

NON-PRAGMATIST HINGE EPISTEMOLOGY

Project description for general audience

The aim of the planned research is to introduce and motivate a non-pragmatist approach to hinge epistemology.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that investigates sources of knowledge and justification. Hinge commitments are propositions that every rational being accepts as certain, and which cannot be easily—or at all—evaluated in terms of justification. For instance, compare a belief that Napoleon was defeated in the Battle of Waterloo with your attitude toward the proposition that you are not a massively deceived brain in a vat, artificially stimulated to experience what seems to you like an ordinary physical world. The first claim—about Napoleon’s defeat—can be supported by historical evidence. There is evidence for it, gathered by historians and widely disseminated until the belief became common knowledge. The belief that one is not massively deceived is quite different in this respect. It seems that there is no evidence—at least no non-circular and easily available evidence—for or against the idea that we are living in a grand simulation. Moreover, even asking for evidence for such a claim seems strange. Normally, we do not even consider such scenarios or evaluate them in terms of justification; we simply take them for granted as not holding.

Hinge epistemologists argue that this act of taking certain commitments for granted, even without evidence, is necessary for other beliefs to be justified. For instance, justification of your belief that Napoleon was defeated in the Battle of Waterloo presupposes certain hinge commitments, such as the assumption that you are not massively deceived. These assumptions are certain but not justified in the ordinary sense. The nature of such assumptions is captured by the hinge metaphor borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*: “If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put” (§343). Such commitments function as the hinges of epistemic justification: they must remain firm and fixed for inquiry and justification to proceed.

Mainstream hinge epistemology takes the a-rational character of hinge commitments at face value, explaining them in pragmatist terms. Simplifying slightly, this view claims that hinge commitments are epistemically good but not in virtue of evidence we have for their truth. Real assent to the idea that we are brains in a vat would drastically change our way of thinking and acting. This leads hinge epistemology to the striking conclusion that the ultimate foundations (or rather hinges) of our epistemic practices are epistemically ungrounded—we have no evidence for their truth.

The planned research explores a radically different explanation of hinge commitments. Its central hypothesis is that positive epistemic status of hinge commitments can be explained in terms of evidential support without collapsing them into ordinary beliefs. The key idea is that evidential basing—the relation in virtue of which beliefs and acceptances are justified and rational—might be realized in different ways than in the paradigmatic case of evidential support of ordinary beliefs. Specifically, basing hinge commitments on epistemic grounds might involve implicit inference to the best explanation of diverse and complex evidence gathered in long process of its accumulation.

For instance, studies in developmental psychology suggest that children typically master the distinction between perceptual appearance and reality around the age of four. This development involves acquiring at least a tacit belief that perceived objects exist independently of being perceived—a belief often cited by epistemologists as a hinge commitment. The process by which this commitment develops appears evaluable in terms of justification. Such a realist conception of the external world develops in response to regularities and patterns in experience and action. This response is not merely causal but involves a distinctively epistemic relation—one of representing the perceptual situation in which the subject finds herself. There is no principled reason to exclude this form of deep belief formation from assessment in terms of rationality. Moreover, the implicit nature of this process and the complexity of epistemic grounds on which subject bases his or her belief help explain signature characteristics of hinge commitments: inaccessibility of their contents, the conversational oddity of questioning them, and individuals’ inability to articulate explicit reasons for their realist assumptions.

The planned research will employ standard methods of analytic epistemology, including conceptual analysis, thought experiments, and engagement with empirical work in psychology. The results will be disseminated through a series of philosophical papers.