

Duncan Prichard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x, 170.

Duncan Prichard seeks the ‘holy grail of epistemology’; he thinks epistemological disjunctivism just might be it. The grail is an approach to perception that satisfies key motivations for both internalism and externalism: externalists emphasize an objective connection between justification and truth, while internalists maintain that subjects have reflective access to the justification for their beliefs. The holy grail would be a correct theory that satisfies both claims, and Prichard suggests that disjunctivism just might be that grail. The view he defends is:

*Epistemological Disjunctivism: The Core Thesis*

In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge an agent, *S*, has perceptual knowledge that  $\phi$  in virtue of being in possession of rational support, *R*, for her belief that  $\phi$  which is both *factive* (i.e., *R*’s obtaining entails  $\phi$ ) and *reflectively accessible* to *S*. (p. 13)

As the parenthetical gloss intimates, Prichard supposes that the relevant justifying states have the target proposition as contents; *R* is typically going to be something like *seeing that  $\phi$* .<sup>1</sup> It is this factivity that, according to Prichard, gives disjunctivism its externalist credentials; the reflective access is meant to capture internalism.

Prichard is careful to distinguish his view from *metaphysical disjunctivism*, which holds that there is nothing significant in common—only a “disjunction”—to perceptual experiences in good and bad cases. Prichard is neutral on this view, defending only the epistemic thesis above. Prichard does not discuss why his view is called “disjunctivism”—no disjunctions are emphasized.

Most of Prichard’s energy in this short book is devoted to a negative project: showing that certain objections to disjunctivism fail. The book contains nothing like an argument with the conclusion that disjunctivism is true; it’s an invitation to take seriously a view suggested to have many attractive features. It does little by way of engagement with extant disjunctivist views, opting instead simply to lay out Prichard’s own form of disjunctivism. This strategy has advantages and

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<sup>1</sup> Arguably, other views not at all disjunctivist in spirit—for example, the ‘conservatism’ of Wright (2004), satisfy this statement of disjunctivism. On this view, the inconclusive rational support provided by perception, *combined with antecedent a priori support*, suffices for the relevant *R*. (But note that Dogramaci (2014) argues that such support does not entail the content in question.)

disadvantages—as Prichard notes (p. 7), it allows him to eschew exegetical questions; there is also some risk of failing to appreciate past insights.

Rather than the more conventional chapter format, Prichard's book is divided into three 'Parts', each comprising 7–9 sections of a few pages each. Part I articulates the disjunctivist approach on offer and sets out what Prichard considers the three central *prima facie* challenges to the view:

1. The Access Problem. Disjunctivism seems implausibly to imply that one has reflective access to contingent facts about the environment.
2. The Distinguishability Problem. Disjunctivism seems inconsistent with the fact that good and bad cases can be introspectively indistinguishable.
3. The Basis Problem. The kinds of factive states one can use to know that *p* seem themselves to be ways of knowing that *p*.

Prichard attempts to answer two of these in Part I. In response to the Basis Problem, Prichard argues that although *seeing that p* is factive, it is not a way of knowing that *p* because it does not entail that one knows that *p* (pp. 26–7). For example, if one is looking at a barn, but has received misleading evidence to the effect that there are fake barns around, one sees that there is a barn, even though one doesn't know (or even believe) that there is a barn. I confess I do not share Prichard's intuitions about such cases, although it doesn't seem to me that there is any obviously right thing to say about such cases.<sup>2</sup>

In a move characteristic of the book, Prichard attempts to avoid the Access Problem by invoking a subtle distinction between particular formulations of it. Prichard denies APC, but accepts APC''':

APC S can know by reflection alone the specific empirical proposition *p*.  
(46)

APC''' In the good+ case, S can know by reflection alone that her reason for believing the specific empirical proposition *p* is the factive empirical reason *R* which entails *p*. (51)

The latter view differs from the former in two respects: first, it restricts the claim to 'good+' cases (paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge). Since these are the cases where disjunctivism seems to imply reflective access to contingent facts, weakening APC in this way isn't a substantive change. The second difference

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<sup>2</sup> McDowell (2011), pp. 45–7 argues that such cases are not ones in which one sees that *p*. Littlejohn (manuscript) argues that this feature of Prichard's view leaves mysterious what it is to *possess* a reason.

concerns the content known by reflection. While Prichard agrees that it would be implausible to suppose that in the relevant cases, *S* knows *p* by reflection alone, he considers it unproblematic that in these cases, *S* knows by reflection alone *that her reason for believing p is R, which entails p*. This move is somewhat puzzling. It is difficult to see why it should be thought more palatable to suppose that one can know this *logically stronger* claim by reflection alone. Prichard writes that some subjects are “in a position to know by reflection alone that they are in possession of a factive empirical reason which entails the target proposition. But that claim, as we have seen, is very different from the claim that such agents can acquire knowledge of specific empirical propositions by reflection alone.” (52) But I don’t see why this difference is of much help to the disjunctivist. Is APC''' less counterintuitive than APC is?

In Part II of the book, Prichard addresses the Distinguishability Problem, which arises from tension between the disjunctivist’s claim that in favorable cases, one has reflective access to factive reasons, and the “undeniable truth that there are parallel introspectively indistinguishable bad cases.” (p. 91) Call the claim that bad cases are introspectively indistinguishable from good cases ‘BCII’. I am surprised that Prichard thinks BCII undeniable, particularly given his characterization of introspective indistinguishability:

I interpret ‘introspective indistinguishability’ in what I take to be the standard way, such that it concerns an inability on the part of the agent to tell (=know) by introspection alone that case  $\alpha$  is non-identical to case  $\beta$ . ... I take this relation to be reflexive and symmetric. (p. 53, n. 3)

I think that Prichard is mistaken to describe this as “the standard way” to understand introspective indistinguishability. It is not at all uncontroversial that the relevant notion should be symmetric, or that it is legitimate to state the characterization without reference to modes of presentation.<sup>3</sup> Given this endnote, BCII quietly rules out *by definition* the prima facie plausible version of disjunctivism where, from the point of view of the good case, one can know by introspection alone that one isn’t in the bad case, but from the point of view of the bad case, one cannot so know that one isn’t in the good case.

The definition given is substantive in another way. Prichard intends the phrase ‘by introspection alone’ extremely seriously—he later clarifies that if introspective knowledge is supplemented with a priori reasoning, the ensuing knowledge isn’t

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<sup>3</sup> Farkas (2008), pp. 101–20 gives a thorough overview of approaches to indistinguishability, emphasizing the importance of modes of presentation. Macpherson (2010), p. 244 argues against the symmetry of indiscriminability.

'by introspection alone'. (pp. 92–5) This is Prichard's solution to the Distinguishability Problem: although one *can* gain knowledge, in the good case, by reasoning, *I have factive reason R; only in the good case would I have R; therefore, I'm in the good case*—this is consistent with BCII because the relevant conclusion isn't known *by introspection alone*—it is only known via introspection combined with a priori reasoning.

This restrictive conception of introspective knowledge seems unsatisfying. For one thing, it is not obvious that there is a coherent notion of knowledge divorced from a priori reasoning.<sup>4</sup> Consider these two cases: (1) I am presented in ordinary circumstances with a white ball. (2) I am presented in ordinary circumstances with a black ball. Given the way my perceptual faculties work, we should consider these cases to be distinguishable in the relevant sense if any are. But can I know them to be distinct *without using a priori reasoning*? The proposition that they're distinct isn't made available to me *directly* via introspection. Instead, I have introspective access to how one case looks, and to a different way another case looks. From this I *infer*, using something like Leibniz's law, that they're distinct. So it seems that a priori reasoning plays roles even in paradigmatic instances of introspective discrimination.

This isn't a terminological challenge for how to use the phrase "introspection alone". In BCII, Prichard is recognizing an *intuitive commitment* to the idea that good and bad cases can be subjectively indistinguishable. Insofar as he wishes to vindicate the common-sense idea that one can't tell good cases from bad cases from the inside, interpreting that idea as weaker than it appears with a strong reading of "introspection alone" is questionable. The Cartesian project of trying to prove from the inside that one is in the good case made *heavy* use of reasoning; this was an attempt to show that BCII was *false*. The relevant skeptical thought behind BCII is that even when one is in the good case, one is unable to tell that one isn't in the bad case. This is a skeptical thought that disjunctivists and other neo-Mooreans must simply deny. Prichard's attempts to preserve the letter of his idiosyncratic interpretation of BCII have the effect of obscuring this central point of conflict. Disjunctivism is an appealing and promising externalist view, but I don't see the case for holy grail status.

Part III of the book applies disjunctivism to the challenge of radical skepticism. Although radical sceptical worries differ from moderate ones in significant ways—they tend to challenge one's background beliefs *en masse*—Prichard argues that a version of the approach given in Part II can extend to that of Part III.

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<sup>4</sup> Ichikawa & Jarvis (2013) argues that there isn't.

Although it would have been longer, the book might have been strengthened by more thorough engagement with extant literature. Regrettably, what engagement there is constitutes an unfortunately unrepresentative picture of philosophy's demographics. The reference list contains only six pieces solo-authored by women; six more are co-authored or co-edited by a woman and a man. Of these twelve publications, all are referenced only in endnotes, and in only one case (Gail Stine's, pp. 103–4) did that endnote include more one sentence of discussion. By contrast, twenty-nine of the 186 works cited were written by Prichard himself.

There is much to commend about this short book; Prichard articulates an attractive and plausible view that deserves wider attention, and his discussion of many of the challenges against it is illuminating. Epistemologists interested in contemporary externalist views should certainly read it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks for helpful discussion to Duncan Prichard, Carrie Jenkins, the 'Board Certified Epistemologists' Facebook group, and my graduate seminar on disjunctivism at UBC.