

Some Concerns Regarding Pritchard's approach to Hinge Commitments

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Introduction

Duncan Pritchard, in his ambitious and very thought-provoking book *Epistemic Angst* (Princeton University Press, 2016) develops a proposal that aims to provide a solution to radical scepticism, namely, the problem of external world scepticism. Pritchard's response to radical scepticism is a bifurcated one - a two-pronged, integrated, undercutting treatment of both putative sceptical paradoxes. On the one hand, he develops an anti-sceptical theory that is inspired by Wittgenstein's remarks on the structure of the rational evaluation as it mainly appears in his remarks that were posthumously published as *On Certainty*.¹ On the other hand, Pritchard advances a particular account of epistemological disjunctivism inspired by John McDowell's work. Despite the initial lack of connection that these two independent approaches appear to have, Pritchard managed to show that both approaches could be complementary to a full treatment of radical scepticism. He focuses on the logical structure of radical sceptical arguments and argues that the formulation of radical scepticism that turns on a closure-style principle is logically distinct from a very similar formulation that turns on what became known as the underdetermination principle. He argues that once one is able to see that these two formulations of the sceptical argument rise out of different sources then one can realize that distinct responses are needed to treat each formulation.

Despite the fact that I'm, on the whole, quite sympathetic with the way Pritchard was able to deal with the issue of radical sceptical paradoxes, I do have some concerns about his response to the closure-based sceptical argument. In the remainder of this paper, I will present those concerns. In particular, I'm not convinced that Pritchard's reading of Wittgenstein's approach to the structure of the rational evaluation based on the idea of hinge commitments taken as non-

¹ Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty*, (eds.) G. E. M. Ascombe & G. H. von Wright, (tr.) D. Paul & G. E. M. Ascombe, Oxford: Blackwell.

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beliefs is well succeeded. If that is right, then Pritchard's response to the closure-based sceptical arguments is less compelling than one could initially think.

In the first part of the paper I will present Pritchard's approach to Wittgenstein's notion of hinge commitments, which is essential to his solution to the closure-based sceptical arguments. And, in the second part of the paper, I will raise some concerns that I have regarding Pritchard's non-belief reading of the hinge commitments. In the third and final part, I make some concluding remarks regarding Pritchard's overall strategy to solve the closure-based sceptical paradox.

1. Pritchard's Approach to Hinge Commitments

Pritchard suggests in his book that the antidote to the problem posed by closure-based radical sceptical paradox lies in a distinctive conception of the structure of rational evaluation as proposed by Wittgenstein on his book *On Certainty* (OC). Wittgenstein's idea is that both sceptical (which claims our rational basis for our beliefs is quite vulnerable) and non-sceptical approaches (which claims we have a strong rational basis for our beliefs) have incorrect results because both rely on the assumption that there is a universal (global) structure of rational evaluation available. But for him, this assumption is mistaken. He argues that the structure of rational evaluation must be fundamentally local. Let's see what is the use Pritchard does of the Wittgensteinian notion of hinge commitments and how it is applied to the closure-based sceptical paradox.

In his attempt to deny the assumption of a universal structure of rational evaluation, Wittgenstein introduces the notion of *hinge commitments*. According to him, hinge commitments are not up to rational evaluation: they cannot be rationally supported nor rationally doubted. The existence of such commitments constitutes the very condition of possibility for further rational evaluation since they are thought as providing the framework relative to which the rational evaluation takes place - independent of the character of the evaluation (positive or negative). Diverging from Moore,² which thought that these optimally certain propositions ('*Moorean propositions*') enjoyed a special status on the rational level, Wittgenstein insisted that the hinge commitments were to be considered as essentially groundless. The following passage seems to

² In his '*A Defence of Commonsense*' and '*Proof of the External World*' G. E. Moore famously argued that we do have knowledge of the 'commonsense view of the world'. For him, propositions such as 'I have hands' and 'there is an external world' can be known and can serve as direct responses against sceptical doubts.

support Wittgenstein's idea:

If a blind man were to ask me "Have you got two hands?" I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. 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)

He was genuinely concerned that if we start doubting all propositions we would be dragged into unintelligibility. Doubting those things that are optimally certain to us can never be rational because "it will always call into question one's entire system of beliefs" (Pritchard, 2016: 78), and consequently, it would be self-defeating. In another passage, Wittgenstein says that "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty." (OC, §115) His idea is that there must be something that needs to stand fast in order to rational doubt genuinely arises, and the hinge commitments are our bedrocks. But for him, these hinge commitments does not have any special epistemic status or any special rational grounding as we can see in the following passage:

My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. [...] That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. (OC, §250)

In this sense, if hinge commitments have no special rational grounds, then it does not make sense to rationally doubt it, and for the same reason, it does not make sense to rationally require any rational basis for it. Hinge commitments are thus essentially a-rational. As Pritchard noted, Wittgenstein has emphasized that our hinge commitments are neither acquired via rational processes nor directly responsive to natural considerations in the same way our normal beliefs are. Wittgenstein thought of hinge commitments as having a visceral, "animal" (OC, §359) nature. He also thought that hinge commitments are not acquired through rational processes. According to him, we are never explicitly taught about our hinge commitments, rather we 'swallow them down' (OC, §359) together with other things that we are explicitly taught. He assumes that in normal circumstances, if everything runs normally, the hinge commitments would "lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry." (OC, §88).

Consider the following remarks made by Wittgenstein:

[...] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the

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fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC, §§341-3)

As can be noticed in this passage, Wittgenstein is not saying that the fact hinge commitments are not up to rational evaluation is due to any kind of limitation on our part, they are not "grounded in my stupidity or credulity." (OC, §235) Rather, as noted already, in order for a rational evaluation to take place we need something to stand fast, and the hinge commitments are the things that play that role. So, his point is that the idea of a fully general rational evaluation doesn't make sense because it would make rational evaluation impossible once we started doubting everything. Hinge commitments are, in this sense, essential as they form the framework relative to which any rational evaluation occurs.

Now, let's ask the important question: How this hinge epistemology approach applies to the closure-based sceptical paradox? Pritchard thinks that Wittgenstein's proposal has a direct application to the closure-based sceptical paradox in virtue of how it demonstrates how closure-based inferences are simply not applicable to our hinge commitments. According to him, the central aspect to solving this problem is to recognize that the closure principle is simply not applicable to hinge commitments, and hence that it cannot be properly used to motivate the sceptical challenge in play. The key to understand how hinge commitments are immune to sceptical doubts is the assumption that hinge commitments are not beliefs; at least not in the sense epistemologists typically understand beliefs. Given that our most basic certainties are not up to rational evaluation and thus cannot be rationally doubted (disconfirmed) or rationally supported (confirmed), they cannot be knowledge apt beliefs. Consequently, the sceptic is not warranted to employ the closure principle to appeal to its conclusion.

2. Some Worries for Pritchard

Now, let me present some of the concerns I have with Pritchard's approach. My worry with Pritchard's response to the closure-based sceptical paradox has to do with his reading of Wittgenstein's notion of hinge commitments. In particular, I don't

think he is successful in defending an attempt to find a middle ground between Wittgenstein account of the structure of rational evaluation and a nonpropositional reading of hinge commitments, according to which entertaining a hinge proposition involves a different type of propositional attitude than that of believing. Consider the following passage about his non-belief reading of hinge commitments:

Like the nonpropositional reading, it precludes the possibility that we can have knowledge, much less rationally grounded knowledge, when it comes to our hinge commitments. If we are not even in the market for belief in this regard then we are, a fortiori, not in the market for knowledge either, rationally grounded or otherwise, particularly once we bear in mind that the notion of belief in play is precisely that notion that is meant to be a component part of knowledge (i.e., knowledge-apt belief). But unlike the nonpropositional reading, this proposal doesn't demand that we should think of our hinge commitments in inherently nonpropositional terms. For sure, such commitments can never coherently be thought of as beliefs, but that doesn't prevent them from being expressed via other propositional attitudes. (Pritchard, 2015: 91)

It is not controversial that propositional attitudes are attitudes towards propositions, which by their nature are responsive to rational considerations. But when Pritchard argues that his non-belief reading does not demand that we should think of our hinge commitments in inherently nonpropositional terms, he is in fact implying that hinge commitments do have propositional contents. And if this is right, then a hinge commitment could be the content of a propositional attitude; therefore it could be the object of belief after all. However, Pritchard contends that hinge commitments cannot be the contents of beliefs; they can only be contents of a particular type of propositional attitude. The fundamental problem is that he does not make clear what this particular kind of propositional attitude would be – what makes his point less palatable.

In another passage Pritchard says:

[...] It is rather to say that there are certain minimal, but constitutive nonetheless, connections between belief and truth such that a propositional attitude that didn't satisfy them simply would not count as a belief, but would be a different propositional attitude entirely. (Pritchard, 2015: 90)

Here Pritchard seems to be trying to motivate the idea that there can be a different propositional attitude for hinge commitments. But his particular strategy seems to be misguided. One's belief that it

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is raining outside can have no connection with the truth – as in the case where it is false – and still be regarded as a belief. Belief is the propositional attitude of taking something as true, whether or not the propositional content is, in fact, true or have any connection with the truth. And this seems to be an attitude one could still have towards a hinge commitment, despite the fact that it cannot be rationally evaluated. The problem is that by accepting this, one is committed with an unwelcome implication, namely, that we suffer from some kind of 'blindness' since we can (and usually do) seem to take hinge commitments to be true and form beliefs on them. In this sense, we would form beliefs about our hinge commitments because we are blind to the fact that hinge commitments are not available to rational scrutiny. What appears to be very problematic by taking this line of reasoning is that this picture doesn't seem to be the case; most of the people don't think they are making a mistake when they look to their hands when asked about how they know they have hands. In any case, it does not seem that Pritchard is clear enough about this point.

Take for instance another passage:

In particular, it makes no sense, for example, for there to be an agent who believes that *p* while taking herself to have no reason whatsoever for thinking *p* to be true. A fortiori, it does not make sense for an agent to believe that *p* while taking herself to have overwhelming reasons for thinking that *p* is false. In such cases, the propositional attitude in question would not be a belief but a different propositional attitude entirely, such as a wishful thinking. (Pritchard, 2015: 91)

It is not clear how these examples should be helping Pritchard to motivate the idea of a different propositional attitude to encompass hinge commitments. Consider, for instance, the well-known Norman clairvoyant case. Norman has formed a belief due to his clairvoyance ability but finds no reason at all to support his belief; in fact, he has misleading evidence pointing to his belief's falsity. However, in this case, we wouldn't say that Norman is not having the propositional attitude of believing; despite the fact he has evidence against it. What seems to be under dispute here is whether or not Norman should keep his belief, and not whether believing is the suitable propositional attitude at hand. The same thing can be said of a subject that remembers that *p* but have lost track of her original evidence for *p*. In this case, we are also not willing to say that her belief that *p* is not a proper propositional attitude.

3. Concluding Remarks

In order to solve the closure-based sceptical paradox Pritchard have appealed to Wittgenstein's conception of the structure of rational evaluation, which makes use of his notion of hinge commitments to show that rational evaluation is essentially local. Pritchard argued for a no-belief reading of hinge commitments in order to show that the closure principle is simply not applicable to hinge commitments and, therefore, cannot be used to motivate the sceptical challenge at hand.

The main worry I have with Pritchard's approach is that once he assumes a non-belief reading of the hinge commitments he is accepting the propositional character of them; consequently, it becomes very counter-intuitive to argue that such hinge commitments cannot be the objects of beliefs. It became very suspicious that despite being propositional in character, hinge commitments can only be the objects of a distinct kind of propositional attitude. Pritchard fails to offer a compelling explanation in order to support this idea.

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