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For an invited symposium on my book *Epistemic Angst* for *Manuscripto* (forthcoming).

RESPONSES TO MY COMMENTATORS

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0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I would like to thank my commentators for taking the time to engage with my monograph. The dread of an author—a sensible author, at any rate—is not directed at the thought of possible critical scrutiny, but rather at the possibility that no-one takes any interest in the work whatsoever. In that spirit, I am delighted that there are philosophers out there keen to engage with my work, critically or otherwise.

1. RESPONSE TO SALVATORE

Salvatore's first worry about my anti-sceptical proposal centres on the notion of *epistemic vertigo* that I introduce at the end of the book. As I make clear, my biscopic treatment of radical scepticism is of an *undercutting* variety, which means that the two (logically distinct, I claim) putative paradoxes that make up the puzzle are shown to not be genuine paradoxes at all. That is, there is no fundamental tension within our everyday epistemic notions that the radical sceptic has exposed; rather, the sceptical problem, on both of its formulations, is trading on contentious theoretical claims that we should abandon. This means that there is no sceptical problem to contend with, and hence no need for epistemic *angst*.

Even so, I do not claim that resolving the sceptical problem returns us to a state of epistemic innocence, on a par with those who are ignorant of the problem, and that is why I introduce the notion of epistemic vertigo. The crux of the matter is that in our everyday inquiries

we never become aware of the fundamental role that our arational hinge commitments play in our localised rational evaluations. As Wittgenstein puts it, they simply “lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry.” (OC, §§88)¹ As such, although our system of rational evaluation is in its nature local, this is never made explicit to us. By engaging with the sceptical problem, however, even in such a way as to realise why this problem is illusory, one inevitably becomes aware of the role that hinge commitments play in our system of rational evaluations, and hence one also becomes aware of the localised nature of these evaluations. In a sense, a kind of *epistemic ascent* has occurred, whereby we’re viewing our epistemic practices from a detached (indeed, I would say *unnatural*) perspective. I think it is this epistemic ascent that leads to the vertigo, in that even once we realise that the sceptical problem is illusory—and, in particular, that it is in the nature of rational evaluations that they occur relative to a backdrop of arational hinge commitments, and hence are essentially local—we might still experience a vestige of anxiety about our epistemic position.

It’s important to reflect on the terminology in play here, however. In particular, the use of the phobic term ‘vertigo’ is very deliberate (the pedants amongst us can substitute ‘acrophobia’ here if they wish). The idea is that if there is an anxiety remaining, it is explicitly phobic because it will run counter to what we know full well to be the case. That is, just as one can be high up and experience vertigo even though one knows full well that one is not in danger, so one can reflect on one’s epistemic position in a certain way (i.e., via the epistemic ascent), and experience epistemic vertigo, even while knowing full well that there is no epistemic insecurity in play (and thus no cause for epistemic *angst*).

Salvatore thinks that the anxiety here is more than just a phobic response, however, in that he maintains that we *should* feel epistemic anxiety once we realise that our practices of rational evaluation are not full general, but rather presuppose arational hinge commitments. I think this is a mistake. In particular, it ignores the very important aspect of the Wittgensteinian picture that it is in the nature of our system of rational evaluation that it is essentially local in this way. As Wittgenstein emphasises at a number of junctures, this is not an incidental feature of our rational practices, but rather a matter of (as he puts it) of *logic* (see, e.g., OC, §§341-43).

Moreover, we also need to remember here that the Wittgensteinian line I take is but one part of the *biscopic* treatment of radical scepticism that I offer. In particular, the other key aspect to this treatment of radical scepticism—the appeal to epistemological disjunctivism—is vitally important to understanding why my proposal is not a ‘sceptical solution’ to the problem.² This is because it is this component of the biscopic stance that ensures that many of our everyday reasons can be factive, and thus that our beliefs enjoy far stronger rational support than we hitherto

supposed. As I explain in the book, the Wittgensteinian and epistemological disjunctivist lines, far from being competing approaches, are in fact mutually supporting, in that each view becomes more plausible when combined with the other. So, for example, it is far easier to accept the idea that rational evaluation is of its nature local if the rational support one's core everyday beliefs enjoy are factive.

Salvatore's second critical point concerns epistemic relativism. In particular, he argues that by embracing hinge commitments I will be stuck with a radical kind of epistemic relativism that I have elsewhere argued is malignant (more modest forms of epistemic relativism are, I would argue, benign).³ This is epistemic relativism which is committed to there being radically incommensurate systems of rational evaluation, such that there can be disagreements between members of these two systems that could never, even in principle, be rationally resolved.

Salvatore clearly holds that if there can be any divergence between the hinge commitments that we endorse, then radical epistemic incommensurability immediately follows. But this is far too quick. In fact, my account of hinge commitments is arguably unique among accounts of this kind in being able to avoid this entailment. Remember that on my view all hinge commitments are expressions of the general *über hinge commitment* that we all share—*viz.*, a visceral, arational certainty that we are not radically and fundamentally in error in our beliefs. Once we understand this point, it becomes apparent that our hinge commitments are not nearly as heterogeneous as we might have previously thought. For example, it may be a hinge commitment of mine that I speak English, while it is a hinge commitment of someone raised in China that they speak Chinese. This is hardly a divergence in our hinge commitments, however, but rather different expressions of effectively the same underlying hinge commitment regarding the language that we speak, common to both of us. It is just that our different circumstances—our geographical location in this case—means that the *über hinge commitment* in play manifests itself with a specific hinge commitment with a slightly different content. The same goes for many of the familiar examples we use (e.g., my name is such-and-such, and so on).

This is not to deny that there can be genuine divergences in one's hinge commitments. Indeed, I suspect religious conviction might be a case in point, an issue I've explored elsewhere.⁴ The point is rather to emphasise that a lot of what may at first glance look like genuine divergence in our hinge commitments is in fact superficial. Moreover, even if it is true that there is some genuine divergence in our hinge commitments, radical epistemic incommensurability does not immediately follow.

To see this we need to remember a further feature of my account of hinge commitments, again drawn from Wittgenstein's own remarks. This is the idea, which crops up throughout *On*

Certainty, that in order to occupy the space of reasons at all, one “must already judge in conformity with mankind.” (OC, §156) Wittgenstein clearly had in mind a philosophical viewpoint that we would now associate with the holistic form of content externalism later espoused by Donald Davidson.⁵ This is a conception of content such that radically departing from the fundamental commitments of those around us is impossible because in such circumstances one would fail to articulate meaningful thoughts. It follows that we necessarily have substantial overlaps in our hinge commitments with those around us.

Incidentally, I think this is the reason why the river-bed analogy (OC, §§96-99) that Wittgenstein uses in describing our hinge commitments is the most effective at capturing what he’s after. Whereas the ‘hinge’ metaphor brings with it the idea of optionality (one can move one’s hinges at will after all), which is something Wittgenstein clearly doesn’t want, the river-bed analogy instead reminds us of Wittgenstein’s essential communitarianism—i.e., that we are all being swept along in this river together.⁶ Yes, there can be change over time in one’s hinge commitments, just as in the metaphor what was once part of the river-bed can over time become part of the river, and *vice versa*, but this change will inevitably be gradual and piecemeal.

Moreover, as I explain in the book, on my theory of hinge commitments, we can account how disagreements arising out of modest divergences in one’s hinge commitments can be resolved rationally. This is because although one’s hinge commitments are not directly responsive to rational considerations, they are *indirectly* responsive to such considerations. This follows from the fact that individual hinge commitments are expressions of the more general über hinge commitment. The path from the former to the latter goes via your wider set of beliefs. (Remember here, by the way, that hinge commitments are not beliefs, at least not in the sense of that propositional attitude which is a constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge anyway, but rather a distinct kind of propositional attitude). This is why it is a hinge commitment in normal conditions to think that you have two hands, but not when you are coming around after having major surgery on your hands that might have led to one of them being removed. Once we recognise this point, however, then it becomes clear how there can be rational ways of changing someone’s hinge commitments over time. In particular, what you need to do is get them to change their wider set of beliefs. If you can do that, then over time you can change their hinge commitments too.

In fact, rather than my view facing a problem with epistemic relativism, I think it instead gives us practical advice about how to deal with some of the most apparently intractable disputes of our day. Take the dispute between evolutionary theorists and creationists. Once we recognise that the source of this disagreement are very fundamental prior commitments, it becomes clear that there is simply no point in either side trying to convince the other ‘head-on’. That is only

going to lead to lots of hot air and neither side budging an inch. Rather, the way to deal with such disagreements is to go ‘side-on’. What I mean by this is that one should seek out areas of agreement and work on maximising that. In doing so, one can gradually inch one’s adversary towards one’s side. Of course, this won’t be an easy process, and the practical impediments might be insuperable. But I think that this is entirely to be expected—whoever thought that rationally resolving such deep disagreements would be easy? The key point, however, is that the *practical* difficulty of rationally resolving deep disagreements is philosophically miles apart from the claim that Salvatore is trying to pin on my view—*viz.*, that such disagreements could never, even in principle, be rationally resolved.

I want to close with a very small point of clarification, which is that Salvatore mischaracterises my view at one point, in that he attributes to me a non-propositional account of hinge commitments. This is not in fact my view. Rather, I think that our hinge commitments can be thought of in terms of propositional attitudes, while at the same time accommodating the kinds of considerations that lead others, such as Salvatore himself, to opt for a non-propositional view.⁷ Moreover, this misattribution, while minor, has at least one unfortunate knock-on effect, which is that Salvatore also mischaracterises why I hold that hinge commitments are not beliefs (in the specific sense of ‘belief’ outlined above anyway). Salvatore thinks that this follows from my commitment to a non-propositional account of hinge commitments, but instead it in fact follows from the distinctive kind of propositional attitude that is on display with regard to our hinge commitments. In particular, I argue that a propositional attitude of endorsement of p which could co-exist with the recognition that one has no rational basis for thinking p true is not a belief. Given how I describe, following Wittgenstein, hinge commitments, it follows that they cannot be beliefs. I think this point that hinge commitments are not beliefs is very important, as a failure to distinguish between these two kinds of propositional attitude has created all kinds of problems for hinge epistemologies, not least in that it has obscured the manner in which such an epistemology can deal with the closure-based formulation of radical scepticism without resorting to denying the closure principle.

2. RESPONSE TO VEDER

Veder’s first concern about my view is surely one that many philosophers would have when they first come across it. For I really am saying that one key move we need to make in order to resolve the radical sceptical problem is to recognise that our hinge commitments are not in the market for rationally grounded knowledge. It follows that there are many claims of which we are optimally

certain, such as that one has hands, which are not known. And that can seem a remarkable thesis at first blush. As Veber once put to me in conversation (and I am here paraphrasing), ‘Wait a minute, you’re saying that your *response* to the problem of radical scepticism is to say that you *don’t* know you have hands?’⁸

But we need to tread a bit more carefully here. For notice that it is rather misleading to gloss my view as merely the claim that our hinge commitments are unknown. This is because there is an important sense in which they are *neither* known nor unknown. What I mean by this is that the whole point of the Wittgensteinian line I take is that some of our most basic commitments are simply not in the market for knowledge. As such, to simply say that they are unknown is misleading since it implies *ignorance* on our part, as if there is something that could have been known and we failed to know it. But that’s not our epistemic relationship to these commitments at all, since once we understand the Wittgensteinian picture of the structure of rational evaluation we thereby realise that there is no coherent sense of our hinge commitments being the kinds of things that could have been known. I think Stanley Cavell (1979, 241) expressed this point very nicely when he noted how, for Wittgenstein, the “human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing.” The key thing is to understand why recognising this is part of the resolution of the sceptical problem, rather than a capitulation to it.⁹

It is also important to remember in this regard that, contrary to what Veber says, we do not ordinarily take it as given that we know our hinge commitments. In fact, as Wittgenstein deftly illustrates, we don’t ordinarily consider them at all, but they are rather part of the tacit background relative to we consider other things. In fact, it takes a specifically *philosophical* context to introduce consideration of the hinge commitments (i.e., of the relevant propositional content, *qua* hinge commitment; the reason for this *caveat* will become apparent in a moment). Indeed, while there are some unusual everyday contexts where we might consider the relevant propositional content at issue, this is invariably a context where it has temporarily ceased to be a hinge commitment, in which case it is then in the market for knowledge. I gave one such example above—in coming around from major surgery on one’s hands, it is not a hinge commitment that one has hands, and that’s why you can come to know this by seeing your hands. Over time, however, it will drift back into the backgrounds and become a hinge commitment again, at which point it will again no longer be in the market for knowledge (but also something that you won’t ordinarily even consider).

Veber’s second concern was the compatibility of epistemological disjunctivism and my Wittgensteinian account of hinge commitments. According to the former, in paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge one enjoys reflectively accessible factive reasons in support of one’s beliefs.

Veber finds this puzzling because he takes our hinge commitments to capture paradigmatic cases of knowledge, and of course I claim that they are not even in the market for knowledge.

There is in fact no tension here, as is clear if one looks again at how I characterise paradigmatic cases in my description of epistemological disjunctivism. This is because I make crystal clear that I am concerned with cases of perceptual *knowledge* (and thus of perceptual *belief*), neither of which, I argue, applies to our hinge commitments. I noted above that I don't think we do ordinarily think of our hinge commitment as known, *contra* Veber. (*Philosophers* might think of them as paradigmatically known, but that's a different matter). *A fortiori*, on my view it is also the case that I don't think we ordinarily regard them as paradigmatic examples of knowledge either. So the putative tension with our ordinary ways of thinking about these epistemic matters is illusory.

Veber's third criticism is especially interesting. In the book I note that my view might seem to be subject to some version of the 'abominable conjunction' view that is posed for those who deny the closure principle.¹⁰ The thought is that there will be propositions that I know, and which I know straightforwardly entail the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, but where I fail to know the latter. Thus we get statements like 'I know I have hands, but I don't know that I'm not a handless brain-in-a-vat' that, on the face of it, look very dubious.

Now I don't deny the closure principle, but I do argue that our hinge commitments, including our hinge commitment that we are not the victims of radical sceptical scenarios, are not in the market for knowledge, so it may seem like I should face a variant of this puzzle (although the example just cited won't work on my view, as the entailment in question is from one unknowable hinge commitment to another unknowable hinge commitment). In the book I argued that such conjunctions cease to be puzzling once we have the perspective provided by the Wittgensteinian account of hinge commitments. For one thing, such conjunctions are not going to be uttered in ordinary contexts, but only in specialised contexts where we are doing philosophy, so we should immediately be on the alert that they should not simply be taken at face value. Moreover, once we have the Wittgensteinian account in play, it becomes apparent that what such conjunctions are in fact expressing is (what we have seen to be) the harmless fact that our everyday beliefs, which are in the market for knowledge, can entail propositions that we are hinge committed to, and hence which aren't in the market for knowledge. Remember too that it's not as if in saying that the hinge commitments aren't known that there is anything that we are ignorant of here, much less are we indicating that we aren't committed to their truth (in fact, we are optimally certain of it).

Veber offers a nice twist on the abominable conjunction objection by presenting an argument that involves a valid inference from an ordinary known belief to a hinge commitment. He argues that I am committed to holding both of the premises as being known (the one because

it is ordinary known belief, the other because it is simply a conceptual truth), but also to treating the conclusion as unknown, because it concerns a hinge commitment. It follows, he claims, that I am committed to claiming that there can be valid arguments with true premises where I don't know whether the conclusion is true. And isn't that absurd?

I think this is far too quick. What would be absurd would be denying that a sound argument where you accept the premises commits you to the truth of the conclusion, but notice that this isn't what Veber is focussing upon, nor is it something that I would need to deny. Indeed, we are optimally certain of our hinge commitments, so of course we are committed to their truth, and that goes just as much when they feature as conclusions to sound arguments. This means that my view has no problem with the idea that sound arguments entail true conclusions, but only with the idea that when we have knowledge of the premises of a sound argument one must thereby have knowledge of the conclusion. I would certainly deny this claim, but I don't think that denying it commits one to absurdity. Indeed, far from it being an awkward consequence of my account of hinge commitments, it is in fact directly entailed by it, as where a sound argument entails a hinge commitment, it obviously cannot lead to knowledge of that conclusion.

I think the apparent awkwardness of the assertion that one can know the premises of a sound argument without knowing the conclusion can be explained away. In particular, in simply saying that one doesn't know the conclusion of a sound argument with known premises it can sound as if one is both not committed to the conclusion and that one is attributing ignorance of this conclusion to oneself (as if one could have known this proposition, but failed to). As we have seen, neither of these claims are true when it comes to our hinge commitments, and once we make this explicit, and explain the motivation for why the conclusion isn't known as part of a wider Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology, then no absurdity remains.

3. RESPONSE TO BORGES

Borges's main concern is to take issue with how I cast the radical sceptical problem in terms of rationally grounded knowledge. My rationale for this is that I take mature human knowledge to be clearly of the rationally grounded kind (indeed, I think that a lot of this knowledge is rationally grounded in factive reasons). That said, I am an epistemic externalist about knowledge, in that I don't think that all knowledge needs to be rationally grounded, albeit I'm an epistemic externalist of a modest stripe in that genuine knowledge that lacks a rational grounding is on my view rather peripheral (given that mature human knowledge tends to be of the rationally grounded kind). So I don't disagree with Borges that there are clear cases of knowledge that don't have rational support

(like the veteran fire fighter case that he describes). Modest epistemic externalism is in contrast to a more radical form of epistemic externalism which claims that most of our knowledge, even of the mature human sort, is lacking in rational grounding. I dislike the latter position because I think it is too revisionary of our everyday epistemic practices, which clearly do treat most knowing subjects as operating within the space of reasons.

This distinction between modest and radical forms of epistemic externalism has a bearing on the sceptical problem in the following way. I take this puzzle, in its strongest form, to be claiming that we lack widespread rationally grounded knowledge. This means that a modest epistemic externalist like me cannot side-step the puzzle by being an epistemic externalist, as of course on this view one does have widespread rationally grounded knowledge. So nothing is gained from being an epistemic externalist in this sense when it comes to the sceptical problematic. In contrast, radical forms of epistemic externalism can try to evade the puzzle by claiming that most knowledge is not rationally grounded, and hence sceptical attacks on knowledge of this kind are irrelevant. I think there are lots of problems facing radical epistemic externalism of this kind, but the key issue for our current purposes is that any such strategy is inevitably going to be highly revisionary, and hence when applied to the sceptical problem will lead to an overriding rather than undercutting approach. In contrast, what I am offering is an undercutting anti-sceptical strategy, and I have argued that this is most definitely to be preferred.

With the foregoing in mind, let's look at Borges's objection. I fear that something important has gone wrong in his reading of me, since he claims that I am opposed to modest epistemic externalism of the kind just described, when in fact that is precisely my view about knowledge in general.¹¹ Reading between the lines, I think the issue is that because I claim modest epistemic externalism, *qua* a form of epistemic externalism, cannot give us any resources to deal with a formulation of the sceptical problem in terms of rationally grounded knowledge Borges is inferring that I think there is something amiss with modest epistemic externalism itself. But that's not the case. In fact, as just explained, I endorse the view; it's just that I don't think it has any bearing on the sceptical problematic.¹²

Things get murkier once Borges explains what he means by modest externalism, which is clearly not what I have in mind. He writes that this concerns the view that while all knowledge is rationally grounded, not all knowledge enjoys reflectively accessible rational grounds. In a domain like this, it is very much a term of art how one wishes to define one's terms, but for me, in *Epistemic Angst* at any rate, I am quite clear that by rational grounds I mean reflectively accessible rational grounds, so the distinction Borges wants to draw doesn't even arise on my view. This is not to say, of course, that one can't make this distinction, but Borges now needs to give us an account of what it means for knowledge to be rationally grounded, in a way that is relevant to the

formulation of the sceptical paradox in hand (as my formulation isn't in dispute, so far as I can tell), such that it doesn't entail that the rational grounds in question are reflectively accessible.

Given the very thin way that I understand reflective access—i.e., that the subject can cite the grounds in question without needing further empirical inquiry, as when one defends one's commitment to p by saying that one can *see that* p —I don't see how this is to be done. What would it even mean to say that one has resolved the sceptical problem by showing that one has the rational grounds required for knowledge, but that one cannot cite them? And what philosophical satisfaction could this stance possibly afford us anyway? The point is clear: epistemic externalism is either formulated in a radical fashion that requires substantial revisionism, or it is formulated in a modest fashion, in which case there is no avoiding the fact that one needs to be able to offer the requisite reflectively accessible rational basis for one's knowledge.¹³

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NOTES

¹ Note that I am referring to Wittgenstein's (1969) *On Certainty* as 'OC'.

² For further discussion of epistemological disjunctivism in its own right, see Pritchard (2012*b*).

³ See Pritchard (2009; 2010).

⁴ See in particular my defence of a distinctive Wittgensteinian stance as regards the epistemology of religious belief—which I call *quasi-fideism*—in Pritchard (2011; 2105; 2017; *forthcoming*).

⁵ See, for example, Davidson (1983 [1986]). I explore Davidson's own stance on radical scepticism in Pritchard (2013).

⁶ If you think the idea of Wittgenstein as embodying some kind of communitarian spirit is implausible, then I urge you to read Tanesini's (2004) wonderful, and unjustly neglected, book on his work.

⁷ See also Moyal-Sharrock (2004).

⁸ This exchange took place at a 2014 summer school hosted by the University of Cologne that was devoted to (what was then) the unpublished manuscript of *Epistemic Angst*.

⁹ Incidentally, various philosophers over the years—Marie McGinn, Michael Williams, Pen Maddy and Ram Neta spring to mind in this regard—have urged me to water-down this part of my view and claim that our hinge commitments can be knowledge, but just not rationally grounded knowledge. While this stance could be made to be broadly consistent with my proposal, I have some concerns. For one thing, while I am epistemic externalist about knowledge, and hence am willing to allow that one can have knowledge in the absence of reflectively accessible rational support, I nonetheless think that some kind of virtue-theoretic story needs to be told about where this knowledge comes from, and I struggle to see how such a story would pan out in the case of our hinge commitments. (Incidentally, the reader who is interested in my wider theory of knowledge—known as *anti-luck/anti-risk virtue epistemology*—should consult Pritchard (2012*a*; 2016)).

¹⁰ For an early statement of this worry in these specific terms, see DeRose (1995).

¹¹ For those interested in my general account of knowledge, which I call *anti-luck virtue epistemology* (or, increasingly, *anti-risk virtue epistemology*), see Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, chs. 1-4) and Pritchard (2012*a*; 2016).

¹² In general, as I note in the précis of *Epistemic Angst* that accompanies this response to commentators, I have come to realize that the philosophical task of offering a theory of knowledge is orthogonal to the challenge of responding to the problem of radical scepticism. Although I still endorse most of what is contained in my first monograph—Pritchard (2005)—I think that I made the mistake there of trying to simultaneously define knowledge and resolve the sceptical problematic.

¹³ While I am grateful to all of my commentators, a special thanks is owed to Rodrigo Borges, as he was responsible for putting this symposium together.