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QUASI-FIDEISM AND EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

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ABSTRACT. Quasi-fideism accounts for the rationality of religious belief by embracing the idea that a subject's most fundamental religious commitments are essentially arational. It departs from standard forms of fideism, however, by contending that this feature of religious commitment does not set it apart from belief in general. Indeed, the quasi-fideist maintains, in keeping with the Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology that underlies the view, that it is in the nature of belief in general (i.e., religious or otherwise) that it presupposes essentially arational commitments, and hence that there can be no specific epistemic objection to religious belief due to it having this feature. This paper explores how quasi-fideism deals with the problems raised by fundamental religious disagreement. In particular, how is quasi-fideism to avoid the charge of epistemic relativism? It is argued that once we understand the arational nature of these fundamental commitments correctly, then quasi-fideism is able to avoid a problematic form of epistemic relativism. Relatedly, it can also explain how a subject's basic religious commitments can change over time in rational ways.

1. My interest is in a certain account of the rationality of religious belief, arguably defended by the (very) late Wittgenstein, along with whether such a proposal has a particular problem with regard to epistemic relativism. The view at issue is *quasi-fideism*, which argues that a subject's basic religious commitments are hinge commitments and hence, like all hinge commitments, are essentially arational. Such a proposal faces two kinds of difficulty.

The first, which is our primary focus here, concerns the fact that there can clearly be widespread divergence both in terms of whether subjects have fundamental religious commitments, and also in terms of the kind of fundamental religious commitments that subjects have (when they have them). The problem is thus whether quasi-fideism generates a problematic form of epistemic relativism whereby religious believers occupy epistemic systems that are essentially closed off from the epistemic systems of non-believers and those who belong to different religious traditions. Every form of hinge epistemology faces a version of this problem, of course, as the very idea of hinge commitments invites the thought that there might be different epistemic systems with distinct hinge commitments. But the application of hinge epistemology to the religious case in the form of quasi-fideism substantially exacerbates this issue, given that there are clearly people who have very different basic religious commitments, and hence (on this view) have different religious hinge commitments.

The second problem is that it might be thought that quasi-fideism is unable to explain how a religious subject could ever change her basic religious convictions, especially via rational processes, insofar as these are understood as arational hinge commitments. But this is at least *prima facie* counterintuitive, given that people change their fundamental religious convictions all the time, including, at least sometimes anyway, by apparently rational means (e.g., via deep and considered reflection of religious matters).

In response to these charges, I will be contending that at most a benign, weak form of epistemic relativism is implied by quasi-fideism, at least once the nature of religious hinge commitments is properly understood. In particular, getting the underlying hinge epistemology right, and understanding how it relates to the religious case, will show us how a general hinge epistemology response to epistemic relativism can be properly extended to quasi-fideism, even despite the evident differences between our everyday commonsense hinge commitments and our religious hinge commitments. Relatedly, I will also be suggesting that when we understand what is involved in a hinge commitment properly, then it also becomes clear how change in religious hinge commitments is possible, including via rational processes, just as change occurs in our hinge commitments more generally.

2. Quasi-fideism offers a distinctive account of the rationality of religious belief, by applying a Wittgensteinian account of the structure of rational evaluation to the religious domain. In his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*,¹ Wittgenstein argues that all rational evaluation presupposes

that a basic set of certainties—*hinge commitments*, as they are known—are in place. As part of the backdrop that enables rational evaluations, they are not themselves subject to rational evaluation, and hence are arationally held, even despite the fact that they are claims that one is optimally certain of. These hinge commitments comprise one’s most basic set of certainties, the kinds of claims where error would indicate that one’s belief system as a whole is fundamentally awry. As such, rather than being theoretical claims, they are instead mundane everyday claims, of the kind that G. E. Moore (e.g., 1925; 1939) famously enumerated, such as that (in normal circumstances) one has hands (e.g., OC, §1), one’s name is such-and-such (e.g., OC, §328), one has never been to the moon (e.g., OC, §117), one is speaking English (e.g., OC §158), and so on. Our complete conviction in these everyday claims reflects a broader certainty that one is not radically in error, a certainty that Wittgenstein maintains must be in place if one is to enter into the space of reasons at all.

Such a proposal has some striking consequences. It means, for example, that at the root of one’s epistemic practices lie arational commitments. As Stanley Cavell (1979, 241) famously put the point, it follows that at a fundamental level our relationship to the world is not one of knowing, at least in terms of how we ordinarily understand that term. While there have been some notable attempts to explain how our hinge commitments could be both lacking in specific positive rational support and yet nonetheless amount to knowledge, in what follows I take it as given that they are unknown.² Aside from the fact that this is my own view, such a stance is the most useful one to take for our purposes, given that it brings the problem posed by epistemic relativism for hinge epistemology—and thus quasi-fideism—into sharpest relief.

In granting that our hinge commitments are unknown, it doesn’t follow that our inability to know these propositions represents a cognitive failure on our part. This is because hinge commitments are held to not be in the market for knowledge in the first place. It is not as if, for example, one is ignorant of one’s hinge commitments.³ A further consequence of the view is that the kind of universal rational evaluations that are at the heart of radical scepticism—and, for that matter, at the heart of traditional forms of *responses* to radical scepticism as well—are incoherent. We simply cannot rationally evaluate all of our commitments at once, since that would involve a rational evaluation of one’s hinge commitments as well, which is impossible.

Another feature of this proposal that is relevant for our purposes is that our hinge commitments are not beliefs, at least in the sense of belief that is of importance to epistemology, which is roughly that propositional attitude that is a constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge. Call this notion of belief *K-apt belief*, to keep it part from the more general folk notion of

belief. K-apt belief has certain basic conceptual connections to truth and reasons. In particular, one cannot K-apt believe that p while at the same time recognizing that one has no rational basis for the truth of p , as the latter excludes the former. This point suffices to ensure that hinge commitments cannot be K-apt beliefs, as they survive the recognition that they are groundlessly held. In particular, the visceral certainty in play is held to be ‘animal’ (OC, §359), in that it is neither grounded in reasons nor directly responsive to them in the way that K-apt beliefs usually are. Rather than being grounded in reasons, this certainty is something that we ‘swallow’ down via our enculturation (OC, §143), and which is thereafter automatically manifest in our actions. As a result, although we are not normally aware of our hinge commitments and the special role that they play in our rational practices—as they usually “lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry” (OC, §88)—becoming aware of them doesn’t undermine our certainty in them.⁴ Accordingly, while hinge commitments qualify as beliefs in the more general folk sense of the term, in that they do involve a commitment to the truth of the target proposition, they would not qualify as beliefs in the more narrow K-apt sense.⁵

3. While Wittgenstein’s primary concern was helping us to see how our most mundane everyday certainties could play this distinctive epistemic role, the specific question of how this way of thinking about the structure of rational evaluation might bear on religious belief seems to be at least implicit to his discussion.⁶ For wouldn’t one’s most fundamental religious commitments constitute hinge commitments on this view? They certainly seem to be the right kind of propositional attitude. Fundamental religious commitment is so basic to the religious believer’s worldview that error here would entail a widespread error in the subject’s belief-system. Relatedly, the kind of conviction that genuine believers have to their core religious beliefs also exhibits the kind of certainty that is characteristic of hinge commitments. In particular, such a commitment plays a fulcrum role in a religious believer’s worldview, such that it stands fast relative to other commitments. This also means that one is not going to lose such a conviction simply because one is faced with counterevidence, and so we have the same resistance to rational considerations that we find with regular, non-religious hinge commitments.

Thinking of fundamental religious conviction in terms of hinge commitments leads to a distinctive account of the rationality of religious belief. As it makes religious conviction, at root, an arational affair, the position counts as a form of fideism. But it is not a straightforward form of fideism, and this thus marks a departure from the fideism that Wittgenstein had seemed to endorse

previously.⁷ The claim is not that religious belief is in general to be understood along arational lines, still less is the idea that religious belief is to be understood differently from ordinary belief, in that it is not to be assessed rationally. Instead, while fundamental religious conviction is to be treated as a hinge commitment, and hence not as a form of K-apt belief (though it will still count as a belief in the folk sense), the subject's other religious beliefs will be akin to regular (K-apt) beliefs, and hence will be subject to rational evaluation in the usual way.⁸ This is why the position is only quasi-fideistic, and not a straightforward form of fideism. Moreover, this relates to an important feature of quasi-fideism which sets it apart from straight fideism, which is that the quasi-fideist maintains that there isn't anything special about the nature of religious belief in this regard. For although religious belief has at its heart arational hinge commitments, this is not something that is peculiar to religious belief as *all* belief has at its heart arational hinge commitments. The arational nature of religious hinge commitments is thus not a reason to be sceptical about the rational standing of religious belief more generally, or at least not a reason that wouldn't also be a reason to be sceptical about the rational standing of belief in general.

4. I've argued elsewhere for the merits of quasi-fideism over competing accounts of the rationality of religious belief, such as fideism, evidentialism, and reformed epistemology.⁹ My primary concern here is rather whether such a position faces the two problems noted above—*viz.*, that it invites a pernicious form of epistemic relativism and, relatedly, that it is unable to explain changes in one's religious commitments, including via rational means.

Given how quasi-fideism is described, one can easily see how each concern would arise. On this view a believer's fundamental religious conviction is a hinge commitment, and hence as such is part of the arational backdrop of certainty relative to which rational evaluations occur. Other agents will have different hinge commitments in this regard, whether different religious hinge commitments (in the case of other forms of religious belief), or the absence of religious hinge commitments (in the case of those who lack religious belief).¹⁰ The difficulty arises, however, once we consider a 'deep' disagreement between someone with a religious hinge commitment and someone who lacks this hinge commitment. For how is this disagreement to be rationally resolved, given that it involves differences in the set of each party's hinge commitments? Indeed, won't it simply be the case that each participant to this debate will maintain their hinge commitments regardless of this disagreement? Relatedly, how is quasi-fideism to explain how religious commitment can change over

time in rational terms, including being lost altogether, if that commitment is understood, at root, as arational?

For the straight fideist, there is no issue here to be concerned about. We should not expect a rational resolution of deep disagreements involving clashes of fundamental religious convictions (including the lack of them), as this is simply not a domain where reason has application. More specifically, the propriety, or otherwise, of having fundamental religious conviction is not meant to be subject to rational assessment. That such disagreements are rationally unresolvable is thus not so much a consequence of straight fideism as built into the position. These disagreements, on this view, are not the result of a clash of distinct epistemic systems, but rather represent (at most) a clash between an epistemic system and commitments that do not properly belong to an epistemic system at all. Relatedly, we shouldn't expect a rational story to be available about how one's religious commitments can change over time, since this is not a domain that is subject to this kind of evaluation in the first place.

Quasi-fideism, however, is in a very different situation in this regard. On this view the religious domain is precisely not subject to different standards of rational assessment when compared with other domains, much less is it immune to rational evaluation. Religious disagreements thus do genuinely represent clashes of epistemic system, systems that are distinct in virtue of their different hinge commitments (just as any kind of deep disagreement involving conflicting hinge commitments would constitute a clash of epistemic system). There is thus no way for quasi-fideism to contain the threat of epistemic relativism to only the religious sphere in the direct manner that straight fideism does.

Whether quasi-fideism differs from straight fideism in terms of the explanation it offers of changes in fundamental religious conviction is, however, an open question. On the face of it, it might be thought that there ought not to be any differences between these views on this score, given that for both positions such convictions are essentially arational. As we will see, however, the 'mixed' nature of quasi-fideism, such that a subject's religious commitments comprise both religious hinges and K-apt beliefs, means that it is able to offer a rational account of how religious hinge commitments can change over time.

5. Let's start with the worry about epistemic relativism, which is our overarching concern here. It's worth clarifying that the relativism at issue is specifically epistemic, and hence not concerned with the truth of the target claims. In particular, in any disagreement of this kind, where conflicting

stances are taken on the same proposition, only one party can be correct. Similarly, although one's hinge commitments are arationally held, this is nonetheless a commitment to their truth, and it is of course important that one's hinge commitments are true, given that they are the kind of claims where error would imply widespread falsity in one's system of beliefs. Indeed, if one's K-apt beliefs are in general to be in the market for knowledge, then one's hinge commitments had better be true.

For the quasi-fideist, then, insofar as there is religious knowledge, then one's arational religious hinge commitments need to be true. Accordingly, if the opposing party in this dispute is in fact correct, then it follows that the religious knowledge the subject thinks she has of her non-hinge religious (K-apt) beliefs is likely illusory. The issue that concerns us, however, abstracts away from the verdict on the truth of the target proposition—a verdict that is in any case moot—and concerns the fact that both parties seem to be entirely within their epistemic rights, as it were, to maintain their position (and maintain it with complete conviction too, insofar as the proposition being defended is a hinge commitment).

In order to evaluate this line of objection, we first need to return to the foundations of quasi-fideism in hinge epistemology and consider how the latter deals with the problem of epistemic relativism. If hinge epistemology can defang this line of objection, the issue will then be whether the application of hinge epistemology to the religious case as represented in quasi-fideism adds a new twist to the problem of epistemic relativism.

It will be useful in this regard to distinguish between a strong and a weak form of epistemic relativism. In its most general form, epistemic relativism is the idea that there can be distinct and incompatible epistemic systems, where these epistemic systems are equally legitimate from an epistemic point of view. Given the nature of our hinge commitments, any divergence in hinge commitments would entail epistemic relativism in this general sense.

There is also a more specific notion of epistemic relativism, however, which maintains not just that there are distinct, but equally legitimate, epistemic systems, but also that these epistemic systems are epistemically incommensurate in the sense that rational resolution of deep disagreements between these epistemic systems is in principle impossible. Notice that this incommensurability claim isn't entailed by epistemic relativism alone, as there could be distinct, but equally legitimate, epistemic systems which do in principle allow for rational resolution of disagreement. Indeed, hinge epistemology offers a case in point. While any divergence in hinge commitments would entail epistemic relativism in the general sense, it wouldn't entail epistemic incommensurability so long as the divergence in hinge commitments is peripheral. Provided that there is a wide-ranging overlap in

the hinge commitments held by both parties, then resolving deep disagreements, while it may face practical hurdles, is not in principle impossible.

Call any form of epistemic relativism that entails epistemic incommensurability *strong epistemic relativism*, and any form of epistemic relativism that doesn't entail epistemic incommensurability *weak epistemic relativism*.¹¹ The point of the foregoing is that hinge epistemology in itself only seems to entail weak epistemic relativism, as while it might entail the possibility of divergent hinge commitments, this is compatible with such a divergence being peripheral rather than substantial. One dialectical option when it comes to defending hinge epistemology in general against the charge of epistemic relativism is thus to contend that divergence in one's hinge commitments is by its nature marginal, and hence that epistemic incommensurability (and thus strong epistemic relativism), which is the real worry driving this charge, doesn't arise. As we will see, whether this is plausible depends very much on the nature of the hinge epistemology in play. Moreover, even if it is plausible as a defence of hinge epistemology in general, it is far from clear that such a defence could extend to the form of hinge epistemology at issue in quasi-fideism which specifically allows for a class of religious commitments to count as hinges where there is already widespread disagreement.

6. Hinge epistemology comes in many different forms, and some versions of the view are fairly sanguine about the challenge posed by strong epistemic relativism. In particular, if one is in general unconcerned about the possibility of epistemically incommensurable epistemic systems, then it will hardly be a desideratum of one's hinge epistemology that it is able to avoid strong epistemic relativism. Accordingly, one finds versions of hinge epistemology that embrace the variability of our hinge commitments, and hence are happy to allow that there can be quite widespread differences in a subject's hinge commitments. On such views it will follow that subjects can have significantly different epistemic systems that correspond to those hinge commitments, and hence strong epistemic relativism naturally ensues.¹²

In contrast, some versions of hinge epistemology do not allow for there to be large-scale variability in one's hinge commitments. This creates at least the conceptual space for a hinge epistemology that is only committed to weak rather than strong epistemic relativism. In particular, if one adopts a conception of hinge epistemology that entails that differences in one's hinge commitments are relatively minor, then while one might be committed to there being distinct epistemic systems, it needn't follow that these systems are epistemically incommensurable. What

becomes important now is whether there are significant overlaps in the hinge commitments in each system, and whether these overlaps are extensive enough to avoid epistemic incommensurability.

Interestingly, however, the versions of hinge epistemology that avoid strong epistemic relativism also tend to be such as to exclude the application of hinge epistemology to the religious case in the form of quasi-fideism. For example, it has been argued that one's hinge commitments are effectively necessary presuppositions for rational endeavor, in the sense that they are commitments that one needs to have in order to coherently engage with one's cognitive projects. It is no wonder, then, that one cannot gain a rational basis for these commitments through undertaking these cognitive projects, as that would be a kind of bootstrapping.¹³ On this conception of hinge commitments one would thus expect there to be extensive overlaps in one's hinge commitments, as they will be required of all rational subjects, and hence they are in a sense universal. It also follows on this conception, however, that fundamental religious convictions are not plausible candidates to be hinge commitments, given that they are clearly not required for rational inquiry. In defending an account of hinge commitments that avoids strong epistemic relativism one is thus prevented from applying the proposal to the religious case.

7. It is not necessary, however, that a hinge epistemology that avoids strong epistemic relativism must give up on the application of this view to religious conviction. In particular, on what I take to be the most compelling way of thinking about our hinge commitments, we can consistently do both. It would, of course, take me too far afield to defend my favoured account of hinge commitments against all alternatives here, but let me at least outline what the view involves.

Recall that we noted above that according to Wittgenstein a subject's particular hinge commitments are manifestations of an overarching certainty that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken. Call this overarching hinge certainty the *über hinge commitment*. It is this general certainty that needs to be in place in order for one to undertake rational evaluations and thereby occupy the space of reasons. A subject's *über hinge commitment* will, however, be manifest in particular conditions via an optimal certainty in particular propositions, such as that one has two hands, that one has never been to the moon, and so on. In particular, these specific hinge commitments are a product of the combination of the subject's *über hinge commitment* and her set of K-apt beliefs. This is why, for example, it is a hinge commitment of ordinary conditions that one has two hands, but it wouldn't be a hinge commitment in an abnormal situation in which one is waking up in a hospital bed after surviving a large explosion. In those conditions, where one's set of

K-apt beliefs will be relevantly different, the über hinge commitment will not be manifest in a hinge certainty that one hands at all (and hence, for example, one could in this scenario come to know that one has hands by looking to see if they are there, something that would be simply incoherent in normal conditions). We can thus explain the way in which one's specific hinge commitments are tied to particular conditions in virtue of how they are effectively a function of one's über hinge commitment and one's set of K-apt beliefs.

It follows from this way of thinking about hinge commitments that these commitments cannot be in tension with one's wider set of K-apt beliefs, since the content of one's specific hinge commitments is determined by those beliefs. This explains why there can be pathological certainties held by a subject which are not thereby hinge commitments. For example, there are cases of abnormal psychology where subjects seem to become convinced of bizarre claims, such as that members of their close family have been replaced by imposters.¹⁴ While there is undoubtedly a kind of certainty in play here—at least to the extent that subjects are consistently, and sincerely, adamant about what they believe—it is also clear that this certainty is in tension with the subject's wider set of beliefs, which is what makes the commitment in play so odd.¹⁵ On the conception of hinge commitments just outlined, this suffices to ensure that these certainties would not count as hinge commitments.

Thinking of specific hinge commitments as manifesting the über hinge commitment also explains why such commitments are not theoretical claims, as such claims are rarely, if ever, of a kind that would manifest one's über hinge commitment. Wittgenstein was, of course, famously suspicious of the contentfulness of theoretical philosophical claims on account of how they employ everyday words in a way that is completely divorced from normal usage. This is why he thought statements like 'There is an external world' or 'There are physical objects' are simply nonsense (at least, in the latter case, as asserted by a philosopher for philosophical ends).¹⁶ But even setting aside this general scepticism about the content of theoretical philosophical claims, there is still the wider point about how our certainty in theoretical claims is by its nature weaker than the certainty that is associated with everyday convictions, not least because of how our everyday practices manifest deeply ingrained ways of acting (where, recall, our hinge certainty is primarily revealed in our actions).¹⁷ I think this explains why, for example, a subject's conviction in a conspiracy theory, no matter how strong this might be, is not normally a good candidate for being a hinge commitment due to its essentially theoretical nature.¹⁸

Conceiving of one's specific hinge commitments as manifestations of the über hinge commitment also explains how one's hinge commitments can change over time. In particular, it can explain how they can change via rational processes even though they are not directly responsive to rational considerations. It was a hinge commitment for Moore, writing around a century ago, that he had never been the moon, and it is still a hinge commitment for most people today. And yet we can easily imagine how circumstances might change over time such that someone alive today would no longer have this as one of their hinge commitments. In particular, if space travel, and moon visitation in particular, became entirely commonplace, then eventually this proposition might be such that one could be wrong about it without this implying that one's beliefs are radically in error. Moreover, notice that this process by which one loses one's hinge commitment to this proposition occurs via a responsiveness to rational considerations, even if the hinge commitment itself is not so responsive. For what is happening here is that as the world changes, so the subject's set of K-apt beliefs changes as a consequence, with the result that over time this proposition no longer manifests the subject's über hinge commitment.¹⁹

This point about how one's hinge commitments can be indirectly responsive to rational considerations on this account is important for our issue regarding epistemic relativism, since it highlights how even a clash between hinge commitments, and thus a clash of epistemic systems, might still be susceptible to at least an indirect rational resolution. In particular, so long as the divergence in hinge commitments is not extensive, then there ought to be enough shared ground for one party to be able to change the K-apt beliefs of the other party, and that, in turn, could ensure that over time the other subject's commitment to the contested proposition ceases to be a hinge commitment.

Of course, none of the foregoing helps much if there is a widespread divergence in hinge commitments, and nothing we have said so far excludes that possibility. Nonetheless, there is a rationale for why such divergence will be limited that is part of this account of hinge commitments. In order to see this, we need to understand how Wittgenstein describes our acquisition of hinge commitments. As noted above, this is not done via a process of ratiocination—we are not usually explicitly taught our hinge commitments, but rather absorb them along with other things that we are taught. So, for example, one is not taught that one has hands, but rather to do things with one's hands, and so on.²⁰ The relevant point for our purposes is that our hinge commitments are not like assumptions that we adopt (or elect to not adopt), but are rather grounded in shared practices. This is why Wittgenstein's account of hinge commitments goes hand-in-hand with a view—these days

associated with holistic forms of content externalism—whereby we simply cannot make sense of radical divergences in our commitments.²¹ As Wittgenstein puts it, in order to make a move in the space of reasons—to judge, to doubt, to count as making a mistake—one must “already judge in conformity with mankind.” (OC, §156) The upshot is that there are limits on this conception of hinge commitments in terms of how extensive a divergence is possible in one’s hinge commitments. The combination of this point with the manner in which a über hinge epistemology can account for the rational change of one’s arational hinge commitments ensures that hinge epistemology entails only weak epistemic relativism and not also its strong counterpart.²²

8. We are now in a position to understand in more detail how fundamental religious conviction might count as a hinge commitment. The idea is that this is not to be understood as a merely theoretical commitment, like an assumption, or as simply something that the subject is optimally certain of, but which might be in conflict with the subject’s K-apt beliefs more generally (as might apply to a pathological certainty). It is rather meant to be ingrained within the subject’s shared practices to such an extent that a commitment to it is a manifestation of the über hinge certainty. For that subject, the falsity of the religious hinge would require massive error in one’s worldview, and hence would be in conflict with one’s über hinge commitment. As such, the religious hinge commitment cannot be in tension with the subject’s wider K-apt beliefs, as it is effectively a manifestation of them. Relatedly, we can also explain how religious conviction, even though arationally held, can nonetheless change over time, including via rational processes. For if the subject’s wider K-apt beliefs undergo sufficient change, something that will usually occur in rational ways, then eventually this can be such that the fundamental religious conviction is no longer a manifestation of the über hinge certainty. The arational nature of fundamental religious conviction thus does not insulate it from change, including rational change, any more than one’s hinge commitment to having never been to the moon is insulated from rational change as the wider world alters in salient ways.

If hinge epistemology on the über hinge view can avoid strong epistemic relativism in the manner outlined above, and quasi-fideism is a natural consequence of this view, then does it follow that quasi-fideism can evade strong epistemic relativism too? Whether this is so depends on whether applying hinge epistemology to the religious case adds a new impetus for strong epistemic relativism. There are some reasons for thinking that this might be the case, not least that there are some disanalogies between non-religious and religious hinges. For example, I noted earlier that a common

feature of our everyday certainties is that they are not explicitly taught, but are rather swallowed down in the world picture that we are taught. But this is obviously not the case with regard to the religious hinge commitments. On the contrary, such commitments are usually regularly affirmed as part of a religious practice. Accordingly, even if these commitments are treated as self-evident claims that don't require rational support in the way that other claims do, they are certainly not thereby implicit to one's everyday practices in the manner of our non-religious hinges.

Relatedly, even though religious hinge commitments might not be treated as requiring rational support, it is usually thought that such support is available. Indeed, many religious traditions involve explicit attempts to offer rational support (e.g., natural theology). That's entirely compatible with quasi-fideism, since the latter is primarily a thesis about the *basis* for the religious hinge commitments—i.e., what matters is that they are in fact rooted in an arational certainty rather than grounded in reasons, regardless of what rational story is told by the religious community. Nonetheless, this marks a disanalogy with non-religious hinge commitments, as there is no parallel practice of offering rational support for these commitments.

That one is usually taught one's fundamental religious commitments, and indeed even offered reasons in support of them, needn't be a count against treating them as *bona fide* hinge commitments. It's enough to make hinge commitments distinctive that they can be optimal certainties that need not be taught, or otherwise made explicit to the subject; it's not necessary to insist that they must be implicit. Indeed, Wittgenstein's main point in this regard is that such claims are not learnt, where by this he means coming to believe them (e.g., by being taught) on the basis of reasons. Relatedly, he doesn't deny that they can be made explicit to the subject (OC, §152). Similarly, as we just noted, what's important about our hinge commitments is that they are not, in fact, grounded in reasons, but rather reflect the primitive über hinge certainty. That's in principle consistent with there being a wider practice of offering reasons for these claims, though on this view such practices would be in a sense confused, as they are implicitly treating the commitment as if it is grounded in reasons when in fact it is not that kind of propositional attitude at all.

Nonetheless, I think there is a potential disanalogy in play here between religious and non-religious hinge commitments. Consider our everyday, non-religious hinge commitments. On the face of it, they can seem to be relative to a range of factors, such as relative to person (my name is such-and-such), geographical region (I am speaking English), cultural epoch (I have never been to the moon), and so on. But such apparent diversity in everyday hinge commitments masks an underlying commonality, in keeping with the point made earlier about how there tends to be widespread

convergence, rather than divergence, in our hinge commitments. It may be a hinge commitment for me that I am speaking English, while a hinge commitment for someone on the other side of the world that they are speaking Chinese, but these are effectively the same hinge commitment, albeit manifest with a slightly different content because of the different experiences of the two subjects involved. The same goes for many other hinge commitments. There is, for example, a general hinge that one's name is such-and-such, even if the particular name that features in that commitments is obviously different from person to person. And so on.

We can think of this generality in terms of how, for most hinge commitments at least, everyone would have that particular hinge commitment were they to be in the specific conditions that the target subject finds herself in. I do not have the hinge commitment that I am speaking Chinese, but were I to have been raised in the region, then I surely would have acquired this hinge commitment. Similarly, in a future world where moon travel is commonplace, and where it is consequently no longer a hinge commitment that one has never been to the moon, one would surely be able to understand why it would have been natural in the past for this to have been a widespread hinge commitment, given the different circumstances that were previously in place.

Religious hinge commitments would seem to be rather different in this regard. In particular, we do not have any great difficulty comprehending how people raised in the very same communities can nonetheless differ in terms of their fundamental religious commitments (where this includes lacking such commitments altogether). That suggests that having a hinge commitment to there being, say, a personal God is very different from having a hinge commitment to one's name being such-and-such. While it is effectively a test of one's sanity that one is certain of the latter, the former seems to be something that reasonable people can disagree about (and often do).

This particular disanalogy effectively calls into question whether fundamental religious commitment is a manifestation of the über hinge certainty, at least in a secular and pluralistic age when those commitments are known to not be universally endorsed. In normal circumstances, being wrong about what one's name is or whether one has hands would clearly suggest that one's conception of the world as a whole and one's place in it is radically and fundamentally mistaken. That's why this commitment is a manifestation of the über hinge certainty. It is also why we would struggle to comprehend how someone in normal conditions could lack this hinge commitment, and hence would look for causes rather than reasons to explain the situation. It seems, however, that fundamental religious conviction isn't like that, as we can perfectly well understand how other people could lack it. In particular, we don't seem to have to attribute massive error to such people in

order to account for why they have different fundamental religious convictions (which would be a barrier to comprehending them), much less are we obliged to understand their convictions in non-rational terms (such as by appealing to the notion that they have had a bump on the head, as might be appropriate for someone who doubts what their name is). If that's right, however, then why should we regard such fundamental convictions as the manifestation of the über hinge certainty?

9. The upshot of the foregoing is that while appealing to the über hinge commitment to understand the notion of a hinge commitment helps hinge epistemology to avoid the challenge posed by strong epistemic relativism, it does so at the expense of undermining the application of hinge epistemology to the religious case. That means that quasi-fideism is still under threat from this challenge. Conversely, of course, one could opt to retain quasi-fideism and reject the über hinge conception of our hinge commitments, but then one would lose the response to strong epistemic relativism that this account of hinge commitments offers us. How should we respond to this dilemma?

I think the answer lies in looking again at how fundamental religious commitments are meant to manifest the über hinge certainty. It's true that we can comprehend how others might have different fundamental convictions in this regard, where this means that we can make sense of why they have the commitments they do without attributing massive error to them (much less by explaining these convictions in purely causal terms). But I don't think that it follows that this means these convictions are not properly understood as manifestations of the über hinge certainty. What is key here is that in understanding another subject who has distinct hinge commitments in a way that does not attribute massive error to them we are effectively compartmentalizing, and thereby *domesticating*, their hinge commitments. I say 'domesticating' because we are effectively understanding them in terms of *our* epistemic frame of reference rather than theirs. From their perspective, in contrast, this commitment cannot be compartmentalized, which is why they cannot themselves make rational sense of the possibility of this error.²³ For them, their whole life is infused with religious commitment, such that one cannot simply detach this from their other commitments while keeping the general truth of the whole intact. But insofar as we lack the religious hinges, then there is nothing preventing us from treating the religious hinge as false while charitably treating the subject's other commitments (whether hinges or K-apt beliefs) as mostly true.

Interestingly, Wittgenstein (OC, §667) touches on this point himself while discussing the possibility of a clash of hinge commitments, in this case regarding whether one has ever been to the moon. He imagines going to an unfamiliar country and being confronted by people who are

convinced that they travel to the moon in their dreams, the idea being that one's hinge commitment that one has never been to the moon is contrasted by their hinge commitment that they have, where in both cases this commitment has been swallowed down as part of one's inculturation.

Wittgenstein points out that it would be incoherent to say to such people that one might be mistaken about one's own hinge commitment, as that would imply that one could tell a rational story about how one might be in error in this regard, something that one cannot do with regard to one's hinge commitments. By parity of reasoning, the same would also be true of the other party with their 'moondream' hinge commitment. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein conspicuously doesn't maintain that each party could not treat the other as mistaken, such that there is a rational story that they could tell about the other party as to why they have this mistaken belief. And, indeed, via the kind of 'domestication' strategy just described, it seems that we can do just that. As we might put it, the point is that such a story is only available from the outside looking in, and not available from the inside looking out.

Viewed this way, the putative disanalogy between religious and everyday non-religious hinges starts to look much less spectacular. Our inability to rationally make sense of how someone could, in normal circumstances, lack the hinge commitment to having hands simply reveals our inability to be able to conceive of what a completely different cultural upbringing would be like that wouldn't issue in this hinge commitment. As the case of the 'moondream' people illustrates, however, with ingenuity we can conceive of how even everyday hinge commitments might not be shared, without this implying that the other party is incomprehensible.

10. The über hinge conception of hinge commitments can thus accommodate religious hinge commitments, contrary to line of argument we considered above. Furthermore, notice that the manner in which this is attained doesn't diminish the case we made for thinking that the über hinge account can evade the challenge of strong epistemic relativism. In making sense of deep disagreements involving clashes of hinge commitments, one is not thereby conceding the possibility of widespread divergence in one's hinge commitments such that epistemic incommensurability ensues. The result is rather the opposite: our ability to make rational sense of the other party precisely depends on our capacity to charitably understand their wider commitments (both other hinges and K-apt beliefs) as generally true. Moreover, isn't this exactly what is borne out in our actual experiences of such deep disagreements? It is the wider overlap in one's commitments that

enables this to be a genuine disagreement at all, and which thus provides the framework for the clash of hinge commitments to be so much as coherent.

This way of thinking about deep disagreements also explains why they don't tend to be tractable in the normal ways. Since one's hinge commitments are not directly responsive to rational considerations, then simply aiming counterevidence at one's adversary's hinge commitments will not be effective. Relatedly, since there are distinct epistemic systems in play, it is not as if what counts as evidence for the one party would be guaranteed to be deemed relevant by the other party anyway. Again, I think this is borne out by our actual experiences of these deep disagreements, where 'head-on' debates between leading figures, each directly targeting the hinge commitments of the other party, tends to convince no-one, with each group effectively simply preaching to their own choir.²⁴

Nonetheless, that deep disagreements are not amenable to a 'head-on' resolution does not entail that they are rationally irresolvable. The point is rather that such disagreements need to be resolved in a 'side-on' fashion. We noted earlier how a subject's hinge commitments can change over time in response to changes in their K-apt beliefs, where the latter alter in rational ways in response to new evidence and changes in circumstance. We saw that the über hinge conception of hinge commitments can explain what is going on here, as one's specific hinge commitments are a function of how the über hinge certainty, in conjunction with one's set of K-apt beliefs, manifests itself in hinge commitments to particular propositions. This shows us how we would go about resolving a deep disagreement in a rational way. One needs to exploit one's common ground in order to change the K-apt beliefs of the other party. If one can change enough of them, then over time one can, in principle, effect a change in their hinge commitments too.

Of course, changes of this kind will be hard to achieve, but that is to be expected, given that we are dealing with disagreements that concern deeply held commitments, convictions that have over time become second nature. Indeed, if one were offering a story of how deep disagreements could be resolved that made their resolution straightforward, then that would be a count against the proposal. The crux of the matter, however, is that there is a rational route available, and hence that epistemic incommensurability, and thus the challenge posed by strong epistemic relativism, is averted. Quasi-fideism is thus no more susceptible to this challenge than hinge epistemology in general, at least insofar as one has the right hinge epistemology in play.²⁵

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NOTES

¹ Published as Wittgenstein (1969). Hereafter ‘OC’.

² See, for example, the entitlement account of hinge commitments offered by Wright (e.g., 2004). See also Coliva (2015) for the development of a related position.

³ That one is not ignorant of propositions which are not in the market for knowledge is one reason why ignorance cannot simply be understood as lack of knowledge—see Pritchard (2021; *forthcomingb*) for further discussion of this point.

⁴ Our recognition of our hinge commitments does give rise to a certain kind of anxiety, however, which I have elsewhere termed *epistemic vertigo*. See Pritchard (2015*a*, part 4; 2019; 2020).

⁵ I develop this account of hinge commitments and their epistemic import in a number of places, but see especially Pritchard (2015*b*, *passim*). For some of the other key discussions of hinge commitments in the contemporary literature, see Strawson (1985), McGinn (1989), Williams (1991), Wright (2004), Coliva (2010; 2015), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For a recent survey of this literature, see Pritchard (2017*b*).

⁶ See, for example, OC, §107, §361 & §612. Moreover, as I’ve argued elsewhere, part of the stimulus for Wittgenstein’s account of hinge commitments is the work of John Henry Newman, particularly Newman (1979 [1870]), concerning the rationality of religious belief—see Pritchard (2015*b*). For further discussion of the relationship between Newman and Wittgenstein in this regard, see Barrett (1997) and Kienzler (2006).

⁷ See especially Wittgenstein (1966). For two important discussions of a straightforward fideistic reading of the later Wittgenstein, see Nielsen (1967) and Philips (1976).

⁸ Since quasi-fideism holds that religious hinge commitments are a kind of folk belief (in that they involve a commitment to the truth of the target proposition), this excludes a fictionalist account of fundamental religious commitment whereby religious faith is not to be understood as involving belief at all (even in the folk sense). For some of the key contemporary discussions of the relationship between faith and belief, see Pojman (1986), Audi (1991), Alston (1996), and Howard-Snyder (2016).

⁹ See Pritchard (2011; 2015*b*; 2017*a*; 2018*b*; *forthcominga*). For some critical discussions of quasi-fideism, see di Ceglie (2017; *forthcoming*), Ljiljana & Slavišab (2017), Bennett-Hunter (2019), de Ridder (2019), Gascoigne (2019, *passim*), Boncompagni (2021), Gomez-Alonso (2021), Smith (2021), and Williams (2021).

¹⁰ A further case of interest in this regard would be subjects who have religious conviction, but where this is not best thought of as a hinge commitment but rather as an ordinary K-apt belief. Perhaps, for example, there is a type of religious believer whose religious conviction is grounded in rational considerations, such as the cosmological considerations that are behind contemporary fine-tuning arguments, as recently outlined in, for example, Hawthorne & Isaacs (2017). Given that it is not part of quasi-fideism to maintain that religious conviction has to be understood as a hinge commitment (but only that it is usually best thought of in these terms), then this is one way in which a subject could lack religious hinge commitments. In what follows I will set this complication to one side and treat those who lack religious hinge commitments as non-believers.

¹¹ For further discussion of this distinction between strong and weak epistemic relativism, including its relevance to hinge epistemology, see Pritchard (2018*c*). See also Pritchard (2010).

¹² For discussion of epistemic relativism and its relationship to hinge epistemology, see Williams (2007), Pritchard (2010; 2018*c*), and Kusch (2016).

¹³ See, especially, Wright’s (2004) entitlement account of hinge commitments and Coliva’s (2015) related account of a hinge-based extended rationality.

¹⁴ This is known as Capgras syndrome. See also the Cotard delusion that one is dead or disembodied. For further discussion of delusions and their philosophical significance, see Bortolotti (2018). See also endnote 15.

¹⁵ Of course, one theoretical option in such cases is not to regard the subject as genuinely believing the target proposition (even in the folk sense of the term) because they aren’t really committed to its truth, despite their protestations to the contrary. In that case it would not plausibly be a candidate for being a hinge commitment, even despite the surface certainty in play.

¹⁶ The opening remarks in *On Certainty*, which correspond to the first of the four notebooks that make up the work, are largely devoted to the unintelligibility of such claims. See, for example, OC, §§35-37.

¹⁷ One drawback of the conception of hinge commitments as necessary presuppositions for cognitive endeavor described above is that it ends up treating theoretical claims, both of a philosophical variety and more generally, as hinge commitments. On this proposal, for example, commitments to the reality of the external world and to the uniformity of nature are counted as hinge commitments.

¹⁸ Indeed, I’ve argued elsewhere that conspiracy theories are often not even best thought of as K-apt beliefs, but rather as a kind of pretense of (K-apt) belief. See Pritchard (2018*a*).

¹⁹ Notice that essentially the same process explains why a subject might, in unusual conditions, no longer be hinge committed to having hands. Going back to the example offered earlier of a scenario in which an agent wakes in a

hospital bed after a large explosion, the subject's set of K-apt beliefs is bound to be significantly different in relevant respects to what it was prior to these unusual conditions obtaining. Moreover, the changes in the K-apt beliefs in response to these changed circumstances could be entirely rational. And yet this change in the K-apt beliefs affects whether the über hinge commitment manifests itself in this specific hinge commitment. There is thus a rational process in play which leads, albeit indirectly, to the change in the subject's hinge commitment.

²⁰ See, for example, OC, §153 & §476.

²¹ See, especially, Davidson (1983), and in particular his use of the principle of charity to defend the claim that 'belief is its nature veridical'. For further discussion of Davidson's content externalism in this respect, see Pritchard (2013).

²² This is also one reason why the 'hinge' metaphor, although it is the one that stuck with Wittgenstein's commentators, is perhaps the least apt of all the metaphors that Wittgenstein uses to illustrate his proposal. What Wittgenstein has in mind, of course, is the idea that something must stand fast in order for something else (in this case rational evaluation) to function. But the hinge metaphor also seems to imply an optionality that Wittgenstein didn't have in mind—one can, after all, move one's hinges at will, and the door will then turn differently. This makes our hinge commitments look like they are matters of individual choice, which is clearly not what Wittgenstein had in mind. This is evident from the other metaphors that Wittgenstein uses in this regard, which do not have any hint of optionality and stress instead the social structures that give rise to one's hinge commitments. Wittgenstein notes, for example, that our hinge certainties constitute the "scaffolding" of our thoughts (OC, §211), that they form the "foundations of our language-games" (OC, §§401-3), that they represent the implicit "world-picture" from within which we inquire, the "inherited background against which [we] distinguish between true and false" (OC, §§94-5), and that they are part of the 'river-bed' that guides the 'river' of thought and inquiry (OC, §§96-99).

²³ This only applies insofar as the religious conviction is a hinge commitment, of course. The kind of religious believer described in endnote 10 above, for example, might be perfectly well able to effect such a compartmentalization.

²⁴ For example, I think the high-profile debates between the so-called 'New Atheists' and (for the most part) representatives of Christianity were of this form, with each side simply promoting the party line to their own supporters.

²⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to Sherif Salem.