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Author

Pritchard, Duncan

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For *Evidentialism at 40: New Arguments, New Angles*
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RETHINKING EVIDENTIALISM

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

University of California, Irvine

dhpritch@uci.edu

ORCID: [0000-0002-5997-0752](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5997-0752)

ABSTRACT. Evidentialism is usually thought of as an inherently conservative epistemological proposal; indeed, as a kind of *antidote* to epistemological radicalism. In an irenic spirit, however, I want to argue that the core evidentialist theses are in fact compatible with some quite heterodox positions in epistemology. I focus on two in particular that are close to my heart: Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology and epistemological disjunctivism. My goal is not to defend these positions, much less defend the combination of these positions with evidentialism. It is rather to demonstrate, on the occasion of its anniversary, that what makes evidentialism epistemologically conservative is not the core theses associated with this view, but rather the ancillary commitments of its main proponents. This is a result that, I contend, evidentialists should welcome.

KEYWORDS: Belief; Epistemological Disjunctivism; Epistemology; Evidentialism; Knowledge; Hinge Epistemology; Wittgenstein, Ludwig.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I want to consider the general idea of evidentialism. Evidentialism is often considered a quite conservative option in epistemology, certainly when compared to its cooler relatives, like virtue epistemology (or, dare I say, anti-risk virtue epistemology).¹ My goal is not to defend evidentialism, as it's not a position I endorse, but rather to show that it is at least compatible with some quite radical views in epistemology.² I want to focus on two such proposals that I have been associated with in my own work: the hinge epistemology advanced in Wittgenstein's final notebooks (published as *On Certainty*),³ and the epistemological disjunctivism that is rooted in the work of John McDowell (e.g., 1995) and which I've offered a systematic presentation of in the language of contemporary epistemology.⁴ That evidentialism is compatible with such views is not to say, of course, that the defenders of evidentialism may be persuaded to reconceive of their proposal along these radical lines. In fact, I suspect that they would be very resistant to any form of epistemological radicalism. But what this does show, however, is that the conservative reputation of evidentialism is not due to the core evidentialist theses but rather reflects ancillary claims that the main defenders of evidentialism tend to hold.

2. EVIDENTIALISM IN OUTLINE

I take the core thesis of evidentialism to be a claim about the relationship between evidence and propositional justification. We can formulate it as follows:

Belief Evidentialism

A subject *S* is epistemically justified in believing proposition *p* at time *t* if and only if *S*'s evidence at *t* supports believing that *p*.⁵

So construed, evidentialism is primarily a claim about *propositional* justification—i.e., what justification is available (at that time) for a belief that *p*, regardless of whether the subject does in fact form a belief on that evidential basis. Simply put, one's propositional justification depends on whether the evidential basis at that moment supports it. If the evidential basis is lacking, then propositional justification is lacking also. Since this is a claim about propositional justification only, then we can set aside issues of knowledge (at least given that we accept, as most do, that justified

true belief doesn't amount to knowledge, and hence that forming a belief on an evidential basis that suffices for propositional justification wouldn't thereby guarantee you knowledge).

Notice that this core version of evidentialism is a bit weaker than the canonical version offered in seminal works by its main proponents, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman.⁶ This is because they want their version of evidentialism to not simply govern propositional justification for belief but for doxastic attitudes more generally. We can formulate this more general thesis as follows:

Doxastic State Evidentialism

A subject *S* is justified in taking a doxastic attitude towards some proposition *p* at time *t* if and only if *S*'s evidence at *t* supports the adoption of that doxastic attitude.⁷

One gets the general idea. Evidentialism now covers not just what beliefs would be appropriate, given the evidence, but also what doubts would be appropriate, what suspensions of belief would be appropriate, and so on. In what follows, for convenience, we will focus on the core evidentialist thesis, though as we will see, nothing really turns on this—the main points we will make would apply just as much to doxastic state evidentialism as they would to belief evidentialism.

There's one more element of evidentialism that we need to get onto the table before we can proceed. This is the conception of evidence in play, as that's obviously crucial to understanding how we are to interpret these evidentialist theses. In particular, evidence is here to be interpreted in terms of the subject's mental states. That is, the subject in the relevant sense 'has' the evidence because it is part of her mental states. It is not enough that there simply exists objectively good evidence for the target proposition, since were the subject to lack access to that evidence by it not being part of her mental states (e.g., by having beliefs about that evidence, or experiences that provide evidence), then it that won't do the justificatory work that the evidentialist wants for their account of propositional justification. This is the sense in which evidentialism is an internalist theory of propositional justification, in contrast, for example, to reliabilism, which makes no such demand on evidence.⁸

With our understanding of evidentialism set out, let us now see how such a proposal could be made compatible with Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology and epistemological disjunctivism.

3. EVIDENTIALISM CAN EMBRACE HINGE EPISTEMOLOGY

In his final notebooks, Wittgenstein offered a radically new conception of the structure of rational evaluation. Naturally, there are many competing accounts of what Wittgenstein had in mind.

Inevitably, however, I will be offering you just my own, not only because I don't have the space to discuss alternative proposals, but because (of course) I think my interpretation is the correct one.⁹ Accordingly, henceforth when I describe Wittgenstein's proposal, the reader should take this to mean my specific rendering of Wittgenstein's proposal. In addition, the reader should also note that I will merely be describing this account, and not defending it (something that I have done at length elsewhere).¹⁰ The point is not whether you are persuaded of the correctness of this Wittgensteinian position, but only that evidentialism can be made compatible with such a radical proposal.

Wittgenstein's core contention is that all rational evaluation presupposes an overarching hinge certainty—a total and utter conviction—in the general veracity of one's worldview. That is, it is a requirement of even being someone who can undertake rational evaluations—who, as we might put it, operates in the space of reasons—that one has this overarching hinge certainty in the general veracity of their worldview. I refer to this overarching hinge certainty as the *über hinge commitment*.¹¹

The reason that the *über hinge commitment* is a 'hinge' (OC, §341-43) is that it provides the framework—the 'scaffolding' (OC, §211), to use another of Wittgenstein's metaphors—on which the practice of rational evaluation turns. Note that it immediately follows from this picture that the *über hinge commitment* is an arational certainty. Since it provides the framework for rational evaluation, it cannot be itself rationally evaluated. Indeed, Wittgenstein's thought is that this overarching certainty is not grounded in reason at all, but rather in action. It is a certainty that is visceral: 'animal', 'primitive'. (OC, §359, §475) We manifest our *über hinge commitment* in the worldview by the way that we (ordinarily, anyway) unhesitantly act in the world, thereby revealing our abiding certainty in the veracity of our worldview. (Wittgenstein approvingly quotes Goethe in this respect: "In the beginning was the deed.") (OC, §396) Relatedly, the subject doesn't need to have formulated in any explicit way the content of the *über hinge commitment* (indeed, usually they won't), for what is important on the Wittgensteinian account is rather how this certainty is revealed in one's actions. We display our deep certainty in the veracity of the worldview not by the thoughts that we formulate, but by how our actions reveal our general confidence in the correctness of our worldview.

Once one grants the existence of the essentially arational *über hinge commitment*, then a number of interesting consequences follow. One consequence, which Wittgenstein explores at length in *On Certainty*, is that there are a body of everyday commonsense certainties which effectively inherit the visceral certainty of the *über hinge commitment*. Consider one's certainty that one has hands in normal conditions. One might think that such certainty is grounded in reasons, such as the

sight or feel of one's hands. Wittgenstein offers a detailed case that this is implausible. In fact, we could make no sense of the idea of being wrong about such a thing in normal conditions—having hands is not like being in possession of one's car keys, where the possibility of error is even conceivable. The reason for this is that to be wrong about something like this in these conditions is for one's worldview as a whole to be in error. That is, when it comes to these everyday certainties, a doubt here would 'drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.' (OC, §613) That's just to say, of course, that these specific everyday certainties are effectively manifestations of the overarching über hinge certainty. And that means that they mirror the über hinge certainty in being essentially arational commitments, displayed in our actions rather than grounded in reasons.

Here is a second important consequence of the radical new picture of the structure of rational evaluation that Wittgenstein is offering. On this proposal, it is in the very nature of rational evaluation that it is essentially local. The very idea of a fully general rational evaluation, whereby one rationally evaluates one's commitments all at once—think, for example, of the kind of rational evaluation that Descartes was attempting in the *Meditations*—is simply incoherent. In particular, radical sceptical arguments, on this view, essentially depend on a faulty philosophical picture that supposes that one can simply extend the scope of one's rational evaluations without limit. Similarly, traditional responses to radical scepticism that attempt to show that our commitments as a whole are on a good rational footing are also problematic, as they subscribe to the same faulty philosophical picture. Once this faulty philosophical picture is removed, then much of the impetus for radical scepticism, and for traditional forms of anti-scepticism, disappears.

Note too a related point in this regard. One aspect of the Wittgensteinian view that many find particularly radical is the suggestion that at the very heart of our rational practices are commitments that are essentially arational, and hence unknown. That can feel very unsettling.¹² But if Wittgenstein is right, then the fact that we are unable to know our hinge commitments should not be concerning to us. It is not as if one is ignorant of one's hinge commitments, as if they are propositions that we should know but are unable to know. That is, our lack of knowledge of our hinge commitments is not a cognitive limitation on our parts. Just as one's inability to picture a circle-square does not indicate an imaginative limitation, so one's inability to know one's hinge commitments does not indicate a cognitive limitation.¹³

Now that we have this overview of Wittgenstein's radical hinge account of the structure of rational evaluation on the table, we can ask whether it is compatible with evidentialism. On the face of it, the proposal seems diametrically opposed to evidentialism, in that it allows there to be a kind

of commitment—an outright certainty no less—that is not rationally grounded. Evidence and reasons are not quite the same, of course, but for our purposes we can gloss over the differences and grant that such hinge certainties are not evidentially grounded either. But then how can it be legitimate to have such hinge certainties from an evidentialist point of view?

A moment's reflection reveals that this reasoning is much too quick, however. Let's start with belief evidentialism. The first thing to note is that this is a thesis about when a belief enjoys propositional justification. But the whole point of Wittgenstein's discussion of our hinge commitments is that they are outside the realm of rational evaluation altogether, and so the question of whether they can enjoy propositional justification simply doesn't gain a grip here. Put another way, on this proposal there could be no such thing as a rational (/evidential) basis such that, if we formed our hinge certainty on this basis it would be rationally (/evidentially) grounded and hence justified. That's just not the kind of thing that a hinge certainty is.

Note that there is a bit of an equivocation here, as we are picking out the target proposition *qua* hinge commitment, but whether a particular proposition amounts to a hinge commitment can vary with one's circumstances. Take the hinge commitment that one has hands. This is only guaranteed to be a hinge commitment in normal circumstances, as there are abnormal conditions in which it wouldn't function in this way. If I awake in hospital after a serious car accident, for example, then it might make perfect sense to doubt the existence of my hands and to treat my sight of them as a rational basis for believing that they remain intact. The point is that in these particular conditions, the über hinge commitment does not generate a specific hinge commitment in this proposition, as it does in ordinary conditions. In these special circumstances, however, one's belief in this proposition could well be rationally (/evidentially) grounded, and hence there is nothing preventing one from taking an evidentialist line on this proposition if one explicitly construes it as not being a hinge commitment. The point thus stands that one can have hinge commitments and belief evidentialism.

But there is more. As I have argued in my writings on hinge certainties, it is important to specify the kind of propositional attitude in play. Contrast the folk notion of belief with a more specific notion of belief that I will call *K-apt belief* (for reasons that will soon be apparent). The folk notion of belief is notoriously permissive. It is, to use Marvin Minsky's (2006, 2) memorable phrase, a 'suitcase term', in that it covers a range of quite different propositional attitudes. Indeed, it is arguably sufficient for belief in the folk sense that one sincerely endorses *p*, regardless of the manner of that endorsement. That's why such diverse propositional attitudes as acceptance, scientific

commitment, religious faith, and delusions all get characterized as (folk) beliefs. As epistemologists, however, we implicitly restrict our attention to a more specific propositional attitude, one that has some crucial base-level connections to reasons and truth. In particular, we are interested in that propositional attitude that is a constituent part of knowledge. This is K-apt belief. Not all of the folk notions of belief satisfy that restriction. We do not need to get into the reeds of this, as all that matters for our purposes is that hinge commitments, while beliefs in the folk sense, are not K-apt beliefs. Here is the reason why. One cannot have a K-apt belief that p while being aware that one has no rational (/evidential) basis for regarding p as being true. Note that this doesn't exclude the possibility that one has a groundless K-apt belief; the point is just that one cannot be aware of this fact. And yet hinge commitments, by their nature, are the kind of propositional attitude where one can become aware of their groundlessness and yet this has no bearing at all on our certainty in them (since they are not grounded in reasons at all, but rather displayed in our actions and, relatedly, our inculcation of a worldview).¹⁴

The reason this point is important for our purposes is that it reinforces our earlier claim that belief evidentialism is compatible with hinge epistemology. The formulation of belief evidentialism is most plausibly understood as being concerned specifically with K-apt belief rather than the folk conception of belief. So construed, however, then it is crystal clear that this thesis cannot have application to our hinge commitments, as they are simply not—nor could ever be—K-apt beliefs. Of course, *modulo* our earlier discussion, in changed circumstances, the very same proposition might not function as a hinge. But that is no problem either, since in those conditions it could function as a K-apt belief and the usual evidentialist rules will apply. So no conflict here either.

Given the foregoing, I think it also reasonably clear that doxastic state evidentialism will also be compatible with hinge epistemology. For however these doxastic states are to be understood, they are surely to be conceived as operating within the space of reasons, and that is a space where hinge commitments simply do not appear. There is thus nothing preventing the proponent of evidentialism from embracing hinge epistemology if they wish, on either version of the thesis.

4. EVIDENTIALISM CAN EMBRACE EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM

Perhaps an even more surprising result is that evidentialism is compatible with epistemological disjunctivism. This is the proposal, which I take to be rooted in the work of McDowell (e.g., 1995),

that in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge that knowledge is grounded in rational support that is both reflectively accessible and factive.¹⁵ This is a controversial thesis on account of the fact that reflectively accessible perceptual reasons are usually taken to be essentially non-factive. In contrast, epistemological disjunctivism takes our ordinary language talk in this regard, which is shot-through with factive reasons, at face-value.

For example, take the factive locution of *seeing that p*. If one sees that *p*, then it follows that *p* must be true (compare *seeming to see that p*, which is not factive). If one sees that there is a barn in front of you, then there is a barn in front of you. We use this factive locution as a reason all the time in everyday life. Imagine the following scenario. Your boss calls into work and expresses scepticism when you say that a co-worker is in the office. It would make perfect sense to say that you know that they are here because you can see that they are in the office. In contrast, it would be very odd in these circumstances, with the co-worker standing right before you, to say that it merely seems to you as if the co-worker is in the office (which is a non-factive locution).

Of course, there are various philosophical reasons why philosophers opt to re-interpret these ordinary factive locutions into non-factive terms, but epistemological disjunctivism provides the resources to resist this reinterpretation. Recall that in his defence of hinge commitments Wittgenstein offered us a way of making sense of our ordinary epistemic practices that incorporated a picture that was alien to the prevailing philosophical orthodoxy. In the same spirit, epistemological disjunctivism offers us a way of making sense of our ordinary epistemic practices involving factive reasons. In particular, it argues that there are no good reasons for treating such factive reasons as problematic; they can be reflectively accessible just as one's other reasons can be. As with the Wittgensteinian position, my goal here is not to convince the reader of the plausibility of epistemological disjunctivism, so it would be beside the point to get into the details of this proposal. All that matters for our purposes is that this is an unorthodox epistemological proposal. Nonetheless, it is a proposal that is entirely consistent with evidentialism.

As with our discussion of hinge epistemology, epistemological disjunctivism trades in reasons rather than evidence, so we will need to gloss over the distinction (which, again, doesn't matter much for our purposes anyway).¹⁶ With this *caveat* in mind, we can start to see how epistemological disjunctivism might be compatible with evidentialism. I noted earlier that evidentialism incorporates a particular conception of evidence cast in terms of the subject's mental states. It is usually taken as given by proponents of evidentialism, in accordance with philosophical orthodoxy, that one's reflective accessible mental states provide non-factive evidential support for

one's beliefs. So insofar as I can reflectively access the rational support for my belief that p , then it must be of the form that it seems to me that p as opposed to that I see that p . But this is precisely what epistemological disjunctivism denies. One can have reflective access to factive mental states, which in turn can function as reasons.

With this broadened notion of evidence—and, relatedly, of what counts as one's mental states—in play, then one can reinterpret evidentialism in ways that can accommodate epistemological disjunctivism. Take belief evidentialism, for example. This refers to one's evidence offering propositional support for one's belief, and we've noted that by evidence the evidentialist means something connected to the subject's mental states. But if epistemological disjunctivism is correct, then that's perfectly consistent with the idea that one's evidence could be factive.

The same applies to the stronger evidentialist thesis of doxastic state evidentialism. Remember that epistemological disjunctivism is only a thesis about the rational (/evidential) support enjoyed by one's perceptual beliefs in paradigm cases. It follows that we don't need to worry about different kinds of doxastic states and the propositional justification they might enjoy; all that matters is the epistemic support that perceptual beliefs enjoy in paradigm cases. Essentially, what the reworking of evidentialism in terms of epistemological disjunctivism would entail is that in these very specific conditions the evidential support for one's propositional justification would be factive in virtue of the evidential ground that one sees that such-and-such is the case.¹⁷

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

One might naturally ask what the point of all this is. It is, I think, fairly obvious that the main proponents of evidentialism will not endorse hinge epistemology or epistemological disjunctivism. Indeed, I think they would find both views quite preposterous (and since I have not been concerned to defend these theses, but merely to describe them, I haven't done anything to mitigate this tendency). My interest, however, on this anniversary of evidentialism, has been irenic. If I am right, then the traditional picture of evidentialism as being an inherently epistemologically conservative proposal is wrong. In fact, evidentialism, properly conceived, is compatible with some quite radical contemporary epistemological proposals. In particular, insofar as evidentialism is a conservative position, this does not reflect its nature, but rather the ancillary commitments of its main proponents. That's a good result for evidentialism, and certainly one to applaud on its anniversary.¹⁸

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NOTES

¹ For some of the key texts on virtue epistemology, see Sosa (1991; 2007; 2009; 2015; 2020), Zagzebski (1996), and Greco (2010). Anti-risk virtue epistemology (previously called *anti-luck virtue epistemology*) is my own preferred account of knowledge—see Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, chs. 1-4) and Pritchard (2012*a*; 2016; 2020*a*).

² I suspect that this volume will represent all the main objections to evidentialism, which is why I will not set out my concerns with the position here, as they are not original to me. Better instead to concentrate on the more interesting—and, I think, largely positive—claim that I want to make about evidentialism.

³ See Wittgenstein (1969). Henceforth ‘OC’.

⁴ See, especially, Pritchard (2012*b*; 2015).

⁵ For helpful discussion of this core evidentialist thesis, see Mittag (2010; 2024). Note that henceforth I am going to treat the notion of justification in play to be obviously epistemic, and so drop the qualifier.

⁶ See, especially, Feldman & Conee (1985; 2001) and Conee & Feldman (2004).

⁷ See, for example, Feldman & Conee (1985, 15). Feldman and Conee in fact talk about the doxastic attitude ‘fitting’ the subject’s ‘total evidence’, but I don’t think this materially changes things.

⁸ For a canonical work on reliabilism, see Goldman (1986).

⁹ For some of the main texts examining Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, see Strawson (1985), McGinn (1989), Williams (1991), Stroll (1994), Moyal-Sharrock (2004; 2021), Wright (2004), Coliva (2010; 2015; 2022), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For my own interpretation, see especially Pritchard (2015, *passim*). For a recent survey of this literature, see Pritchard (2017) and Moyal-Sharrock & Pritchard (*forthcoming*).

¹⁰ See, especially, Pritchard (2015).

¹¹ See especially Pritchard (2015, part 2). Note that since the über hinge commitment concerns the general veracity of one’s worldview, then it involves a certainty that one is not the victim of radical sceptical hypotheses. While this is a consequence of the über hinge commitment, however, it would be misleading, as we will see, to put too much emphasis on this point in our exegesis of Wittgenstein’s views. This is because his main concern is rather showing how some of the most mundane commonsense commitments that we have, such as that one hands (in normal conditions), are effectively manifestations of the über hinge commitment (in that doubt here would call one’s worldview as a whole into question).

¹² Indeed, as I’ve argued, in a Cavellian spirit, it *is* unsettling, but not unsettling in a way that is related to the problem of radical scepticism. What is at issue here is what I refer to as *epistemic vertigo*, which is a very different kind of epistemic *angst* than that in play in the radical sceptical problematic. See Pritchard (2020*b*; 2021*a*; 2024*a*).

¹³ Other conceptions of our hinge commitments might well have this consequence, especially that offered by Wright (2004), who explicitly casts our hinge commitments in terms of a general cognitive limitation. For discussion of this specific issue, see Pritchard (2023). On the idea that ignorance is not just lack of knowledge (or true belief), but also involves a normative component, in the sense that ignorance is failing to be aware of what one ought to be aware of (the *normative account of ignorance*), see Pritchard (2021*b*; 2021*c*).

¹⁴ This is the sense in which becoming aware of the hinge nature of this commitment (something that is not normally apparent in everyday life), can feel uncanny. This is what gives rise to the epistemic vertigo—see endnote 12. For further discussion of the distinction between folk belief and K-apt belief, see Pritchard (2015, part 2; 2018; *forthcoming*). For further discussion of different ways of classifying our belief talk, see Stevenson (2002).

¹⁵ I develop this thesis in detail in Pritchard (2012*b*). See also Pritchard (2015, *passim*).

¹⁶ I discuss how to think of epistemological disjunctivism in terms of evidence in Pritchard (2010; 2024*b*).

¹⁷ Insofar as evidentialism is compatible with epistemological disjunctivism, then I think it is also likely to be compatible with another radical proposal in the general vicinity of epistemological disjunctivism—*viz.*, knowledge-first epistemology, of the kind defended by Williamson (2000). Indeed, given that Williamson himself defends the claims that (i) knowledge is identical with evidence, and (ii) knowledge is a mental state, it should be relatively straightforward to articulate an evidentialist position that embraces knowledge-first epistemology. (I gather that Fratanio (*forthcoming*), which also appears in this volume, defends a knowledge-first version of evidentialism).

¹⁸ I am grateful to Kevin McCain for detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper.