

# Review: Duncan Pritchard: Epistemological Disjunctivism\*

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The theory of knowledge, like many areas of philosophy, becomes difficult (and interesting) when it emerges that some of our most basic intuitions conflict with each other. In the case of the theory of knowledge, one intuition is that whatever confers positive epistemic status on beliefs must be reflectively accessible to the subject. Another is that whatever confers positive epistemic status on beliefs should make the beliefs likely to be true. The difficulty comes when it emerges that there is no intersection between the set of factors that are reflectively accessible to a subject and the set of factors that make a belief likely to be true.

Traditionally, theories of knowledge have sought to solve the problem by affirming one set of intuitions and/or showing the other to be defective. In *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, Duncan Pritchard discusses a theory that purports to show that the apparent conflict between the intuitions is illusory—that in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge, the knowing subject has reflective access to factors that guarantee the truth of her belief. This is the epistemological disjunctivist thesis. Most epistemologists think that it is false and Pritchard does not set out to show that it is true. Rather, the aim of the book is to show that the obvious *prima facie* reasons for thinking that epistemological disjunctivism is false do not work and then to use the thesis to address scepticism.

Three problems immediately arise. Firstly, if a perceiver has purely reflective access to the fact that she is seeing that  $p$ , it seems she has access to the fact that  $p$  simply by reflection since seeing that  $p$  entails the truth of  $p$ . Where  $p$  is some empirical proposition, this seems surprising—empirical propositions do not seem open available to pure reflection. Secondly, the

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idea that a perceiver can have reflective access to the fact that she is seeing that  $p$  seems in tension with that a case of seeing might be subjectively indistinguishable from a similar hallucination. Thirdly, knowing that one is seeing that  $p$  would seem to entail knowing that  $p$ . If seeing that  $p$  presupposes knowing that  $p$ , however, then it is hard to see how the fact that one is seeing that  $p$  can ground one's knowledge that  $p$ .

Pritchard argues that whilst these concerns are *prima facie* problems for epistemological disjunctivism, each of them can be argued away. Epistemological disjunctivism only holds that, in certain cases of veridical perception, the perceiver has reflective access to the fact that she is seeing that  $p$  (p. 51). In such cases, the subject already has perceptual knowledge that  $p$ . The result is that epistemological disjunctivism does not hold that one can expand one's knowledge of empirical propositions by reflection alone. Furthermore, contrary to first appearances, seeing that  $p$  does not entail knowing that  $p$ . Pritchard points out that, for one thing, seeing that  $p$  does not even seem to entail having justification for  $p$  (p. 50). Seeing that  $p$  thus does not presuppose knowing that  $p$  and can thus provide a rational basis for believing that  $p$ .

To deal with the remaining problem concerning discrimination, Pritchard draws a distinction between *favouring* and *discriminating* epistemic support. One has the former type of epistemic support for  $p$  just when one has better evidence for  $p$  than some other error possibility. Having favouring evidence for one's belief that one is seeing a zebra (for example), merely requires that one have better evidence for the belief that one is seeing a zebra than that one is seeing a cleverly disguised mule (p. 79). Unlike discriminating support, favouring support does not require one to be able to discriminate between a zebra and a cleverly disguised mule.

This distinction yields a "two-tiered" relevant alternatives theory of knowledge. There are various ways in which a perceiver can fail to acquire knowledge—she might be hallucinating, the local environment might be unhelpful in more or less contrived ways etc. Assuming that the perceiver cannot rule these out, some of these possibilities get in the way of her knowing where others do not. The two-tiered theory divides ways in which the belief might be false between those that obtain in nearby possible worlds and those that do not. A perceiver's knowledge depends on her being able to discriminate between a veridical case and those nearby possibilities, but merely have favouring epistemic support for her belief over those possibilities that are not nearby (p. 88).

This (independently motivated) distinction helps the epistemological disjunctivist answer the problem about the possibility of a veridical perception and a hallucination being subjectively indistinguishable. Once one accepts a two-tiered relevant alternatives theory, the requirement that a perceiver must be able to discriminate between veridical perceptions and hallucinations subsides. The idea is that in paradigm cases of seeing that *p*, an individual has favouring epistemic support for her belief that she is seeing rather than hallucinating and can thus know that she is seeing rather than hallucinating on this basis (pp. 96-7). The fact that an individual cannot distinguish, by introspection alone, between cases of seeing and hallucination thus does not undermine the claim that, when she is in a case of seeing she can know that she is in such a case.

Having dealt with the *prima facie* problems, Pritchard turns to apply epistemological disjunctivism to the puzzle of radical scepticism. Again, Pritchard argues that an epistemological disjunctivist approach combines the benefits of both internalist and externalist theories. The epistemological disjunctivist response to the problem of radical scepticism is a neo-Moorean one in that it allows that we can know that we are not brains in vats. The idea is that because such sceptical possibilities are not empirically motivated, they are merely raised. The result is that, by epistemological disjunctivist lights, an agent *does* have sufficient reflectively accessible grounds for ruling out sceptical possibilities, since what is reflectively accessible to her is the fact that she is seeing rather than a brain in a vat (p. 125).

What this yields is an *undercutting* strategy for resisting scepticism. Epistemological disjunctivism explains why the intuition that we generally do not know that we are not brains in vats is misguided on the grounds that it explains how it is that we can come to have reflectively accessible rational support for our beliefs about the world. What the theory thus allows us to do is see why scepticism is unmotivated, since it rests on the problematic claim that, in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge, a perceiver's grounds for her belief are just the same as in a corresponding case of hallucination.

The main selling point of the book's project is that epistemological disjunctivism promises to steer an intuitive path between internalism and externalism. This is the primary motivation for the book's project. I think that there might be cause to wonder how far this is the case. As Pritchard observes, arguments against internalist theories have claimed that it is problematic that the kind of factors that internalist theories associate with justification do not

seem to connect to truth in the right way.<sup>1</sup> Put another way, an individual might be strongly justified by internalist lights whilst still having a belief that is unlikely to be true.

Whilst epistemological disjunctivism might be able to handle this problem with internalism, it is not so clear that it handles other problems directed specifically at internalism. Like traditional internalist theories, epistemological disjunctivism holds that a perceiving subject's knowledge (at least sometimes) involves her having reflective access to the grounds for her belief. This would seem to leave epistemological disjunctivism open to attacks on the idea that knowledge depends on reflective access. It would seem that for subject's a perceptual belief that *p* to be justified by reflective access to the fact that she is seeing, the perceiving subject needs to *believe* that she is in fact seeing that *p*. Such a belief would need to be justified, presumably by another belief, which leads to a regress.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not epistemological disjunctivism has any resources for dealing with this problem that are not available to the internalist is unclear. In any event, the above problem is certainly not just the epistemological disjunctivist's problem. Nonetheless, if epistemological disjunctivism is to be sold on the grounds that it sorts out problems for both internalist and externalist theories, it seems that it should have something to say about the above problem. Otherwise, there is a danger of landing the externalist with the internalist's problems.

An interesting question concerns the relationship between epistemological disjunctivism and *metaphysical disjunctivism*—specifically, whether or not the former entails the latter. Pritchard claims that '[i]t is reasonably clear that epistemological disjunctivism does not in itself entail metaphysical disjunctivism' (p. 24). Intuitively, I find it reasonably clear that epistemological disjunctivism *does* entail metaphysical disjunctivism. The source of the disagreement here, I think, is a disagreement about metaphysical disjunctivism.

Pritchard states that:

'Although there is a range of metaphysical disjunctivist views, what they have in common is a rejection of the idea that the nature of one's perceptual experience is the same regardless of whether one is having a normal veridical perceptual experience

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<sup>1</sup>John Gibbons (2006) takes this strategy.

<sup>2</sup>See Michael Bergmann (2006).

as opposed to being the victim of an introspectively indistinguishable experience which is in fact an illusion [...] or an hallucination' (p. 23).

This, as I see it, is just the denial of the claim that a perceiver in a paradigmatic case of seeing and a perceiver who is hallucinating are having identical experiences. Epistemological disjunctivism surely does entail this claim. It certainly seems mysterious how experiences that are *metaphysically* identical could come apart in terms of providing reasons. If this is what metaphysical disjunctivism amounts to, then epistemological disjunctivism surely does entail metaphysical disjunctivism.

Pritchard's explanation of the claim that epistemological disjunctivism does not entail metaphysical disjunctivism is that 'the rational standing available to the agent in normal veridical perceptual experiences and corresponding (introspectively indistinguishable) cases of illusion and hallucination are radically different does not in itself entail that there is no common metaphysical essence to the perceptual experiences in these cases...' (p. 24). The claim that there is no common metaphysical essence, however, surely comes apart from the above claim that the experiences are identical. The question of whether or not epistemological disjunctivism entails metaphysical disjunctivism thus hinges on which claim ought to be treated as constitutive of metaphysical disjunctivism. Fairly recent work on metaphysical disjunctivism would seem to indicate that it is the former. Whilst metaphysical disjunctivists have sought to defend the latter claim, Tyler Burge (2005) argues that it is incompatible with what is known about perception.<sup>3</sup> In response, John McDowell (2011) moves metaphysical disjunctivism towards the former position. Giving metaphysical disjunctivism its most plausible reading means epistemological disjunctivism does entail metaphysical disjunctivism.

There is so very much to like (and to recommend) about *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. It is philosophically deep, with many subtle distinctions that I have not been able to do justice to in the overview given here. This subtlety does not come at the expense of clarity, though—the book is hugely readable from start to finish. Some of the most interesting philosophical discussion comes from taking a theory that is commonly taken to be obviously false and showing that the apparently obvious arguments against it

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<sup>3</sup>William Fish (2009) describes metaphysical disjunctivism in terms of the former thesis.

fail. Pritchard's book does just this and it does so in a way that is fascinating, engaging and above all thought-provoking. There is much to be learned here.

## References

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