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For *Analysis*  
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## SCEPTICISM AND COMMONSENSE

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Michael Bergmann (2021) has written a sophisticated monograph on radical skepticism that offers a distinctive kind of commonsense response to this difficulty. My critical concern is not with the virtues of this text, however, of which there are many, but with what I take to be a fundamental lacuna at the heart of the project, which is Bergmann's failure to fully interrogate philosophical appeals to commonsense in the context of the sceptical problem. As I hope to show, this lacuna constitutes more than the kind of strategic decision that all monograph writers must make (one can't cover everything, after all), but potentially undermines the positive anti-sceptical project that Bergmann develops.

### 2. BERGMANN'S PROJECT

Bergmann's avowed goal is to "identify the best arguments for radical skepticism and to reject responses to them that don't pass muster." (2021, 1) Once he's identified the best arguments for radical skepticism, his aim is to respond to them by offering a commonsense, broadly Reidian,

response to radical skepticism. In particular, Bergmann defends what he terms a non-inferential and non-concessive commonsense response to radical skepticism, whereby our ordinary beliefs are “justifiably held non-inferentially, even if they are not based on or defensible via any available good arguments.” (2021, 4) So construed, Bergmann’s goals ought to be uncontroversial, as surely we would all prefer a non-concessive treatment of radical skepticism in its strongest form, one that appeals only to commonsense. As always in philosophy, however, the devil is in the detail. More specifically, the problems lie in how Bergmann sets up his project, and in particular how he uncritically helps himself to supposedly commonsense claims that are highly questionable in the context of the problem of radical skepticism.

That there is some large-scale philosophical maneuvering going on behind the scenes should be apparent to the observant reader fairly early in the book. For example, in a single eye-popping paragraph in the first full chapter Bergmann (2021, 20-21) quickly dismisses the following contemporary treatments of radical scepticism: contextualism, contrastivism, non-closure, and hinge epistemology. In all these cases the rationale offered is that they are overly concessive in their response to the problem of radical scepticism—they ‘overestimate’ scepticism, as Bergmann puts it—in that they all grant that we are unable to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. No serious consideration is given to why anyone might defend such views. More importantly for our purposes, Bergmann never considers the fact that all of these proposals are motivated by appealing to our actual practices of epistemic appraisal. Indeed, those who propose such views will standardly contend that a proper appreciation of our epistemic practices reveals that we aren’t conceding anything to the radical sceptic by claiming that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. (It’s not as if we ordinarily go around claiming that we do have knowledge of these propositions, after all). Shouldn’t a ‘commonsense’ philosopher like Bergmann be more interested in the details of these proposals?

Bergmann (2021, 23-26) gives a slightly longer critique of another contemporary treatment of radical scepticism—epistemological disjunctivism—presumably because this view doesn’t claim that we are unable to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses (it is thus a ‘non-concessive’ anti-sceptical proposal in the relevant sense). Even so, I think it’s clear that he isn’t all that concerned with the details of this view either. Bergmann’s (2021, 25) main objection to this proposal is effectively a restatement of the orthodox position regarding rational support that is explicitly rejected by proponents of epistemological disjunctivism—*viz.*, the new evil demon (NED) thesis. I

explain what the view amounts to, and why epistemological disjunctivism rejects it, below. What is presently significant is that Bergmann's main rationale for rejecting epistemological disjunctivism is that it is in conflict with the NED thesis that he takes to be so highly intuitive, and thus part of the commonsense picture that he wishes to retain.

Bergmann (2021, 26) also offers a further objection to epistemological disjunctivism that I think is especially revealing, which is that even proponents of this view concede that the position faces an uphill struggle because of how unintuitive it is. While this claim is undoubtedly true, I don't think it shows what Bergmann thinks that it shows—*viz.*, that the position is contrary to commonsense. We will come back to this point.

### 3. TWO EXHIBITS:

#### EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM AND HINGE EPISTEMOLOGY

While it would undoubtedly be useful to explore the motivation for all the contemporary anti-sceptical proposals that Bergmann rejects, since space is limited I will focus my attention on two proposals that I find particularly interesting: epistemological disjunctivism and hinge epistemology. Let's take them in turn.

Bergmann is obviously right that most philosophers find NED intuitive, and hence find epistemological disjunctivism, which is in direct conflict with NED, unintuitive. But that hardly shows that NED is an article of commonsense as Bergmann supposes. NED is the thesis that the rational support enjoyed by one's beliefs even in ideal epistemic conditions can be no better than that enjoyed by one's envatted counterpart.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, proponents of epistemological disjunctivism reject NED, maintaining instead that in optimal epistemic conditions the rational support enjoyed by one's beliefs can be significantly better than that enjoyed by one's envatted counterpart. In particular, in such conditions the rational support that one's perceptual knowledge that *p* enjoys can consist of the factive reason that *one sees that p*, where seeing that *p* entails *p*. Clearly, one's envatted counterpart cannot have corresponding perceptual beliefs that enjoy such factive reasons.

It would obviously take me too far afield to defend epistemological disjunctivism here.<sup>2</sup> What's significant about the way that epistemological disjunctivism is motivated for our purposes, however, is that one of the key claims made by proponents of this position is that our ordinary

epistemic practices are shot-through with appeals to factive reasons in epistemically good conditions. Our ordinary epistemic practices, taken at face-value, thus license the notion of factive reasons, and hence speak against NED. According to epistemological disjunctivism, it is only when in the grip of a certain faulty philosophical picture that this commonsense way of thinking about reasons is rejected, and replaced with an alternative picture that has NED at its heart.<sup>3</sup>

The claim in play is thus precisely that commonsense, at least in the guise of our actual epistemic practices, favors epistemological disjunctivism, with its rejection of NED, over the alternative philosophical picture that many philosophers find so compelling, and which embraces NED. Bergmann never considers how epistemological disjunctivism is motivated by appeal to our actual epistemic practices, but rather instead weighs the view against what he takes to be the intuitive nature of NED. And yet if epistemological disjunctivism is right, then it is simply a mistake, from a commonsense point of view, to take that intuition at face-value, since it presupposes a problematic theoretical picture that is in conflict with our ordinary epistemic practices and hence which is, at least defeasibility, in tension with commonsense. At the very least, I think that a self-avowed commonsense philosopher ought to be very interested in the contention made by epistemological disjunctivism that it is rooted in our ordinary epistemic practices in this way.

This point also bears on Bergmann's secondary objection to epistemological disjunctivism that it is a controversial thesis even by the lights of those who propose it. Bergmann takes this to be evidence that is contrary to commonsense. But with the foregoing in mind, I think it should be clear why those who defend epistemological disjunctivism don't view matters in this fashion. Yes, many philosophers find epistemological disjunctivism unintuitive, just as many philosophers find NED intuitive (the latter explains the former). But according to epistemological disjunctivism, at least, all this shows is that many contemporary philosophers have failed to properly understand the nature of our ordinary epistemic practices, and have been far too quick to opt for a faulty theoretical account of the rational support for our ordinary perceptual beliefs as a consequence, one that is centered on NED. Put simply, it can be true both that epistemological disjunctivism represents the commonsense position in this debate and that it is also highly controversial among philosophers. It is only if one equates commonsense with what contemporary philosophers tend to treat as obvious—which is clearly highly dubious in this context, if not all contexts—that one would take the controversial nature of epistemological disjunctivism among philosophers to determine whether it is a commonsense position.

Consider now our second exhibit, hinge epistemology. This is the proposal that has been extracted from Wittgenstein's final notebooks, published as *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969), whereby our system of rational evaluation presupposes a backdrop of primitive arational certainty. This backdrop of certainty is manifested in our *hinge commitments*: the core nodes of our commonsense convictions, comprising of claims of which we are completely certain. The idea is that since these certainties have to be in place in order for us to undertake rational evaluations—they are the 'hinges' around which the system of rational evaluation turns (Wittgenstein 1969, §§341-43)—so they cannot be themselves subject to rational evaluation, and hence are groundlessly held. As such, they are simply not in the market for knowledge.

Bergmann's only objection to hinge epistemology is that it is an overly concessive response to radical skepticism, since it grants that we can't know our hinge commitments. Given Bergmann's professed interest in commonsense, however, it's curious that he doesn't stop to consider *why* hinge epistemologists hold such a view or why they think that the claim that we are unable to know our hinge commitments isn't at all concessive to radical scepticism. In fact, the Wittgensteinian contention is that when we look closely at our actual epistemic practices we realize that there are a class of everyday certainties—the hinge commitments—that don't function at all like other empirical claims that are in the market for knowledge. Our hinge commitments are unknowable, but properly understood this claim is not in conflict with our ordinary epistemic practices at all but rather entirely in keeping with them. The idea that we ought to know these propositions, and in particular that it is an article of commonsense that they are known, is thus meant to arise out of a faulty picture of what our ordinary epistemic practices involve.

Interestingly, the foil for this Wittgensteinian claim is Moore's (1925; 1939) supposedly commonsense contention that we do know these everyday certainties. Consider the famous example that Moore (1939) offers: that one has hands. Moore argues that in normal conditions one is optimally certain of such a claim, and hence that it amounts to knowledge (even if he cannot prove it). Wittgenstein grants that we are optimally certain of these Moorean claims in normal conditions, but argues that they do not amount to knowledge. By offering a sustained discussion of the nature of these Moorean certainties and the role that they play in our epistemic practices, Wittgenstein tries to get us to see just how odd Moore's claim that we know them is. There is, for example, no normal context where people go round claiming knowledge of their hands as Moore does. (As Wittgenstein (1969, §464) puts it at one point, asserting that one has knowledge of a hinge commitment would be

akin saying ‘good morning’ in the middle of a conversation). While Wittgenstein is thus granting that these commonsense certainties play a special role in our epistemic practices, he is explicitly disputing the idea that it follows that we have a commonsense commitment to treating them as knowledge. On the contrary, Wittgenstein maintains that our actual epistemic practices reveal that there is no such commitment to them being known.

As with epistemological disjunctivism, it would obviously take me too far afield to offer a full defence of hinge epistemology here, but in any case the crux of the matter for our current purposes is not whether this view is correct.<sup>4</sup> It is rather that Wittgenstein is offering a critique of what philosophers treat as commonsense, one that has a bearing on the radical sceptical problem. We might have been tempted to follow Moore in concluding from the fact that these commonsense hinge commitments are optimally certain that they are therefore known, but Wittgenstein is highlighting that to do so is to buy-into a philosophical picture that is in fact in tension with our ordinary epistemic practices, rather than representative of them. In particular, Wittgenstein is arguing that attending to our ordinary epistemic practices reveals the manner in which all rational evaluation is in its nature local, in that it essentially presupposes a background framework of certainty that is required for such rational evaluations to occur, and which is thus itself immune to rational evaluation. On this picture, the very idea of universal rational evaluations, of the kind that the radical sceptic purports to undertake, is simply incoherent. Moreover, it is not just the radical sceptic who is shown to be embracing this faculty conception of rational evaluation, but also traditional *anti*-sceptics—including even supposedly commonsense philosophers such as Moore—who also fail to recognize that this conception is deeply at odds with our ordinary epistemic practices.

Properly understood, then, hinge epistemology is not offering a concessive response to radical scepticism at all, much less is it presenting a response to radical scepticism that is contrary to commonsense. If Wittgenstein is right, the sceptical problem arises from a misrepresentation of our ordinary epistemic practices, one that even a commonsense philosopher like Moore succumbs to. Unpacking the faulty theoretical picture that arises as a result is thus the antidote to radical scepticism. Even if one is ultimately unpersuaded by this diagnosis of the sceptical problematic, it should be clear that it isn’t fairly subject to a quick dismissal on the grounds that it is overly concessive to radical scepticism and thus contrary to commonsense.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. UNDERCUTTING TREATMENTS OF PHILOSOPHICAL PARADOXES

There is a common theme to both epistemological disjunctivism and hinge epistemology that is relevant to our discussion, which is that they both represent *undercutting* treatments of the radical sceptical problem. This problem, like many core philosophical difficulties, purports to be a paradox, in the sense it seems to arise entirely out of our ordinary ways of thinking about knowledge and yet nonetheless generates a highly counterintuitive claim—*viz.*, that knowledge, or most of it anyway, is impossible. Philosophical paradoxes are especially troubling because they seem to demand that we need to make substantive revisions to our ordinary ways of thinking in the relevant domain in order to avoid the paradoxical conclusion. What is interesting about undercutting responses to philosophical paradoxes, however, is that they are concerned with showing that the difficulty is not arising out of our ordinary ways of thinking in that domain at all, but is rather the product of a faulty philosophical account of those ordinary ways of thinking. In this sense, the paradox is not resolved so much as dissolved, in that it is shown that there isn't really a paradox in play after all. More specifically, the puzzle is rather the product of theoretical claims that, since they are disengaged from our ordinary ways of thinking in that domain, we can simply jettison (something that wouldn't be such a straightforward option if the puzzle were arising from our ordinary ways of thinking, as then a wholesale revisionism of these ways of thinking would be required).<sup>6</sup>

Both epistemological disjunctivism and hinge epistemology are undercutting proposals in just this sense, for they are both maintaining that our ordinary epistemic practices, properly understood, do not license radical scepticism at all. Instead, it is only a faulty philosophical picture of those practices that generates the puzzle. In the case of epistemological disjunctivism, the target is a formulation of radical scepticism that essentially turns on an idea that I have elsewhere termed the *insularity of reasons thesis*—*viz.*, that even in the best case, our rational support is compatible with widespread falsity in our beliefs. This claim is clearly what drives NED. In contrast, epistemological disjunctivism argues that our ordinary epistemic practices, with factive reasons at their heart, runs counter to insularity of reasons thesis. Moreover, it contends that the philosophical arguments against factive reasons are themselves problematic. The version of the sceptical puzzle that trades on this thesis is thus undercut. Reflection on the commonsense incorporated in our ordinary epistemic practices therefore reveals that there is no genuine sceptical paradox that requires response, as it is simply trading on contentious theoretical claims like NED that are masquerading as commonsense.



In the case of hinge epistemology, the target is a formulation of radical scepticism that fundamentally turns on an idea that I have elsewhere termed the *universality of rational evaluation thesis*—*viz.*, that there can be universal rational evaluations. Hinge epistemology counters this claim by showing how our ordinary epistemic practices reveal the essentially local nature of rational evaluation, in that all rational evaluation presupposes a backdrop of arational certainty, as manifested in our hinge commitments. It is only when in the clutches of a faulty theoretical account of our ordinary practices whereby universal rational evaluations are possible that the radical sceptical problem can gain a grip. Again, then, we find that reflection on the commonsense incorporated in our ordinary epistemic practices reveals that there is no genuine sceptical paradox that requires a response because it turns out that it is simply appealing to contentious theoretical claims masquerading as commonsense.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I want to close by reiterating that the point of the foregoing is not to defend epistemological disjunctivism and hinge epistemology over Bergmann's anti-skepticism (something that, in any case, I haven't attempted). It is rather to highlight a prominent way in which commonsense features in undercutting anti-sceptical treatments that Bergmann's approach never considers. In both of the cases that we have looked at Bergmann quickly rejects these proposals because they conflict with philosophical orthodoxy, which he takes to be indicative of what counts as commonsense in this debate. And yet, as we have seen, it is very much an open question whether our philosophical proposals have accurately captured the nature of our ordinary epistemic practices, and thus understood what commonsense demands. If we wish to be serious about undertaking a response to radical scepticism that takes commonsense as its starting point, it is thus imperative that we first interrogate the philosophical reconstructions of our ordinary epistemic practices that are presented to us as commonsense. With this point in mind, I want to close with a famous quotation from Thompson Clarke's influential treatment of the problem of radical scepticism:

“What is the skeptic examining: our most fundamental convictions, or the product of a large piece of philosophizing about empirical knowledge done before he comes on stage?” (Clarke 1972, 754)<sup>8</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bergmann characterizes the NED thesis in terms of evidence rather than reasons. Since I don't regard these notions as interchangeable, I've stuck to my preferred formulation in terms of reasons. So far as I can tell, nothing hangs on this point for our present purposes.

<sup>2</sup> For a sustained defence of the view, see Pritchard (2012). For an earlier influential statement of this kind of position, see McDowell (1995).

<sup>3</sup> McDowell (1995) makes this point quite forcefully. For an expansion of this claim, see Pritchard (2012, part 1). A similar point has been credited to Austin and Wittgenstein. For discussion of these two attributions, see, respectively, Longworth (2021) and Schönbaumsfeld (2021).

<sup>4</sup> I offer a sustained defence of hinge epistemology in a number of places, but see especially Pritchard (2015). For some of the other main contemporary treatments of hinge epistemology, see Strawson (1985), McGinn (1989), Williams (1991), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Wright (2004), Coliva (2015), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For a recent survey, see Pritchard (2017).

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of how Moore and Wittgenstein offer two very different ways of thinking about commonsense, see Pritchard (2021).

<sup>6</sup> The main impetus for the contemporary treatment of radical scepticism as a paradox is Stroud (1984). I discuss undercutting responses to philosophical paradoxes like radical scepticism in more detail in Pritchard (2015, part 1). See also Williams (1991, ch. 1) and Cassam (2009, ch. 1) for contemporary defences of similar ways of thinking about responding to philosophical paradoxes.

<sup>7</sup> I argue in Pritchard (2015) that the insularity of reasons thesis lies at the heart of a formulation of radical scepticism that turns on the underdetermination principle, while the universality of reasons thesis lies at the heart of a logically distinct formulation of radical scepticism that turns on the closure principle. This is why, on my view at least, epistemological disjunctivism and hinge epistemology are concerned with distinct formulations of radical scepticism, and hence are not competing anti-sceptical problems (though nothing turns on this for our purposes here).

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Mike Bergmann, Ram Neta and Chris Yeomans.