KNOWLEDGE BASED ON SEEING

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ABSTRACT: In *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, Duncan Prichard defends his brand of epistemological disjunctivism from three worries. In this paper I argue that his responses to two of these worries are in tension with one another.

KEYWORDS: Duncan Prichard, epistemological disjunctivism, knowledge, basing

In his wide-ranging and ambitious *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, Duncan Pritchard outlines and defends what he calls the "holy grail" of epistemology – a view that aims to combine the virtues of both internalist and externalist approaches in epistemology, and which claims to offer a novel, robust, and "satisfying" response to the problem of radical skepticism. The only problem with this view, Pritchard notes, is that it "occupies a region of logical space in epistemology that many hold is simply unavailable."[1] According to Pritchard's diagnosis, there are three chief *prima facie* problems for his brand of epistemological disjunctivism that have seemed to make it unavailable, and his defense is constituted by replies to these three problems, in addition to an elaboration of its virtues. But unfortunately for the search for epistemology's holy grail, in this paper I will show that Pritchard's responses to two of the three problems facing his preferred form of epistemological disjunctivism are in tension.

1. The Setup: What Is Epistemological Disjunctivism?

The view that Prichard calls epistemological disjunctivism, he formulates as follows:

> **Epistemological Disjunctivism: The Core Thesis**
>
> In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge an agent, S, has perceptual knowledge that ϕ in virtue of being in possession of rational support, R, for her belief that ϕ which is both factive (i.e., R's obtaining entails ϕ) and reflectively accessible to S.[2]

[1] Duncan Prichard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 18.

[2] Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 13. After stating this principle using '*ϕ*' as a schematic letter for propositions on the first page of his first chapter, Pritchard goes on to never use '*ϕ*' again, instead using '*p*.' I'll follow him in this.

What Pritchard means by this is best illustrated by considering a specific case of perceptual knowledge, such as that in which you know that this paper is in front of you. In the paradigmatic case, you start by seeing that this paper is in front of you, and at least partially in virtue of that fact, the fact that you see that this paper is in front of you is reflectively accessible to you – meaning that you can know it by reflection alone. Call this fact *R*.

So in virtue of being in a position to know that you see that this paper is in front of you, you possess *R* as rational support – as your *reason* for your perceptual knowledge that this paper is in front of you. And it is a particularly excellent reason, because it actually *entails* that this paper is in front of you (since you cannot count as seeing that this is true unless it really is true). So in paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge, your knowledge is supported by reasons of the very best sort, and these reasons are not merely some external facts about reliability or safety that are epistemically inaccessible to you and hence unavailable in responding to radical skepticism, but rather they are your very own reasons – accessible to you on the basis of reflection alone. Hence, Prichard's view has much in common with classical forms of internalist foundationalism such as those of C.I. Lewis and Roderick Chisholm, on which the basic perceptual reasons are facts about your subjective psychological experience that are presumed to be luminous, incorrigible, or otherwise knowable on the basis of reflection alone, except that Pritchard's view claims that in paradigmatic cases, what happens is that there is a *world-implicating* fact – that you factively *see that p* – that is knowable by reflection alone. And this gives Pritchard's view a whole set of advantages that are unavailable to classical forms of internalism.

What makes this view count as a kind of *disjunctivist* view about perceptual knowledge is that as Pritchard interprets the view, the kind of rational support that the *core thesis* describes is not available in cases in which you are faced with an illusion or a hallucination. Although this isn't obvious from the formulation of the *core thesis* by itself, it follows from Pritchard's interpretation that for a piece of rational support to be *reflectively available* to you, it must be possible for you to know it by reflection alone. Since knowledge is factive, knowability by reflection alone is presumably factive,[3] and so you cannot have this rational support for your belief that *p* unless you *see that p*. In the philosophy of perception, disjunctivism about perceptual experience is the view that seeing that *p* is a state that is different in kind from states that are subjectively indiscriminable from it, such as suffering a visual illusion as of *p* or having a hallucination as of *p*. So by analogy, the

[3] Perhaps some things that are not true can be known by reflection alone, such as *that you are reflecting*, but *that you see that* ϕ is not among them.

consequence of Prichard's view that the rational support available for perceptual beliefs is different in kind in these cases is naturally termed a kind of *epistemological* disjunctivism, and as Prichard notes, though there is no entailment between perceptual and epistemological disjunctivism in either direction, the two views may be natural allies.

I'll note in passing that it is probably not good practice in nomenclature to name views by their consequences rather than by their core theses. Pritchard's view earns the name of *epistemological disjunctivism* because it holds that the form of rational support available for perceptual beliefs differs between the good and bad cases, but he accepts this thesis for very particular reasons that need not be shared by everyone who holds that the form of rational support available in the good and bad cases differ. For example, on one sort of view, in virtue of seeing that *p*, you count as having *that p* available as your reason to believe that p.[4] This view allows a form of rational support that is only available in the good case, but it does not carry Pritchard's commitment that the fact that you see that *p* is reflectively available. Similarly, on another sort of view, when you see that *p*, the fact that you see that *p* counts as part of the rational support that you have for *p* regardless of whether it is reflectively accessible to you – just because it is true.[5] This view again allows a form of rational support that is only available in the good case, but again, it does not carry Pritchard's commitments about reflective availability. So the term, 'epistemological disjunctivism' is probably better reserved as a name for what these different views have in common. Hence I'll continue in what follows to refer to *Pritchard's view* and to the *core thesis*, or to *Pritchard's form of epistemological disjunctivism*.

[4] This appears to be Timothy Williamson's view; he holds that your evidence is what you know and that seeing that *P* entails knowing that *P*, so in virtue of seeing that *P*, you come to have *P* as part of your evidence. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2000).

[5] This is how Matthew McGrath and Juan Comesaña interpret John McDowell's view, especially in John McDowell, "Avoiding the Myth of the Given," in *Experience, Norm, and Nature*, ed. John McDowell and J. Lindgaard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009). See especially Matthew McGrath and Juan Comesaña, "Perceptual Reasons," *Philosophical Studies* Online First, http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11098-015-0542-x. In his book, Pritchard distinguishes on pages 36-37 between *accessibilist* and *mentalist* forms of epistemological internalism, and defends the *core thesis* as satisfying a form of accessibilism. In that context, it is natural to interpret the view McGrath and Comesaña attribute to McDowell as the mentalist analogue of Pritchard's core thesis.

2. The Basing Problem

The simplest problem that Pritchard considers for his core thesis is posed by the idea that seeing that *p entails* knowing that *p*. This idea is, Pritchard suggests, accepted by "most views,"[6] and it is certainly a consequence of Timothy Williamson's familiar thesis that knowledge is the most general factive stative attitude.[7] But if seeing entails knowing, then it is hard to see how the fact that you see that this paper is in front of you could be your *basis* for believing that this paper is in front of you.

Prichard's solution to this problem is to reject – rightly, I believe – the principle that *seeing* entails *knowing*. His chief counterexample to this entailment involves a case in which you have *misleading evidence*. For example, if you are driving through normal countryside but have rationally come to believe that you are in fake barn country, then when you look at the barn directly in front of you, if you are rational, then you will see that there is a barn, but you will not *know* that there is a barn, because you will not *believe* that there is a barn. And indeed, even if you irrationally do believe that there is a barn, still the fact that this is an irrational belief will prevent it from being knowledge.

I have no issue with this counterexample; I myself have actually offered the same sort of case as a counterexample to the thesis that seeing entails knowing. And indeed, I believe that there are other sorts of counterexamples. For example, your perceptual experience represents far more things than you actually form beliefs about. And in the good case, your visual relationship to all of these things that are represented is factive – a kind of visual success. So you see them to be the case, but since you don't believe them to be the case, you don't know them to be the case. And similarly, even when you do form beliefs on the basis of your perceptual experiences, those beliefs are always formed some time *after* the perceptual experience. So in the intervening time, while you are in the process of forming the belief on the basis of what you see, you see that *p* without believing that *p*, and hence without knowing that *p*.

Indeed – and this will be important later – I believe that it is a conceptual point that if *R* is the *original basis* of one's belief that *p*, then one must have been in possession of *R before* forming the belief that *p*. It is possible, of course, to shift

[6] Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 21.

[7] Though see John Turri, "Does Perceiving Entail Knowing?" *Theoria* 76 (2010), 197-206 for a dissenting opinion. Turri's counterexamples to the *sees entails knows* principle are inconsistent with the judgments about seeing in fake barn cases that Pritchard relies on, and I myself prefer Pritchard's reasons for rejecting the principle (see Mark Schroeder, "Knowledge is Not the Most General Factive Stative Attitude," unpublished manuscript).

the basis for one's belief that *p* – for example, you may start by believing that *p* for the reason that *S*, and then come to learn that *R*, which also supports *p*. If you then learn that you were wrong about *S*, or simply forget *S*, *R* may then be the basis for your belief that *p* even if you were not in possession of *R* before you formed the belief that *p*. But this is possible only because you had some other original basis for your belief, which has shifted. The conceptual point is that if *R* is the *original* basis of your belief that *p*, then you must have been in possession of *R* *before* forming the belief that *p*.

Pritchard does not explicitly endorse this conceptual principle about basing. But in the absence of such a principle, it is hard to see why he should think that it needs to be possible to see that *p* without knowing that *p*, in order to make sense of how it is possible for the fact that one sees that *p* to be one's *basis* for one's knowledge that *p*. The conceptual point about temporal priority of original basing explains *why* the basing problem is even a *prima facie* problem for Pritchard's thesis, *and* it explains why rejecting the principle that seeing entails knowing would help to address this problem. And it follows from this principle that it is possible to see without knowing even in cases in which you have no misleading evidence and are in a position to know – but simply don't know, yet. This turns out to be in direct tension with Pritchard's solution to a second prima facie problem for his core thesis.

3. The Access Problem

The second serious problem for his core thesis that Pritchard takes up is what he calls the *access* problem. The access problem is a worry to the effect that if it is really possible to know by reflection alone that one sees that *p*, as Pritchard's core thesis claims, then it must be possible to know by reflection alone that *p*. But *p* is just a paradigmatic ordinary empirical proposition that is directly perceptually observable. Such propositions are not knowable on the basis of reflection alone, and so that is good reason to think that the core thesis must be false – it can't be possible to know that one sees that *p* on the basis of reflection alone.

Pritchard first imagines that this problem is posed for an agent who already has empirical knowledge. But he notes that if it is only possible for an agent who already has empirical knowledge that *p* to know that *p* on the basis of reflection, that does not really show that it is possible to know that *p* on the basis of reflection *alone*. And so in order to constitute a serious objection, the access problem must focus on cases in which the agent does *not* have knowledge that *p*. Pritchard formulates this more formidable version of this objection as follows:

The Access Problem

(AP1'') *S* can know by reflection alone that she is in possession of the factive reason *R* for believing the specific empirical proposition *p* (although she does not believe that *p* on this basis, or on any other basis). [Premise]

(AP2'') *S* can know by reflection alone that *R* entails *p*. [Premise]

(APC'') *S* can know by reflection alone the specific empirical proposition *p*. [From (AP1''), (AP2'')]

As Pritchard notes, this argument is valid, and the second premise is exceedingly hard to deny. Moreover, as he further notes, on his own view it is possible to see that *p* without knowing that *p*. And the core thesis says that in paradigmatic cases, when an agent sees that *p*, the fact that she sees that *p* is *reflectively available* to her. So this is what leads to the impression that Pritchard must accept the first premise.

But Pritchard claims that the first premise is false. This, he claims, is because the *only* cases in which it is possible to see that *p* without already knowing that *p* are cases in which one has misleading evidence – for example, that one justifiedly believes that one is in fake barn country even though one is not. But in these cases, he claims, obviously you cannot know by reflection alone that one sees that *p* – for example, that there is a barn in front of you. So, he claims, the *very cases* in which the access problem could possibly pose a threat are cases in which misleading evidence makes the first premise false. Hence, he concludes, the only cases in which an agent has a reflective justification available for an empirical proposition *p* are ones in which she knows that *p* on independent empirical grounds. So the fact that there is a reflective justification available in these cases does not, he holds, undermine the truism that such truths can only be known empirically.

4. The Clash

In order to maintain his answer to the access problem, Pritchard must claim that the *only* counterexamples to the principle that seeing entails knowing are cases in which the subject is in possession of misleading evidence – that is, that they are all cases in which the subject sees but is not even in a *position* to know. But as we saw earlier, the conceptual point that lies behind the basing problem *presupposes* that there are *other* cases in which one sees without knowing. And that is because, according to the conceptual point, nothing can be the original basis for one's belief unless one had it *before* one formed the belief. So in particular, that one sees that

p cannot be the basis for one's belief that *p* unless one sees that *p* before one knows that *p*. But in all such cases of successfully basing belief on what one sees, there is a time period during which one sees that *p* and is in a *position* to know that *p*, but does not yet know that *p*. And during this time, both premises of the argument formulating the access problem are *true*.

As I've argued, in the absence of the conceptual point about priority in basing, it is very hard to see why the claim that seeing entails knowing would pose even a *prima facie* problem for Pritchard's core thesis. So in principle, Pritchard could reject the conceptual point and take it as a point in his favor that it turns out that the basing problem is not, after all, even a *prima facie* problem for his view. But I think this would be a mistake. The claim that original basing requires temporal priority is central to any plausible understanding of what basing is or why it is epistemologically significant. Without this conceptual point, I worry that we would lose enough grip on what makes basing important to make it very unclear why Pritchard's core thesis has anything enlightening to say about perceptual knowledge or about skepticism. So I conclude, instead, that Pritchard is on the right track to solving the basing problem, but on the wrong track to solving the access problem. And this should be no surprise; plausibly the access problem is the most central reason why the view that Pritchard describes in his book has been widely perceived as occupying an "unavailable" portion of logical space.[8]

[8] Special thanks to Conor McHugh, Clayton Littlejohn, Hagit Benbaji, and Ram Neta.