**An Evidentialist Account of Hinges**

How do you know that you’re not an orangutan?

It seems this question is risibly easy because there are countless decisive answers: orangutans don’t wear clothes but you do, orangutans have orange fur but you don’t, orangutans can’t speak English but you do, etc.

How do you know that you’re not an orangutan being neurochemically stimulated to have the very same experiences that you’re having, or can recall having, right now (a “neurochemically stimulated orangutan”, for short)?

It seems this question is impossibly difficult because no answer could be decisive: any answer you might offer is one that an orangutan being so stimulated would also offer, and with precisely the same degree of confidence.

But if the first question is so easy to answer, then how could the second question be so difficult to answer? If you know that you’re not an orangutan, then you can deduce, and thereby come to know by means of that deduction, that you’re not an *especially large* orangutan, or a *male* orangutan, or a *broken-legged* orangutan, or any kind of orangutan at all. But if you can come to know by means of that deduction that you’re not any kind of orangutan at all, then won’t you be able to come to know by means of such a deduction that you’re not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan?[[1]](#footnote-1)

In *Epistemic Angst*, Duncan Pritchard defends a negative answer to this last question. On Pritchard’s view, the following propositions can all be true of you at the same time and in the same context, even if you recognize that the proposition *I am not an orangutan* entails the proposition *I am not an electrochemically stimulated orangutan*:

1. you know that you’re not an orangutan,
2. every proposition that you believe as a result of competently deducing it from the premise that you’re not an orangutan is a proposition that you know to be true, and yet
3. you don’t know that you’re not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan.

This, says Pritchard, is because, even if you know that the proposition *I am not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan* follows from the proposition *I am not an orangutan*, nonetheless, the former proposition is not one to which you can bear the relation of belief, and so not one that you can know (or even justifiably believe) to be true. More generally, Pritchard claims, for any particular person and time, there will be a class of propositions which the person can understand, and which the person can also understand to be entailed by propositions that she knows to be true, but to which that very same person cannot bear the relation of belief, or *a fortiori*, of knowledge. According to Pritchard, this class of propositions are those of which Wittgenstein speaks in the following famous passage from *On Certainty*:

“The *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

“That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in *deed* not doubted.” (*On Certainty*, §§ 341 – 3).

Pritchard refers to the latter category of propositions as “hinge propositions”, and claims that hinge propositions are not propositions towards which we can bear the relation of belief (or, for that matter, of doubt or disbelief).

In this paper, I will argue that Pritchard’s attempt to defend the combination of (a) – (c) by appeal to the notion of a “hinge proposition” fails both as an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s text, and also as a response to the epistemological puzzle raised above. I will defend an evidentialist account of hinge propositions, and use that account to argue that (c) is false: on the basis of your total empirical evidence, you *do* know that you’re not a deceptively stimulated orangutan.

**Section I: The Closure Puzzle**

After some tinkering, here is how Pritchard finally formulates the Closure Puzzle, which is one of the two skeptical puzzles that motivates his overall epistemological view.

1. One is unable to have rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses.
2. The closure principle [“If S has rationally grounded knowledge that p, and S competently deduces from p that q, thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining her rationally grounded knowledge that p, then S has rationally grounded knowledge that q.”]
3. One has widespread rationally grounded everyday knowledge.

Since almost any item of rationally grounded “everyday knowledge” (e.g., I am not an orangutan) is such that a logically competent agent like you can know that it implies the denial of a radical skeptical hypothesis (e.g., I am not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan) and can therefore deduce from it the denial of a radical skeptical hypothesis, the triad above appears to be inconsistent. And yet all three of the claims are apparently true. So either one of the apparently true claims is not really true, or else the apparently inconsistent triad is not really inconsistent: one way or the other, the appearances cannot all be veridical. The puzzle is then to figure out which appearances are misleading, and why.

Pritchard critically assesses various solutions to this skeptical puzzle. The skeptic claims that (I) and (II) are true and (III) is false. The abductivist (e.g., Russell 1912, BonJour 1985) claims that (II) and (III) are true and (I) is false. Attributor contextualists (e.g., DeRose 1995, Lewis 1996) are in a position to claim that (II) is true, and that relative to ordinary low standards (III) is true and (I) is false, and relative to the high standards generated by consideration of skeptical hypotheses, (I) is true and (III) is false. Pritchard criticizes all of these views as providing inadequate treatments of the Closure Puzzle.

But there is another set of views – Wittgensteinian views – that accept the truth of all three of (I) – (III), and instead claim that it is *the inconsistency* among those three propositions that is merely apparent. To see how this Wittgensteinian view might go, return to the orangutan hypothesis, and let’s grant that you have rationally grounded knowledge that you are not an orangutan. According to the Wittgensteinian, it is possible for you to have such rationally grounded knowledge only if you participate in a form of life that *in some sense* (to be considered anon) presupposes that you are not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan, and more generally presupposes that your total evidence is not radically and systematically misleading. We will call this presupposition a “hinge commitment”. Because of this presupposition, you are not able to acquire rationally grounded knowledge that you are not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan by deducing that from the known premise that you are not an orangutan.

This is the general form of Wittgensteinian views. Where the versions of Wittgensteinianism differ is in what sort of presupposition is at issue, and how such a presupposition is claimed to block the acquisition of rationally grounded knowledge of the denial of a radical skeptical hypothesis. One way of fleshing out the thought – Crispin Wright’s way of doing so – is to claim that rationally grounded everyday knowledge requires rational acceptance of the veridicality of one’s evidence, and so rational acceptance of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses, but that such rational acceptance is not itself a form of rationally grounded knowledge. Another way of fleshing out the thought – what Pritchard calls the “non-propositional” view – is to claim that rationally grounded everyday knowledge requires a habit of trusting one’s evidence, treating it as if it is veridical, but that this trust does not involve an attitude towards any proposition, and that there is no proposition our acceptance of which would amount to such trust. But neither of these views is Pritchard’s.

Before presenting Pritchard’s own version of the Wittgensteinian view, I would first like to consider his argument against the non-propositional view, which is the view that Pritchard takes to be attributable to Wittgenstein with the greatest textual plausibility. I will quote Pritchard’s argument in full here:

“The trouble with [the non-propositional view] is that while we can surely make sense of the idea that these hinge commitments are simply ways of acting rather than propositional attitudes, it doesn’t seem all that hard to convert such ways of acting into a corresponding propositional attitude in such a way as to generate the closure problem. What happens, on this view, when an agent reasons from her rationally grounded knowledge that Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz was in 1805 to the entailment that the universe must not have come into existence five minutes ago? Is not the result of this competent deduction a propositional attitude toward the entailed proposition, something very much akin to (if not identical to) a belief (at least to the extent that it excludes agnosticism about the truth of the target proposition)? But insofar as there is a propositional attitude in play here, then we can reasonably ask whether it amounts to rationally grounded knowledge… and a negative answer will lead to the closure problem.” (Pritchard 2016, 87)

Of course, we might fail to express any proposition by uttering such words as “I am not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan”, or having such words run through our minds. But that we *might* fail to express any proposition by uttering such words does not entail that we *cannot* express any proposition by doing so, or that we cannot express any proposition to which rationally assent is possible. And the latter claims are highly implausible, though they are what the non-propositionalist must claim in order to solve the closure puzzle. By Pritchard’s lights then, the non-propositional view therefore fails to offer a convincing solution to the closure puzzle. Despite what Pritchard takes to be the textual evidence that Wittgenstein held such a view, we must nonetheless, by Pritchard’s own lights, reject that view. In what follows, I will offer an interpretation of Wittgenstein that accommodates the texts that form the basis of what Pritchard calls the “non-propositional” view.

**Section II: Pritchard’s own Wittgensteinian solution to the Closure Puzzle**

How does Pritchard propose to develop a Wittgensteinian view that allows for all of (I) – (III) to be true? Pritchard agrees with Wright to this extent: even though our hinge commitments are themselves attitudes to propositions, those attitudes need not be the sorts of attitudes required for rationally grounded knowledge that our hinge commitments are true. But where Pritchard and Wright part company is on this point: for Wright, the attitude is not of the sort required for rationally grounded knowledge because the sorts of reasons that we have for those hinge commitments are not evidential reasons, whereas for Pritchard, the attitude is not of the sort required for rationally grounded knowledge because our hinge commitments are not rationally determinable attitudes at all. Pritchard sometimes puts this point by saying that our hinge commitments are not themselves beliefs, but on other occasions he puts his point more precisely by saying that the attitudes that constitute these hinge commitments are not attitudes that are formed by, or responsive to, rational considerations. And so those attitudes cannot be the kinds of attitudes involved in the “rationally grounded knowledge” mentioned in (I) - (III).

Pritchard insists that the propositions that are hinges for me at one moment will not all be the same propositions that are hinges for you at that same moment, or for me at another moment – and that these differences are not determined solely by differences in indexical reference, or in the truth-value of the proposition, or in the agent’s psychological capacity to understand and entertain the proposition in question. This point is crucial to the effectiveness of his appeal to hinge propositions in solving the closure puzzle. To see why this is, let’s suppose the contrary for the sake of argument. Specifically, let’s suppose that the proposition “I have spent all my life on or near the surface of the Earth” is a hinge proposition for everyone who understands it, and of whom it is true. Now, suppose I am doing a study of people who have lived all of their lives on Earth (i.e., who have never done extensive space travel), and I come to notice a pattern: such people never suffer from a particular type of carcinoma that is relatively common among people who’ve spent considerable time in outer space. Now I perform a highly reliable test that indicates that I suffer from this type of carcinoma as well: would this not make it rational for me to doubt what had heretofore been one of my hinge commitments, viz., that I have lived all my life on Earth? And suppose furthermore that, as I perform more and more tests, the evidence increasingly suggests that the initial test indicating carcinoma was faulty: would this not make it rational for me to suspend the aforementioned doubt? But what could suspending this doubt amount to, if not believing once again, that I have lived all my life on Earth? And this belief, so formed, would be formed rationally, and assessable as rational.

Could Pritchard say that what I have here called a “belief” – viz., the rationally grounded suspension of doubt described above – is not the kind of attitude that he means to be denying we can rationally form or revise with respect to hinge commitments? If he says this, then it’s not clear why the closure puzzle generated by the apparent truth of (I), (II), and (III) is not equally generated by what I have here called a “belief”, and so Pritchard proffers a solution to a skeptical puzzle concerning one kind of attitude, but a perfectly analogous puzzle arises concerning the kind of “belief” that I have been discussing here.

Pritchard’s way of handling the sort of case I described is by means of relativizing hinge propositions to a person at a time. In the story I’ve just told about doing a study of people who’ve lived all their lives on the Earth, what might begin as a hinge proposition for me – viz., I’m lived all my life on the Earth – ceases to be a hinge proposition for me once I gain evidence that I have the carcinoma in question. And even once that evidence is defeated, the proposition that I’ve lived all my life on the Earth continues not to be a hinge proposition, but rather a proposition that I now rationally believe, having rationally suspended my earlier doubts. This is how Pritchard accommodates the kind of case I’ve described.

If this accommodation is not to be ad hoc, then Pritchard must tell us something more about what it is for a proposition to be a hinge proposition, and what it is for an attitude to that proposition to constitute a hinge commitment: what could these things be, such that we should expect them to be relative to a person at a time? Thankfully, he says quite a bit about this, as we’ll see in the next section.

**Section III: What are Hinge Propositions? What are Hinge Commitments?**

Pritchard introduces hinge propositions by considering Wittgenstein’s response to Moore’s claimed certainty that he has two hands:

“My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.

“That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.” (*On Certainty*, §250, quoted in Pritchard 2016, 64 – 5)

Wittgenstein says that he is not “in a position” to take the sight of his hand as evidence for his having two hands. He’s not in such a position because, given that he’s in normal circumstances, his having two hands is “as certain as anything that [he] could produce in evidence for it.” The inference here indicates that Wittgenstein takes the fact that something is as certain as anything that he could produce in evidence for it to explain why he is not in a position to take the sight of his hand as evidence for it. But since there is nothing about this explanation that depends upon its being *the sight of his hand* that he might or might not take as evidence for his having two hands, it seems that Wittgenstein is here committed to the following: the fact that something is as certain as anything that he could produce in evidence for it explains why he is not in a position to take anything as evidence for it. If this is what Wittgenstein is saying, then he takes his having two hands to have the following features:

1. It is as certain as anything that he could produce in evidence for it (note: this does *not* imply that it is as certain as anything could be)
2. He is not in a position to take anything as evidence for it, and
3. (a) is true because (b) is true.

Let’s use Pritchard’s phrase “Moorean certainties” to refer to propositions of which (a) – (c) are all true. Pritchard also considers another passage in Wittgenstein’s discussion of Moore’s certainty that he has two hands:

“If a blind man were to ask me ‘Have you got two hands?’ I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*?” (*On Certainty*, §125, quoted in Pritchard 2016, 65).

After quoting the passage above, Pritchard offers the following construal:

“A quite striking claim is emerging here. For not only are these Moorean certainties necessarily groundless, according to Wittgenstein, but it also seems they are by that same token immune to rational doubt. For any rational basis for doubting the Moorean certainty would be necessarily less certain than the optimally certain Moorean certainty, and hence one would have more reason to doubt the grounds offered for doubting the Moorean certainty than to doubt the Moorean certainty itself.” (Pritchard 2016, 65)

For Pritchard, then, hinge propositions are Moorean certainties that are immune to rational doubt. And what, according to Pritchard, explains their immunity to rational doubt? Pritchard takes the answer to this question to be suggested by the following passage from Wittgenstein:

“if you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.” (*On Certainty*, §115, quoted in Pritchard 2016, 66).

“The *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

“That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.” (*On Certainty*, §341-2, quoted in Pritchard 2016, 66)

According to Pritchard, what these passages suggest is that

“all rational evaluation… takes place relative to fundamental commitments that are themselves immune to rational evaluation, but that need to be in place in order for a rational evaluation to occur.” (Pritchard 2016, 66)

These “fundamental commitments” are what Pritchard calls “hinge commitments”, and the contents of these commitments are “hinge propositions”. According to Pritchard’s Wittgenstein then, these hinge propositions are Moorean certainties (i.e., propositions for which no evidence may be offered, because they are at least as certain as anything that could serve as evidence for them) that are immune to rational doubt, and this immunity results from the fact that our commitment to the truth of those propositions is fundamental to the practice of rational evaluation itself. Pritchard attributes this view to Wittgenstein, but also endorses it himself, as providing the basis for a solution to the Closure Puzzle.

I would now like to argue that Wittgenstein’s actual view is quite different from the one that Pritchard attributes to him – and it also provides a more plausible solution to the Closure Puzzle than does the view that Pritchard attributes to him. In the remainder of this section and the next, I’ll confine myself to articulating what I take Wittgenstein’s actual view to be. First, although Pritchard is correct to read Wittgenstein as holding that Moorean certainties are “necessarily groundless” in the sense that one is not in a position to take anything as evidence for them, it does not follow from this that such certainties are “immune to rational doubt”. Pritchard thinks that this does follow because “any rational basis for doubting the Moorean certainty would be necessarily less certain than the optimally certain Moorean certainty”. But, as noted above, Wittgenstein doesn’t claim that Moorean certainties are “optimally certain”. All he claims is that they are “as certain” as anything that might be provided as evidence for them. But their being at least that certain is compatible with their being no more certain than something that might serve as a reason to doubt them. So I don’t see evidence for thinking that Wittgenstein takes Moorean certainties to be immune to rational doubt.

Of course, in the passages quoted above from §115 and §341-2, Wittgenstein does say that certainty about some things is, in some way, presupposed by doubts concerning other things. But neither of those passages reveal Wittgenstein’s commitment to the claim that Moorean certainties – those things for which I cannot produce evidence because they are as certain as anything that could be produced as evidence for them – are immune to rational doubt. The first passage says only that it is impossible to doubt some things without being certain of other things. It *doesn’t* say that there is some particular thing T such that it is impossible to doubt anything without being certain of T. Likewise, the second passage says only that questions and doubts can be raised only locally, not globally. Neither passage identifies Moorean certainties such as “I have two hands” as the loci of presupposed certainty.

Indeed, throughout *On Certainty*, we find Wittgenstein identifying propositions that are (what we, following Pritchard, have been calling) Moorean certainties, and describing some presupposed certainty in connection with those propositions – but *not* describing the Moorean certainties themselves as presupposed certainties. Consider, for instance:

“Why is it not possible for me to doubt that I have never been on the moon? And how could I try to doubt it?  
“First and foremost, the supposition that perhaps I have been there would strike me as idle. Nothing would follow from it, nothing be explained by it. It would not tie in with anything in my life. When I say "Nothing speaks for, everything against it," this presupposes a principle of speaking for and against. That is, I must be able to say what would speak for it.” (*On Certainty*, §117)

“In general I take as true what is found in textbooks, of geography for example. Why? I say: All these facts have been confirmed a hundred times over. But how do I know that? What is my evidence for it? I have a world-picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting. The propositions describing it are not all equally subject to testing.” (*On Certainty*, §162)

“I have a telephone conversation with New York. My friend tells me that his young trees have buds of such and such a kind. I am now convinced that his tree is... Am I also convinced that the earth exists?

“The existence of the earth is rather part of the whole picture which forms the starting-point of belief for me.

“Does my telephone call to New York strengthen my conviction that the earth exists?  
“Much seems to be fixed, and it is removed from the traffic. It is also so to speak shunted onto an unused siding. (*On Certainty,*§208 - 10)

The presupposed certainties that Wittgenstein mention include: “a principle of speaking for and against”, “a world-picture”, “the whole picture which forms the starting-point of belief for me”. But while Wittgenstein sometimes mentions Moorean certainties as *part of* one or another of these things, he never identifies any such presupposed certainty with any particular Moorean certainty. Why would he avoid making this identification?

Is it because Wittgenstein wanted to describe the presuppositions in question *in fully general terms* that he refuses to identify *particular* Moorean certainties with such presuppositions? Pritchard seems to think so. He writes:

“one might be tempted …to regard hinge commitments as being entirely context-bound. But this would be an unduly quick way of reading Wittgenstein’s remarks on hinge propositions. For closer inspection of this apparently heterogeneous class of hinge commitments reveals that they all in effect codify, that particular person, the entirely general hinge commitment that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one’s beliefs. Call this commitment the *uber hinge commitment*, and call the proposition endorsed by the uber hinge commitment the *uber hinge proposition*.” (Pritchard 2016, 95)

In order to evaluate the hypothesis that I take Pritchard to hold– the hypothesis that what Wittgenstein identifies as the presupposed certainties of inquiry are simply the uber hinge commitment, and that Moorean certainties are just contextually salient applications of this uber hinge commitment – we must first understand a bit more clearly the content of the uber hinge commitment. In the passage quoted above, Pritchard articulates that content as: that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one’s beliefs. But he offers a helpful gloss on this articulation in a footnote:

“I say ‘radically *and* fundamentally’ here to stress both the extent and the depth of the error involved.” (Pritchard 2016, 203)

Pritchard doesn’t explain how we should understand the notions of “extent” or of “depth”. But without a clearer account of these notions, it’s not clear how to understand the content of the uber hinge commitment, or how to evaluate the interpretative hypothesis bruited above. In the next section, I’ll propose a way to understand the notions of extent and of depth that will do these things. It will eventually turn out, however, that, while the proposal I offer is more faithful than Pritchard’s to Wittgenstein’s text in *On Certainty*, it offers a solution to the Closure Puzzle that is, in Pritchard’s terminology, not “Wittgensteinian” at all: it allows that (II) and (III) are true but (I) is false. Thus, I will argue that the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty* was not what Pritchard would call a “Wittgensteinian”.

**Section IV: What is the uber hinge, and how is it related to particular hinges?**

Consider the following hypothesis:

(H) All of my current beliefs are exactly true, except for my belief that I am RN, instead of RN’s identical twin brother.

If (H) is true, it follows that most of my beliefs about the world are true, not false – for even though many of my beliefs involve identifying me with RN, all those same beliefs also involve identifying me with someone who has RN’s historical properties and relations (which, we may suppose, RN’s identical twin brother does). Clearly, though, the denial of (H) is, at least in normal cases, a Moorean certainty – it is as certain as anything that may be offered as evidence for it, and I am not in a position to take anything as evidence for it, and the latter is true because the former is. How, then, can we treat the denial of (H) as a contextually specific application of the uber hinge proposition that I am not radically and fundamentally mistaken in my beliefs?

I can see only one plausible way to do this. Let’s begin by considering what it is for a mistake in one’s beliefs to be “fundamental”. I suggest that fundamental mistakes in my beliefs are errors that arise not through my reasoning poorly from my evidence, but rather they are *errors that arise somehow from my evidence itself*. What does this mean? Of course, if evidence is factive, then an agent’s evidence cannot itself be mistaken. But mistakes can nonetheless arise from an agent’s evidence, if that evidence is strongly unrepresentative of the population with respect to the characteristics of which it is treated as evidence. Consider, for instance, the unbroken series of coin tosses that all land heads at the beginning of *Rosenkranz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; such a run of heads would strongly indicate that something out of the ordinary is happening – that the coin is not as fair as it seems, or perhaps even that one is dreaming – and yet it’s possible that nothing out of the ordinary is happening, and that the unbroken series of heads is just a strange coincidence. In such a case, the unbroken series of coin tosses would be an error that arises from the evidence itself, even if it is not contained in the evidence itself. The evidence may consist solely of facts, but those particular facts are misleading concerning what other facts obtain. When my evidence itself misleads me, the error in my beliefs is fundamental.

What is it, then, for an error in my beliefs to be “radical”? It is for the fundamental error(s) to affect not just my beliefs about whether a particular coin is fair, or whether a particular causal process occurs, but rather to affect my beliefs about *almost everything*. In other words, an error in my beliefs is both radical and fundamental when *my total evidence is misleading with respect to most everything*. If this is correct, then we can spell out the content of the uber hinge proposition as follows:

(UHP) My total evidence is *not generally* misleading.

The uber hinge commitment is, I propose, simply our confidence that UHP is true: this would explain what Pritchard has in mind when he speaks of the uber hinge commitment as commitment to the proposition that one is not “radically” and “fundamentally” mistaken in one’s beliefs. Particular hinge commitments that a person has a time would then be that person’s commitments at that time to the various propositions that follow from its being the case that *the particular body of total evidence that she has at that time* is not generally misleading. Thus, your particular hinge commitments will differ from mine.

Pritchard and Wright both think of the uber hinge commitment as a commitment that we are *entitled* to have, though they differ on the source of that entitlement, and how that entitlement affects the rational assessability of the commitment itself. But there is not a single text in *On Certainty* that describes us as “entitled” to the uber hinge commitment. For Wittgenstein, the uber hinge commitment is a commitment that we do have – but he says nothing about whether or not we are “entitled” to have it – whatever such entitlement might amount to.

Pritchard and Wright also both think of the uber hinge commitment as a presupposition, or ground, of our practice of inquiry, or of our practice of judgment and reliance on evidence quite generally – and on this point Wittgenstein joins them. Nonetheless, while Pritchard and Wright both develop an account of our entitlement to the uber hinge commitment, neither says much to explain the way in which the uber hinge commitment grounds our practice of inquiry. In the remainder of this section, I want to offer an explanation of how the uber hinge commitment can ground our practice of inquiry. The explanation I offer appeals to two fundamental features of our practice of inquiry. While my explanation is not one that Wittgenstein himself explicitly offers, it is also not incompatible with any of the claims or remarks in *On Certainty*, but rather helps us to understand them.

The first of these two fundamental features to which I appeal is one that I’ve argued elsewhere is constitutive of what it is for something to be the *evidence that an agent has*: TE is an agent’s total evidence at a particular time t only if, at t, that agent is rationally required to distribute her credence over propositions in such a way that her credence in each proposition is proportional to the support that proposition receives from TE.[[2]](#footnote-2) I state this as a *necessary*, but not a *sufficient*, condition on TE being an agent’s total evidence at a time. I leave it open that there may be different bodies of total evidence that support all the same propositions to the same extent, even though only one of those bodies of evidence belongs to the agent at the time in question.

The second of the two fundamental features of our practice of judgment and reliance of evidence is a feature that follows from a plausible general principle concerning the relation between rational confidence and evidence: it is rational for an agent to proportion her confidence in p to the degree to which p is supported by some evidence E only if it is rational for her to be confident that E is not misleading with respect to p. Notice that this principle expresses a necessary connection between the degree to which we are rational to proportion our confidence in a proposition to evidence that supports the proposition, on the one hand, and the degree to which we are rational to be confident that the evidence in question is not misleading with respect to that proposition. The principle is completely neutral on the issue of what explains this necessary connection, or even whether that necessary connection should be explained in the same way in different cases. But the necessary connection is not plausibly deniable: if it is rational for me to proportion my confidence in some hypothesis H to the support that H receives from evidence E, then it must also be rational for me to be confident that E is not misleading with respect to H. If I cannot rationally be confident of the latter, then it is not rational for me to proportion my confidence in H to E’s support of H.

Summing up, then, we can identify the following two features as fundamental to our practice of judgment, and reliance on evidence:

(1) It is rational for us to proportion our confidence in a proposition to the degree to which that proposition is supported by our total evidence.

(2) It is rational for us to proportion our confidence in a proposition to the degree to which that proposition is supported by our total evidence only if it is rational for us to be confident that our total evidence is not generally misleading.

But notice that, from (1) and (2), we can deduce the following consequences:

(3) It is rational for us to be confident that our total evidence is not generally misleading (from 1 and 2).

(4) Our total evidence supports the proposition that our total evidence is not generally misleading (from 1 and 3).

Since 4 follows from 1 and 3, and 3 follows from 1 and 2, 1 and 2 are the only assumptions of the argument. And I’ve already said why those two assumptions are plausibly thought to articulate fundamental features of our practice of judgment and reliance on evidence. Thus, those two fundamental features of our practice of judgment and reliance on evidence imply that we are justifiably confident that (UHP) our total evidence is not generally misleading. Of course, if we know that p implies q, then we are justified in being at least as confident in q as we are in p. Therefore, since we are justifiably confident that our total evidence is not generally misleading, we are also justified in being at least as confident that our total evidence is not generally misleading in any of a variety of specific ways. For instance, we are justified in being at least as confident that we are not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan, or that the universe was not created 5 minutes ago, replete with misleading signs of the past.

I’ve just given an a priori argument for the following thesis: if an agent has any evidence at all, then she is justified in being confident that UHP is true, and thereby she is at least as justified in being confident that any thesis she knows to be entailed by UHP – i.e., that the universe was not created 5 minutes ago, replete with misleading signs of the past, or that she is not a neurochemically stimulated orangutan – is also true. In other words, it is a priori that, for any epistemic agent who has any empirical evidence at all, it is a posteriori that her total evidence is not globally misleading. This argument thus provides us with an interpretation of *On Certainty* that:

1. explains the notion of an agent’s uber hinge commitment at a time as that agent’s commitment to the truth of UHP, relativized to that agent and that time
2. explains the notion of a hinge proposition for an agent at a time as a proposition that follows from the application of UHP to the body of total evidence that a particular agent possesses at a particular time (i.e., a proposition to the effect that this particular body of total evidence is not generally misleading),
3. explains the non-propositional presupposed certainty to which Wittgenstein refers – e.g. “a principle of speaking for and against”, “a world-picture”, “the whole picture which forms the starting-point of belief for me” – as the agent’s *possession* *of* (i.e., her capacity to deploy) some body of total evidence.

Now that we’ve found such an interpretation of *On Certainty*, we will show in the next section that it provides a solution to Pritchard’s closure puzzle.

**Section V: Using Hinges to Provide a Moorean Solution to the Closure Puzzle**

Suppose that you work as the sole zookeeper in a zoo that deceptively stimulates half of its orangutans to have the experience as of being the sole human zookeeper in a zoo that deceptively stimulates all of its orangutans. The other half of its orangutans are unburdened by this deceptive stimulation. If this stimulation is accomplished by means of wireless connection with mechanisms fully internal to the orangutan’s brain, how will you be able to tell which are the deceptively stimulated orangutans and which are not? Presumably by means of their behavior: the deceptively stimulated orangutans are likely to behave more or less like zookeepers – or at least like orangutans imitating zookeepers. On the basis of this behavioral evidence, you can come to know which orangutans are which. And you might notice a striking pattern: all of the deceptively stimulated orangutans are spending almost all of their time in the northernmost room of the primate house, whereas the others are spending almost all of their time in the southernmost room. (Perhaps the wireless control mechanism only works in the northernmost room.)

Now, suppose you suddenly realize that, without having noticed it along the way, you have been spending almost all of your time in the northernmost room of the primate house: in such a case, does rationality require you to revise your level of confidence in the proposition that you are not a deceptively stimulated orangutan? It seems clear that it does require such a revision; if you fail to reduce your level of confidence in the proposition that you are not a deceptively stimulated orangutan, you are thereby less than fully rational.

Of course, if you do become slightly more confident in the prospect of your being a deceptively stimulated orangutan, then this increase in your confidence will ramify throughout your web of belief: you will also need to adjust the confidence that you invest in all sorts of other empirical hypotheses about your surroundings, given that you are now less sure than you were before of the trustworthiness of your evidence. And this might in turn have consequences for your rational degree of credence in the hypothesis that you have been spending your time in the northernmost room of the primate house: so the evidence that tells in favor of your being a deceptively stimulated orangutan also tells in favor of that very same evidence being misleading. We will return to this point below. But notice that, even if some evidence does indicate its own misleadingness, it does not follow that such evidence has no consequences at all for your rational degree of confidence in various hypotheses. What follows, rather, is that the precise consequences that it has are less than fully clear. But, even so, such evidence does have some consequences for how we can rationally invest our confidence, and so it has consequences on our rational attitudes towards our anti-skeptical hinge commitments.

In the previous section, I pointed out that gaining empirical evidence against some hinge proposition involves gaining evidence against UHP. Thus, such evidence provides to reason to think that it is itself misleading. If suddenly a text field pops up at the bottom of your visual field that reads “you are a brain in a vat and your current sensory experience is all the result of artificial electrochemical stimulation”, such evidence would not only give some reason to think of all of your other visual evidence as misleading – it would also give reason to think of it itself as misleading. Similarly, if you gain empirical evidence that you are a deceptively stimulated orangutan, then this evidence gives some reason for you to suspect all of your empirical evidence of being misleading, including that very evidence itself.

Can you be empirically justified in *believing* – or even in being highly confident – that UHP is false, i.e. that your empirical evidence is globally misleading? Any evidence that you have for this hypothesis would indicate its own misleadingness. To the extent that such evidence supported the hypothesis that UHP is false, it would also support its own misleadingness, and thereby undermine its own support for the hypothesis that UHP is false. This is of course *not* to say that one agent’s total body of empirical evidence could not support UHP more strongly than another agent’s could (perhaps by virtue of being more coherent). It is only to say that no agent’s total body of empirical evidence could justify *believing* the denial of UHP. While you might be more or less empirically justified in believing UHP, you cannot possibly have empirical justification for believing the denial of UHP. To have such justification would be to lack empirical justification for believing anything, and so not to have it in the first place.

It follows from the a priori argument that I’ve just given that, if an agent has empirical justification for believing anything at all, then she has empirical justification for denying skeptical hypotheses. In other words, if you have empirical evidence that justifies you in believing anything at all, then you have empirical evidence that justifies you in believing that your empirical evidence is not globally and systematically misleading. In particular, you have empirical evidence that justifies denying that you are a brain in a vat, or that your whole life is but a dream, or that you are a deceptively stimulated orangutan, and so on.

It is thus a necessary condition of having any empirically justified beliefs that one have empirical evidence against skeptical hypotheses, and in favor of one’s hinge propositions, and that one be rationally committed to the truth of that hinge proposition. But the rationality of the latter commitment needn’t (indeed, for all I say here, couldn’t) arise as a result of reflecting on one’s strategic entitlements or pragmatic reasons: it could result simply from the fact that one’s total empirical evidence supports the truth of the uber hinge. On this view, it is a necessary condition of having any empirically justified beliefs that one has an empirically justified belief in the truth of one’s uber hinge.

This, I propose, is the right answer to the closure puzzle. It is not what Pritchard would classify as a Wittgensteinian answer because it does not accept the truth of all of (I) – (III): in particular, it rejects (I). In this respect, it is a Moorean answer. But it is neither the sort of externalist Moorean answer that Pritchard rejects, nor need it be any form of abductivism. It is, rather, Moore’s own version of Mooreanism. Here is Moore:

“How am I to prove now that ‘Here is one hand, and here’s another’? I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof.” (“Proof of an External World”).

That I am now awake is something that I know, and I know it on the basis of my total evidence. But my total evidence is more evidence than I know how to state or attend to, and so my evidence-based knowledge is not the result of a proof. Moore is a non-abductivist evidentialist about his knowledge that he is not dreaming, and, more generally, about his knowledge of hinge propositions. And so too, on my interpretation, is Wittgenstein.

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1. Dretske 1970 and Nozick 1981 are among the few philosophers before Pritchard who’ve answered this question in the negative, but they did so on very different grounds than Pritchard offers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Neta 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)