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Venturinha and epistemic vertigo

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VENTURINHA AND EPISTEMIC VERTIGO

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ABSTRACT. This paper critically explores Nuno Venturinha's (2018) discussion of the Wittgensteinian notion of *epistemic vertigo* in the context of the radical sceptical problematic, at least as that notion has been recently articulated by Duncan Pritchard (e.g., 2015).

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Nuno Venturinha (2018) has written an ambitious and wide-ranging book developing his contextualist epistemology. Since there is a great deal of philosophical overlap between Venturinha's views and my own, not least in terms of the kind of broadly Wittgensteinian approach to philosophical questions that we both endorse, my goal here is to target one key thread in this book, which is Venturinha's appeal to the notion of *epistemic vertigo*. This is an idea that I have developed in a number of recent works, and which I take to be a central element of the Wittgensteinian epistemology that I defend.[1] As we will see, although Venturinha endorses my account of epistemic vertigo, it also seems clear from his wider remarks that he has a different understanding of it. Accordingly, by focusing on this notion we are able to highlight ways in which our understanding of the skeptical problematic diverges. At the very least, this gives me the opportunity to press Venturinha further on one key element of his epistemological position.

2. EPISTEMIC VERTIGO AND WITTGENSTEINIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

In Wittgenstein's final notebooks, published as *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969), one can discern, albeit in impressionistic form, a distinctive approach to certain fundamental epistemological issues. This is his so-called *hinge epistemology*. In outline, hinge epistemology appeals to the idea that there is a set of basic arational commitments that are core to all rational evaluation: the *hinge commitments*. These are everyday ('Moorean') claims that we are all optimally certain of (though we rarely, if ever, explicitly reflect upon them). They are essentially arational because these commitments must be in place in order for rational evaluation to even be possible (this explains the use of the 'hinge' metaphor). Our hinge commitments, even while fundamental to our rational practices, are thus not in the market for knowledge.

Since hinge commitments cannot themselves be rationally evaluated, and yet are required for all rational evaluation to occur, it follows that rational evaluation must be an essentially local phenomenon. In particular, and *contra* the radical sceptic and traditional anti-sceptic, the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation (whether negative, as in the case of radical scepticism, or positive, as in the case of traditional anti-scepticism) is simply incoherent. There is thus a sense in which there is no ultimate rational foundation of our believing, and we have instead to recognize the "groundlessness of our believing." (Wittgenstein 1969, §166) But notice that if Wittgenstein is right that the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation is incoherent, then it follows that this is not a *skeptical* conclusion to draw. Instead, aspiring for a fully general rational evaluation of our beliefs—for an ultimate rational foundation—would be akin to aspiring for a circle-square. Just as it is no limitation on our part that we are unable to construct a circle-square, so it is no cognitive limitation on our part that we are unable to undertake fully general rational evaluations. Relatedly, while our hinge commitments are not known, there is also a sense in which they are not unknown either. That is, it is not as if we are *ignorant* of these claims, since they are not in the market for knowledge in the first place.[2]

As the foregoing indicates, I maintain that one can appeal to the notion of a hinge commitment to diagnose where the radical skeptical problem goes awry, at least in one of its most influential contemporary incarnations.[3] Hinge epistemology is thus a key part of the resolution to the *epistemic angst* at issue in the radical skeptical problem. Nonetheless, I also claim that a residual anxiety remains, one that is distinct from the epistemic angst prompted by our failure to adequately answer the radical skeptical puzzle. That is, even once one has become convinced by the Wittgensteinian

hinge response to radical scepticism, and so recognizes that there is nothing essentially problematic about one's epistemic position, one can nonetheless feel that there is something deeply unsettling about one's epistemic situation. I refer to this as *epistemic vertigo*.

The nomenclature is deliberate, since I mean to capture the idea that we might have a *phobic* reaction to our epistemic predicament.[4] Just as one can be up high and perfectly aware that one is not in danger, and yet be afraid nonetheless, so one can be aware that there is nothing essentially problematic about one's epistemic position and yet succumb to epistemic vertigo.[5] The reason why epistemic vertigo occurs is that recognizing the role that hinge commitments play in our epistemic practices, and thus the ultimate groundlessness of our believing, does not take one back to a state of epistemic innocence prior to one's engagement with the skeptical problem. In our everyday life our hinge commitments are hidden of view—they lie, as Wittgenstein (1969, §88) puts it at one point, "apart from the route travelled by inquiry." For example, no-one teaches you that you have hands, but you are rather taught to do things with one's hands. The everyday certainties that constitute our hinge commitments are thus 'swallowed down' along with everything else that is made explicit to us. (Wittgenstein 1969, §143)

When engaging in the kind of philosophical reflection that is stimulated by the skeptical problem, however, one becomes aware of these hinge commitments and the distinctive role that they play in our practices. Moreover, this recognition of the hinge commitments and their special epistemic role is not something that is lost once one realizes that they are unavoidable features of one's rational architecture. There is thus no going back to a pre-theoretical state where one employs the hinge commitments without realizing that this is what one is doing. This is the sense in which there can be no return to epistemic innocence once the skeptical problem is resolved. Our everyday epistemic practices of unreflectively employing hinge commitments are perfectly in order as they are (at least in this regard, anyway), but there is no way that *we*, *qua* philosophers, can now return to a state of unreflectively employing our hinge commitments. There is thus an inevitable sense in which we are alienated from our everyday epistemic practices, even while recognizing that they are perfectly fine as they are. This is what spurs the epistemic vertigo, since we are condemned to be aware of the ultimate groundlessness of our believing, rather than for it to be hidden from view as it is for those who have never engaged with the skeptical problem.[6]

I think epistemic vertigo highlights something interesting about a Wittgensteinian quietism. The sense in which Wittgenstein is a philosophical quietist concerns how he shows how certain philosophical problems are in fact illusory, in that they trade on dubious theoretical claims

masquerading as common sense. But this is not a straightforward philosophical quietism. The moral to be drawn, for example, is not to simply to abandon philosophical theorizing. Indeed, one needs to do *more* philosophical theorizing (of the right sort) in order to find one's way out of the intellectual predicament that one is in (to 'find one's way out of fly-bottle'). (Wittgenstein 1953, §309) Moreover, while Wittgenstein's approach undercuts the philosophical difficulty in hand, it does not return one back to a pre-philosophical state. Instead, Wittgenstein is offering us a kind of neo-Pyrrhonian philosophical *practice* of inquiry which helps those infected with philosophy—a disease for which there is no cure—to settle our philosophical anxieties.[7]

3. VENTURINHA ON EPISTEMIC VERTIGO

On the face of it, Venturinha agrees with me about the role and importance of epistemic vertigo in our understanding of the radical skeptical problem. To begin with, here is how he describes epistemic vertigo:

> "In *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, Duncan Pritchard considers that […] "the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of rational evaluation" (2016: 184) can bring a solution to the problem of radical skepticism and consequently eliminate the epistemic angst associated to it. Yet, Pritchard admits, an "epistemic vertigo" may subsist after the loss of our "epistemic innocence" (2016: 184–188). He explains that "the phenomenon of epistemic vertigo is more psychological than philosophical, in that it describes the particular phenomenology involved when one has resolved the skeptical puzzle." (2016: 186)" (Venturinha 2018, 55)

And here is Venturinha endorsing this account of epistemic vertigo, so described:

> "[…] we saw that Pritchard also calls attention to an "epistemic vertigo" […], a residuum of skepticism that, even against our will, we cannot dismiss. […] I agree with Pritchard. […] skepticism has a corrosive strength that cannot be eliminated once and for all by means of any theoretical argumentation. The only way to override vertigo is, I shall argue […], by taking a moral-epistemological attitude." (Venturinha 2018, 87)

But this surface agreement may mask deeper disagreement. For notice that Venturinha here talks about 'overriding' epistemic vertigo by 'taking a moral-epistemological attitude,' and yet on the conception of epistemic vertigo that I have outlined it isn't clear that adopting *any* specific attitude, much less one with an epistemological component, could 'override' epistemic vertigo.

We can get a flavor of what Venturinha has in mind in this regard in the following passage:

> "When my conscience tells me that I should not do, or should not have done, such and such, I am

never alone in existence, as if I were making use of a private language. Here we can see that in a moral scenario there is no room for an epistemic vertigo. Not even the deepest modal uncertainty dissolves my moral conscience. Like hinges, our moral commitments prevail." (Venturinha 2018, 90-91)

The thought seems to be that in the moral case all doubt is eliminated, and therefore 'overridden', by one's moral certainty. I certainly wouldn't doubt that there are moral hinge commitments, and that when in the grip of them, as with any other hinge commitments, any talk of doubt would be artificial. Our hinge commitments are optimally certain, and this certainty is manifest in our action, as Wittgenstein emphasizes time and again in *On Certainty*.[8] But what puzzles me about these remarks is that epistemic vertigo is explicitly meant to be an anxiety that remains even once one has resolved the problem of radical skepticism, and hence remains even when there are no longer any actual doubts. In particular, epistemic vertigo is meant to be a vestige of skepticism that continues even once one recognizes the role that one's optimally certain hinge commitments play in one's epistemic practices (and of course such optimal certainty excludes genuine doubt). Accordingly, whatever 'overriding' epistemic vertigo might mean, it cannot on my conception of it involve overcoming residual skeptical *doubts*, as there are no skeptical doubts left to be overcome.

It follows that Venturinha must have something rather different in mind when it comes to epistemic vertigo than I have set out. In particular, he must regard this notion as picking out a specific kind of skeptical doubt, one that remains even once one has embraced a Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology, and hence also come to recognize the essential locality of rational evaluations. If that's right, then the surface agreement in our views masks a deeper disagreement, since on my view once one gets to this point there is nothing left of the radical skeptical problem itself. Remember, after all, that on the Wittgensteinian treatment of this problem it is completely undercut, in the sense that it is shown to be an illusory philosophical puzzle.[9] Epistemic vertigo rather reflects the alienated vantage point that we are compelled to occupy once the skeptical threat has been disposed of. This is a vantage point where we recognize features of our epistemic practices which are ordinarily kept hidden but which, when exposed, naturally lead one, in one's alienated state, to the kind of intellectual giddiness that I call epistemic vertigo.

Does this difference in our anti-skeptical stances matter? Possibly not, though possibly it matters a great deal. It rather depends on how Venturinha responds to these remarks. For my own part it is difficult for me to assess the anti-skeptical credentials of the position he sets out until I can understand how epistemic vertigo, as he understands the term, relates to the radical skeptical puzzle.[10]

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NOTES

[1] For the main statement of my Wittgensteinian treatment of radical skepticism, including the notion of epistemic vertigo, see Pritchard (2015, *passim*). For more on my treatment of the notion of epistemic vertigo itself, see Pritchard (*forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*).

[2] For more on this point that ignorance is inapplicable to our lack of knowledge of hinge commitments, see Pritchard (2019). For an overview of recent work on hinge epistemology, see Pritchard (2017).

[3] In particular, I claim that a hinge epistemology, properly understood, is the antidote to the kind of 'closure-based' radical skepticism that has been much discussed in contemporary epistemology (though I also claim that it fails to engage with the closely related, but distinct, 'underdetermination-based' contemporary formulation of the radical skeptical problem). For the details, see Pritchard (2015, *passim*).

[4] With this point in mind, it should be *epistemic acrophobia*, strictly speaking, but for presentational reasons I elected to stick with the more user-friendly epistemic vertigo.

[5] This is why I have characterized epistemic vertigo as an *alief*—see Gendler (2008)—rather than a belief, in that it is a propositional attitude that can co-exist with beliefs with opposing contents (e.g., one can *alieve* that one is in danger even while fully believing that there is no danger). See Pritchard (2015, part four).

[6] This is another reason for employing the 'vertigo' metaphor, since one can think of this alienation as being the result of a kind of epistemic 'ascent' away from our everyday epistemic practices, and which thus prompts the giddy feeling of epistemic insecurity, even despite our intellectual assurances that the radical skeptical problem is in fact illusory.

[7] I explore this idea in more detail in Pritchard (*forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*). For more on the distinctive features of Wittgensteinian quietism, see McDowell (2009)

[8] Wittgenstein (1969, §402) approvingly quotes Goethe in this regard: 'In the beginning was the deed.'

[9] Recall—see endnote 3—that I am here focusing on the closure-based formulation of the radical skeptical problem, and thereby bracketing related contemporary formulations, such as the underdetermination-based formulation.

[10] Thanks to Nuno Venturinha.