# Hinge Epistemology, Radical Skepticism, and Domain Specific Skepticism

Drew Johnson

University of Connecticut

drew.johnson@uconn.edu

*Abstract*: This paper explores how hinge epistemology (specifically, Duncan Pritchard's brand of hinge epistemology) might fruitfully be applied not only to the problem of radical skepticism, but also to certain domain specific (or 'local') skepticisms, and in particular, moral skepticism. The paper explains the idea of a domain specific skepticism, and how domain specific skepticisms contrast with radical skepticism. I argue that a domain specific skeptical problem can be resolved in just the same way as radical skepticism, if there are hinge commitments within that domain. I then suggest that there are hinge commitments in the moral domain, and use this to address a moral skeptical problem due to our apparent inability to know moral nihilism to be false.

## 1. Introduction[1]

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Radical skepticism claims that we can know very little, if anything, about the external world. I now think I know that I am typing on a computer, but, if radical skepticism is correct, I cannot know this. Radical skepticism is typically motivated by noting our apparent inability to rule out certain skeptical hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that I am currently a bodiless brain in a vat, being electrochemically stimulated so as to have the belief that I am typing at a computer. Skeptical hypothesis are designed to be the sort of thing one could not know to be false, precisely because one would still have all the same experiences one actually has, if the skeptical hypothesis were true.

Domain specific (or local) skepticism, by contrast, calls into question not our knowledge of the world generally, but rather knowledge in just a specific domain, such as mathematics or morality. Also, domain specific skepticisms, unlike radical skepticism, can be motivated by noting the apparent differences between the domain in question and other domains. For instance, motivation for a kind of skepticism about religion can be found in the observation that different cultures have different and incompatible religions, and that no culture is in a better position than the others to know the truth of the matter; this is in contrast to other domains such as mathematics, where there is cross-cultural agreement and convergence. Radical skepticism cannot be motivated by such an observed difference between domains, because it questions

knowledge in (almost all) domains at once.[2] Given the divergent motivations for radical and domain specific skepticisms, one might expect them to require different types of solution. I shall argue, however, that a certain form of response to the problem of radical skepticism, if successful, also promises to solve some domain specific skeptical problems.

In this paper, I focus on moral skepticism as an instance of domain specific skepticism. In the first section, I present the problem of moral knowledge skepticism. The problem is generated by recognizing (i) that we appear to have moral knowledge (at least in easy cases), but (ii) that it also seems that we cannot know moral nihilism to be false, and (iii) if we cannot know moral nihilism to be false, it seems that we can't know any particular moral claim to be true.[3] In the second section, I present the *radical* skeptical problem for rationally grounded knowledge based on the principle that rationally grounded knowledge is closed under known deduction, and which is structurally similar to the moral skeptical problem presented in the first section. I then explain how hinge epistemology (taking Duncan Pritchard's (2012, 2015) brand as exemplar) can be used to address the closure-based problem of radical skepticism. I then show how this solution

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[2] Radical Cartesian skepticism is sometimes presented as an epistemic challenge to perceptual knowledge, and so might be thought to be specific to the perceptual domain, but it extends beyond this to other domains as well. For instance, I take myself to know that Elizabeth I was Henry VIII's daughter, and that Harry Potter is a work of fiction by J.K. Rowling, etc., and these are not instances of knowledge by perception (at least not directly). Nevertheless, if the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis were true, I would also fail to have knowledge of these things.

[3] This version of the problem is due to an argument for moral skepticism based on the moral skeptical hypothesis of moral nihilism (Walter Sinnott-Armstrong 2006: 77-81).

can be generally applied to closure-based domain specific skeptical problems.[4] So long as there are hinge propositions in a given domain, closure-based skeptical problems for that domain can be solved. In the third section, I employ this hinge epistemology as a solution to moral skepticism by showing that if there are hinge propositions at all, it is plausible to think there are hinge propositions in the domain of ethics.

The main goal of this paper is to argue for the following conditional: *If* Pritchard's hinge epistemology is the correct response to closure-based radical skeptical problems regarding rationally grounded knowledge, *then* it also functions as a response to closure-based domain specific skepticism about rationally grounded knowledge, given that there are hinge propositions in the relevant domains. Throughout, then, I shall assume that Pritchard's hinge epistemology offers the correct response to radical skepticism.

*2. Moral Skepticism*

Moral skepticism as I here understand it is the position that we cannot know any proposition in the moral domain to be true. Moral skepticism denies something most would accept: that it is possible, at least in easy cases, to know that some act is morally right or wrong. This broad construal of moral skepticism encompasses several more specific versions. For instance, one can be a moral skeptic by denying that there are any true moral propositions (*moral nihilism*), or by

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[4] I suspect that this general solution is available to any brand of hinge epistemology that offers a solution to the problem of radical skepticism, though I do not commit myself to this in this paper. So long as a particular version of hinge epistemology bases its solution to the radical skeptical problem on the presence of hinge commitments, the application to domain specific skeptical problems should in principle be available.

denying that there are any moral beliefs (*ethical non-cognitivism*), or by denying that any moral beliefs are justified (*moral justification skepticism*), or by denying that any justified true moral beliefs count as knowledge (*moral knowledge skepticism*).[5] Moral knowledge skepticism is perhaps the strongest form of moral skepticism because of how many of the surface features of moral thought and discourse it accommodates. The view does not deny that we have moral beliefs, or that we ever have justification for our moral beliefs, or that any of our moral beliefs are true. The view can grant that moral thought and discourse is in many ways how we experience it to be - it allows that we can form moral beliefs on the basis of reasons. What moral knowledge skepticism denies is that any of our justified moral beliefs count as knowledge.

Rather than present moral knowledge skepticism as a position to be refuted, I here treat moral knowledge skepticism as posing a problem: motivations for moral knowledge skepticism are in tension with our ordinary conviction that moral knowledge is possible, and that our moral knowledge in many cases enjoys rational grounds. For instance, some take themselves to *know* that it is wrong to consume animal products from factory farms, and moreover to have rational grounds for this knowledge; this knowledge is grounded in knowledge about the conditions under which factory farmed animals are raised, and knowledge that these conditions constitute a *harm* to these animals, etc. We often provide epistemic justification for the ethical positions we

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[5] This is roughly Sinnott-Armstrong's taxonomy of moral skepticisms (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006: 10-11). More specifically, the kind of skepticism of interest here is what Sinnott-Armstrong calls *Academic skepticism about moral knowledge*: "the claim that nobody ever knows that any substantive moral belief is true" (2006: 11).

accept, and this indicates that we take our ethical beliefs to be capable of enjoying the sort of epistemic support required for rationally grounded knowledge.

One motivation for moral knowledge skepticism is found in our apparent inability to rule out moral skeptical scenarios, such as moral nihilism. This inability to rule out moral nihilism forms the basis for Sinnott-Armstrong's argument for moral knowledge skepticism (2006: 79-80), which I reconstruct here as a skeptical *problem* about rationally grounded moral knowledge:

1. S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that moral nihilism is false.

2. If S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that moral nihilism is false, then S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that it is wrong to torture babies just for fun.

3. But S can have rationally grounded knowledge that it is wrong to torture babies just for fun.

As we have just seen, the third claim represents a commonsense view about the moral domain, as most would accept that it is possible to have rationally grounded knowledge of that kind. One might wonder what makes the first claim plausible here. The radical skeptical problem relies on the idea that one cannot rule out skeptical hypotheses (such as the BIV hypothesis) as false, because everything would seem to one exactly as it does if the BIV hypothesis were true. So, too, we cannot rule out the hypothesis of moral nihilism, because it seems that all of one's subjective experiences would be exactly as they are if moral nihilism were true. As Sinnott-Armstrong argues, moral nihilism is a logically consistent view, is compatible with all

the non-moral facts, and cannot be refuted without begging the question, so there does not appear to be evidence available that could rule out moral nihilism as false (1996: 15; 2006: 80).

In fact, the moral skeptical problem might appear even *more* troublesome than the radical skeptical one, due to the ways in which the moral domain is different from other domains. Our moral convictions are among our most certain, and this makes it particularly hard to envision taking up an agnostic attitude towards moral issues. But at the same time, the moral domain is different from many other domains (in an epistemically significant way), in that it seems possible for two people to be reasoning correctly, and agree on all the relevant non-moral facts about a case, and yet still disagree over what morally ought to be done in that case.[6]

The problem that this poses for my apparently rationally grounded knowledge is this: apparently, if I cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that moral nihilism is false, then I cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that it is wrong to torture babies just for fun. As we

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[6] Allan Gibbard provides an example of this phenomenon of deep disagreement in ethics: "My teacher Richard Brandt, in the late 1940's, spent a year studying the ethical thinking of some Hopi Indians. A central question he investigated was whether any ethical differences between Hopi and Euro-American thinking were fundamental, rather than being grounded in differences on matters of non-ethical fact. He found almost none, but he did find one candidate he couldn't eliminate. Young Hopi men had played a game we might call chicken pull. It involved burying a chicken up to its neck in the ground, and then riding by on their horses and seeing who could pull the chicken out of the ground by its neck. The Hopi saw nothing wrong with this game. Brandt then asked them whether the chicken felt pain, and they answered that it did, that a chicken feels pain in the same way we do. So the Hopi believed the non-normative things that Brandt's own community was convinced make such games morally wrong. But they didn't think the game in any way wrong" (2009: 8-9).

shall see in the next section, the reasoning at this step is underwritten by an epistemic closure principle. Intuitively, the idea is that if rationally grounded knowledge is closed under known deduction, then if I have rationally grounded knowledge that it is wrong to torture babies just for fun, I can deduce from this that moral nihilism is false (because I know at least one moral truth), and so come to have rationally grounded knowledge that moral nihilism is false. But given that I cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that moral nihilism is false, we can conclude that I cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that it is wrong to torture babies just for fun.

I set aside the moral skeptical problem for now, and turn to the problem of radical skepticism, the response that Pritchard's hinge epistemology offers, and an explanation of how this response can be used to address domain specific skepticisms. With this anti-skeptical strategy in hand, I will then revisit the problem of moral skepticism (in Section III).

*3. Dissolving the Problem of Radical Skepticism*

Pritchard's hinge epistemology offers a solution specifically to closure-based radical skeptical problems. The closure-based radical skeptical problem can be presented as a triad of three apparently incompatible claims, each of which enjoys *prima facie* plausibility (note the structural parallel to the moral skeptical problem in the previous section):

> *The Closure-based Radical Skeptical Problem*
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> *1.* S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that S is not a (handless) brain in a vat.
>
> *2.* If S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that S is not a brain in a vat, then S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that S has hands.
>
> *3.* S can have rationally grounded knowledge that S has hands.

The first claim presents a radical skeptical hypothesis (the BIV hypothesis). It seems that one cannot know the denial of the BIV hypothesis because everything would appear to one exactly as it does if the BIV hypothesis were true. There is thus in principle no (internally accessible) discriminating evidence one could appeal to that would show the BIV hypothesis false. The third claim presents what is meant to be an instance of everyday knowledge, underscoring the fact that most of us take ourselves to have knowledge (despite what the skeptic says). The second claim bridges the first and the third, creating the inconsistent triad. The second claim is motivated by the Closure$_{rk}$ Principle (Pritchard, 2015: 91):

> *The Closure$_{rk}$ Principle:* 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.

> The Closure$_{rk}$ Principle, presented in this way, is meant to be highly intuitive and hard to deny.[7] This principle plays a critical role in generating the skeptical problem. The Closure$_{rk}$ Principle tells us that, given *S* has rationally grounded knowledge that she has hands, *S* could competently deduce from this (and so come to have rationally grounded knowledge) that the BIV hypothesis is false. But, given that *S* cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that the BIV hypothesis is false, we can infer that *S* cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that she has hands.

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[7] Here is Pritchard: "With the closure principle so formulated, it is hard to see how it could be denied. How could one draw a competent deduction from one's knowledge . . . without thereby coming to know the deduced conclusion?" (2015: 14).

Thus, each of the three claims of the skeptical problem initially seems quite plausible, yet together they are incompatible. However, and this is the crucial Wittgensteinian insight, a paradox is *only* generated if propositions such as the proposition that one has hands, or that one is not a BIV, are open to the kind of rational evaluation that allows them to appear in closure-style inferences.[8] If our commitment to propositions like these are *not* open to rational evaluation, they cannot appropriately appear in an instance of the Closure$_{rk}$ Principle. This would block the crucial closure-based inference involved in the second claim of the radical skeptical problem. The upshot here is that the skeptical problem is only a genuine problem if we buy into what Pritchard calls the *Universality of Rational Evaluation Thesis* (2015: 55):

> *The Universality of Rational Evaluation Thesis:* There are no in principle limits on the range of rational evaluation.

According to this principle, every proposition is such that it could in principle be the object of rationally governed propositional attitudes like belief, can figure in closure-based inferences, and is capable of receiving rational support from other propositions. Pritchard's Wittgenstein-inspired resolution of the closure-based radical skeptical problem turns on denying the universality of rational evaluation thesis, and so on claiming that some propositions are not properly objects of rationally governed propositional attitudes and so cannot figure in closure-style inferences.

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[8] Throughout, reference to "rationality" should be understood to involve *epistemic* reasons t*o think true*, in a way incompatible with agnosticism. This is in contrast to practical reasons (i.e. reasons to accept as true for practical purposes), or reasons to accept as true only in order to avoid "cognitive paralysis." This is part of what distinguishes Pritchard's position from Wright's (2004). See Pritchard (2016: 77-84).

According to Pritchard, the lesson of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* is that it is part of the structure of rational evaluation that certain propositions must be immune to rational evaluation. That is, the whole enterprise of rational evaluation (including believing, doubting, and knowing) is made possible by holding certain propositions (called "hinge propositions") fixed – these propositions cannot properly be the objects of rationally grounded knowledge, but we are nonetheless committed to their truth (these are our "hinge commitments").[9] Pritchard's version of hinge epistemology holds that we can have hinge commitments to propositions; that is, propositions are the objects of this attitude of commitment. This propositional attitude of commitment, significantly, is *not* a kind of knowledge-apt belief (in fact, Pritchard calls his interpretation of Wittgenstein the "non-belief reading") (2015: 90)). The claim that hinge commitment is an attitude towards propositions that is not a form of belief distinguishes Pritchard's view from other hinge epistemologies, some of which hold that hinge commitments do not even have propositional content, and some of which hold that hinge commitments do have propositional content *and* that we can believe – and have rationally grounded knowledge of – hinge propositions.[10]

Hinge propositions, on Pritchard's view are such that no other proposition could serve as a rational ground for them. This indicates *not* that the hinge propositions are maximally grounded, but rather that they are *ungroundable*, standing as the foundations for rational

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[9] As I understand it, to have a hinge commitment towards a proposition is to be committed to the truth of that proposition. But despite being a truth-oriented attitude, hinge commitments are not directly responsive to epistemic reasons.

[10] See Coliva (2016) for an overview of approaches to Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*.

evaluation in general. It is a mark of a hinge commitment that one could not give up that commitment without taking oneself to be radically and fundamentally in error.[11]

Pritchard makes a distinction between personal hinge commitments, the über hinge commitment, and anti-skeptical hinge commitments (2015: 95). *Personal hinge commitments* are the commitments one has to particular propositions, such as the proposition that one has never been to the moon, or that one's own name is such-and-such, etc. What counts as a personal hinge proposition varies a great deal between cultures, societies, and even between individuals, but what ties all these personal hinge commitments together, Pritchard says, is that all personal hinge commitments 'codify' (which I take to amount to something like 'manifest', or 'instantiate') the *über hinge commitment*: a commitment everyone shares to the proposition that one is not radically and fundamentally in error (Pritchard 2015: 94-5). The notion of the über hinge commitment provides us a way to distinguish between which commitments count as genuine hinge commitments, and which are just beliefs one holds with a high degree of credence. If I were shown to be wrong about a belief I held to a high degree of credence (take for instance, my

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[11] One immediate worry here is that, on this view, it turns out that we cannot properly know or even believe propositions such as the proposition that one has hands. That this does not count as a capitulation to the skeptic seems little comfort; the proposal that one could not even believe that one has hands seems hard to swallow. However, Pritchard notes that this is not so surprising once we realize "that the phenomenology of a propositional attitude does not suffice to determine what propositional attitude is in play. The phenomenology of the propositional attitude of wishful thinking may be, in certain cases, subjectively indistinguishable from the phenomenology of the propositional attitude of believing, for example, but that does not make wishful thinking a kind of believing. The same goes for our hinge commitments . . ." (2015: 102).

belief that Neptune is a planet - suppose I am very confident that this is true), I might be shocked, but this would not render me in error about most of my other beliefs, or about other deeply held beliefs of mine. One's commitment to the truth of a proposition counts as a personal hinge commitment if one could not give up that commitment without taking oneself to be radically and fundamentally in error - the über hinge represents this feature that all personal hinge commitments share.

Anti-skeptical hinge commitments are hinge commitments to the denials of specific skeptical hypotheses. They are directly entailed by the über hinge commitment - one has anti-skeptical hinge commitments in virtue of one's commitment to the über hinge proposition that one is not radically and fundamentally in error (Pritchard, 2015: 97).

Summing up, here are some features of personal hinge commitments that I will use as criteria for whether or not a given proposition *p* is operating as a personal hinge proposition for *S*:

1. There is nothing more certain for S than p that could be used to rationally support p.

2. S's commitment to p is not directly responsive to reasons.

3. If S were to be shown that p was false, S would take herself to be radically and fundamentally in error, not just in error about p.

The idea behind 1: taking, for instance, the proposition that I have hands; in ordinary circumstances, there is nothing I am more certain of than that I have hands which could stand as a rational basis for holding that I have hands. The idea behind 2: given that there is nothing more certain for me than that I have hands, my commitment to that proposition does not respond to reasons. Were someone to try to convince me I did not have hands, there is in principle nothing

they could say which would be more certain to me than my having hands, and thus there are no reasons that could directly bear on my commitment here. And the idea behind 3: if I were shown to be wrong about my having hands, I would no longer be in a position to be certain about anything else; for if I am wrong about *that*, there is nothing more certain I could trust as a basis for making further judgments.[12]

Hinge epistemology dissolves the closure-based radical skeptical problem by denying the universality of rational evaluation thesis. Hinge commitments are not open to rational evaluation. Given that the universality of rational evaluation thesis is false, the closure principle is not everywhere applicable. In particular, the closure principle is not applicable to hinge commitments. Since we have anti-skeptical hinge commitments, as well as personal hinge commitments in everyday claims (e.g. that I have hands), neither the denial of the BIV hypothesis nor the proposition that one has hands can appropriately appear in the closure principle underwriting the bridging claim of the skeptical problem. Thus, the skeptical paradox is undercut. The second claim of the skeptical problem ("If $S$ cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that $S$ is not a brain in a vat, then $S$ cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that $S$ has hands") is not supported by the Closure$_{rk}$ Principle.[13]

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[12] It is also important to note here that hinge commitments may be false. There is nothing about having a hinge commitment that guarantees the truth of what one is committed to. They play a special role in rational evaluation, being the pivots upon which one believes or doubts, but this does not imply any kind of infallibility.

[13] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their help in clarifying how this response to the radical skeptical problem functions.

*4. Application to Domain specific skepticism*

As mentioned in the previous section, one distinctive feature of radical skeptical hypotheses is that such hypotheses call into question (almost) all of what we think we know. They succeed in doing so because they present possibilities that (i) if true, would be incompatible with (almost) all the propositions we think are true, and (ii) are such that we in principle could never be in a position to rule out. Domain specific skepticisms call into question (almost) all knowledge in *just one* domain, rather than all knowledge generally. So, for instance, moral skepticism calls into question all of our knowledge regarding what is morally right or wrong, but does not call into question other knowledge, such as my knowledge that there is a red mug before me. Also, as mentioned earlier, domain specific skepticisms often have different motivations from radical skepticism. Domain specific skepticisms can be motivated by noting apparent differences between those domains and other domains, while radical skepticism cannot be so motivated because it calls everything into doubt at once. This suggests that however we respond to radical skepticism, we will have to respond to skepticism in a particular domain in a different way; the different possible motivations indicate that we are dealing with two separate types of problems.

What radical skeptical hypotheses do, in effect, is present a scenario, which if true, would render most propositions across most domains false. This does not require that some propositions be members of all domains.[14] Skepticism does not necessarily turn on connections between the

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[14] How do we know which propositions belong in which domains? In talking about *domain* specific skepticism, I follow Lynch (2009). According to Lynch, which propositions belong to which domains is determined by the central concepts employed in the range of propositions of that domain. Which domain a proposition belongs to is a matter of "the kind of concepts (moral, legal, mathematical) that compose the

*content* of propositions, but rather on the *evidential relations* between propositions, and evidential relations can cross domains of inquiry. For instance, our beliefs (in the domain of biology) about the physiological features of salmon, such as whether salmon have a nervous system that allows for the experience of pain and suffering, have evidential relations with some moral propositions about how we ought to treat salmon. Reason to doubt that salmon are physiologically capable of pain is also reason to doubt we have any moral obligations towards salmon. These cross-domain evidential relations are what support radical skepticism. Reason to doubt that I have hands, the thought goes, is also reason to doubt almost any proposition, in any domain. Domain specific skepticisms, then, just involve local (intra-domain) evidential relations, while radical skepticism purportedly involves global evidential relations (intra- and inter-domain), such that doubting one proposition (e.g., that one had hands) calls into doubt almost all other propositions.

Domain specific skepticism will involve a domain specific skeptical hypothesis: a hypothesis incompatible with the truth of (almost) any of the propositions within that domain. Also, a domain specific skeptical hypothesis should threaten rationally grounded knowledge within that domain, but not too much more than that. Otherwise, the BIV hypothesis would count

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proposition in question" (Lynch, 2009: 80). In turn, which domain a concept belongs to is a matter of what kind of concept it is, where concept kinds are individuated by the kinds of properties those concepts are concepts of. Thus, what really individuates the moral domain from, say, the mathematical domain, on this view, is that the central concepts of morality concern different kinds of properties than the properties mathematical concepts concern.

trivially as a domain-specific skeptical hypothesis for each domain. A domain-specific closure-based skeptical problem takes the following form: For a domain D, we have:

1. S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that a skeptical hypothesis specific to D is false.

2. If S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that a skeptical hypothesis specific to D is false, then S cannot have rationally grounded knowledge of the proposition that p in domain D.

3. But S does have rationally grounded knowledge of the proposition that p in domain D.

At first, it appears that hinge epistemology is unable to directly address domain-specific skepticisms. Domain-specific skepticism does not call all knowledge into question, just knowledge with respect to a particular domain. Because of this, the denials of domain-specific skeptical hypotheses are not *directly* entailed by the über hinge commitment (the commitment we all share to the proposition that we are not radically and fundamentally in error). Skepticism about a particular domain might be right, but that need not render one radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs.

If the denial of a domain specific skeptical hypothesis is not entailed by the über hinge commitment, then it is not guaranteed we have an anti-skeptical hinge commitment in that domain. This allows the possibility that the domain-specific skeptical hypothesis is open to rational evaluation, and so can figure in instances of the closure principle, thus generating skeptical worries. And indeed, hinge epistemology does not automatically resolve all closure-based skeptical worries for any given domain of discourse (nor should we want it to - it should certainly be possible to be a skeptic about witches, for instance). For instance, a person

who has no hinge commitments in the domain of religion is able to entertain genuine skeptical worries about religion motivated by closure-like concerns; it is not a conceptual impossibility for such a person to remain skeptical of the religious domain as a whole, in the way that it *is* a conceptual impossibility for one to give up the über hinge commitment and still engage in rational evaluation.

Nevertheless, hinge epistemology may be able to offer an *indirect* response to certain domain-specific closure-based skeptical problems. Hinge epistemology can be applied as a solution to a domain-specific closure-based skeptical problem, if one has a hinge commitment within that domain. Here is why: if there is a hinge proposition in a specific domain, then the domain-specific skeptical hypothesis for that domain is incompatible with that hinge proposition. But if this is the case, then the über hinge commitment (codified by the domain specific hinge commitment) entails the denial of the domain-specific skeptical hypothesis, resulting in an anti-skeptical hinge commitment in the domain. The domain-specific skeptical problem is then dissolved in just the same way the closure-based radical skeptical problem was. In other words: suppose I have a hinge commitment to the proposition that p in domain D, where p is incompatible with D-specific skeptical hypothesis H. The proposition that p, as a personal hinge commitment, is a particular instantiation of the über hinge; I could not give up p without taking myself to be radically and fundamentally in error, so I could not give up p without also giving up the über hinge (and to give up the über hinge is to have no hinge commitments at all). So, the über hinge, *as codified by* p, does entail the denial of H, thus generating an anti-skeptical hinge

for D. The domain specific skeptical problem for D can then be resolved in the same way as the radical skeptical problem.[15]

Whether or not a given closure-based domain-specific skeptical problem can be resolved with the help of hinge epistemology depends on whether there are hinge propositions as part of that domain of discourse. For instance, for a person that *does* have religious hinge commitments, those hinge commitments codify the über hinge for that person, and therefore the über hinge commitment in turn entails the denial of specific skeptical hypotheses about the religious domain. This person would have anti-skeptical hinge commitments in the domain of religion.[16]

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[15] One might worry that the über hinge (that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs) does not seem to itself directly logically entail the denial of any particular domain specific skeptical hypothesis. However, my argument here is that the über hinge, as codified by a personal hinge commitment in a domain, *is* incompatible with the skeptical hypothesis for that domain. If I have a personal hinge commitment to the proposition that p, then *it could not both be true* that (i) I am not radically and fundamentally in error (the über hinge), and (ii) that the relevant domain specific skeptical hypothesis is correct. For, if the domain specific skeptical hypothesis were correct, then I would be wrong about p. And if I were wrong about p, given that p codifies the über hinge for me, I *would* also be radically and fundamentally in error. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this worry.

[16] This seems to have the consequence that whether or not one needs to worry about skeptical problems in a domain is a subjective matter - for those lacking hinge commitments in a domain, domain specific skeptical hypotheses prevent them from having knowledge in that domain, but those who have hinge commitments in that domain can have knowledge in that domain. In short, the view appears committed to a form of epistemic relativism. Pritchard alludes to this issue in his discussion of hinge epistemology (2015: 109), and addresses it more fully in his (2009) "Defusing Epistemic Relativism." Pritchard (2009)

*5. Application to Moral Skepticism*

We have seen that hinge epistemology can be applied to domain-specific skeptical problems when there are hinge commitments within the domain. So, in order to provide a hinge epistemic response to moral skepticism (of the closure-based variety), we need to show that certain ethical claims codify the über hinge commitment. Given that we have ethical hinge commitments, the über hinge proposition entails the denial of the moral skeptical hypothesis (moral nihilism), so we would have an anti-skeptical hinge commitment in the moral domain. The moral skeptical problem is then dissolved in just the same way as the radical skeptical problem.

One might see the epistemological status of moral claims generally as problematic, requiring a separate treatment from knowledge regarding everyday middle-sized goods (e.g., knowing that there is a mug before one). Many prominent theories of moral epistemology, such as wide reflective equilibrium, or moral intuitionism, are designed to address what are taken to be special problems for moral epistemology. The proposal here (applying hinge epistemology to the moral domain) is to be understood as being in competition with, say, wide reflective equilibrium as an account of moral epistemology. A full comparison of the relative merits of hinge epistemology in comparison to other moral epistemologies is beyond the scope of the

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responds to the worry of epistemic relativism by noting that epistemic relativism does not entail a problematic form of truth relativism, and that a certain kind of epistemic relativism is reflective of our actual practices and makes good sense of faultless epistemic disagreement. Recall, again, that hinge commitments are not infallible. Even though a person with religious hinge commitments may be rational in rejecting certain skeptical worries, the hinge propositions this person is committed to may still be false.

present paper. My more modest goal here is to show that hinge epistemology at least offers a viable alternative.

So what might be an ethical hinge commitment? Hinge commitments (at least in the examples Wittgenstein and Pritchard use) are usually specific claims, e.g. "I have hands," rather than general abstract claims such as "there are material objects." So I begin by considering a specific moral claim I suspect is foundational in the way hinge commitments are supposed to be, and then evaluate further whether it fits the characterization of a hinge commitment: the proposed hinge commitment is (G): "It would be morally wrong to pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it just for fun."[17]

Recall the tests I presented earlier for deciding whether someone has a hinge commitment towards a given proposition: 1. There is nothing more certain than a hinge proposition one could use to rationally support the hinge proposition. 2. One's commitment to the proposition is not directly responsive to reasons. 3. If one were to be shown that the proposition was false, one would take oneself to be radically and fundamentally in error. I invite the reader to reflect on the phenomenology of their own attitude towards (G), and whether they find it to exhibit these features.[18]

Is there anything more certain than (G) that could provide evidential support for it? General ethical theories and principles seem to be the best candidates. But propositions like (G) often serve as a litmus test for our ethical theories. An ethical theory that denied (G) would, for

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[17] This example is adapted from Harman (1988).

[18] However, we should also heed Pritchard's caution that the phenomenology of our attitude toward a given proposition does not always help reveal the nature of the propositional attitude we in fact hold.

that reason, strike us as an implausible ethical theory. Indeed, this feature of propositions like (G) plays a significant role in the process of wide reflective equilibrium, where our ethical theorizing has to get the right results when it comes to our intuitions about particular cases. This suggests that general ethical theories and principles do not provide epistemic support for (G) by being more certain. Rather, it is the other way around - it speaks in favor of an ethical theory that the theory tells us it would be wrong to pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it.

In ordinary circumstances, we do not need to reason for (G) - just picturing pouring gasoline on a cat and igniting it elicits moral disgust. To view (G) as standing in need of epistemic justification presents an implausible picture of ethical judgment: it is one that over-intellectualizes our actual epistemic practices in the moral domain. One might attempt to appeal to more general ethical principles in justifying the wrongness of igniting a cat, such as the principle that it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering, but these more general principles (I contend) are not more certain (and hence could not be used as rational grounds for belief) than (G). That causing unnecessary suffering is wrong might *explain* what is wrong with burning a cat alive, but it is not more *certain* – compare: that my perceptual apparatus is reliable and functioning properly might *explain* why it is that I can now see my two hands, but in ordinary circumstances I would not *justify* my thinking that I have two hands by first determining that my perceptual apparatus is reliable and functioning properly.[19] In general, where *p* explains why *q* is true, it is not always the case that one must justifiably believe *p* in order to justifiably believe *q*.

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[19] See Wittgenstein (1969, passage 250): "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."

In this case, reasoning from the wrongness of causing unnecessary pain to the conclusion that it would be wrong to set a cat on fire seems to involve one thought too many. I take these reflections to suggest that (G) meets criterion 1 for being a hinge proposition; it is plausible to think that there is nothing more certain than (G) which could provide epistemic support for it.

Regarding criterion 2: according to 2, one's commitment to the hinge proposition is not directly responsive to reasons and non-optional; this serves to differentiate hinges from knowledge-apt beliefs, which are directly responsive to reasons, and can be formed or dropped based on one's evidence. Is a commitment to the proposition that it would be wrong to pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it just for fun responsive to reasons? I suspect most people could not be convinced that igniting a cat for fun is permissible – there simply are no reasons we can conceive of in ordinary situations which might convince us that it is morally permissible to light a cat on fire just for fun, and this indicates that (G) is not responsive to reasons in the right way to count as knowledge-apt belief. This point is related to the discussion of criterion 1: Because there is nothing more certain that could support (G), reasons do not bear on (G) directly.

Regarding criterion 3: according to 3, if one were to be shown wrong about a hinge proposition, one would take oneself to be radically and fundamentally in error. (G), I conjecture, exhibits this feature as well. If I *were* wrong about this proposition, I would probably also be wrong about a significant collection of my other beliefs (both moral and non-moral), such as my belief that it is also wrong to torture toddlers, or my belief that the physiology of cats is such that they are able to feel pain, or my belief that cats are mammals, and not cleverly constructed robots, etc.

Of course, it is difficult to show with certainty that a particular proposition functions as a hinge commitment rather than as a knowledge-apt belief, largely because the propositional attitude distinctive of hinge commitments is phenomenologically very similar to that of knowledge-apt belief (Pritchard, 2015: 102). But if it is correct to think we do have ethical hinge commitments, then it is possible to address the closure-based moral skeptical problem using hinge epistemology. An ethical hinge proposition would codify the über hinge proposition; the personal ethical hinge manifests one's commitment to the proposition that one is not radically and fundamentally in error. Since the ethical hinge proposition is incompatible with moral nihilism, the über hinge proposition (as manifested by the personal ethical hinge) then entails the denial of moral nihilism, generating an anti-skeptical hinge. And given that there is an anti-skeptical hinge in the moral domain, we have it that one cannot arrive at a moral skeptical hypothesis through an instance of the $Closure_{rk}$ Principle. Thus, the central 'bridging' claim of the skeptical problem (that one cannot know some moral claim $p$ if one cannot know that a moral skeptical hypothesis is false) is undercut, dissolving the moral skeptical problem.

## 6. Conclusion

Initially, it appears that the radical skeptical problem requires a different sort of solution than skeptical problems for particular domains. Even when both kinds of skeptical problems are presented in a structurally similar way, invoking the $Closure_{rk}$ Principle and a relevant skeptical hypothesis, solutions to the radical skeptical problem are not guaranteed to apply to domain-specific skeptical problems. This is as it should be; it would be a bad result if solutions to radical skeptical problems also ruled out skeptical positions in any given domain, since there are some domains we may want to be skeptical about (or for which we at least want the option).

However, I have argued in this paper that for *some* domain-specific skepticisms, at least one kind of response to the radical skeptical problem (a hinge epistemic response) also addresses the domain-specific skeptical problem. And there is a principled way to see which domains these are, and why the hinge epistemic response applies: these are just those domains for which we have hinge commitments to propositions in that domain. While I have focused on Pritchard's brand of hinge epistemology in this paper, I hope that the basic reasoning employed here extends to other versions of hinge epistemology as well. Where hinge commitments play a crucial role in addressing the problem of radical skepticism, however the details of that response work, we should expect that hinge commitments (however the notion of a 'hinge' is construed) in particular domains will likewise work to address domain-specific skepticisms.

My particular concern in this work has been to apply hinge epistemology to solve a moral skeptical problem based on the Closure$_{rk}$ Principle. The main contention is that if hinge epistemology succeeds in answering the closure-based problem of radical skepticism, then it also allows us to answer closure-based moral skeptical problems that invoke moral skeptical hypotheses, such as moral nihilism. This application crucially depends on the claim that we have some hinge commitments in the moral domain. I suggested the proposition that it would be wrong to pour gasoline on a cat and ignite counts just for fun counts as one such hinge.

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