**How Holy is the Disjunctivist Grail?**

Ram Neta

The bulk of Pritchard’s wonderful book[[1]](#endnote-1) is devoted to defending epistemological disjunctivism from the objections that have been commonly leveled against it. I am in complete agreement with everything that Pritchard says in this part of the book.

But this leaves open the question of whether there is anything to be said in favor of epistemological disjunctivism. Pritchard certainly thinks there is. At the beginning of the book, Pritchard describes disjunctivism as the "holy grail" of epistemology.  Why?  Because, according to him, it enjoys the advantages of both internalism and externalism without suffering from their disadvantages.  In this paper, I would like to call into question whether this last claim can be substantiated.

Here is what Pritchard writes, in sketching the disadvantage of internalism that is avoided by disjunctivism:

"epistemic internalism faces a formidable drawback in that it struggles to show how the epistemic standing for our 'worldly' beliefs -- e.g., beliefs about one's immediate physical environment -- should bear any essential connection to the worldly facts that these beliefs are ostensibly about.  In a nutshell, by internalist lights one can enjoy an excellent epistemic standing for one's worldly beliefs and yet it won't thereby follow that any of these beliefs are even likely to be true."[[2]](#endnote-2)

Today, I want to put some pressure on this comment.  Specifically, I want to know, what is the disadvantage that the internalist is being alleged to suffer?  What is it that the internalist must "struggle" to show?  Pritchard's specification of this employs three ambiguous phrases.

(1) "our 'worldly' beliefs":  this may refer collectively to the whole body of our worldly beliefs, or distributively to each one of those beliefs

(2) "likely to be true":  this may be understood as meaning *objectively likely* to be true, or as *rational for us to take it* to be true

(3) "any essential connection to worldly facts":  this may refer to correspondence to the facts, or it may refer to a causal connection to the facts

Given these three ambiguities, we have a total of 8 ways of understanding Pritchard's allegation concerning the drawback of internalism:

(a) the internalist cannot explain why the whole body of our worldly beliefs is objectively likely to be mostly true

(b) the internalist cannot explain why the whole body of our worldly beliefs is objectively likely to be causally connected to the facts that they are about

(c) the internalist cannot explain why it is rational for us to take the whole body of our worldly beliefs to be mostly true

(d) the internalist cannot explain why it is rational for us to take the whole body of our worldly beliefs to be causally connected to the facts that they are about

(e) for any particular worldly belief, the internalist cannot explain why it is objectively likely to be true

(f) for any particular worldly belief, the internalist cannot explain why it is objectively likely to be causally connected to the fact that it is about

(g) for any particular worldly belief, the internalist cannot explain why it is rational for us to take it to be true

(h) for any particular worldly belief, the internalist cannot explain why it is rational for us to take it to be causally connected to the fact that it is about

I will now argue that all 8 of these claims are false.  In other words, Pritchard cannot substantiate his claim concerning the advantage of disjunctivism over internalism.  In fact, not only can the internalist explain all of the things mentioned in (a) - (h) above, but she can do all of that means by means of no fewer than four different strategies.  I will enumerate all four strategies now, and show how each strategy provides the internalist with a way to explain all of the things mentioned in (a) - (h) above.

Strategy 1:  The internalist can appeal to Donald Davidson's account of belief.[[3]](#endnote-3)  On Davidson's view, human psychology aims to explain human behavior as the resultant of forces along three dimensions:  beliefs (or, representations of how things are), desires (or, representations of how things are to be), and meanings (or the representational contents of our words).  Psychologists confront a puzzle about how to resolve behavior systematically into these three dimensions, since it seems as if any isolated bit of behavior can be explained by indefinitely many combinations of these three forces.  For instance, you hear someone say "I want pizza", but what explains this verbal behavior?  It is natural to think of the behavior as explained by their desire for pizza, and their belief that, by saying those words, they can increase the chances of getting what they want, since those words signify that they want pizza, and they are directed to an interlocutor who can help them get pizza.  But could we not also explain their behavior by appeal to their desire to graduate from college, and their belief that by saying those very words they can increase the chances of getting what they want, since those words signify the correct answer to a final exam that they believe themselves to be taking now?  It seems that, for any bit of behavior, we can always come up with innumerably many deviant explanations of that behavior in terms of desires, beliefs, and meanings:  so what makes one of those explanations any closer to being true than any other?

Davidson acknowledges that formal constraints on an explanatory theory of human behavior (or what he calls an "interpretation") will rule out many possible explanations:  for instance, our assignment of meanings to expressions should be finitely axiomatizable and recursive, and should imply theorems that take the form of Tarski's T-sentences.  But such formal constraints can't narrow down the explanatory candidates as much as is required in practice.  What other constraints can do so then?  In response to this question, Davidson writes:

"widespread agreement is the only possible background against which disputes and mistakes can be interpreted."[[4]](#endnote-4)

As Davidson understands the constraint of "widespread agreement", it means roughly this:  the interpreter and the interpreter are thinking more or less similar thoughts about more or less similar things.  Since an omniscient being could be an interpreter at least as well as we can, this means that, for a creature to be interpretable as a believer, its beliefs must be, for the most part, close to the truth, and close to the truth about the things in the environment about which the creature would sensibly think, i.e., things to which the creature is causally connected (e.g., through perception, or through intentional action).

Thus, on Davidson's view, the whole body of our worldly beliefs is objectively likely to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about because, for a creature to be a believer in the first place, it must be interpretable as a believer, and this requires that its beliefs must be, for the most part, true and causally connected to the facts that they are about:  thus, (a) and (b) are both false.  Because all of the aforestated facts can be known simply by reflecting (along Davidsonian lines) on the nature of belief, it follows that it is rational for us to take the whole body of our worldly beliefs to be mostly true and causally connected to the facts that they are about:  thus, (c) and (d) are both false.  Because the whole body of our wordily beliefs is objectively likely to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about, we can easily infer, of each individual worldly belief that is not defeated, that is probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (e) and (f) are both false.  And because the aforestated fact can also be known simply by reflecting on the nature of belief, it follows that it is rational for us, with respect to each undefeated empirical belief that we have, to take it to be probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (g) and (h) are both false.  An internalist can therefore do precisely what (a) - (h) say that she cannot do, simply by appeal to the Davidsonian account of belief, and without abandoning her internalism concerning justification.

Strategy 2:  The internalist can appeal to Hilary Putnam's view of representational content.[[5]](#endnote-5)  Putnam begins his book *Reason, Truth and History* as follows:

"An ant is crawling on a patch of sand.  As it crawls, it traces a line in the sand.  By pure chance the line that it traces curves and recrosses itself in such a way that it ends up looking like a recognizable caricature of Winston Churchill.  Has the ant trace a picture of Winston Churchill, a picture that *depicts* Churchill?

"Most people would say, on a little reflection, that it has not.  The ant, after all, has never seen Churchill, or even a picture of Churchill, and it had no intention of depicting Churchill.  It simply traced a line (and even *that* was unintentional), a line that *we* can 'see as' a picture of Churchill."[[6]](#endnote-6)

Resemblance, Putnam very plausibly concludes, does not make for representation, because resemblance can be *accidental*.  But what kind of accident is it that is incompatible with representation?  Putnam gives the example of the ant, and points out that the ant's motions are guided neither by the ant's perceptual representation of Churchill, nor by the ant's intention to produce a representation of Churchill.  Representation, in short, requires a kind of causal connection.  More specifically, for Putnam, it requires a kind of causation that normally (though not invariably) relates representational states to things (objects, events) of which they are true.  Thus, a particular concept represents water just in case the tokening of that concept is normally (though again, not invariably) causally connected to the presence of water.  The causal connection may be of the kind present in perceptual belief, in which the presence of water causes the tokening of the concept via the mediation of perception (e.g., tasting water) -- or it may be the kind of causal connection present in intention, in which the tokening of the concept of water causes the presence of water via the mediation of action (e.g., attempting to get some water to drink).

Thus, on Putnam's view, for a set of states (call it S) to represent a set of things (call it T), the elements of S must be, for the most part, true of, and causally connected to, the elements of T.  What implications does this view have for (a) - (h) above?  Well, consider how the skeptic aims to generate epistemic trouble for our ordinary beliefs about the world around us.  The skeptic formulates a hypothesis that has three features:  (i) it explains why we have the perceptual evidence that we have, and (ii) if the hypothesis is true, then the bulk of our beliefs about the world around us are false, and (iii) there is no perceptual evidence by appeal to which we could rule out the hypothesis.  The skeptic then challenges us to explain why our ordinary beliefs about the world around us are better supported (let alone, supported to the level necessary for knowledge) than this alternative hypothesis.  If we cannot rise to the challenge, the skeptic concludes that our ordinary beliefs about the world around us are inadequately supported.  For a hypothesis to have all three of the features that the skeptic requires, the hypothesis will have to posit causes of our perceptual evidence that are not merely different, but *systematically and globally different*, from the ordinary worldly objects that we take to cause us to have that evidence.  (A skeptical hypothesis cannot merely posit a few local differences in the causes of our perceptual evidence, for then the hypothesis would not have feature (iii).)  But, on Putnam's view of representation, it is impossible for the causes of our perceptual evidence to be systematically and globally different from the ordinary worldly objects that we take to cause us to have that evidence, for it is a necessary condition of our so much as representing those ordinary worldly objects (let alone believing anything about them) that at least some of those objects be causally related to us via perception.  In short, on Putnam's view, if the skeptic's hypothesis were (per impossible) true, then it would be false.  So it is false.

All of the reasoning in the preceding paragraph is reasoning that an internalist about justification could help herself to, so long as she accepts Putnam's view of representational content.  But this means that the internalist has a way to explain why the whole body of our beliefs is objectively likely to be true, and objectively likely to be causally connected to the facts that they are about:  thus, (a) and (b) are both false.  Because all of the aforestated facts can be known simply by reflecting (along Putnamian lines) on the nature of representational content, it follows that it is rational for us to take the whole body of our worldly beliefs to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about:  thus, (c) and (d) are both false.  Because the whole body of our wordily beliefs is objectively likely to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about, we can easily infer, of each individual worldly belief that is not defeated, that is probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (e) and (f) are both false.  And because the aforestated fact can also be known simply by reflecting on the nature of representational content, it follows that it is rational for us, with respect to each undefeated empirical belief that we have, to take it to be probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (g) and (h) are both false.  An internalist can therefore do precisely what (a) - (h) say that she cannot do, simply by appeal to the Putnamian view of representational content, and without abandoning her internalism concerning justification.

Strategy 3:  The internalist can appeal to Tyler Burge's account of the nature of our perceptual faculties, and our perceptual states.[[7]](#endnote-7)  In explaining why it is that our perceptual states entitle us to believe various things about the world around us, Burge writes:

"Veridicality enters into the very nature of perceptual states and abilities.  So it is built into the nature of the competence associated with the formation of a reliable perceptual state that the state make a non-accidental, explanatory, positive contribution to true belief and knowledge in the animal's normal environment -- in animals that are capable of true belief and knowledge.  ...

"Because a perceptual competence or state is individuated and correctly constitutively explained partly in terms of representational success, exercises of the competence, or instances of the state, have a structural and explanatory connection to veridicality.  This connection is in itself an epistemically relevant good in that it contributes to the representational good, truth, that epistemic goods serve.  The competence or state's being reliably veridical in normal conditions gives this epistemically-relevant good a status sufficient that it can contribute to the specific epistemic good, warrant."[[8]](#endnote-8)

Whatever we may think of Burge's view of warrant in general, or of perceptual entitlement in particular, the point that is relevant for our purposes is that, on Burge's view, it is of the nature of perceptual states to be typically (though of course not invariably) veridical.  And if perceptual states are typically veridical, then that implies that the beliefs that we form simply by conceptualizing the contents of  those perceptual states will be typically true.  But those beliefs form the evidential basis of all of our beliefs about the world around us:  it is the truth of the former that makes the rest of our beliefs objectively likely to be true, and it is the causal connection of the former to the perceived objects that they are about that makes the rest of our beliefs objectively likely to be causally connected to the facts that they are about.  Thus, if the internalist appeals to Burge's account of perceptual states, (a) and (b) will be false.  Because all of the aforestated facts can be known simply by reflecting (along Burgean lines) on the nature of perceptual states, it follows that it is rational for us to take the whole body of our worldly beliefs to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about:  thus, (c) and (d) are both false.  Because the whole body of our wordily beliefs is objectively likely to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about, we can easily infer, of each individual worldly belief that is not defeated, that is probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (e) and (f) are both false.  And because the aforestated fact can also be known simply by reflecting on the nature of perceptual states, it follows that it is rational for us, with respect to each undefeated empirical belief that we have, to take it to be probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (g) and (h) are both false.  An internalist can therefore do precisely what (a) - (h) say that she cannot do, simply by appeal to the Burgean view of the nature of perceptual states, and without abandoning her internalism concerning justification.

Strategy 4:  The internalist can appeal to Ernest Sosa's transcendental argument.[[9]](#endnote-9)  Towards the end of his book *Knowing Full Well*, Ernest Sosa asks us to "consider... the example of a cognitively disabling pill -- call it *Disablex*.  This is a pill that terminally disables one's cognitive faculties so that they combine to create a coherent illusion of empirical reality.  It thus renders the exercise of any of one's faculties likely to be flawed and misleading.  How can you right now be sure that you have never taken any such pill?  Appealing to the present deliverances of your faculties would seem vicious, since these are of course deliverances likely to be made misleading by your having taken the pill.

"... the claim that you have taken any such pill is a self-defeating claim.  Both believing that you have taken it, and even suspending judgment on that question, are epistemically self-defeating.  The contrary claim, that you have taken no such pill, follows from what is epistemically obligatory and self-sustaining, namely your commitment to denying the universal unreliability of your faculties.  How then could possibly proceed with epistemic impropriety by affirming the reliability of your faculties (at least to the extent that they are not universally unreliable)?  How indeed could it be improper to affirm also anything you can see to follow logically from that?  How in particular could you act improperly by affirming the consequence that you have never taken any *Disablex*?"[[10]](#endnote-10)

Sosa points out that it is incoherent to hold beliefs of the form:  I may have taken Disablex, but I don't know whether my reasons for believing that I may have taken Disablex are trustworthy reasons.  But can we affirm merely the first conjunct, without also having to affirm the second?  No.  Given the consequences of taking Disablex, the second conjunct simply follows from the first conjunct (as asserted by me):  if it's true that I may have taken Disablex, then it follows that I cannot know whether my reasons for believing that I may have taken Disablex are trustworthy reasons.  And so here is  an example of an incoherent belief in which the conjuncts are not merely logically consistent (as they are in a Moorean paradoxical belief) -- it is an example of an incoherent belief in which the first conjunct implies the second!  Since we cannot coherently affirm the first conjunct without affirming the second, and we also cannot coherently affirm the first conjunct while affirming the second, it follows that we cannot coherently affirm the first conjunct.  Sosa concludes that we cannot coherently affirm the skeptic's hypothesis may be true.

Since we cannot coherently affirm that the skeptic's hypothesis may be true, but we can coherently deny that the skeptic's may be true, we are obligated to deny that the skeptic's hypothesis may be true if we form any attitude about it at all.  But if we are obligated to dismiss wholesale challenges to our epistemic faculties, then we are also obligated to trust those faculties in correcting their own deliverances.  And we can trust those faculties in correcting their own deliverances only if we think that the beliefs delivered by those faculties are, at least on the whole and in the long run, mostly true, and mostly true because (as those beliefs themselves affirm) they are causally connected to the facts that make them true.  Thus, so long as the internalist can appeal to Sosa's transcendental argument, (a) and (b) are both false.  Because all of the aforestated facts can be known simply by reflecting (along Sosa's lines) on skeptical hypotheses, it follows that it is rational for us to take the whole body of our worldly beliefs to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about:  thus, (c) and (d) are both false.  Because the whole body of our wordily beliefs is objectively likely to be mostly true and mostly causally connected to the facts that they are about, we can easily infer, of each individual worldly belief that is not defeated, that is probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (e) and (f) are both false.  And because the aforestated fact can also be known simply by reflecting on skeptical hypotheses, it follows that it is rational for us, with respect to each undefeated empirical belief that we have, to take it to be probably true and probably causally connected to the fact that it is about:  thus, (g) and (h) are both false.  An internalist can therefore do precisely what (a) - (h) say that she cannot do, simply by appeal to Sosa's transcendental argument, and without abandoning her internalism concerning justification.

Conclusion:  To this point, I have argued that there is no obvious interpretation of Pritchard's claim on which it correctly characterizes the advantage that disjunctivism enjoys over internalism.  So what advantage does disjunctivism enjoy over internalism, if any?  I have suggested an answer to this question in other work[[11]](#endnote-11), but I will leave things here now, in the hope of having provoked Pritchard to provide his own answer to this question.  Given the ingenuity of the rest of his work on disjunctivism, I have high hopes!

**Works Cited**

Burge, Tyler. 2003. “Perceptual Entitlement.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **67**: 503 – 48.

Davidson, Donald. 1984. “Belief and the Basis of Meaning” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Clarendon Press: Oxford).

Neta, Ram. 2011. “A Refutation of Cartesian Fallibilism.” *Nous* **45**: 658 – 95.

Pritchard, Duncan. 2012. *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Putnam, Hilary. 1981. *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Sosa, Ernest. 2011. *Knowing Full Well*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.

1. Pritchard 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*., p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Davidson 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*., p. 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Putnam 1981. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*., p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Burge 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*., p. 532. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sosa 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*., p. 155-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Neta 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)