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Responses

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Responses

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0. Introductory remarks

I would like to extend my warm thanks to Eros Moreira de Carvalho, Nicola Claudio Salvatore, and Tiegue Vieira Rodrigues for their insightful comments on my book. I have very much enjoyed reflecting on these comments and developing my responses.

1. Response to Eros Moreira de Carvalho

Eros Moreira de Carvalho makes a crucial mistake when characterising my non-belief reading of *On Certainty* [=OC], so let me begin with that. According to this proposal, one is not to think of our hinge commitments as beliefs, at least not in the sense of belief that interests us (and which is needed for the set-up of the radical sceptical paradox), which is that propositional attitude that is the constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge (or 'K-apt' belief, for short). He writes that according to my proposal when one undertakes competent deductions where the entailed proposition is the content of a hinge commitment, then although one doesn't acquire a (K-apt) belief in the entailed proposition, one does thereby acquire a propositional attitude towards that proposition. I presume that he means by this that one thereby acquires the hinge commitment in the target proposition as a result of undertaking the competent deduction. If so, I should emphasise that this is absolutely *not* my view. This is in part because I claim that the hinge commitments are there anyway, so at most one might become aware that one has such a commitment in this fashion, but one would not thereby *acquire* a hinge commitment in this way. But more generally this is because I also claim that hinge commitments are not acquired via any rational process, much less via a paradigmatic rational process like competent deduction. They are rather "swallowed down" (OC, §143) as part of the background of other propositions that one engages with rationally. This is why one is not ordinarily even aware of one's hinge commitments, at least *qua* hinge commitments. As I argue in *Epistemic Angst*, I think that taking the visceral, "animal" (OC, §359) nature of hinge commitments seriously is crucial if we are to understand what Wittgenstein has in mind when he talks about this notion (and it is also crucial to

understanding why they are not beliefs, at least in the K-apt sense of the term).

I fear that a failure to understand this element of my view has ramifications for some of the objections that Carvalho raises. For example, he notes a criticism I make elsewhere of the idea that one might rationally trust a hinge proposition, and thereby have a kind of belief in that proposition that would put it in the market for knowledge, even though one recognises that one has no rational basis for the truth of the proposition in question. I claim that this scenario is simply incoherent, in that recognising that one has no rational basis for the truth of the target proposition would lead one to be agnostic about the truth of the target proposition, and belief in the relevant sense that interests us (i.e., K-apt belief) is incompatible with agnosticism of this kind. The nub of the matter is that rational trusting is not the right propositional attitude to capture our hinge commitments, precisely because it can coexist with agnosticism. Carvalho claims that this critique ought to be just as applicable to my account of hinge commitments, since we can also become aware that we lack a rational basis for their truth. In particular, why doesn't it follow that we are obliged to be agnostic about these propositions too, and hence not be committed to them?

Carvalho is here failing to see a crucial difference between the two cases. Those who maintain that we can know hinge propositions by rationally trusting them are treating the propositional attitude in play as being belief-like in the relevant sense, and that's what I'm critiquing. My claim, in contrast, is that this propositional attitude isn't even belief-like, because it is not the kind of propositional attitude that is in principle directly reasons-responsive in the way that (K-apt) belief is. In particular, being agnostic about one's hinge commitments is not even an option on my view, regardless of whether one recognises that one lacks a rational basis for the target proposition. This is something that I take Wittgenstein to be absolutely clear about, and is why hinge commitments have this visceral, animal nature. It is also why—and this is a distinctive feature of hinge commitments as I characterise them—one can recognise that one has no rational basis for the truth of a hinge commitment and yet be no less committed to it. In short, our hinge commitments are nothing like rational trustings precisely because the latter, but not the former, is compatible with adopting the kind of intellectual distance with regard to the target proposition that is represented by being agnostic about its truth.

Carvalho also complains in this regard that I haven't explained what notion of epistemic normativity applies to our hinge commitments. I must confess that I struggle to understand the challenge in play, given that hinge commitments are explicitly held to be arational. To demand a rational story about their adoption seems

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to me to simply reject the whole framework of hinge epistemology. In particular, it is to attempt the kind of universal rational evaluation that Wittgenstein demonstrates to be impossible. Taking the idea that there can only be local rational evaluations seriously entails giving up the aspiration to rationally underwrite all our practices at once. (And note that this is not because we are epistemically limited in some way. As Wittgenstein makes clear repeatedly, the very idea of a universal rational evaluation of this kind is simply a chimera). Moreover, it's not clear that any kind of normativity would be relevant to assessing our hinge commitments anyway, given their visceral, animal nature, since not only are they not under one's control, but they are also not (directly, anyway) reasons-responsive either.

In a more constructive vein, Carvalho puts forward what he calls an ability reading of *On Certainty*, which he takes to be a more plausible account of hinge commitments than the one that I offer. Interestingly, I toyed with an interpretive proposal broadly along these lines myself at one point, back when I was thinking of Wittgenstein as a kind of epistemic externalist, such that knowledge is always by its nature 'brute', in the sense of being "by favour of Nature." (OC, §505)¹ My fundamental problem with this sort of view, however, is that I just don't see how these commitments *can* function like abilities, as they aren't specific ways of doing anything. They are more like background commitments that enable one's abilities to function as they do, such that our certainty is manifest in our action, rather than being specific abilities themselves.

I think it is telling in this respect that Carvalho doesn't offer any concrete examples of how a hinge commitment could function as an ability (instead he simply offers examples of normal abilities, like knowing how to ride a bike). I don't think this is mere oversight on his part, but rather reflects the fact that once one tries to formulate such a case the view falls apart. What would it be to treat one's hinge commitment that (say) one has hands as (only) the manifestation of an ability? For sure, one has lots of abilities that make use of one's hands, but why would we think that those abilities are manifestations of the hinge commitment? Is the ability to scratch one's nose a manifestation of one's hinge commitment to one's hands? If so, then any and every ability will be the manifestation of one's hinge commitments, which is hardly plausible. But what more specific ability can we delineate here that captures the hinge commitment at issue? I think the problem we are confronting is that abilities are specific ways of doing specific things. Our hinge commitments, in contrast, constitute the backdrop of primitive certainty relative to which we manifest our abilities, and hence are not to be equated with the abilities themselves².

Carvalho goes on to argue that the ability reading ensures that the rational support one enjoys for one's hinge commitments in such

cases can be factive. I think this is confused. I entirely agree with Carvalho that there can be such a thing as factive rational support, and that this is rooted in the manifestation of our abilities. Indeed, I argue for such a view myself, as part of a proposal I call *epistemological disjunctivism*, whereby the factive state of *seeing that p* (a state which is rooted in one's perceptual abilities) can factively ground one's perceptual knowledge that *p*.³ Where Carvalho goes awry is in thinking that such a proposal has any bearing on our hinge commitments. For one thing, Carvalho claims that he agrees with me that our hinge commitments do not amount to knowledge, so I'm not altogether sure why he wants them to enjoy a factive rational grounding (as opposed to merely manifesting states that are world-involving, which is a very different matter). But if our hinge commitments do enjoy factive rational support, then how are we to understand *that*? Is my hinge commitment that I have hands rooted in my *seeing that* I have hands, for example? But now it seems we are back to a propositional reading of our hinge commitments—one that presumably holds that we have propositional *knowledge* of the target propositions—that is entirely contrary to what Carvalho intends. But if not that, then what? Merely the ability to see my hands? But that doesn't seem right either, for all the reasons noted above, as this doesn't capture the hinge commitment in play at all. The point is that it isn't the idea that there can be factively grounded knowledge that is problematic, or even that this factively grounded knowledge can be rooted in one's manifestation of relevant abilities. What's problematic is the thought that the possibility of such factively grounded knowledge has any bearing on our epistemic relationship to our hinge commitments.

2. Response to Nicola Claudio Salvatore

Nicola Claudio Salvatore revisits a previous exchange of our where we discussed the extent to which a Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology of the kind that I defend was doomed to epistemic relativism.⁴ Here is the structure of the worry. If our system of rational evaluation essentially has arational hinge commitments at its core, and if there can be divergences in our hinge commitments, then how could rational resolution of deep disagreements (i.e., involving rational systems incorporating different hinge commitments) be possible? In short, why doesn't hinge epistemology directly lead to a form of epistemic incommensurability, and thus to epistemic relativism?

My previous response to this problem, which I have also articulated at length elsewhere,⁵ is to argue that the fact that there can be distinct rational systems, in the sense of incorporating distinct sets of hinge commitments, does not itself entail epistemic

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incommensurability (and hence doesn't lead to epistemic relativism). The reason for this is that the possibility of divergent sets of hinge commitments is quite compatible with there being substantial overlap in one's hinge commitments. It is only if there is no significant overlap of this kind that one gets the incommensurability claim, since that would be required to ensure that there is no common ground which rationally structures the disagreement at issue. In contrast, so long as there are common hinge commitments, then there is always a basis on which to motivate a rational response to deep disagreements of this kind.

I further argued that it is part-and-parcel of a Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology, as I interpret this proposal at any rate, that there will be overlaps in one's hinge commitments. For one thing, on my account of hinge epistemology, there is far less variability in our hinge commitments than one might initially suppose. Our hinge commitments can seem to vary from culture to culture ('I am speaking English'), epoch to epoch ('I have never been to the moon'), person to person ('My name is DHP'), and so on. But this surface variability is misleading, for all our hinge commitments codify a common overarching hinge commitment (the '*über hinge commitment*', as I call it), such that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs. This, coupled with one's set of beliefs, determines the specific hinge commitments that one has. Expressed this way, we can see why many apparently distinct hinge commitments are effectively just superficially distinct manifestations of the same underlying hinge commitment—e.g., one is normally hinge committed to one's name being such-and-such, but of course which particular name is plugged in here will vary from person to person.

The foregoing means that there is less variability in our hinge commitments than we might have antecedently supposed, though it is still consistent with there being radical divergence in our hinge commitments. This is why a second point I make in *Epistemic Angst* is also important. This is that Wittgenstein offers us a broadly Davidsonian account of why in being able to make sense of a disagreement at all—such that we can regard the disagreement as contentful—we must be able to identify shared fundamental commitments. As he puts it at one point, in order to make moves in the space of reasons at all, such that one even counts as having made a mistake, one "must already judge in conformity with mankind." (OC, §156) The crux of the matter is that it is a requirement on being able to express contentful thoughts at all, and thus being in the market for disagreement in the first place, that one does not radically diverge in one's conception of the world, and that means that wholesale differences in one's hinge commitments are simply not possible⁶.

If that's right, then divergence in hinge commitments is nothing to be afraid of. On the contrary, I take Wittgenstein to be accurately

describing here what is in fact our epistemic predicament, in that various pressing debates that we confront are of this kind. Relatedly, that deep disagreements are not epistemically incommensurable is entirely compatible with the idea that they can often be very hard to resolve from a practical point of view. Interestingly, however, once we understand the nature of these deep disagreements correctly—i.e., as involving a clash of hinge commitments—then it also becomes apparent how we should go about trying to resolve them. In particular, there is little to be gained from confronting such disagreements head-on, as if the other person’s hinge commitments could be dislodged by reason. Instead, such disagreements must be approached side-on. What I mean by this is that one should approach these kinds of disagreement by looking for common ground—i.e., shared hinge commitments, shared beliefs—and working to use that as a basis to change other beliefs that the person holds, and thereby change their mind.

This highlights another feature of my account of hinge commitments, which is that although they are not directly responsive to rational considerations, they are indirectly responsive. This is because which specific hinge commitments one holds is a function of the über hinge commitment and one’s set of beliefs. The latter *are* directly rationally responsive in principle (unlike one’s hinge commitments). Accordingly, if one can change a person’s beliefs, then over time one can also change the specific hinge commitments that they hold. There is nothing mysterious about this. Wittgenstein, appealing to an example offered G. E. Moore, thought that it was a hinge commitment that one has never been to the moon. (OC, §171) Fast forward to the future, and imagine now that moon travel is so common that one could easily have been there without realising (e.g., a long-haul transatlantic flight might make a detour to the moon without this deserving comment). If one became aware of this, then one would no longer treat one’s never having been to the moon as a hinge commitment (e.g., it might now just be a belief that one holds). What goes here for the moon can go for other specific hinge commitments. If I want to convince you to abandon creationism, for example, then while there’s likely no point arguing that God doesn’t exist, there is a point to finding common ground and trying, on this basis, to convince you to change your beliefs in relevant ways. If I manage to change enough of them, then over time this disagreement might be rationally resolved. *Modulo* what I said earlier, I’m not denying that there are enormous practical difficulties in play here. My point is just that there is nothing in the notion of a hinge commitment, properly understood, that entails the kind of in principle problem for rationally resolving deep disagreements that is involved in the epistemic incommensurability claim. There is thus no direct route from a hinge epistemology to epistemic relativism.

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Salvatore is unconvinced by my reply, and so tries a new tack. This time around he enlists my arguments elsewhere where I have tried to apply a Wittgensteinian epistemology to the debate regarding the rationality of religious belief. I call the resulting view of the rationality of religious belief *quasi-fideism*, and the basic idea behind it is one that I think Wittgenstein gets from John Henry Newman (1979 [1870]).⁷ Roughly, what's on offer is what (these days) we might call a *parity argument*. Yes, religious belief presupposes basic commitments that are essentially arational. But this does not show that there is anything essentially epistemically amiss with religious belief, much less that all religious belief is thereby arationally held, since *all* belief presupposes basic commitments that are essentially arational (but is no less rationally held for that). The resulting account of religious conviction is thus at root fideistic, since it allows that such conviction is fundamentally arational, while also treating ordinary (non-hinge) religious beliefs as no less rational as a result.

Salvatore thinks that if fundamental religious conviction can be cast in terms of hinge commitments, then it follows that it must be possible for there to be the kind of radical divergence in hinge commitments that would allow for epistemic incommensurability. But this doesn't follow at all. Even though two people might disagree over religious claims because they have different hinge commitments this doesn't prevent them from agreeing over much else that is not of a religious nature. In particular, there is nothing preventing them from having substantial overlap in their hinge commitments. So there is nothing in the idea of religious hinge commitments, specifically, that licences epistemic incommensurability, and thereby epistemic relativism. If Salvatore wishes to resurrect his charge that my hinge epistemology leads to epistemic relativism, then he will need to argue directly against the claim that there are bound to be significant overlaps in one's hinge commitments, on pain of us being able to make sense of each other at all. And nothing that Salvatore offers motivates that critical line.

3. Response to Tiegue Vieira Rodrigues

Tiegue Vieira Rodrigues is broadly sympathetic to the anti-sceptical strategy that I set out in *Epistemic Angst*, so his concern is more regarding the detail. In particular, he worries about the nature of the propositional attitude in play when it comes to hinge commitments. I think the source of his concern is revealed in his remark that if hinge commitments are propositional attitudes, then it follows that they 'could be the object of belief after all', contrary to my non-belief account of them. Crucially, however, there is no such entailment, especially once one remembers the specific sense of belief that I have in mind.

As I noted in the book, the notion of 'belief' gets used in a wide variety of ways, not just by philosophers but also by theorists in other disciplines (e.g., cognitive science).⁸ There may be some sense of 'belief' in which our hinge commitments legitimately count as beliefs. But my interest is in whether they count as beliefs in a very specific sense. Roughly, as noted above, by 'belief' I have in mind that propositional attitude which is a constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge ('K-apt' belief for short). The reason why I focus on this particular conception of belief is that this is the notion that is specifically relevant to the closure-style inference in play in the formulation of the closure-based radical sceptical paradox. It is thus important to ascertain whether hinge commitments are beliefs in this particular sense of the term.

I argue that they clearly aren't. This is because belief in the K-apt sense has some basic conceptual connections to reasons and truth, which the propositional attitude involved in hinge commitments does not satisfy. For example, one such conceptual connection is that K-apt belief is not compatible with one recognising that one has no rational basis for the truth of the target proposition. Rodrigues seems to think that anything propositional can be the subject of a belief. I doubt that is generally true, but it certainly isn't true of K-apt belief (though note that I raise an important *caveat* about this claim below). Wishful thinking, for example, is not K-apt belief. Accordingly, if everyone were so inclined as to wishfully think that *p*, then no-one could believe that *p* in the K-apt sense. (Rodrigues misses this point, I think, because he seems to hold that belief is transparent, in the sense that we cannot, as he puts it, be 'blind' about what we believe. But this is not a credible way of thinking about belief, especially in the K-apt sense, as the example of wishful thinking highlights. I might think that I K-apt believe that *p*, and then come to discover that in fact I only wishfully think that *p*).

In any case, if one accepts my description of the propositional attitude involved in hinge commitments—one which I think closely follows Wittgenstein's own remarks in this regard—then it should be clear that one can never believe one's hinge commitments in the K-apt sense. This is because to be hinge committed to a proposition is precisely to have a commitment to it that would survive the recognition that one has no rational basis for its truth. (Rodrigues mischaracterises this constraint, by the way, since he thinks the idea is that one's beliefs must always be rationally grounded. But that's not the claim at all. In fact, given what I've just said, there is no problem with *bona fide* K-apt beliefs lacking any rational ground or simply being irrational. The issue is specifically about one's *recognition* that one's has no rational basis for the truth of the target proposition).⁹ Relatedly, our hinge commitments are different from K-apt beliefs in other ways, such as in terms of how they are acquired and how they

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change over time. (Note that they are not *aliefs* either—the latter can be in conflict with our wider beliefs, as when one’s aleif is phobic, but on my account of hinge commitments they cannot be in conflict with one’s wider beliefs since their content is in effect determined by them)¹⁰.

There is an important *caveat* that we should raise here, which is that I’m not here denying that the very same proposition can at one time be the subject of a hinge commitment and at another time be the subject of a (K-apt) belief. Indeed, it is explicitly part of the view that this can be the case, and in fact there is nothing at all puzzling about this feature of hinge commitments on my proposal. Normally one is hinge committed to having hands, but if one awoke in hospital, dazed, after a serious car accident that injured one’s hands, then clearly this wouldn’t be a hinge commitment any more. Now it would make perfect sense to find out whether one has hands by looking to see whether they are there, and in the process form a (K-apt) belief that one has hands. Relatedly, as noted above, while it may be a hinge commitment for us that we have never been to the moon, I doubt this will be a hinge commitment for our grandchildren. And so on. The point is that on my account of hinge commitments different sets of beliefs will lead to the codification of different hinge commitments. Crucially, however, what we are describing here is not a situation where a hinge commitment is also (K-apt) believed, but rather a situation where a proposition which at one time functioned as a hinge commitment now functions as a (K-apt) belief. That is perfectly compatible with my claim that our hinge commitments cannot figure in closure-based inferences in the manner that the sceptic needs to generate the closure-based radical sceptical paradox.

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Notes

¹ See especially Pritchard (2001; 2005*b*).

² Relatedly, while this background of certainty needs to be in place in order to manifest one's abilities, it would be a mistake to therefore import this background of certainty into one's understanding of the abilities themselves.

³ See especially Pritchard (2012).

⁴ See Salvatore (2018) and Pritchard (2018*b*).

⁵ Most recently in Pritchard (*forthcoming*). See also Pritchard (2009; 2010; 2018*a*).

⁶ See also Davidson (1983 [1986]) and Pritchard (2013).

⁷ For my main defences of quasi-fideism, see Pritchard (2011; 2015; 2017; 2018*c*). For further discussion of the influence of Newman (1979 [1870]) on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, see Kienzler (2006) and Pritchard (2015).

⁸ For a useful taxonomy of different notions of belief, see Stevenson (2002).

⁹ This is also why Norman, in the famous clairvoyant case that Rodrigues mentions, doesn't count as having a K-apt belief insofar as he takes himself to have no rational basis for the truth of the proposition in question. He might well in some sense endorse that proposition, and such an endorsement might count as a belief in some loose sense. But it would not be a belief in the specific sense that I have in mind.

¹⁰ For further discussion of aliefs, see Gendler (2008).

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