

Book Reviews

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Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing, by Duncan Pritchard. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016, 239 pages, ISBN: 9780691167237.

Duncan Pritchard's new book constitutes a continuation of his research into the problem of scepticism. It is a version of a series of lectures he gave at Soochow University in Taiwan in 2013 and an amendment to the theory contained in his previous book: *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford, 2012).

Pritchard's diagnosis is that the source of scepticism is not an inconsistency ingrained in our pre-philosophical intuitions; instead, he thinks that illegitimate ways in which those intuitions have been interpreted philosophically are what give rise to scepticism. His purpose is therefore to purge our intuitions of philosophical distortions and in this way to remove the threat of radical scepticism, which manifests itself through *epistemic angst*: the fear that there is in fact no knowledge of the external world. Pritchard analyses and attempts to respond to the two sceptical paradoxes which allegedly cause epistemic angst: the first is based on the principle of underdetermination; the second, on the principle of closure. Each of these paradoxes is formed of an inconsistent triad of claims. Pritchard's formulation of the sceptical paradox based on underdetermination is as follows (p. 32):

- (1) One cannot have rational support that favors one's belief that one is sitting at one's desk over a brain in a vat hypothesis.
- (2) If one cannot have rational support that favors one's belief that one is sitting at one's desk over a brain in a vat hypothesis, then one does not know that one is sitting at one's desk.
- (3) One knows that one is sitting at one's desk.

This paradox arises due to the inconsistency (a real one, according to Pritchard) of the triad composed of three claims corresponding to (1)-(3) in the paradox above:

- (1) One cannot have rational support that favors one's belief in an everyday proposition over an incompatible radical sceptical hypothesis.
- (2) The principle of underdetermination.
- (3) One has widespread everyday knowledge.

Pritchard employs the following version of the principle of underdetermination:

(UNDERDETERMINATION) If S knows that p and q describe incompatible scenarios, and yet S lacks a rational basis that favors p over q , then S lacks knowledge that p .

Pritchard denies (1) in the triad and paradox: in the good case the subject does have support favouring the claim of being sitting at one's desk over being a brain in a vat. In this review, however, I will not dwell on the solution to the paradox based on underdetermination that is offered in *Epistemic Angst*, because it does not go beyond what Pritchard already proposed in *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. What has changed with respect to the previous book is that Pritchard now admits that disjunctivism needs to be enhanced if it is to successfully deal with the second sceptical paradox: that based on closure.

This is how Pritchard reconstructs the closure-based sceptical paradox (p. 15):

- (1) One cannot know that one is not a brain in a vat.
- (2) If one cannot know that one is not a brain in a vat, then one cannot know that one is sitting at one's desk.
- (3) One knows that one is sitting at one's desk.

This paradox again arises due to the inconsistency (which in this case, according to Pritchard, is only apparent; I will return to this issue later) of the triad composed of the following three claims that correspond to (1)-(3) in this paradox:

- (1) One is unable to know the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses.
- (2) The principle of closure.
- (3) One has widespread everyday knowledge.

Pritchard appeals to the principle of closure in the following form:

(CLOSURE) If S knows that p , and S competently deduces from p that q , thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining knowledge that p , then S knows that q .

The problem with closure that bothers Pritchard is that one cannot have (1), (2) and (3) at the same time. Endorsing disjunctivism yields a commitment to (3). Rejection of (2) is too revisionary to be taken as an option by Pritchard. It is also difficult to deny (1), and just bite the bullet by saying that one can know that one is not in a sceptical scenario (p. 163) — this is effectively denying a widespread and strong intuition. So, since Pritchard wants to save all three elements of the triad, he argues that they are not inconsistent after all. In his attempt to show this he appeals to Wittgenstein's idea of hinge commitments. According to that idea, negations of sceptical hypotheses (i.e., hinge commitments) are not susceptible to rational evaluation; in this respect they differ from ordinary beliefs. His interpretation of hinge commitments, together with disjunctivism, form a *bisopic* solution to the problem of scepticism. In this way, paradox based on underdetermination is brought within the scope of a single solution (disjunctivism); and that based on closure is brought within the scope of another (hinge commitments).

Pritchard's solution to closure-based paradox relies upon the *non-belief reading* of hinge commitments. Pritchard analyses various fragments of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, where the idea of hinge commitments originates. On the basis of those scattered fragments, Pritchard reconstructs Wittgenstein as claiming that one does not have knowledge that one is not in a sceptical scenario, but also that it is not possible to doubt that one's beliefs are generally correct. Doubt, and hence rational evaluation, can only be local, i.e., they concern only some non-basic beliefs. For Wittgenstein, there are ba-

sic beliefs that cannot be rationally justified (or doubted), because they are no less plausible than any claim that might be called upon in support of them. These are called *hinge commitments*. A belief that one is not a brain in a vat is a good example of such a basic, unjustifiable claim. Pritchard takes this intuition as the starting point for his own anti-sceptical strategy. However, he indicates an interesting problem that threatens Wittgenstein's theory (and some of its modern interpretations too).

The problem is that Wittgenstein's theory is incompatible with closure. Consider the following reasoning:

- (1) There is a desk in front of me.
- (2) If there is a desk in front of me, I am not a brain in a vat.
- (3) I am not a brain in a vat.

This is an instance of *modus ponens*, and as such, it is an example of valid reasoning. In this example, (1) is a mundane case of perceptual knowledge and (2) is true on the basis of how a brain in a vat is described. If one knows these premises, one competently deduces the conclusion on the basis of them and as a result of this deduction, one forms the belief in the conclusion: in virtue of the principle of closure, one knows the conclusion. Since Wittgenstein argues that there is no deductive knowledge of hinge commitments, he must reject closure.

To avoid this clash with closure, Pritchard proposes the non-belief reading of hinge commitments (p. 90-4). He argues that having a hinge commitment should be understood propositionally, i.e., as having some attitude towards a proposition. One has hinge commitments to propositions (called *hinge propositions*) that codify one's single, *über hinge commitment*: that one is not fundamentally and massively mistaken in one's beliefs (I will comment on the codification relation later). The trick that solves the closure problem is that the subject has an attitude different from belief towards hinge propositions (since Pritchard does not offer a name for it, for the purpose of this review I will call it the *non-belief attitude*). The (CLOSURE) formulation of the closure principle only concerns cases in which the subject forms *a belief*. Therefore, closure does not apply to cases of

deductions which end with hinge propositions, because, according to Pritchard, one has some other attitude towards hinge commitments: not belief. Therefore, all three elements of the closure-based triad are consistent after all, and there is no tension that can generate a paradox.

This short reconstruction helps to reveal some obscurities within Pritchard's account. My main concern is that the book seems to lack a positive characterisation of the non-belief attitude. The negative characteristic of this attitude is that it is not knowledge-apt, hence the crucial difference from belief (p. 90); and this feature is what Pritchard needs to avoid application of closure to non-believed hinge propositions. Meanwhile, positive description is limited to the claim that non-belief is belief-like in the sense of being incompatible with an agnostic attitude towards the truth of the proposition in question (p. 101). The only passage in the book in which I found more precise information on how Pritchard understands an agnostic attitude is the fragment in which he contrasts his own approach with Wright's entitlement reading of hinge commitments (p. 77-84). According to Pritchard, rational trust, as defined by Wright, is indeed compatible with the an agnostic attitude (in contrast to Wright's intentions):

The crux of the matter, however, is whether the rational trust in question really could legitimately exclude agnosticism about the truth of the target proposition. The reason why this is problematic is that it is hard to see how an agent who is fully aware that she has no rational basis for regarding the target proposition as true could be anything but agnostic about that proposition. After all, isn't the recognition that this rational basis is lacking simply tantamount to being agnostic about the truth of this proposition? How could it be otherwise? (p. 82)

However, what is not clear to me is how Pritchard's own theory avoids the same problem. According to Pritchard, a subject who is committed to a hinge proposition does not have rational justification for it either. In what respect that subject's predicament differs from the situation of someone who "is fully aware that she has no rational basis for regarding the target proposition as true" is not explained and far from evident. Is she unaware that she has no rational basis for regarding the hinge proposition true? This seems rather implausible; and Pritchard does not commit himself to any such claim. Thus, until we are told more concerning the non-belief and/or agnosticism, it is not clear how an attitude of non-belief is incompatible with an agnostic stance.

Moreover, the distinctness of attitudes of non-belief and belief is not precisely established either. Pritchard describes the difference between belief and non-belief thus:

Crucially, however, insofar as we accept that such a commitment [hinge commitment — B.C.] is merely codifying the prior über hinge commitment, a commitment that is not the result of a rational process or even in principle responsive to rational processes, then the anti-skeptical hinge commitment is also very different from belief in fundamental respects. (p. 101)

Therefore, the bulk of explaining the rationale behind postulating the existence of a different type of attitude towards hinge commitments results from the fact that a hinge commitment is the result of *codification* of an über hinge commitment. However, it is not clear how codification actually works. Everybody, according to Pritchard, has the über hinge commitment; but different subjects have different hinge commitments that codify the über hinge commitment. Moreover, the list of commitments a given subject has may vary during that subject's lifetime (p. 94-7). What I find to be missing is an explanation of what processes result in the subject's performing certain codifications of the über hinge commitment — and not some others. Pritchard only claims that this issue is "highly context-sensitive" (p. 95). There seems to be an explanatory gap here. If I understand the passage quoted above correctly, Pritchard attempts to define non-belief in opposition to belief, by contrasting processes that generate these attitudes. One acquires beliefs as a result of various belief-forming processes such as deduction; while one's hinge commitments arise as a result of codification of the über hinge commitment. Until we are told in more detail what processes are responsible for codification, we are also in the dark about what the non-belief attitude is and exactly in what respects it is distinct from belief.

The third *caveat* is that Pritchard, in order to block the closure-based paradox, must establish that non-believing that p excludes believing that p . This cannot be taken for granted or stipulated. Some attitudes seem to be compatible with belief. I can, for instance, hope that I will catch the train home this evening and at the same time believe that I will catch it. Belief and non-belief differ in their knowledge-aptness; but it must be established that if one has a non-knowledge-apt non-belief attitude, then one cannot (simultaneously

or at some later moment) have a knowledge-apt belief attitude. It cannot simply be assumed that once one non-believes that p , then one cannot at some point start to believe that p .

Having presented my worries concerning the non-belief attitude, I would like to point out an interesting argument raised by Pritchard to criticise an externalist response to closure-based paradox, which consists of denial of (1) in such a paradox:

- (1) one cannot know that one is not a brain in a vat.

Externalists grant the subject knowledge of not being a brain in a vat, yet deny that this knowledge has rational grounds. In response, Pritchard argues that one can formulate the principle of closure and closure paradox in a way that is analogous to the previous presentation, just by replacing the concept of knowledge with rationally grounded knowledge (p. 22-3):

- (1) One cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that one is not a brain in a vat.
- (2) If one cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that one is not a brain in a vat, then one cannot have rationally grounded knowledge that one is sitting at one's desk.
- (3) One has rationally grounded knowledge that one is sitting at one's desk.

(CLOSURE-RK) 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 .

Now, externalists face a dilemma. It is difficult to see how they could reject (1); (2) is an application of closure; and rejection of (3) is a bold move with an inconvenient consequence: although there is knowledge of mundane facts, this knowledge is not rationally grounded. This completely disconnects knowledge from rational ground for it; which is a very revisionary move.

Epistemic Angst is an interesting and thought-provoking book. It presents an ambitious attempt to refute scepticism, which is sup-

posed to be in agreement with our intuitions, purging them of philosophical claims which give rise to paradoxes. The discussion of two types of scepticism is very insightful and carefully conducted, while the idea of combining hinge commitments and disjunctivism in responding to them is promising. However, Pritchard's answer to closure-based theory relies on the non-belief reading of hinge commitments, which currently is not described well enough to equip it for the task.

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