

## *Penultimate Draft*

### *Summa Contra Scepticos*

Critical Notice of: Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Soochow University Lectures in Philosophy), Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-691-16723-7. 239pp.

*Keywords:* epistemic skepticism, hinge epistemology, epistemic disjunctivism, Duncan Pritchard, Ludwig Wittgenstein

*Abstract:* This critical notice concerns Duncan Pritchard's *Epistemic Angst* (2016). After a summary of the book, I offer some brief critical comments on five issues: the distinction between overriding and undercutting strategies against skepticism, epistemic relativism, foundationalist hinge epistemology, the relationship between hinge propositions and evidence, and the universality of rational evaluation.

*Epistemic Angst* is Duncan Pritchard's to-date most comprehensive attempt to defuse Cartesian epistemic skepticism (=ES). The argument builds on Pritchard's more than sixty previous publications on the same general topic. Given limitations of space, this critical notice will nevertheless focus on *Epistemic Angst* alone. I shall also confine myself to a discussion of Pritchard's own position, leaving aside his criticisms of other views.

#### *1. Two Kinds of External-World Skepticism*

The argument of *Epistemic Angst* is structured around a number of binary distinctions. The first contrasts two types of external-world ES, or 'brain-in-a-vat' (=BIV) ES: 'closure-based' and 'underdetermination-based' ES. Roughly, the former insists that, since knowledge is closed under (known) entailment, you can only know, say, that you are currently reading this essay (=p), if you also know that you are not a BIV. Alas, you cannot know that you are not a BIV; ergo you cannot know that p. Underdetermination-based skepticism holds that you can only know that p, if your evidence for p is stronger than your evidence for the corresponding BIV scenario. Alas, your evidence in both cases is the same; ergo, you do not know that p.

Pritchard suggests that the two kinds of ES each come with a specific view about reason and rationality. Closure-based ES is tied to the 'universality of rational evaluation' thesis: 'there

are no in-principle limits on the extent to which our beliefs can be rationally evaluated' (2016: 3). Underdetermination-based skepticism again is inseparable from the 'insularity of reasons' idea: the evidence available to us is insufficient to distinguish between non-skeptical and skeptical scenarios (2016: 55).

A skeptical challenge based on closure is more demanding than a skeptical challenge based on underdetermination. To defeat closure-*ES* you need to know that the skeptical hypothesis is false. To rule out underdetermination-*ES* your balance of evidence needs to favor your ordinary beliefs over skeptical scenarios. But this is compatible with not knowing the skeptical hypothesis to be false.

Distinguishing between the two types of *BIV*-skepticism is the 'hinge' on which Pritchard's whole book turns; this bifurcation motivates his 'biscopic' answer to *ES* (2016: 173). Epistemic biscopism is the view that we need two distinct ways of disarming *BIV-ES*: one way addressing the closure-variant, the other tackling the underdetermination-version.

## 2. *Overriding and Undercutting Strategies against ES*

The second major binary opposition of *Epistemic Angst* concerns general strategies for defusing *BIV-ES*. Philosophers using the 'overriding' strategy combine concession with revision: they agree with the skeptic that our 'folk-epistemic concepts' leave room for skeptical challenges; but they then go on to introduce (independently-motivated) revised concepts in the hope of thereby blocking *ES*. Epistemic externalism or the rejection of closure are cases in point (2016: 67). Philosophers relying on the 'undercutting' strategy make no concessions to the sceptic. Instead they maintain that, in light of our correctly-understood folk-epistemic concepts, the legitimacy of skeptical challenges is wholly 'illusory'. The initial semblance of legitimacy is due to misunderstandings of our folk-epistemic concepts and practices. Two such misunderstandings are especially important here: the already-mentioned universality of rational evaluation and insularity of reasons (2016: 59).

## 3. *Hinge Epistemology and Closure-ES*

This brings us to Pritchard's two anti-skeptical proposals: 'hinge epistemology' as the undercutting antidote to closure-*ES*, and 'epistemic disjunctivism' as the undercutting weapon against underdetermination-*ES*. This section summarizes the former; the next section the latter.

Pritchard's hinge epistemology develops themes from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969). The term 'hinge' derives from Wittgenstein's remark that 'our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn' (1969: §341). For *Epistemic Angst* a hinge is a combination of a specific propositional attitude with a particular kind of proposition. A hinge attitude is the attitude of taking a proposition to be maximally certain, and thus as beyond justification or doubt. A hinge proposition is any proposition so taken by a subject.

Pritchard divides hinges into three kinds. The first kind consist of the so-called '*über* hinge'. Its propositional content is that one is 'not radically and fundamentally mistaken' in one's beliefs (2016: 86). The *über* hinge is 'codified' in different '*personal* hinges'. These include hinges about one's autobiography (e.g. one's date of birth); about one's body (e.g. one's having two hands); or hinges widely shared in a given culture. Finally, 'anti-skeptical hinges' are the denials of radical skeptical positions: for instance, that I am not a *BIV*. The *über* hinge is the 'common core' of all hinges and gives them unity (2016: 96).

*Epistemic Angst* rejects what Pritchard calls 'a highly context-sensitive account of hinge commitments. Hinges do not change radically from person to person, and from one situation to another. Hinge proposition are 'specific ... to particular people (within cultures, epochs, and so on)' (2016: 95). Although hinges can change over time, 'these changes are entirely at the periphery and the rate of change is inevitably slow' (2016: 97).

Pritchard insists that the propositional attitude characteristic of hinges is not belief or knowing. Belief or knowledge (that *p*) are propositional attitudes that one gives up the moment one recognizes that one has no rational basis for taking *p* to be true. For our hinge propositions, however, we do not have any evidence; and yet, this is no reason for us not to take them to be true. Pritchard explains the special role of hinges vis-à-vis evidence as follows. In order for one proposition or experience (=a) to be rational support for another proposition (=b), a must be more certain than b. But hinge propositions are maximally certain. Hence there is no evidence for the truth of hinge propositions. Pritchard draws this lesson from §125 where Wittgenstein suggests that it would not make sense for him to check by looking whether he has got two hands: 'For why shouldn't I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands?'

Pritchard recognizes two *prima facie* problems for his view of hinge commitments. Take the following propositions:

(\*) Napoleon died in 1821.

(+) The Earth has existed for a long time.

(\*) is meant to be some ordinary, uncontroversial piece of knowledge. (+) is a hinge proposition. (\*) seems to entail (+). But then, why can't I treat this entailment as giving me a rational ground for believing (+)? Call this 'Problem<sub>1</sub>'. Or recall the closure principle. (\*) entails (+), and I know (\*). But then to know (\*) I have to know (+). But Pritchard says that we cannot know (+). Does this not invite the skeptical conclusion? Call this 'Problem<sub>2</sub>'. Pritchard's solution to Problem<sub>1</sub> is to insist that although (+) can be deduced from (\*), '... the propositional attitude that results from such deductions ... cannot be a genuine (knowledge-apt) believing, but is instead a mere codification of the prior über hinge commitment ...' (2016: 102). And Pritchard deals with Problem<sub>2</sub> simply by restricting the applicability of closure to beliefs.

In contending that hinges are not rationally grounded, Pritchard is not just opposing internalist notions of justification. He also means to exclude externalist renderings. Focusing on a process reliabilist version of externalism, he maintains that hinge commitments are not 'the produce of any specific kind of belief-forming process' (2016: 76). Hinges are 'utterly visceral—or 'animal'' (2016: 84).

Before turning to hinge epistemology's anti-skeptical import, it is worth mentioning how Pritchard handles its potential to veer towards epistemic *relativism*. If hinges can differ from one culture – or even one person – to the next, and if challenges to hinges are impossible to earn, what should we say about disagreements involving hinges? Are such disagreements faultless and irresolvable? Pritchard responds by proposing that such hinge-disagreements would be irresolvable only in a situation of 'epistemic incommensurability' where not a single hinge is shared. And Pritchard sides with Wittgenstein in deeming such scenario highly dubious; it is unclear whether we could even begin to understand a person that differs so completely from us (2016: 110).

How does hinge epistemology undermine *ES*? The key thought is that since hinges are maximally certain, there cannot be grounds from which they can be challenged. Challenges must be earned; and, to be earned, a challenge must have a degree of certainty higher than the challenged proposition. Moreover, to challenge or doubt any one certainty is to challenge or doubt all (2016: 66). As Wittgenstein puts the point: 'But what could make me doubt whether this person here is N.N., whom I have known for years? Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.' (1969: §§613-4)

Pritchard advertises hinge epistemology as giving us a 'radically new conception of the structure of rational evaluation' (2016: 66). It shows that the key presupposition of closure-*ES*, that is, the 'universality of rational evaluation' thesis, is false: there are 'in-principle limits on the extent to which our beliefs can be rationally evaluated' (2016: 3). In other words, 'all

rational evaluation is essentially local' (2016: 66). Skeptical wholesale evaluation of all of our beliefs and commitments is not a more radical version of our everyday local evaluations. Skeptical wholesale evaluation is an incoherent version: to doubt everything is to doubt nothing; and to doubt without a reason is doubt irrationally. Put differently, closure-ES is wrong to maintain that, in order to know ordinary things, we need to *know* that we are not in skeptical scenarios. We cannot know the denials of skeptical hypotheses. But this is not for a lack of certainty; it is because our certainty concerning the denials of skeptical hypotheses is at its maximum.

#### 4. *Epistemic Disjunctivism and Underdetermination-ES*

Despite its success in disposing of closure-ES, Pritchard claims that hinge epistemology does a poor job vis-à-vis underdetermination-ES. The latter is based on the 'new evil demon' intuition, to wit, that the evidence available to us is incapable of distinguishing between skeptical ('bad') and non-skeptical ('good') scenarios. Hinge epistemology does not dislodge this intuition.

This brings us to epistemic disjunctivism or the view 'that when it comes to paradigm cases of knowledge, the rational support available to the subject is both reflectively accessible and factive' (2016: 2). I can know that I am sitting in front of the computer right now since I am seeing the computer in good lighting conditions, and I am not under the influence of any drugs. Under these conditions my seeing the computer is factive. That I see it, entails that it is there. Pritchard assumes that this is in keeping with our 'folk epistemic concepts' (2016: 134).

To turn epistemic disjunctivism into an anti-ES weapon, Pritchard draws a distinction between two kinds of evidence: 'discriminating' versus 'favoring'. Consider the possibility that the animals we see in one of the pens in our local zoo might not be zebras but mules painted so as to look like zebras. From where we are standing, we might not have the perceptually discriminating evidence that allows us to decide between the two possibilities. And yet, in all likelihood we will have other evidence: knowledge of how likely the zoo director is to engage in such deception; knowledge of whether our local zoo has the financial means to buy zebras; or knowledge of previous visits and close-up views of the animals. This visually non-discriminating evidence favors the belief that the animals are zebras rather than mules. It is (at least compared with the perceptual evidence) merely 'favoring'.

Pritchard holds that we have *factive favoring* evidence for the denial of BIV scenarios. As in the zoo-example, here again our immediate evidence is not discriminating. To that extent, the 'new evil demon' intuition is right. Nevertheless, even in the absence of relevant discriminating evidence, we still have plenty of factive evidence for our ordinary beliefs that we are in good

scenarios: we often find ourselves in ‘paradigm cases of knowledge’ – I see my computer – and in all these cases we have reflectively accessible and factive rational support for our beliefs. This support ‘decisively favors’ my ordinary beliefs over *BIV* alternatives (2016: 138).

Finally, we do not beg the question against the sceptic when we invoke this favoring-factive evidence. Challenges have to be earned; they have to be ‘rationally motivated’. *BIV-ES* lacks such rational motivation. The error possibilities raised by the sceptic are merely ‘bare’, or abstract (2016: 139). And this gives us the right to ignore them.

### 5. *Epistemic Angst and Vertigo*

In his ‘Concluding Postscript’ Pritchard offers a final distinction: ‘epistemic angst’ versus ‘epistemic vertigo’. We experience epistemic angst as long as we are unable to defeat various versions of *ES*. Pritchard’s book, is meant to provide the decisive cure. Alas, *Epistemic Angst* warns that a residual ‘epistemic vertigo’ is likely to remain: an irrational ‘intellectual anxiety’ triggered by reflecting on the ‘groundlessness of our believing’ (2016: 185).

### 6. *Overriding and Undercutting Strategies?*

I now turn to a critical assessment. I begin with a comment on the distinction between overriding and undercutting anti-skeptical strategies. I find the idea insightful, but remain uncomfortable with the way it is employed in *Epistemic Angst*. Recall: on the overriding strategy we grant that our epistemic folk-concepts and practices allow for *ES*, but then go on to block *ES* via an independently-motivated revision of our epistemic concepts. On the undercutting strategy we deny that our epistemic folk-concepts allow for *ES*, and we put the blame for the appearance of plausibility of *ES* squarely at the door of philosophical misunderstandings. Pritchard takes himself to be an undercutter, and Fred Dretske (2005) or Robert Nozick (1981) to be overriders. I find both attributions implausible. Pritchard allows that *ES* ...

... arises out of very natural intellectual inclinations and aspirations. The drive to step out of one’s ordinary ways of believing and reasoning ... Moreover, once we have adopted this perspective, the aspiration to go on to discover the universal rational foundations of our beliefs—and thereby adopt a *completely* detached perspective—is very natural too. ... (2016: 186-7)

Presumably such ‘very natural intellectual inclinations and aspiration’ have something to do with our epistemic folk-concepts and practices. For how could they be ‘very natural’ otherwise? Moreover, is not Pritchard offering a revision of our folk-epistemic concepts when he introduces the category of hinges, with their so-far overlooked, peculiar propositional attitude? And surely he too thinks of this category as independently motivated.

Dretske and Nozick deny closure. But they do not do so in an effort to revise our folk-epistemic ways. They rather take us to have been committed to the denying of closure all along. That is after all what Dretske tries to argue in terms of relevant alternatives and little Mary at the zoo. And both authors agree with Pritchard that *ES* owes its existence first and foremost to philosophical misunderstandings of our everyday concepts and practices.

### 7. *Epistemic Relativism?*

The rest of my critical comments all concern hinge epistemology – this should be taken as considerable agreement with Pritchard’s development of epistemic disjunctivism.

I begin with a comment on the handling of epistemic relativism in *Epistemic Angst*. The issue is important in the context of *ES* since Pritchard (2009) regards epistemic relativism as a form of *ES*. Recall that Pritchard defines epistemic relativism in terms of epistemic incommensurability, that is, a situation where two seemingly disagreeing parties have not a single hinge in common. This makes epistemic relativism so absurdly strong that it is all too easy to avoid the charge. It is also completely out of step with much contemporary theorizing about epistemic relativism. Think for instance of how the view is presented in such key texts as Richard Rorty (1980) or Paul Boghossian (2006). Building on Rorty, Boghossian construes epistemic relativism as an interpretation of a situation of irresolvable disagreement between ‘fundamentally different epistemic systems’. Two epistemic systems differ fundamentally when they differ *in at least one (not all!)* ‘fundamental (i.e. underived) epistemic principle’ that is key to the dispute in question. Moreover, neither friends (like Rorty) nor foes (like Boghossian) of epistemic relativism assume that – *mutatis mutandis* – hinge-disagreements can be rationally resolved just as long as enough hinges are shared. Pritchard obviously thinks otherwise, but he offers no argument for his view.

### 8. *Hinge Foundationalism or Contextualism?*

Pritchard's Wittgenstein and Pritchard himself are foundationalists about hinges. Pritchard does not think that hinges vary considerably with context or person. Hinges are specific to cultures and epochs and their rate of change is very slow (2016: 95-7). All rational evaluations of propositions presuppose other propositions that remain unquestioned in the given context of evaluation; and for each epistemic subject we can (in principle) identify the set of hinge propositions that underwrite all of their epistemic practices. Note that one can agree with the first half of the last sentence, without committing to the second. To do so makes one something a 'hinge contextualist'. I find the clearest formulation of this view in William Alston's little classic 'Epistemic Circularity' (1986):

'Not everything can be subjected to the test of critical examination, or else we shall be bereft of all belief. We can establish some conclusions only by assuming other propositions, not all of which can themselves be established. There is, perhaps, no particular assumption that cannot be disengaged and successfully argued for, but we cannot turn the trick with the whole lot all at once. We can make some justifications explicit only at the cost of leaving others implicit. (Alston 1986: 28)

Interestingly enough, Alston finds resonances of this view in Wittgenstein, Peirce and Dewey (1986: 28-9). This is not the occasion to enter into a fully-fledged defense of Alston's view. I flag it here only to emphasize that Pritchard provides no arguments as to why we should prefer his hinge foundationalism to Alston's hinge contextualism.

#### 9. Are Hinges without Rational Support?

After much soul-searching as to what I might be missing, I have to confess myself unable to agree with Pritchard's claim that hinges are principally without any rational support. This is of course the heart of Pritchard's interpretation of hinges. It underwrites the claim that hinges are not knowledge-apt and that the closure does not apply in their case. Pritchard finds support for his view in the following remark by Wittgenstein:

'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*? (Who decides *what* stands fast?) And what does it mean to say that such and such stands fast?' (1969: §125)



I fail to see this passage as offering an argument for the idea that Wittgenstein has no evidence whatsoever for having two hands. I rather read this passage as saying that, as things stand for Wittgenstein at the time of the blind man's asking, his (i.e. Wittgenstein's) credence in his eyesight is no stronger than his credence in his handedness. And the remarks goes on to suggest that it is a contextual matter whether Wittgenstein's hands are a touchstone for the reliability of his perception, or whether his perception is the touchstone for the reality of his hands.

This train of thought leaves open the possibility of, first, a history of Wittgenstein amassing evidence for his handedness via perception and proprioception; and second, a history of his amassing evidence for the reliability of his perception and proprioception involving as touchstones, amongst many other things, his hands. Of course, most of this historical evidence will no longer be available to him at the time when he meets the blind person; most of it is forgotten. And yet, what remains is surely more than enough to justify his belief in the presence.

It should also be remembered that amongst the hinges -- or as he prefers to say 'cases in which I rightly say I cannot be making a mistake' (§674) -- Wittgenstein counts 'propositions of arithmetic' (§448) as well 'the earth is round' or 'water boils at 100°C' (§§291-299). I am not sure I understand the claim that such propositions are 'by their nature never the result of rational processes nor responsive to rational processes' (2016: 90).

### *10. On the Universality of Rational Evaluation*

Much of the force of Pritchard's hinge-epistemological, anti-skeptical considerations comes from his committing the sceptic to the idea of the 'universality of rational evaluation'. That is to say, according to *Epistemic Angst*, the epistemic sceptic aims for a 'wholesale' evaluation of our beliefs. Clearly, such wholesale evaluation is incoherent. Every investigation must be based on some presuppositions that remain unquestioned and uninvestigated in the background.

But is the *BIV*-sceptic really committed to a rational evaluation of all our beliefs at once? Does Pritchard offer a convincing argument to this effect? Or can the *BIV*-sceptic argue that she leaves an enormous amount of our beliefs (and hinges) unquestioned? She might insist for example that she does not deny anything about our perceptual experiences and beliefs -- except that these allow us to conclude that we are in a good scenario and that external-world skepticism is wrong.

Pritchard tries to build a bridge from this limited skepticism to a skepticism about everything by suggesting that a thorough doubt about one hinge quickly inflates into a doubt about all hinges. Here is a passage from §613 that speaks to that idea: 'what could make me doubt whether this person here is N.N., whom I have known for years? Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.' Note however that these sentences come at the end of passage that distinguishes between different cases:

'If I now say "I know that the water in the kettle in the gas-flame will not freeze but boil", I seem to be as justified in this "I know" as I am in *any*. "If I know anything I know *this*". - Or do I know with still *greater* certainty that the person opposite me is my old friend so-and-so? And how does that compare with the proposition that I am seeing with two eyes and shall see them if I look in the glass? - I don't know confidently what I am to answer here. - But still there is a difference between cases. If the water over the gas freezes, of course I shall be as astonished as can be, but I shall assume some factor I don't know of, and perhaps leave the matter to physicists to judge. But what could make me doubt whether this person here is N.N., whom I have known for years? Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.'

I read this as saying that while doubting some hinges quickly inflates into global doubt and thus chaos, the doubting of other hinges does not. And Wittgenstein expresses his own lack of confidence on how best to distinguish these cases. If Pritchard has a good criterion here - and a criterion that counts the denial of knowledge of the external world as akin to denial of knowing his friend - then we deserve to be told.

### 11. Conclusion

As befits the genre of the critical notice, I have here focused primarily on disagreements and quibbles. Lest this distracts from my appreciation of the book, I hurry to emphasize that I am enthusiastic about ways in which *Epistemic Angst* seeks to bring Wittgenstein's reflections on hinges into the epistemological mainstream. I am not fully convinced that

Wittgenstein is quite as radical as Pritchard makes him out to be. But that is a family quarrel.<sup>1</sup>

### *Bibliography*

- Alston, W. P. (1986) 'Epistemic Circularity', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47/1: 1-30.
- Boghossian, P. (2006) *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dretske, F. (2005) 'The Case Against Closure', in E. Sosa and M. Steup (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 12-26. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nozick, R. (1981) *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pritchard, D. (2009) 'Defusing Epistemic Relativism', *Synthese* 166/4: 397-412.
- Rorty, R. (1981) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969) *On Certainty*, Oxford: Blackwell.

*Martin Kusch*

*University of Vienna, Austria*

---

<sup>1</sup> For comments on a first draft or related discussions I am grateful to Natalie Ashton, Robin McKenna, Duncan Pritchard, Maggie RöSSLer, and a referee for the journal. Research on this review was supported by ERC Advanced Grant No. 339382 ('The Emergence of Relativism').