not manifest it. When we consider an assessment

ability, the ability to assess evidence of a subject matter, we get disjunctivism about evidence. Either one exercises one's ability to assess evidence and therefore has access to the fact that a particular piece of evidence favors a certain hypothesis, or one has failed to exercise that ability and therefore does not have access to that fact.

That cognitive abilities in general are reliably successful secures of course that one is not radically mistaken in one's beliefs. That these abilities are exercised and manifested only when they are successful secures that accessible reasons based on those successful exercises are not insular. Thus hinge commitments, construed as ways of acting that constitute abilities of access, provide resources to respond both to the universality of rational evaluation thesis and the insularity of reasons thesis. The key is to conceive of hinge commitments in the light of what is necessary to secure cognitive contact with the world.<sup>1</sup> The gap is closed between not being radically mistaken in one's beliefs and having reasons that are compatible with these beliefs being false. The same abilities that are responsible for ruling out the possibility of being radically mistaken in one's beliefs are also responsible, when properly exercised, for providing reasons that are not compatible with the falsity of those beliefs. In fact, because our procedures of rational evaluation are local, that is, attuned to our environment, they are not insular.

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1 One consequence of this view is that all our propositional knowledge and understanding are based on skills, or, to put in Ryle's words, one "is primarily a knower-how and only secondarily a knower-that" (1945-46, p. 16). See Carvalho (2018) for a more detailed explanation of this point.