Natalie Alana Ashton, Vienna

The Case for a Feminist Hinge Epistemology*

Abstract: In this paper I make the case for a feminist hinge epistemology in three steps. My first step is to explain hinge epistemologies as contemporary epistemologies that take Wittgenstein's work in *On Certainty* as their starting point. My second step is to make three criticisms of this literature as it currently stands. My third step is to introduce feminist epistemologies, which argue that social factors like race and gender affect what different people and groups justifiably believe, and argue that developing a feminist hinge epistemology is both plausible (because of important similarities between the two kinds of views) and desirable (because feminist epistemologies have resources which can help hinge epistemologies to avoid the three problems that I have raised).

1. Introduction

In this paper I will make the case for a feminist hinge epistemology. By this, I mean an account of epistemic justification which draws on both Wittgenstein's work in *On Certainty* (where he claims that some beliefs have a special status analogous to that of "hinges") and on feminist epistemology (which argues that social factors like race and gender have an effect on justification). I'll make the case for this project in three steps.

First I will introduce hinge epistemology, and the central Wittgensteinian insight that it is based upon. There are many interesting and important historical and interpretative issues that I won't be able to discuss in detail. Instead I will offer a brief and minimal description of hinge epistemology in order to focus on its potential as an applied epistemology.

Second I will outline three criticisms of hinge epistemologies as they currently stand. Again, there is much more that could be said about, and in response to, these criticisms – and I hope that more will be said in future. But in this paper I will simply sketch out the current problems as I see them.

Third I will make the positive case for developing a feminist (and so applied) hinge epistemology. I'll explain what feminist epistemologies are, and highlight some parallels between one branch of these – feminist standpoint theories. I'll

then argue that the literature on feminist epistemology contains resources which would help hinge epistemologists to overcome the three problems I indicated that hinge epistemology has. This will make clear that developing a feminist hinge epistemology is not just plausible, but desirable.

2. Hinge epistemology

The term hinge epistemology refers to a range of contemporary epistemological views that are based on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (OC 1969). It most obviously applies to recent views which are explicitly developed and self-described as hinge epistemologies (e.g. Coliva 2015, Pritchard 2016) but other views which place *On Certainty* at the heart of their epistemological theorising can also be described as hinge epistemologies (e.g. Stroll 1987, Conway 1989, Williams 1991, Moyal-Sharrock 2004, Wright 2004, and Kusch 2016). We'll see in the next section that hinge epistemologies can be primarily historical or they can be primarily systematic. By the end of this paper I hope to have convinced you that hinge epistemologies can also take an applied approach.

On Certainty itself is very open to interpretation, which is part of why hinge epistemology contains so many different views, but most scholars agree that Wittgenstein's aim in writing the material that went into it was, first, to make sense of Moore's "Proof of an External World" (1939) and the claim that we know the external world exists, and, second, to use the insight gleaned from this to understand knowledge claims more generally.[1] It is endorsement of this key insight which is central to hinge epistemology.

We find this key insight in the following passage (and the metaphor used in this passage is also where the name "hinge" epistemology comes from):

> That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

> That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

> But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC 1969: §§341–343)

---

[1] Duncan Pritchard claims that an overlooked influence on *On Certainty* was John Henry Newman, although he doesn't dispute that responding to Moore was the main motivation (Pritchard 2016: Ch. 4, En. 24).

This insight is about the special justificatory role that some epistemic commitments have. The idea is that most claims to knowledge can be questioned, and supported or undermined, by evidence – we can move them around as we undertake epistemic inquiry – but other claims, or commitments, can't be treated like this.[2] The rest of epistemic inquiry depends on them, and so they have to stay fixed in place, like the hinges on which the door turns.

I think that we can capture this idea more concretely by highlighting two claims that all hinge epistemologists take from OC.

- *Lack of Evidential Support:* There are some propositions/commitments that we take ourselves to know, and which are importantly connected to other propositions which we take ourselves to know, which lack evidential support (in some sense).
- *Legitimacy:* Nevertheless, these propositions/commitments are legitimate (in some sense).

A good deal of the debate within the literature on hinge epistemology concerns the best way to cash out the details of these two claims. I don't have space in this paper to discuss the various possibilities that have been proposed so far, and so I'm allowing the phrase "in some sense" to do a lot of work in unifying different hinge proposals. I've opted for a minimal description of hinge epistemologists' central claims in order to capture all variants.

3. Three criticisms

Now that I have offered a basic, minimal explanation of what hinge epistemology is, I will make three criticisms of current hinge epistemologies.

My first criticism relates to methodology. So far, hinge epistemologists have evaluated and shaped their accounts against two criteria. The first of these is *faithfulness* – whether or not the account faithfully reconstructs the text of *On Certainty* and accurately represents Wittgenstein's intentions. Examples of authors primarily concerned with faithfulness are Danièle Moyal Sharrock (2004), and Martin Kusch (2016).

Others use a criterion which I'll call *usefulness* – they take Wittgenstein as a starting point, but primarily develop their accounts according to how well they

---

2 There is some debate over whether hinges should be understood as beliefs or propositions or something else. For example Moyal-Sharrock argues that hinges have a non-propositional character (2004: Ch. 2), and Pritchard claims that they are propositional but not beliefs (2016: 90 – 94).

respond to particular epistemic problems and debates. I take Michael Williams (1991), and Annalisa Coliva (2015) to be examples of authors primarily concerned with usefulness.

My first criticism of hinge epistemology is aimed at authors using the usefulness criterion. I think that this is a good criterion to use, but that it is being deployed in a problematic way. When these authors criticise each other's accounts, and shape their own, they are thinking of usefulness as equivalent to the ability to respond to radical scepticism. When other issues and debates are considered, it is still ultimately in the service of having a scepticism-ready account. But epistemic justification isn't just about radical scepticism. It's crucial in all areas of life. Even if the issue of radical scepticism were solved, there would still be interesting and important questions to ask about justification and the role that it plays in science, law, medicine, and daily interactions. Losing sight of this fact, and developing an account of justification without these questions in mind, will result in a skewed picture which isn't fit for purpose. Hinge epistemologists need to broaden the range of problems that they consider when evaluating for usefulness.

To be clear: I think that there is, and should be, room for both usefulness and faithfulness when it comes to evaluating hinge accounts. All authors can benefit from paying attention to both criteria, and there is also likely value in authors varying in the extents to which they tend towards one or the other. My point is just that, to the extent that authors do tend towards usefulness, they need to broaden their understanding of what usefulness amounts to.

My remaining two criticisms are to do with two areas of the literature that I think are underdeveloped. The first area is the debate on pragmatism, which comes up when hinge epistemologists talk about the sense in which hinges are legitimate. Some authors say that hinges are legitimate because of the semantic role that they play (Cavell 1979, McGinn 1989, Williams 1991, Moyal-Sharrock 2004, Coliva 2010, and Schönbaumsfeld 2016), whilst others talk about them being *epistemic*. But *epistemic* can mean a few different things. Sometimes a hinge's status as epistemic turns on whether it is *supported by evidence*. At others it turns on whether or not it is *knowable*. And at others it turns on whether or not its legitimacy is due to *pragmatic factors*. It's these last two senses which are relevant to my criticism.

Pragmatism comes up in discussions of hinge epistemology as a criticism of Crispin Wright's (2004; 2014) view. Wright has argued for the legitimacy of hinges on a "utilitarian" basis; he says that hinges are legitimate because all other epistemic inquiry is dependent on them (Wright 2014: 224–228). He has been widely criticised for this argument because, according to his opponents, this argument

is *pragmatic* rather than *epistemic* (see Brueckner 2007; Jenkins 2007; Pederson 2009; Vahid 2011; and Smith 2013. An exception is Hazlett 2014.).

More generally, pragmatism comes up as something that hinge epistemologists tend to avoid. Moyal-Sharrock (2003) (following Brandom 2002) makes a distinction between what we might call "strong" utilitarian pragmatism, and "weak" pragmatism which is only pragmatic in the sense that it is concerned with the practical (2003: 126). She says that weak pragmatism is acceptable, but strong pragmatism is not. Coliva (2015: 127–136) follows her in this, and Pritchard (2016) goes even further, ruling out even weak pragmatic factors.

There are two problems with this anti-pragmatism. The first is that Wright's critics seem to slip between using epistemic in the sense of knowability, and epistemic in the sense of excluding pragmatic factors. They note that Wright wants to secure the first, and then criticise him for not successfully securing the second. But they don't argue that these two senses are connected, and Wright had argued specifically that they are not (2014: 238–239).

The second problem with this anti-pragmatism is related to the first, but more general: there is a wealth of literature on pragmatism in epistemology, and hinge epistemologists have so far failed to draw on this.[3] They make claims about the relation between the epistemic and pragmatic domains without citing classic writers (except perhaps in passing) and without referring to contemporary work on pragmatism at all. This is especially disappointing as there is even literature on this which references *On Certainty* explicitly. Miriam McCormick's *Believing Against the Evidence* (2015) provides a comprehensive argument for the conclusion that there is no distinct epistemic domain that can be isolated from moral or pragmatic domains of normativity, and makes brief but explicit mention of *On Certainty*. Anna Boncompagni's *Wittgenstein and Pragmatism* (2016) is entirely devoted to evaluating *On Certainty* in light of a pragmatist perspective.

My third (and last) criticism of current hinge epistemologies is of the debate on epistemic relativism. By epistemic relativism I meant the view that justification (rather than truth, or any other phenomena) is dependent on some contingent variable – often an epistemic framework. We can think of a commitment to relativism as a commitment to the following three claims:[4]

- Epistemic justification is dependent on a framework

---

3 For classical pragmatism see, for example, James 1897. For a survey of the contemporary literature on pragmatism see Reisner 2018.

4 This is roughly the definition of epistemic relativism that Williams (2007) and Coliva (2015) use. Kusch (2016) includes some additional claim which I haven't included in the main text as I think that they can be shown to follow from those that I have included.

- There are, or could be, multiple frameworks
- No independent meta-justification (justification of the frameworks themselves) is possible

On the face of it, hinge epistemology seems to lend itself to a relativist interpretation. It says that justification is dependent on one or more sets of hinges, which we can understand as epistemic frameworks, and that no such justification (including meta-justification) is possible independently of these frameworks. In other words, the first and third hallmarks of relativism seem to be straightforwardly present in hinge epistemology, whilst the second claim (that there are, or could be, multiple frameworks of hinges) seems at least prima facie plausible.[5]

As a result of this we might expect that relativism would be widely accepted, or at least a contentious topic, amongst hinge epistemologists. But it isn't. It's almost universally resisted.[6] I think the best explanation for this is that epistemic relativism is seen as uncontentiously problematic, as evidenced by the fact that none of the hinge epistemologists who do engage with relativism spend much time explaining why they think that it is problematic, instead focusing on resisting what they take to be an objection to their view.

One exception to this pattern is Kusch (2016), who has offered a very comprehensive treatment of relativism in *On Certainty*. He explores exactly what epistemic relativism is without assuming that it is problematic, and then considers a number of arguments for and against relativist interpretations of *On Certainty*. Ultimately, he defends a relativist interpretation of hinges.

I think that Kusch's strategy is preferable because it is less dogmatic, and that more hinge epistemologists should question the assumption that relativism is objectionable before attempting to show whether or not it is present in their views. I suspect that if they did this we might see more pro-relativist hinge ac-

---

5 Coliva (2015) and Pritchard (2011) set up their discussions of relativism in hinge epistemology in this way, and their responses focus on showing that the second claim is not true on hinge epistemology. Williams (2007) takes a different tack, focusing on the third claim. As I understand his argument, he aims to show that the third claim is true on his view (there is no independent meta-justification) but that this is not problematic. I think that this is consistent with his view being relativism, but he seems not to.

6 Of the authors I've discussed, only Kusch (2016) argues that hinge epistemology should be understood as relativist. The others have either not engaged with the issue at length (I believe this to be true of Stroll, McGinn, Wright, Moyal-Sharrock, and Schönbaumsfeld) or argue that hinge epistemology is not relativist (Williams, Coliva and Pritchard).

counts, which would be an interesting outcome, but the other possibility – that we see better defended anti-relativist accounts – is just as appealing.

4. Why feminist epistemology?

Now that I've introduced and criticised hinge epistemology I'm going to suggest that developing a feminist hinge epistemology is both a plausible and a desirable project. First I'll briefly explain what feminist epistemologies are. I'll then highlight some similarities between them and hinge epistemologies to reveal why I think it's plausible to combine them. Finally I'll show how feminist epistemologies can help hinge epistemologists to overcome the three problems that I pointed out in the previous section, in order to demonstrate why this project should be desirable to hinge epistemologists.

   Feminist Epistemology is a branch of epistemology which explores the influence of social factors (such as gender and race) on knowledge, via justification. The idea that these social factors have such an effect on justification is called the *situated knowledge thesis*. The strand of feminist epistemology that I think most closely resembles hinge epistemology is feminist standpoint theory.[7] On standpoint views, not only is knowledge situated, but it is situated in such a way that those who have an oppressed social location (such as women or people of colour in many societies today) can have more, or better, justification that those who are in dominant positions. This is often called the *epistemic advantage*, or *epistemic privilege*, thesis.

   In very general terms, standpoint theorists understand epistemic advantage to arise because people from different social locations have different experiences which lead them to develop different epistemic resources, and because the specific experiences of the oppressed lead them to develop *better* epistemic resources. Different authors offer different accounts of what these resources are – they have been described variously as: engaged perspectives (Hartsock 1983; Collins 1986); sets of concepts (Fricker 2007); weightings of theoretical values (Wylie 2003); and as partially composed of epistemic virtues (Medina 2013).

   One thing that all of these accounts of epistemic resources have in common is that they are comprised of components which are not responsive to evidence –

---

[7] The other branches of feminist epistemology are feminist empiricism and postmodernism. Intemann (2010) has argued that feminist empiricism and standpoint theory are no longer as clearly distinct as they once were, so some of the similarities that I point out between hinge epistemology and standpoint theory may also hold between hinge epistemology and feminist empiricism.

or at least not in the usual way. Here we can see a parallel to the first main commitment of hinge epistemology, according to which our central epistemic resource – our justificatory framework – is ultimately dependent on one or more sets of special propositions (or proposition-like-things) which lack evidential support (in some sense).

The second central commitment of hinge epistemology is that these non-evidential components are nevertheless legitimate. And the legitimacy of non-evidential components is also a defining feature of feminist standpoint theory. Where mainstream epistemologists usually see the influence of non-evidential and social factors as problematic, and as tainting justification, feminist standpoint theorists (and feminist epistemologists in general) see them as a necessary, and advantageous, aspect of justification. Whilst there is much more to explore here, I take these two similarities to show that developing a feminist hinge epistemology is at least a plausible project.

I also think that the project of developing a feminist hinge epistemology would be very fruitful for hinge epistemologists, as it would automatically refocus the debate in a way that placed more emphasis on the areas which I have identified as so far lacking.

The first criticism I made of hinge epistemology was of the range of problems which hinge epistemologists refer to when evaluating their accounts according to the criteria of usefulness. Feminist epistemologists are concerned with a much broader range of problems than mainstream epistemologists are. They are concerned with securing an account of justification that is useful for science (e. g. Harding 1991) and politics (e. g. Anderson 2006) as well as for emancipatory projects. If hinge epistemologists aimed to make their accounts work for these goals, as well as the goal of responding to scepticism, then they would be better prepared to achieve a well-rounded picture of justification.

The second criticism was that hinge epistemologists don't properly engage with literature and arguments about the effect that pragmatic factors can have on the epistemic domain. I claimed that they have failed to notice an ambiguity in their literature on pragmatism, and have been needlessly avoiding pragmatist views as a result. Feminist epistemologists allow that social factors affect justification, which makes their views clearly pragmatic, and so exploring a feminist hinge epistemology which shares this notion of knowledge as socially situated would be one way (alongside engaging with the literature that I mentioned above) to correct this mistake.

The final criticism that I made was that hinge epistemologists have failed to question the mainstream assumption that relativism is an objection to be avoided, rather than a plausible view in its own right. In general, this problem is also still present in feminist epistemology. However some feminist standpoint theo-

rists have offered more creative treatments of relativism. Sandra Harding (1991; 1995) defends a view that we might think of as post-relativist. She rejects the dichotomy between relativism and objectivism, and instead argues for a position which she calls "strong objectivity" which is supposed to be distinct from, and superior to, both previous options. Helen Longino (1997) has defended what she calls "contextual empiricism" elsewhere in feminist epistemology, and Alison Wylie (2003) has applied this idea to standpoint theory in a view which looks amenable to relativism. A feminist hinge epistemology incorporating similar creativity would be well placed to follow the advice that I gave above, of exploring what happens when the mainstream assumption about the status of relativism is questioned.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I've made the case for developing a feminist version of hinge epistemology. I've shown that there are similarities between hinge epistemologies and feminist epistemologies which make such a project at least prima facie plausible, and I've suggested that the literature on feminist epistemology contains resources which would help hinge epistemologists to overcome the three criticisms that I have raised of current hinge accounts. I haven't fleshed out what such a view would look like in detail here – although see Ashton (2015) for one possibility – nor have I explained what the benefits of such a project would be for feminist epistemologists and epistemologies – although I think there are some. However I hope that by making the case that a feminist hinge epistemology is both plausible and desirable I create space for these interesting issues to be explored.[8]

Bibliography

Anderson, Elizabeth: The Epistemology of Democracy, in: Episteme, 3(1–2) (2006), 8–22.
Ashton, Natalie: Appropriate Belief without Evidence, in: Teorema: Revista Internacional de Filosofía, 34(2) (2015), 7–28.
Boncompagni, Anna: Wittgenstein and Pragmatism: *On Certainty* in the Light of Peirce and James, London 2016.
Brandom, Robert: Pragmatics and Pragmatisms, in: James Conant and Urszula M. Zeglen (eds.): Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism, London 2002, 40–58.

Brueckner, Anthony: Hinge Propositions and Epistemic Justification, in: Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 88(3) (2007), 285–287.

Cavell, Stanley: The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy, Cambridge, MA 1979.

Coliva, Annalisa: Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty and Common Sense, Basingstoke 2010.

Coliva, Annalisa: Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology, Basingstoke 2015.

Collins, Patricia H.: Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought, in: Social Problems, 33(6) (1986), S14-S32.

Conway, Gertrude D: Wittgenstein on Foundations, Amherst, NY 1989.

Fricker, Miranda: Epistemic Injustice, Oxford 2007.

Harding, Sandra: Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives, Ithaca, NY 1991.

Harding, Sandra: Strong Objectivity: A Response to the New Objectivity Question, in: Synthese, 104 (1995), 331–349.

Hartsock, Nancy C. M.: The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism, in: Sandra Harding & Merrill B. Hintikka (eds.): Discovering Reality, Dordrecht 1983, 283–310.

Hazlett, Allan: Entitlement and Mutually Recognized Reasonable Disagreement, in: Episteme 11(1) (2014), 1–25.

Intemann, Kristen: 25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where are We Now?, in: Hypatia, 25 (2010), 778–796.

Jenkins, Carrie S: Entitlement and Rationality, in: Synthese 157(1) (2007), 25–45.

Kusch, Martin: Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and Relativism, in: Sonya Rinofner-Kreidl & Harald A. Wiltsche (eds.): Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Methods and Perspectives. Proceedings of the 37th International Wittgenstein Symposium, Berlin 2016, 29–46.

Longino, Helen: Feminist Epistemology as a Local Epistemology, in: Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes, 71 (1997), 19–54.

McCormick, Miriam: Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief, London 2015.

McGinn, Marie: Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism. Oxford 1989.

Medina, José. The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination. Oxford 2013.

Moore, G. E.: Proof of an External World, in: Proceedings of the British Academy, 25 (1939), 273–300.

Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle: Logic in Action: Wittgenstein's Logical Pragmatism and the Impotence of Scepticism, in: Philosophical Investigations, 26(2) (2003), 125–148.

Moyal-Sharrock: Understanding Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. Basingstoke 2004.

Pritchard, Duncan: Epistemic Relativism, Epistemic Incommensurability and Wittgensteinian Epistemology, in: Steven Hales (ed.): The Blackwell Companion to Relativism. Oxford 2011, 266–285.

Pritchard, Duncan: Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing, Princeton 2016.

Pedersen, Nikolaj Jang: Entitlement, Value and Rationality, in: Synthese 171(3) (2009), 443–457.

Reisner, Andrew: Pragmatic Reasons for Belief, in: Daniel Star (ed.): The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity, Oxford 2018, 705–726.

Schönbaumsfeld, Genia: "Hinge Propositions" and the "Logical" Exclusion of Doubt, in Annalisa Coliva & Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (eds): Hinge Epistemology, in: International Journal for the Study of Skepticism, 6(2–3) (2016): 165–181.

Smith, Martin: Entitlement and Evidence, in: Australasian Journal of Philosophy 91(4) (2013), 735–753.

Stroll, Avrum: Foundationalism and Common Sense, in: Philosophical Investigations, 10(4) (1987), 279–298.

Vahid, Hamid: The Concept of Entitlement and Its Epistemic Relevance, in: Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 92(3) (2011), 380–399.

Williams, Michael: Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism, Oxford 1991.

Williams, Michael: Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism, in: Episteme, 4(1) (2007), 93–114.

Wright, Crispin: Warrant For Nothing (And Foundations For Free)?, in: Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 78(1) (2004), 167–212.

Wright, Crispin: On Epistemic Entitlement (II): Welfare State Epistemology, in: Dylan Dodd & Elia Zardini (eds.): Scepticism and Perceptual Justification, Oxford 2014, 213–247.

Wylie, Alison: Why Standpoint Matters, in: Robert Figueroa & Sandra G. Harding (eds.): Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology, London 2003, 26–48.