Epistemic Pluralism, Epistemic Relativism and 'Hinge' Epistemology

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Abstract: According to Paul Boghossian (2006, 73) a core tenet of epistemic relativism is what he calls *epistemic pluralism*, according to which (i) 'there are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems', but (ii) 'no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others'. Embracing the former claim is more or less uncontroversial–viz., a descriptive fact about epistemic diversity. The latter claim by contrast is very controversial. Interestingly, the Wittgenstenian 'hinge' epistemologist, in virtue of maintaining that rational evaluation is essentially local, will (arguably, at least) be committed to the more controversial leg of the epistemic pluralist thesis, simply in virtue of countenancing the descriptive leg. This paper does three central things. First, it is shown that this 'relativistic' reading of Wittgenstein's epistemology is plausible only if the locality of rational evaluation (in conjunction with a reasonable appreciation of epistemic diversity) commits the Wittgenstenian to a further epistemic incommensurability thesis. Next, Duncan Pritchard's (e.g., 2009; 2015) novel attempt to save the hinge epistemologist from a commitment to epistemic incommensurability is canvassed and critiqued. Finally, it is suggested how, regardless of whether Pritchard's strategy is successful, there might be another very different way—drawing from recent work by John MacFarlane (2014)—for the hinge epistemologist to embrace epistemic pluralism while steering clear of epistemic relativism, understood in a very specific way.

INTRODUCTION

According to Paul Boghossian (2006, 73), a core tenet of epistemic relativism is what he calls *epistemic pluralism*, the thesis that (i) 'there are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems', but (ii) 'no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others.'[1] Metaepistemological absolutists often take for granted that the less controversial (i) does not entail the more

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[1] Boghossian (2006, 73).

controversial (ii), and with this assumption in hand, insist that (ii) is false even if the descriptive claim captured by (i) is true[2].

Interestingly, though, this stock absolutist response to the pluralist component of epistemic relativism is plausibly not available to the Wittgensteinian 'hinge' epistemologist[3], for whom the more controversial element of epistemic pluralism, (ii), is (arguably) inevitable once it is affirmed that there are many, or indeed *any*, fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems. This raises an important dilemma for the would-be Wittgenstenian epistemologist: either grant that a hinge epistemology is essentially a relativistic epistemology (one which embraces both legs of the epistemic pluralism thesis), or alternatively deny at least some version of the widely accepted descriptive claim that there are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems. In the face of this dilemma, Duncan Pritchard (2009; 2010; 2015) has recently defended a non-relativistic reading of Wittgenstein's epistemology, and accordingly, has sought to reject, with some qualifications, the descriptive component of the epistemic pluralist thesis.

Here is the plan. §1 distinguishes between different versions of descriptive epistemic pluralism, clarifying which version (paired with a Wittgensteinian epistemology) arguably commits one to the stronger 'equal standing' leg of epistemic pluralism. §§2–3 outline and critique Pritchard's anti-relativistic response to relativist interpretations of Wittgenstein's epistemology, with a focus on Pritchard's Davidsonian and '*über hinge*' strategies—viz., strategies that can be used to resist with some qualifications the version of descriptive leg of the epistemic pluralist thesis that would seem to commit the hinge epistemologist to epistemic incommensurability. §4 suggests how, regardless of whether Pritchard's strategy succeeds, the Wittgensteinian hinge epistemologist might nonetheless have available a metaepistemological rationale for accepting (within a Wittgensteinian framework) the very version of descriptive pluralism which Pritchard's brand of hinge epistemology rejects, whilst nonetheless avoiding any further commitment to epistemic relativism, understood along certain specific lines.

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[2] For a notable expression of the more idea that descriptive forms of relativism do not entail relativism in a philosophically interesting sense, see Rachels (2003, e.g, 16-23); see also Boghossian (2006, Ch. 5–6). Cf., Baghramian and Carter (2015, §2.1) for an overview of various discussions of descriptive relativism in epistemology.

[3] I will be using 'hinge epistemology' to refer to the epistemological theses clustered around the notion of a 'hinge proposition' as advanced in Wittgenstein's posthumous *On Certainty* (1969). See also Coliva (2010b) and Pritchard (2015) for some notable contemporary expositions of this approach.

1. DESCRIPTIVE EPISTEMIC PLURALISM, EPISTEMIC INCOMMENSURA-BILITY AND RELATIVISM

Everyone ought to be an epistemic pluralist in a very minimal (and uninteresting) sense: we should all agree that not all epistemic systems are *identical*. Define an 'epistemic system' as a set of epistemic principles. Epistemic principles are, to follow here Paul Boghossian (e.g., 2001; 2006) general normative propositions that specify the conditions under which certain beliefs have positive or negative epistemic merit[4]. Call the thesis that not all epistemic systems are identical *weak descriptive epistemic pluralism.*

We also needn't stray from what's entirely obvious to embrace a slightly stronger version of descriptive epistemic relativism according to which some epistemic systems are *significantly* different from other epistemic systems, where 'significantly' means more than simply 'non-identical'. Call this *moderate descriptive epistemic pluralism.* Consider briefly a sample of some 'wayward[5]' features of certain contemporary epistemic systems:

> *Zetetic Astronomy*: Maintains that the earth is a 'flat disk centered at the North Pole' and that the 'sun, moon, planets, and stars only a few hundred miles above the surface of the earth'[6].
>
> *Amondawa tribe*: Lacks linguistic structures that relate time and space, and furthermore, lacks any abstract concept of 'time'[7].
>
> *Yaohnanen*: This tribe is convinced that Prince Phillip, the current Duke of Edinburgh, is the embodiment of a spirit that was born on a volcano on their island, the 'pale-skinned son of the mountain spirit[8].'

The Zetetic Astronomers, the Amondawa and the Yaohnanen part ways with us not just peripherally, but fundamentally, when it comes to the nature of the planet we occupy, the relatedness of time and space, and Prince Philip's divine attributes,

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[4] At least provided we are cognitivists, epistemic principles can be true or false. By contrast, epistemic *rules* are prescriptive; for example, *In conditions C, belief in way W.* Epistemic principles, if true, imply epistemic rules or norms which, qua prescriptive, are not truth-apt. For example, if the principle *Beliefs formed on the basis of wishful thinking are unjustified* is true, then its truth gives rise to a non-truth-apt prescriptive epistemic rule to the effect that: *If your basis for B is wishful thinking, don't believe B.*

[5] I borrow this expression from Quassim Cassam (2016).

[6] https://www.theflatearthsociety.org/home/index.php/about-the-society.

[7] See for example Sinha et al. (2011). For some examples of similar cases of epistemic diversity that include the unavailability of certain concepts for the purposes of reasoning and planning, see (Hacking 1982)

[8] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from/_our_own_correspondent/6734469.stm.

respectively. We should all be moderate descriptive epistemic pluralists because there's plenty of evidence for the *existence* of these kinds of belief systems.

This said, let's revisit more carefully the component of epistemic relativism that Paul Boghossian calls *epistemic pluralism*, a doctrine that is comprised of two theses:

> **Epistemic pluralism**: (i) 'there are many fundamentally different, gen-uinely alternative epistemic systems', but (ii) 'no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others'[9].

The first leg is effectively the thesis we are calling *moderate descriptive epistemic pluralism* (hereafter, MDEP), a thesis we should all accept. The second thesis is, how-ever, deeply controversial. Whereas absolutists and relativists alike should accept MDEP, absolutists deny (ii) while relativists accept it. From the absolutists's perspec-tive, there needn't be anything philosophically significant about diversity of opinion, even when it is radical. The absolutist's stock diagnosis of radically divergent epis-temic systems (and ensuing disagreements owing to such divergent systems) will be that at least one such system is riddled with error. The relativist is inclined to a differ-ent diagnosis. For ease of exposition, let's call the second leg of the epistemic pluralist's thesis *equal standing*, to capture the claim that there are no facts by virtue of which any epistemic system is more correct than any other.

One reason many epistemic relativists are inclined to *equal standing* once MDEP is granted is that they accept, in addition to MDEP, a further thesis about the possibility conditions of rational persuasion—*epistemic imcommensurability*.

> **Epistemic incommensurability (EI)**: It is possible for two agents to have opposing beliefs which are rationally justified to an equal extent where there is no rational basis by which either agent could properly persuade the other to revise their view.

Consider that if MDEP were false—that is, if everyone more or less shared the same epistemic system—then this fact would undercut the putative motivation for embracing EI, at least, in so far as the kinds of agents we're interested in are creatures like us (rather than, say, possible agents very different from us). After all, if everyone accepted (more or less) the same epistemic system (with only peripheral differences), then it's hard to see why rational persuasion *wouldn't* at least in principle be possible.

However, the very possibility of rational persuasion does indeed look much bleaker once we grant that epistemic systems can and do radically diverge, *a la* MDEP. To ap-preciate why a relativist might be inclined to accept EI, given MDEP, just consider

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[9](Boghossian 2006, 73).

Richard Rorty's (1980) notable diagnosis of the famous 17th century dispute between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine concerning the truth of heliocentrism, where each reached different and incompatible conclusions. Galileo claimed that heliocentrism was true, and he appealed to telescopic evidence (and more generally to Western science) in support of his claim; Bellarmine denied heliocentrism, embracing instead geocentrism, on the basis of Scriptural evidence, supplied by the Catechism of the Catholic Church[10]. Each verdict came out justified, respectively, with reference to each's *own* accepted epistemic system, but not to the other's. And further, neither seemed very well positioned to rationally persuade the other[11].

In short, MDEP, taken to its logical conclusion, gives us cases of deep disagreement—viz., disagreement about some target proposition(s) but also disagreement about what kinds of evidence are even relevant to adjudicating the target proposition(s)[12]. The relativist takes such deep disagreements that are the natural consequence of MDEP as evidence for EI, a thesis that itself implies the *equal standing* leg of epistemic pluralism. The absolutist by contrasts blocks the move from MDEP to EI to equal standing by simply denying that MDEP gives rise to EI. There are various ways to do this, both sceptical and non-sceptical[13], though these strategies needn't concern us here.

What I want to suggest now is that certain substantive commitments in epistemology, when paired with MDEP, might arguably at least lead straight to EI (and thus to *equal standing*), even for epistemologists who, in embracing these substantive commitments, would prefer to steer clear of relativism.

Enter here Wittgenstenian 'hinge' epistemology—an epistemological approach inspired by Wittgenstein's posthumous writings in *On Certainty* (hereafter, OC), and which encourages a novel way of thinking about the structure of rational support, one which has profound implications for the status of our foundational beliefs—viz., beliefs of the sort G.E. Moore (1925; cf., 1939) had, erroneously in Wittgenstein's view, appealed to in an attempt to prove the existence of the external world. The gist of Wittgenstien's positive project can be framed against a background dissatisfaction with Moore. As Wittgenstein saw it, Moore was in no position to provide evidence for the claim that he has hands, a claim for which Moore took himself to be absolutely certain[14]. Wittgenstein writes:

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[10] For a detailed historical account of this dispute, see Finocchiaro (2009).

[11] For a detailed discussion of this case, see Carter (2016, Ch. 4). See also Boghossian (2006, Ch. 5–6) and Siegel (2011).

[12] I am using 'deep disagreement' here in a way that is consonant with Hales (2014).

[13] The most notable sceptical strategy for blocking the move from MDEP to EI is the Pyrrhonian strategy, which recommends withholding of judgment in the face of disagreement, or equipollence. For discussion of this strategy, see Carter (2016, Ch. 3).

[14] For a recent overview of contemporary work on Moore's proof, see Carter (2012).

> My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything
> that I could produce in evidence for it. *That is why I am not in a position
> to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.* (OC, §250, my italics)

If the structure of rational support relations is such that rational support flows from only from what is more certain to what is less certain, but not the other way around, then what is to be said for the epistemic status of those beliefs which are most certain to one? On Wittgenstein's view, such certainties—what he calls 'hinges'—are themselves *arational* (not subject to rational support or doubt[15]) though also entirely necessary for the practice of rational evaluation. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon 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 inves-
> tigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

> But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate every-
> thing, 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 §§341–3)

As Duncan Pritchard (2015, 66) notes, what emerges from Wittgenstein's think-ing about hinge propositions and their role within the practice of rational evaluation is that all rational evaluation is *essentially* local. Call this the *locality of rational evaluation thesis*, which Pritchard articulates as follows:

> **Locality of Rational Evaluation Thesis (LRET)**: '[…] all rational eval-
> uation is essentially local, in that it takes place relative to fundamental
> commitments which are themselves immune to rational evaluation, but
> which need to be in place for a rational evaluation to occur' (2015, 66).

The descriptive claim MDEP, against a background commitment to LRET, receives a more sophisticated gloss. Call the version of MDEP that is available to proponents of LRET, MDEP+:

> **MDEP+**: There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative
> sets of hinge propositions, which are themselves immune to rational eval-
> uation, and which need to be in place for essentially local (i.e., hinge-
> relative) rational evaluation to occur.

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[15] Just as hinge propositions cannot be rationally supported, neither can they be rationally doubted (e.g. OC §317, §322, §342); to doubt a hinge proposition would be to at the same time call into question the wider belief system (OC §115, §186). As Wittgenstein notes, 'If someone doubted whether the earth had existed a hundred years ago, I should not understand, for this reason: I would not know what such a person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not' (OC §231).

It looks very much like, even though MDEP itself doesn't entail EI, MDEP+ *does* entail EI. After all, if rational evaluation is essentially local, and if there are fundamentally different, genuinely alternative sets of hinge propositions, then—in cases of deep disagreements (viz., where a dispute concerns both some first order-proposition as well as what kinds of evidence are even relevant to settling it—it seems as though there would be no rational basis by which either agent could properly persuade the other to revise their view. After all, each would be justified relative to her own (local) set of hinge propositions, which are fundamentally different from one's interlocutor's hinges.

Putting this all together, it looks as though the Wittgensteinian hinge epistemologist, in virtue of embracing the thesis that all rational evaluation is essentially local (LRET), cannot accept moderate descriptive epistemic pluralism—the thesis that 'there are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems' without also going all in for the more controversial 'equal standing' leg of epistemic pluralism, viz., the leg that is entailed by the epistemic incommensurability thesis, and which insists that there are 'no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others'[16].

If the foregoing is right, then a consequence is that 'hinge' epistemology is *essentially* a relativistic epistemology—and indeed, this is the interpretation that many commentators have preferred[17]. As Annalisa Coliva (2010, 1) has suggested, 'Relativists and anti-relativists alike are nowadays mostly united in considering Wittgenstein an epistemic relativist'[18].

However, things on this score might not be so straightforward. In recent work, Duncan Pritchard has defended a creative anti-relativistic manoeuver available to the Wittgenstenian, one that will require that we examine more carefully the relationship between MDEP+ and EI.

2. PRITCHARD ON DESCRIPTIVE PLURALISM AND RADICALLY DIVERGENT HINGES

MDEP+, to which the Wittgensteinian is committed, insists that there are many 'fundamentally different', genuinely alternative sets of hinge propositions. In §1, we considered some examples of epistemic systems that are not *merely* non-identical (as was implied by weak descriptive epistemic relativism), but whose differences to each other

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[16] For related discussion on this point, see Coliva (2010a, 188–190) and (2010b, 1–3).

[17] See, for example, Rorty 1980; Boghossian 2006; Trigg 1973.

[18] See, however, Williams (e.g., 1996; 2007) for the opposite reading of Wittgenstein's epistemology, as a kind of 'antidote' to epistemic relativism. Coliva (2010b) and Pritchard (e.g., 2015, *passim*) also resist the prevailing relativistic reading of Wittgenstein.

and our own are striking. It is this fact that seems incontestable. Although it seems apparent that once MDEP+ is granted, EI looks inevitable, this transition between MDEP+ and EI might be too quick.

As Duncan Pritchard (2015) puts it:

> That all rational evaluation takes place relative to hinge commitments is entirely compatible with there being a great deal of overlap in subjects' hinge commitments, *even when they are from very different cultures.* So the question we need to ask is whether there can be *radical divergence* in one's hinge commitments[19] (2015, 109, my italics).

As Pritchard is using 'radical' here and elsewhere (see, e.g., Pritchard 2010, 279–80), he is taking radical to exclude at least some shared background. MDEP+ is compatible with significant divergence between epistemic systems that are not radically different, in this sense. But given that a shared background could at least potentially be appealed to in the course of rational persuasion, it will take a slightly stronger version of MDEP+ to imply EI (and *a fortiori* equal standing). Call this stronger version MDEP++.

> **MDEP++**: There are many *radically* and fundamentally different, genuinely alternative sets of hinge propositions, which are themselves immune to rational evaluation, and which need to be in place for essentially local (i.e., hinge-relative) rational evaluation to occur.

But, Pritchard denies MDEP++. This is important because, if it takes MDEP++, and not merely MDEP+ to commit the hinge epistemologist to EI, then a viable rationale for rejecting MDEP++ allows the hinge epistemologist, who happily embraces LRET, to *reject* the equal standing leg of the epistemic pluralist thesis—viz., the relativistic leg of the thesis—even while maintaining a plausible version of the descriptive leg of the thesis, MDEP+. Pritchard's own rationale for rejecting MDEP++ is grounded in Wittgenstein's own thinking about the necessity of a shared background for the possibility of disagreement. For example, Wittgenstein says:

> The truth of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements. That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them. (OC, §§80– 81)

> In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind. (OC, §156)

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[19] Pritchard is advancing this claim in criticism of Michael Williams' (1996; 2007) brand of Wittgenstenian contextualism, which Pritchard takes to overlook this point.

In his assessment of these passages, Pritchard remarks:

> If this is right, then we can at least count on a dispute between two agents who are intelligible to one another as involving a shared background of beliefs, and hence as having shared hinge commitments (2015, 210).

Furthermore, he adds:

> The general idea in play here is a familiar one: that wholesale error in an agent's beliefs or statements is not even intelligible. As Donald Davidson (1983: 432) famously put this point, "belief is in its nature veridical." Such error would thus be a reason for regarding the agent concerned as not being a believer or as not being someone who is making statements in the first place (e.g., it could be a reason to think that the agent is mad). At the very least, wholesale error of this sort would be a reason for thinking that the agent in question is not making the statements that she seems to be making, or doesn't have the beliefs that were previously credited to her.

In summary, the picture that Pritchard offers is one that combines two very different kinds of descriptive claims, so as to yield a nuanced version of descriptive epistemic pluralism that—even for the Wittgenstenian who insists that all rational evaluation is essentially local—arguably does not lead to the epistemic incommensurability thesis. The first descriptive claim, which Pritchard (uncontroversially) takes for granted, is that—for the hinge epistemologist—it must be countenanced that there are fundamentally different sets of hinges; this is a concession of epistemic diversity. The second descriptive claim—one which implies a rejection of MDEP++, is that, at least some shared background must underlie even disputes framed against very different sets of hinges, and such a shared background brings with it possibility conditions for (in principle) rational adjudication of the sort incompatible with EI.

3. SHARED BACKGROUNDS AND THE ÜBER HINGE COMMITMENT

Pritchard's position represents an innovative strategy for reconciling, on the one hand, a concession of epistemic diversity, with, on the other, the Wittgenstenian's contention that all rational assessment is essentially local, *without* devolving into EI and thus to the relatvistic *equal standing* leg of the epistemic pluralism thesis.

But let's take a closer look at the claim relied upon to get this result—viz., that recognising a minimal shared background, even in cases where interlocutors are committed to very different hinges, blocks the passage from MDEP+ (which the hinge

epistemologist *is* committed to) to EI. At core, the claim can be pared down to the following *prima facie* plausible idea: that a shared background supplies conditions for possible rational adjudication. Put another way: for two interlocutors, A and B, and dispute D, D is not in principle rationally inadjudicable for A and B if there is some shared background, B, which is a necessary precondition for D.

I think this is more or less right. However, in recent work, I've criticised a version a special case of this general claim–not by rejecting it outright, but by opting for a modification of it[20]. I want to briefly review my proposed modification and then outline how it influences Pritchard's strategy. To this end, just imagine a dispute between— say—a Western scientist, and a member of the Yaohnanen tribe considered in §1 (i.e., the tribe that is convinced Prince Phillip is a divine being). Suppose we grant Pritchard the broadly Davidsonian point that any meaningful disagreement between the scientist and the Yaohnanen requires at least some shared background. Let's imagine that the scientist the leader of the Yaohanen (call them Cy and Yao, respectively) attempt to rationally dispute the claim that Prince Phillip is divine. Cy insists that there is no scientific evidence that Phillip is divine. Yao appeals to Yaohanen folk legend, according to which a 'pale-skinned' (Phillip is Caucasian) son of a mountain spirit is said to have travelled to a faraway land (e.g., England), married a powerful woman (in this case, Queen Elizabeth) and then returned to them (Phillip visited the island of Vanatu in 1974). Prince Phillip seemed to the Yaohnanen to fit these criteria to a tee. Of course, Cy rejects that Yaohanen folk lore is relevant to the truth of the proposition that Phillip is divine, and the Yaohanen think it clearly is. As things stand, rational persuasion looks unpromising.

In a case like this one, it's important to note that *merely* identifying certain points of agreement between Cy and Yao needn't be sufficient for demonstrating the possibility that rational adjudication is possible in light of their respective starting points. Suppose, in the dialectical situation described, it is pointed out to both parties that there is some epistemic norm both are happy to accept—viz., a tautological norm that says *Infer A from A*. Both Cy and Yao can agree that such a norm is appropriately neutral between them. However, it's not yet evident that this fact is significant *vis-à-vis* whether the two parties could rationally adjudicate their dispute. The reason is that such norm, though appropriately neutral, is not appropriately *discriminatory* in the sense that such a norm would fail to favour one position over the other; as such, it would plausibly fail play the kind of role that it would need to in order to facilitate bringing interlocutors locked in an otherwise irreconcilable position into a (non-question-begging) resolution. There is another side to this coin: a norm (or proposition) that that does very well in the 'discriminatory role' will plausibly fail to be

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[20]See Carter (2016, Ch. 4).

appropriately neutral, and thus is not something that can by the lights of both parties be introduced into a shared background[21].

The lesson to be learned is that for two interlocutors, A and B, who antecedently accept very different hinges, and dispute D, D is possibly rationally inadjudicable for A and B *even if* there is some shared background, B, which both A and B are free to appeal to. Relevant to whether rational adjudication would be possible in such a circumstance is what, specifically, is shared in the background. It's not clear that the kind of shared background that is implied by Pritchard's Davidsonian line will be enough to vouchsafe the possibility of rational adjudication in such circumstances; this is because it's unclear whether what would be secured in such a background would be appropriately discriminatory, in the sense just articulated. And if that's right, then it becomes less clear whether MDEP++ can be rejected by the hinge epistemologist on broadly Davidsonian grounds.

The dialectic at this point can be summarised as: the challenge for the Wittgenstenian who wants to (i) concede substantial epistemic diversity (of the sort captured by MDEP+) while embracing LERT (that rational evaluation is essentially local) without also accepting the epistemic incommensuraility thesis (and a fortiori, *equal standing*) that seems to follow from these claims, will be to show how MDEP++ is false. MDEP++, recall, says that there are many *radically* and fundamentally different, genuinely alternative sets of hinge propositions, which are themselves immune to rational evaluation, and which need to be in place for essentially local (i.e., hinge-relative) rational evaluation to occur. I've argued that the Davidsonian line embraced by Pritchard, which involves merely highlighting that some shared background is a necessary precondition for even seemingly deep forms of disagreement, is insufficient for demonstrating the falsity of MDEP++ because it is in principle compatible with MDEP++.

Interestingly, Pritchard's recent anti-sceptical work (e.g., 2015, Ch. 4) reveals a further possible anti-relativistic move that the hinge epistemologist could make at this juncture, one that appeals to what Pritchard calls an *über hinge commitment.* Pritchard's *über hinge* strategy might appear promising even if the Davidsonian line was not for the Wittgenstenian who wishes to reject the EI-entailing MDEP++. Pritchard articulates the notion of an über hinge (in connection to ordinary hinge commitments) as follows:

> [...] closer inspection of this apparently heterogeneous class of hinge commitments reveals that they all in effect codify, for that particular person, the entirely general hinge commitment that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs. Call this commitment the *über*

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[21]See Carter (2016, §4.3) for a more detailed presentation of this point.

hinge commitment, and call the proposition endorsed by the über hinge commitment the *über hinge proposition*.

Perhaps, if as Pritchard elsewhere (e.g., 2015, 206) puts it, 'A commitment to the absence of […] systematic deception is […] a plausible manifestation of one's general über hinge commitment', we could locate a very specific item that will be in any shared background *beyond* whatever must be in the shared background between interlocutors simply (*a la* Davidson) for genuine disagreement to be meaningful. After all, we can imagine champions of very different epistemic systems failing to *radically* diverge (in the sense relevant to MDEP++) simply because their shared commitment to regarding themselves as not radically deceived might generate for them a stock of mutually recongnisable propositions, some of which could (perhaps) be not only appropriately neutral but appropriately discriminatory *vis-à-vis* their epistemic disagreement.

Or course, one line of criticism to this strategy proceeds as follows: for the *über-hinge* strategy to be better-positioned than the Davidsonian strategy for rejecting MEDP++, further argument is needed for why shared commitment to the *über-hinge proposition* (on behalf of both parties representing very different epistemic systems) is such that, by appealing to it, rational adjudication of the dispute would be possible. Without additional 'proof of concept', the epistemic-incommensurability-entailing MDEP++ seems to remain at least potentially on the table as a plausible commitment of the hinge epistemologist (given her acceptance of LRET).

There might, however, be a further problem for such a strategy. Here it will be helpful to consider how a recent worry raised by Crispin Wright's (2012) to an anti-sceptical strategy employed by Annalisa Coliva (2012) could potentially be 're-deployed' as a challenge for advancing the über-hinge strategy as an 'anti-relativistic' strategy on behalf of the hinge epistemologist. Here's Wright (2012):

> if it really were constitutive of our conception of rational empirical enquiry to assume that there is an external material world, then there should be a kind of unintelligibility about a sceptical challenge to the rationality of this assumption which would be at odds with the sense of paradox created by the best sceptical arguments that challenge it. There is, it seems to me, an implicit tension in the very notion that elements which are constitutive of a concept—which belong primitively to its identity and are not sustained by other features of it—should be sufficiently opaque to be controversial and apparently vulnerable to philosophical challenge. If *free* action, to take a parallel example, is, conceptually constitutively, simply action performed with a sense of freedom, for normal human reasons,

without external force or duress, why does anyone feel the familiar kind
of challenge posed by determinism as any kind of problem? (2012, 479)

Here, Wright submits as problematic any anti-sceptical strategy that renders un-
intelligible something that appears to be intelligible. In this case, Wright is taking it
that a sceptical challenge to the assumption that there is an external world is at least
intelligible, and it is *ceteris paribus* problematic if a given anti-sceptical strategy fails
to preserve this. Note that I am here taking no stand as to whether Coliva's own anti-
sceptical strategy, to which Wright is levelling this critique, actually succumbs to it.
Rather, I want to register the desideratum being highlighted here as a valid one.

I want to now consider that the worry Wright poses to Coliva (framed in terms
of this desideratum) can potentially be recast as a worry for the *über hinge* strategy,
in so far as it is meant to block the move from descriptive to controversial epistemic
pluralism, *via* a rejection of MDEP++. To this end, let's take as a starting point that,
just as the sceptical problem is an intelligible one (one that raises a genuine philo-
sophical tension), so likewise is the problem of epistemic relativism. That is, there
is, as anti-relativist Paul Boghossian (2001) sums it up, '[…] a serious difficulty see-
ing how there could be objectively valid reasons for belief, a difficulty that has per-
haps not been adequately faced up to in the analytic tradition' (2001, 1). But, if it
really were constitutive of the practice of rational assessment (as per the über-hinge
strategy) that certain hinges be in common between even the most radically different
epistemic systems, then there would be a kind of unintelligibility about the relativist's
challenge, construed as a challenge to vindicate rational assessment as objective (in
a manner incompatible with the 'equal standing' leg of epistemic pluralism). To the
extent that this concern is on the right track, an über-hinge styled rationale for reject-
ing MDEP++ will need to be paired with an accompanying story for how the problem
posed by epistemic relativists is as intelligible as it seems.

4. NON-RELATIVISTIC 'HINGE' EPISTEMOLOGY? SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS

Thus far, I have not commented on the vexing question of what is *distinctive* of a philo-
sophical position rightly called epistemic relativism. Rather, I've simply noted that the
more provocative (non-descriptive) leg of the epistemic pluralism thesis (no facts by
virtue of which any epistemic system is more correct than any of the others) is of-
ten taken to be feature of epistemic relativism. Indeed, most self-ascribed epistemic
relativists have embraced this thesis[22].

[22]See, for example, Richard Rorty (1980; 1989), Ian Hacking (1982), Paul Feyerabend (1975) and
Thomas Kuhn (1962) among others.

However, I want to close by considering how—potentially at least—the hinge epistemologist could actually welcome MDEP++, and thus embrace EI along with the 'equal standing' leg of the epistemic pluralist thesis, all while maintaining that doing so is not sufficient for being an epistemic relativism of a genuinely philosophically interesting sort. This suggestion perhaps sounds bizarre initially, but to appreciate how it might go, it will require that we look more carefully at Boghossian's epistemic pluralist thesis, as it stands embedded (along side an epistemic non-absolutist thesis and an epistemic relationist thesis) within the wider position Boghossian defines as epistemic relativism, as follows:

Epistemic Relativism (Boghossian's Formulation)

A. There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (*Epistemic non-absolutism*)

B. If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form

"E justifies belief B"

as expressing the claim

E justifies belief B

but rather as expressing the claim:

According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B. (*Epistemic relationism*)

C. There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (*Epistemic pluralism*)

The matter of whether this is in fact the right way to characterise the epistemic relativist's core insight—as a conjunction of these three claims—has been a matter of contemporary dispute. In particular, MacFarlane (2014) and Wright (2008) have called into doubt Boghossian's inclusion of the *epistemic relationist* thesis, and whether its inclusion can satisfactorialy preserve the difference between relativism proper and contextualism.

Consider that epistemic contextualists (e.g., DeRose 1992; 2009) insist that the extension of "knows" or "justified" in attributions of the form "S knows that p" or "S is

justified in believing P" varies with the context in which these terms are used, and accordingly sentences that attribute these terms can express different propositions and have different truth-conditions in different contexts (of use). However, while contextualists agree that knowledge/justification ascribing sentences do not get a truth value, *simpliciter*, but only relative to a 'standards parameter' whose value is supplied by the context in which they are used, contextualists are happy to agree that justification/knowledge ascribing sentences have their truth values *absolutely*. That is to say, once the value of the relevant standards parameter is supplied (i.e., in the case of attributor contextualism, the standards operant in the attributor's context), there is a once-and-for-all answer to the question of whether a given justification/knowledge attribution is true.

According to MacFarlane, this is what a proper relativist denies. On MacFarlane's brand of epistemic relativism about "knows", whether a particular use of a knowledge-ascribing sentence, e.g., "George knows he has a hand" is true depends on the epistemic standards at play in the *assessor*'s context–viz., the context in which the knowledge ascription is being assessed for truth or falsity. But, given that the very same knowledge ascription can be assessed for truth or falsity from indefinitely many perspectives, when I say that George knows he has a hand, what I've said does not get a truth value absolutely, but only relatively[23].

Against this background, we can see that—if the hinge epistemologist opts for MacFarlane's way of thinking about what makes a philosophical position relativistic in an interesting sense, there is at least some scope for her to embrace *both* legs of the epistemic pluralist thesis while at the same time purporting to avoid relativism (proper) by simply embracing (along with epistemic pluralism) the epistemic relationism thesis that MacFarlane takes to disqualify Boghossian's epistemic relativist from being a relativist, proper (MacFarlane (2014, 33, fn. 5) reads Boghossian's relativist as a contextualist). On the resulting view, the Wittgensmenian can insist that rational assessment is essentially local in the sense that knowledge/justification attributions do not get truth values independent of local hinges that supply the relevant standards, but that once these standards are supplied, knowledge/justification attributions get their truth-values absolutely.

MacFarlane's characterisation of relativism in terms of assessment-sensitivity is controversial, and it's unclear whether the hinge epistemologist would be satisfied by this characterisation of the landscape in the first place (or, satisfied enough to advert to it in justifying how a hinge epistemologist's commitment to both legs of the epistemic pluralist thesis might be taxonomised as contextualism rather than relativism). I simply register this point as a means of showing the full scope of the hinge epistemologist's options in the face of the original dilemma. The original dilemma for the hinge

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[23] See Carter (2016, Ch. 7; 2017) for further discussion of these differences.

epistemologist—viz., either reject (as Pritchard has) some version of descriptive epistemic pluralism or embrace the most provocative leg of the pluralist thesis—remains I think one of the most vexing issues facing hinge epistemologists who are convinced that rational assessment is a local affair while at the same time put off by the prospect of full-blown relativism.

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