

# THE BASIS-ACCESS DILEMMA FOR EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM

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ABSTRACT: Epistemological disjunctivists such as Duncan Pritchard claim that in paradigmatic cases of knowledge the rational support for the known propositions is both factive and reflectively accessible. This position faces some problems, including the basis problem – how can our knowledge be *based on* such strong reasons that seem to leave no room for non-knowledge and therefore presuppose knowledge? – and the access problem – can disjunctivists avoid the implausible claim that we can achieve knowledge through inference from our introspective awareness of those reasons? I argue that disjunctivists cannot solve both of these problems at the same time by posing the dilemma question whether we can have factive and reflectively accessible reasons without knowledge. While I focus on Pritchard throughout most of the paper, I argue in the last section that other anti-skeptical versions of disjunctivism face the same dilemma.

KEYWORDS: epistemological disjunctivism, basis problem, access problem, underdetermination problem

*Epistemological disjunctivism* is the claim that in certain cases of knowledge, the rational support for the known propositions is both *factive* and *reflectively accessible*. Most advocates take this position to address skepticism, in particular what Duncan Pritchard calls the *underdetermination problem*, which arises from the claim that we have no rational grounds that would favor our everyday beliefs over corresponding skeptical hypotheses. His point is that when and if our beliefs in such propositions are true, we can have factive reflectively accessible reasons that support them, but given they are false, it is impossible to have such factive reasons.

While it may seem attractive that epistemological disjunctivism (henceforth I will drop “epistemological”) can provide such a treatment of skepticism, there are also important problems. Pritchard notes three “core problems:” first, the *basis problem*, which arises because the reasons the disjunctivist claims may seem to presuppose or be substantially equivalent to knowing, and thus not be considered a possible basis for knowledge. Thus, the disjunctivist needs to provide conceptual room for such reasons without knowledge. Second, the *access problem*: it seems that if our factive reasons are reflectively accessible, we can infer from having those

reasons that the corresponding proposition is true. But that would mean that whenever we have such reasons, we can achieve knowledge that what they suggest is true just by reflection alone. This seems obviously false. And third, the *distinguishability problem*, which arises because one cannot plausibly be capable of distinguishing between the truth of a common sense proposition and a skeptical scenario in which this proposition is false. But it may seem that when one has a factive reflectively accessible reason, one is actually able to distinguish these two cases, which would be a repugnant conclusion.

I wish to argue here that disjunctivism cannot be defended against all of these problems, at least not insofar as it is understood as a position that can address skepticism. The rough idea is that once the disjunctivist has avoided the basis problem by making room for cases of reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, she also has to accept that in such cases there is a reflective route to knowing the relevant propositions. This reinforces the access problem and also leads to complications with the disjunctivist response to the underdetermination problem. I will begin to lay out this line of argument in greater detail by discussing skepticism and the underdetermination problem. Next I will discuss Pritchard's influential version of disjunctivism and review his discussion of the three problems mentioned above. I will try to show that not only do we have to reject at least one of Pritchard's responses to these problems, but also that there is a more general dilemma for anti-skeptical brands of disjunctivism making it impossible to address both problems in a consistent way. Finally, I will discuss the implication for two different versions of disjunctivism. I will there argue that other versions of disjunctivism are under the same pressure as Pritchard's to answer whether there are reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, although the contextualized version has a somewhat better outlook to overcome the dilemma.

### **I. Skepticism and Underdetermination**

Pritchard points out that an important virtue of disjunctivism is that it can address a particular strand of skepticism, namely what he calls the *underdetermination problem*. He distinguishes this problem from another problem of Cartesian skepticism, the *closure-based skeptical paradox*. Both types of skepticism are Cartesian in the sense that they are both motivated by reference to skeptical scenarios. I will here use Descartes' original Evil Demon scenario: while we interpret our perceptual appearances as being caused by an external world that is in line with most of our beliefs, we might also be the victims of a deception by an evil demon

who has been supplying these appearances directly to us.<sup>1</sup> In such a case, all our empirical beliefs might turn out to be false.

The skeptical problem I will be more concerned with here is the *underdetermination problem*. The underlying idea was introduced by Keith Lehrer and Stewart Cohen:<sup>2</sup> compare two subjects,  $S_1$  who is in a world roughly as we assume the world really is, and  $S_2$ , who is in a skeptical scenario. Suppose both have the exact same perceptual experience and the same beliefs. Suppose both have (in an epistemically unobjectionable manner) formed the empirical belief that  $p$ , but while  $S_1$ 's belief is true,  $S_2$  is mistaken about  $p$  due to deception. Both appear to be justified in their belief that  $p$  *in the same way*.<sup>3</sup> But this suggests that our justification is disconnected from the truth of  $p$ .

Pritchard turns this worry into a more precise skeptical argument that aims to actually establish a skeptical conclusion.<sup>4</sup> The starting point of this argument derives from the line above and states that a subject such as  $S_1$  must have the same rational support for believing any given proposition as  $S_2$ . Thus we cannot have such rational support that *favors* the hypothesis that we are a subject like  $S_1$  over the hypothesis that we are a subject like  $S_2$ . The skeptical allegation then is that we cannot have knowledge of any proposition for which we lack rational support that favors it over a skeptical scenario.

The most powerful version of underdetermination-based skepticism is, as Pritchard argues, a version concerned with *rationally grounded empirical knowledge*. He formulates this type of skepticism as based on the *underdetermination<sub>rk</sub> principle*.

If  $S$  knows that  $p$  and  $q$  describe incompatible scenarios, and yet  $S$  lacks a rational basis that favors  $p$  over  $q$ , then  $S$  lacks rationally grounded knowledge that  $p$ .<sup>5</sup>

This principle gives rise to an “inconsistent triad:”

(I) One cannot have rational support that favors one's belief in an everyday

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, transl. Donald Cress, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1993), AT VII 21-3.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Lehrer and Stewart Cohen, “Justification, Truth, and Coherence,” *Synthese* 55 (1983): 191-207.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ram Neta and Duncan Pritchard, “McDowell and the New Evil Genius,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 381-96.

<sup>4</sup> Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 29-32.

<sup>5</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 34.

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proposition over an incompatible radical skeptical hypothesis.

(II) The underdetermination<sub>RR</sub> principle.

(III) One has widespread rationally grounded everyday knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Given that (III) is supposed to apply to subjects who know about incompatible skeptical scenarios to their beliefs, we face an inconsistency and will have to give up one of these three claims.

The above formulation of the underdetermination<sub>RR</sub> principle is especially powerful because it even leaves the epistemic externalist without any special resources to deny it: the notion of rationally grounded knowledge is directly tied to the notion of a rational basis. In fact, the only way of denying the underdetermination<sub>RR</sub> principle is to say that one may, at least in some cases, not need a rational basis that favors one's beliefs *over skeptical hypotheses*. The challenge then is to say under which conditions we do not need rational grounds counting against such skeptical hypotheses. *Epistemic contextualists* try to give such conditions (or sometimes just claim that there are such conditions), but discussing these proposals is beyond my scope here.

The other option to avoid the skeptical paradoxes of course is to deny (I). The difficulty in denying this is that rational support is apparently an internalistic notion. But there is no apparent internal difference between subjects in a regular scenario and subjects in a corresponding skeptical scenario. The disjunctivist strategy is to include an external element in the notion of rational support while retaining the internalistic features, in particular the idea that we have reflective access to our rational support. I will discuss this position in the next section.

## II. Epistemological Disjunctivism

The basic idea of epistemological disjunctivism is traced back to John McDowell,<sup>7</sup> or at least his interpretation by Ram Neta and Pritchard.<sup>8</sup> Pritchard has later adapted a modification of this, namely:

In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge an agent, *S*, has perceptual knowledge that *Φ* in virtue of being in possession of rational support, *R*, for her

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<sup>6</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 35, my enumeration.

<sup>7</sup> John McDowell, "Knowledge and the Internal," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (1995): 877–893.

<sup>8</sup> Neta and Pritchard, "McDowell and the New Evil Genius".

belief that  $\Phi$  which is both *factive* [...] and *reflectively accessible* to  $S$ .<sup>9</sup>

He thinks that such factive and reflectively accessible rational support can simply consist in “seeing that  $\Phi$ .” This gives him grounds for denying (I), thereby avoiding the problem mentioned above. Pritchard has confined himself to defending specifically our perceptual knowledge against skepticism, although he does not rule out that the same lines of reasoning apply elsewhere, too.

A clarification about the nature of our reflective access is in order. Although this statement of disjunctivism does not make it unambiguously clear here, Pritchard later says that he considers having reflective access to a factive reason to entail that we can know by reflection alone that this is a factive reason.<sup>10</sup> This is important because it means that he is not merely claiming that our reflective access might just consist in being able to recognize that we have *a reason for p* without being able to see the factive nature of that reason. Such a kind of reflective access would indeed give us a powerful resource against skepticism, whereas the much weaker alternative would not serve as well.

A natural question is what Pritchard means when he writes of “paradigmatic cases” of perceptual knowledge. He later introduces a taxonomy of “good” and “bad” cases of perception, and mentions that the disjunctivist has the best category, the “good+” cases, “in mind.” These are cases that are both (a) objectively and (b) subjectively good, meaning that the agent is in an environment in which her perception is functioning properly and is in possession of sufficient grounds for accepting the target proposition, including the absence of “defeaters” that prevent her from believing it. A “good+” case also requires (c) that the subject has veridical belief of the target proposition. Given this, the subject can be described as both “seeing that  $p$ ” and “knowing that  $p$ .”<sup>11</sup>

If one takes this as an explanation of what constitutes a “paradigmatic case” of perceptual knowledge, then it is irritating that “good+” cases are the only ones which allow knowledge. It is unclear then why the restriction to “good+” cases would be of any help to explaining what constitutes a “paradigmatic case” of perceptual knowledge, for any case of knowledge is a “good+” case.<sup>12</sup> The issue of what counts as a paradigmatic case will be relevant later on.

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<sup>9</sup> Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 29-31.

<sup>12</sup> An important problem which I will not discuss here is that it is open to the skeptic to debate whether there are any “good+” cases.

I have already mentioned that epistemological disjunctivism promises a treatment of skepticism, at least of the kind of skepticism that arises from any version of the underdetermination problem. Pritchard mentions another motivation for his position: when we are challenged to provide reasons for our beliefs, or self-acclaimed knowledge, we often invoke factive locutions such as “I (can) see that...”<sup>13</sup> As mentioned, for Pritchard the fact that *I see that p* simply *is* my reason for believing that *p*, which, as he points out, matches a common way of talking in ordinary discourse. He argues that this naturalness should give disjunctivism the status of a “default position.”

### III. Problems for Disjunctivism

So far, I have mainly been outlining the positive claims of disjunctivism and how they are motivated. But there are serious problems for this position. In particular, Pritchard recognizes three “core problems” internal to the position, which I will discuss below. To begin with, it is also worth mentioning that Pritchard accepts a more general problem: while disjunctivism has a straightforward way of rejecting underdetermination-based skepticism, it is not so clear how disjunctivists should handle closure-based skepticism. He points out that they *can* just claim that we even have knowledge that we are not in an Evil Demon scenario for we can have reflectively accessible factive rational support for not being in such a scenario, e.g. by seeing that we have hands.<sup>14</sup> This would avoid the problem at the heart of closure-based skepticism, namely the intuition that we can know certain empirical propositions but not the denials of skeptical hypotheses, even if the latter immediately follow from the former. However, the claim that we do actually know that we are not in an Evil Demon scenario seems too strong to Pritchard. If that is right, disjunctivists face the challenge to provide an explanation of this intuition. Pritchard’s own approach is to instead accept this intuition and embrace a neo-Wittgensteinian theory of *hinge propositions* and denying that these can be rationally evaluated in the same way as other propositions.<sup>15</sup> The idea is that we can

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<sup>13</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 17-8. This applies to perceptual knowledge as well as to other forms of knowledge, which we may provide reasons for by claiming that “I remember that...” or “I can show that...” “I see that...” also has a reading on which it does not state a perceptual position, but that I understand a certain argument or the like.

<sup>14</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 157-63.

<sup>15</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 173-9. Other than pointing out that we need something like this to address closure-based skepticism, Pritchard offers no reason to accept this combination of two

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assume these hinge propositions in our evaluation of other propositions so that those will often count as known, but we need not say that we also know the hinge propositions. I will here only discuss disjunctivism not amended in this way, but the problems discussed below apply to the amended version just as well.

The general problem of skepticism aside, Pritchard discusses these three “core problems” for disjunctivism:<sup>16</sup>

1. The *basis problem*. Intuitively, we would say that seeing that *p* can serve as a *basis* for knowing that *p*. But on the disjunctivist conception, seeing that *p* is understood in a particularly strong way, requiring the truth of *p* and reflective access to the fact that one sees that *p*. The worry then is that seeing that *p* is in fact something so strong that it already *presupposes* knowing that *p*. This would prevent us from saying that it constitutes a *basis* for knowing that *p*.
2. The *access problem*. A general problem for semantic externalists is that they have to carefully state the privileged access one has to one’s mental states in order not to commit themselves to claiming that one can come to know facts about one’s environment by mere reflection.<sup>17</sup> A similar problem applies to disjunctivism: if we can reflectively access our reasons and some of these reasons imply the truth of the embedded proposition, then, in these cases, it seems that one can by reflection alone come to know that proposition. But then positing reflective access to empirical reasons leads to the claim that we can come to know empirical proposition based on reflection alone, which seems wrong.
3. The *distinguishability problem*. The disjunctivist reply to underdetermination-based skepticism is to say that the factive reasons we have in support of many everyday propositions are different from the reasons a corresponding subject in a skeptical scenario that is internally indistinguishable has. But then, because the non-deceived subject is supposed to have access to her reasons, she should be able to distinguish her reasons from a deceived subject’s reasons. But this would mean that she can distinguish her situation from a situation in a skeptical scenario. This would be denying the fundamental intuition underlying Cartesian skepticism that we can *not* distinguish between being the victim of an evil demon and being in a world that is roughly as we expect it, which just

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views that are in a fundamental tension. Wittgensteinians believe that rational evaluation is essentially local because we need hinge propositions in the background to be able to conduct such evaluations. But disjunctivism posits reasons that are so strong that there is no longer any reason to claim that we would need such hinges in the background of our local evaluations.

<sup>16</sup> See Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 19-22; Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 127-32.

<sup>17</sup> Michael McKinsey, “Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access,” *Analysis* 51 (1991), 9–16.

seems undeniably true.

Ultimately, I wish to argue that the disjunctivist cannot respond to both the basis problem (at least in a slightly revised version) and the access problem at the same time. I do not take any stance on whether each of the three problems may by itself be addressed by the disjunctivist in a satisfactory way. To make my point, let me run through these problems and discuss which options are open to the disjunctivist and which route Pritchard is recommending.

First the basis problem. This problem is related to what Pritchard calls the *entailment thesis*, namely that seeing that  $p$  entails knowing that  $p$ .<sup>18</sup> His own approach is to deny the entailment thesis and argue for the possibility of cases in which we see that  $p$  without knowing that  $p$ . Let me first briefly discuss whether the disjunctivist can retain the entailment thesis in the face of the basis problem.

It might seem that a possible strategy was to claim that knowledge can be based on seeing *because* it entails knowing. Alan Millar defends a version of disjunctivism on which the relevant reasons are *explanatory* or *motivating*, i.e. they explain why the subject has that knowledge.<sup>19</sup> The idea would be to say that our seeing that  $p$  provides an *explanans* of our knowing that  $p$  that is strong enough to entail the truth of the *explanandum*. This is correct in one sense: when we discuss the epistemic situation of a subject  $S$ , we may well use the fact that  $S$  sees that  $p$  to argue for and explain the fact that  $S$  knows that  $p$ . However, this explanation cannot be an explanation of the way  $S$  arrived at her knowledge that  $p$ .  $S$  must have gone through some process (however simple) of forming a belief that  $p$  when first seeing that  $p$ . But we cannot claim that such a psychological process is *logically guaranteed* to take place. Note that any non-disjunctivist position can allow a contingent process either by saying that one has only access to non-factive reasons or by saying that there are no factive reasons, and thus a further step of assessing or weighing the reasons we do have access to would be required to arrive at belief.

Millar escapes this problem by understanding motivating reasons as reasons for which I believe something. On this conception, a reason can only become a motivating reason once I believe the relevant proposition, so there is no need for me to a process of belief-formation anymore. This does indeed avoid the problem, but, as Millar notes, it also gives up on any ambition to address underdetermination-

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<sup>18</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Millar, "Reasons for Belief, Perception, and Reflective Knowledge," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 88 (2014): 1-19, and "Perceptual Knowledge and Well-Founded Belief," *Episteme* 31 (2016): 43-59.

based skepticism: Millar's motivating reasons are not sources of *justification*, and invoking them as such would invoke our knowledge to justify the very same knowledge.<sup>20</sup> This points out an important qualification of the basis problem: it is a problem for those who want our reasons to be a basis that *justifies* our beliefs. And only if one allows this justificatory role of reasons can one employ the disjunctivist's trademark move of invoking one's reasons as rational support that favors our beliefs over skeptical hypotheses.

So insofar as disjunctivism aims at a response to skepticism, Pritchard is right to approach the basis problem by offering reasons to deny the entailment thesis and thus making conceptual space for states of seeing that *p* without knowing that *p*. His strategy is to claim that seeing that *p* merely "*guarantees that one is in a good position to gain knowledge,*" but that there are cases in which one is "unable to exploit this opportunity."<sup>21</sup> He motivates this claim with a version of Goldman's 'fake barn' case:<sup>22</sup>

Suppose [...] that one is in a situation where one is genuinely visually presented with a barn and circumstances are in fact epistemically good (there's no deception in play, one's faculties are functioning properly, and so on). But now suppose further that one has been told, by an otherwise reliable informant, that one is presently being deceived (that one is in barn façade county, say), even though this is in fact not the case. Clearly, in such a case one ought not believe the target proposition, and hence one cannot know this proposition either. [...] Does it follow that one does not see that the target proposition obtains? I suggest not.<sup>23</sup>

As Pritchard explains, the situation here is one in which one is presented with a *misleading defeater* which prevents knowledge.<sup>24</sup> He argues that one still counts as seeing that *p* because we would intuitively describe this case as an instance of seeing that *p* once we recognize that the defeater was indeed misleading. The general claim is that such defeaters prevent knowledge, but may not always prevent the possession of factive reasons. Note that Pritchard is not merely arguing that in the scenario described one counts as *seeing a barn* (a highly intuitive claim), but that one also

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<sup>20</sup> Millar, "Perceptual Knowledge," 56.

<sup>21</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 771–791.

<sup>23</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> See also Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 127–129.

counts as *seeing that there is a barn*. Once we enforce this distinction, it is less clear whether Pritchard's claim is indeed intuitively plausible.<sup>25</sup>

But let us accept the example here just for the sake of the argument. A noteworthy aspect of it then is this: while we are presented an alleged case of having a factive reason for *p* without knowing that *p*, Pritchard later clarifies that he does not consider this a case of a reflectively accessible reason, for the defeater obstructs our reflective access to our factive reason.<sup>26</sup> That is to say, as long as one believes that one is or might well be deceived by a barn façade, one would not and could not be aware that one sees that there is a barn, but only that one appears to be seeing a barn. But note that he has initially stated that seeing that *p simply is* a type of reflectively accessible reason,<sup>27</sup> and he has used it as his go-to example for such reasons. This would have seemed to commit him to not accepting the barn case as an instance of genuinely seeing that *p*. Note also that the presence of a defeater is something that, according to Pritchard's taxonomy discussed above, rules out counting such a case as a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge (although, of course, there is no knowledge in this case anyway).

But what if we accept that the subject in the barn case sees that there is a barn without having reflective access to that reason? Of course, the existence of cases of seeing that *p* without knowing that *p* would be a counterexample against the entailment thesis as formulated by Pritchard. This would solve the version of the basis problem arising from the entailment thesis. But one should then also worry about the relation between *reflectively accessible* factive reasons and knowledge. Consider this modification of the entailment thesis:

*The entailment\* thesis:*

Having a reflectively accessible factive reason that *p* entails knowing that *p*.

If the entailment\* thesis is true, a version of the basis problem remains pressing: if one has a reflectively accessible factive reason, one should not be logically guaranteed to also have knowledge, for this leaves no room for a contingent

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<sup>25</sup> Craig French, "The Formulation of Epistemological Disjunctivism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 92 (2016): 86-104, takes this line of criticism.

<sup>26</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 50. The same is true of Pritchard's other type of examples of seeing that *p* without knowing that *p* (ibid., 32). These are cases in which one believes that *p* on another basis than perception, e.g. wishful thinking. These cases, too, only seem to count as not involving knowledge as long as the subject does not have rational access to her factive reason for *p*.

<sup>27</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 14.

process of forming a belief on the basis of one's reasons. Intuitively, one would need to *actually access* one's reason to arrive at knowledge – otherwise, we cannot say that our knowledge is based on and justified by our reason. But we cannot make this work if by having such a reason one is logically guaranteed to already have knowledge. If the entailment\* thesis were true, there could not be any reflectively *accessible* factive reasons that are not already *accessed*. Let me call this the *basis\* problem*.

In fact, we do not even need a notion as strong as logical entailment to generate the basis\* problem. Here is a general version:

*The necessity thesis:*

Necessarily: If S has a reflectively accessible factive reason that *p*, then S knows that *p*.

This thesis leaves open the notion of necessity involved. Let me here work with *epistemic* or *a priori* necessity, i.e. the claim that we can infer *a priori* from *S*s having a rationally accessible factive reason for *p* that *S* knows that *p*. This would then mean that in any *a priori* possible case in which *S* has a reflectively accessible factive reason that *p*, *S* knows that *p*. Thus the disjunctivist could still not make sense of a contingent process of forming a belief on the basis of a reason if one is necessarily to have knowledge. The strongest version of a necessity thesis that disjunctivists might be able to accept would be a version which claims that having a reflectively accessible reason is followed by knowledge with “psychological necessity.” This would still be contentious, but at least disjunctivists could posit some kind of laws of belief-formation which could cite the possession of reasons as a basis of knowledge.

What the disjunctivist would need to refute her commitment to the entailment\* thesis and the necessity thesis is a possible case in which a subject has a reflectively accessible factive reason for *p*, but lacks knowledge that *p*. Pritchard arguably does not offer such an example, for in his examples the subjects in question seem to lack reflective access to their reasons. In addition to this, his taxonomy of cases only allows one type of “paradigmatic” cases of perception in which one has reflectively accessible factive reasons – the “good+” cases –, and these cases are branded as cases of knowledge.<sup>28</sup> But maybe such cases still are possible. My argument later will be that we do not need to decide on the question whether such cases are possible (in any relevant sense), because either answer leads to trouble for disjunctivism.

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<sup>28</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 29.

To be able to do this, I need to discuss the access problem. From the discussion of the basis\* problem above it is apparent that the two problems are related, for both arise from the danger of positing too close a link between our reasons and our actual beliefs. However, while the basis\* problem problematizes the claim that our reasons *guarantee* knowledge, the access problem problematizes the idea that we can *achieve* knowledge from our reasons without external input.

Pritchard offers the following setup of the access problem:

(AP1) *S* can know by reflection alone that her reason for believing the specific empirical proposition *p* is the factive reason *R*. [Premise]

(AP2) *S* can know by reflection alone that *R* entails *p*. [Premise]

(APC) *S* can know by reflection alone the specific empirical proposition *p*. [From (AP1), (AP2)]<sup>29</sup>

Pritchard points out that the argument actually not deductively valid, for *S* will not have come to be “in possession” of *R* by mere reflection, and thus it would not be by reflection alone that *S* knows that *p*.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in the case of vision I can only come to be seeing that *p* given the right empirical circumstances, and thus there is an empirical element in the course of my coming to believe and know that *p*. Therefore *S*'s belief that *p* is not *a priori*, as Pritchard insist, but it is rather belief *based on an empirical reason*.<sup>31</sup>

He recognizes that this response assumes that the possession of a reflectively accessible reason led up to belief. But what about cases in which a subject is in possession of such a reason, but this reason does not lead to a belief? The subject might here believe that *p* for a different (non-empirical) reason, or she might not believe that *p* at all. Pritchard discusses this as a revised setup of the problem:

(AP1') *S* can know by reflection alone that she is in possession of the factive reason *R* for believing the specific empirical proposition *p* (although she does not believe *p* on that basis, or any other empirical basis). [Premise]

(AP2) *S* can know by reflection alone that *R* entails *p*. [Premise]

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<sup>29</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 47. Note also that given the entailment\* thesis, in this setup *S* would already count as knowing that *p* given her true belief on the basis of a factive reflectively accessible reason.

<sup>31</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 129.

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(APC) *S* can know by reflection alone the specific empirical proposition *p*. [From (AP1'), (AP2)]<sup>32</sup>

The idea here is that *S* can come to know *p* by reflection alone, i.e. she could move from a state of disbelief or poorly justified belief to a state of knowledge just by reflecting on the kind of reasons she possesses. Here, Pritchard's response is to deny that (AP1') can be the case. While he admits that "seeing that *p* can come apart from believing that *p*," he thinks that instances of this such as the barn case do not support (AP1'):

In such a case there seems no reason at all for the epistemological disjunctivist to concede that the agent concerned has reflective access to the factive reason. Their claim, after all, is only that the rational basis for your beliefs – i.e. the reasons on which one's beliefs are based – needs to be reflectively accessible. [...] Moreover, although the epistemological disjunctivist is willing to part company with the philosophical herd and claim that one's seeing that *p* can<sup>33</sup> be reflectively accessible to one in cases where one has paradigmatic perceptual knowledge that *p* (such that one believes that *p* on the basis of seeing that *p*), it does not follow from this trail-blazing stance that they are thereby committed to supposing that in *every* case where one sees that *p* it is reflectively accessible to one that this is so.<sup>34</sup>

In this passage, Pritchard explicitly denies that one needs to have reflective access to one's seeing that *p*. As mentioned, this is curious, for he initially introduced seeing that *p* as an instance of a reflectively accessible factive reason.<sup>35</sup> Be the notion of seeing that *p* as it may, it should be beginning to become apparent that I think his denial of the possibility of (AP1') is in tension with a full treatment of the basis\* problem, specifically the version of it arising from the necessity thesis. Let me therefore look at the question whether the disjunctivist could instead accept the possibility of (AP1').

The formulation above is still not quite a logically valid argument. But consider the following reformulation, the gist of which I borrow from Tim Kraft.<sup>36</sup> Let *R* be a factive reason for the specific empirical proposition *p*. Then the problem arises in this setup:

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<sup>32</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 49, my enumeration.

<sup>33</sup> To be clear, Pritchard has introduced epistemological disjunctivism as the claim that one has reflectively accessible factive reasons in *all paradigmatic cases* of perceptual knowledge.

<sup>34</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 14, see above.

<sup>36</sup> Tim Kraft, "Epistemological Disjunctivism's Genuine Access Problem," *Theoria* 81 (2015): 311–332, here 316–317.

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(AP1\*)  $S$  can know by reflection alone that  $S$  is in possession of  $R$ .

(AP2\*)  $S$  can know by reflection alone that  $S$  being in possession of  $R$  entails  $p$ .

(APC\*)  $S$  can know by reflection alone that  $p$ .

Kraft points out that the validity of this argument depends on the closure of reflective knowledge under reflectively known entailment.<sup>37</sup> The relevant principle here would be:

If  $S$  can know by reflection alone that  $\Phi$  and  $S$  can know by reflection alone that  $\Phi$  entails  $\Psi$ , then  $S$  can know by reflection alone that  $\Psi$ .

This is, as Kraft notes, a highly plausible principle, and should be accepted especially by someone like Pritchard who is interested in retaining a version of the closure principle for knowledge. Given such a closure principle, the above argument is indeed logically valid. Accepting (AP1') means that there is a true instance of (AP1\*) in which  $S$  does not know that  $p$ .

(AP2\*) and (APC\*) straightforwardly capture the intent of (AP2) and (APC), so given this version of closure of reflective knowledge the disjunctivist either has to deny (AP2) or accept (APC). (AP2) seems to follow from any reasonably strong statement of epistemological disjunctivism: if by reflective accessibility we mean that it is reflectively accessible that the reason in question is factive, then it is clear that reflecting on that reason will allow a subject to derive that her possessing that reason entails that the target proposition is true.

This would leave the disjunctivist with the only remaining option of "biting the bullet" and accepting (APC). Maybe, one might argue, this is not such a meaningful concession, for the setup of the access problem required that  $S$  already has an empirical factive reason  $R$ , so  $S$  can know that  $p$  *only given she has an empirical reason for this*. In that sense, such knowledge would not be *a priori* but rather *grounded* in empirical reasons, for it is only possible given the right empirical

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<sup>37</sup> Three points are noteworthy: first, Neta and Pritchard, "McDowell and the New Evil Genius," 389, draw this inference under closure of just knowledge under known entailment, which is not quite the same. Second, the closure of possible reflective knowledge under reflectively known entailment, which is at work here (" $S$  can know...") and which I introduce above, follows from the closure of (actual) reflective knowledge under reflectively known entailment. Third, we do not have to demand possible *reflective* knowledge of the entailment in question to allow the validity of the argument, but a principle of the closure of possible reflective knowledge under just any knowable entailment (maybe due to testimony from a logician) is less plausible – we should not be willing to say that the thusly deduced proposition is still reflectively known.

circumstances and indeed some kind of perception or other empirical input. A problem, however, is that in such cases, as Pritchard notes, the *route* from the state of not knowing that  $p$  to knowing that  $p$  would be entirely reflective.<sup>38</sup> This would again put us under pressure to allow for an empirical basis of our knowledge: instead of believing or knowing that  $p$  based on the empirical reasons we have, we would come to know that  $p$  *based on reflection on the fact that we have  $p$ -entailing reasons* (but no  $p$ -entailing beliefs). Sure enough, our reasoning would involve empirical reasons, but only to the extent that we recognize that we have them and that they are factive. They would not be our reasons for believing and knowing that  $p$ , but rather what gave rise to our actual reasons, which would be entirely introspective in nature.

Perhaps the epistemological disjunctivist can actually bite that last bullet and claim that sometimes this simply is how we arrive at beliefs or knowledge. Maybe more troublesome is that such a kind of knowledge would lead to problems with the disjunctivist reply to underdetermination-based skepticism related to the distinguishability problem. Let me therefore briefly discuss this problem.

Pritchard introduces a distinction between *favoring* and *discriminating epistemic support*. Favoring epistemic support is such that it favors a proposition  $p$  over its rivals in that it gives us *better evidence* for  $p$ , but does not entail its truth nor rule out all other hypotheses. Discriminating epistemic support, on the other hand, consists in the possession of *discriminatory capacities* that allow us to actually rule out certain scenarios or hypotheses.<sup>39</sup> Of course, underdetermination-based skepticism seeks to exploit the fact that we typically lack discriminating epistemic support for our empirical beliefs.

This distinction allows Pritchard to formulate a response to the distinguishability problem. Consider again the two subjects  $S_1$ , who is in a scenario where most of her everyday beliefs are true, and  $S_2$ , who is in an indistinguishable skeptical scenario. Clearly, both lack discriminating capacities to distinguish between their situations, for both scenarios by hypothesis present them with indistinguishable evidence. Still, both have favoring epistemic support for their beliefs: their perception, or other empirical sources, suggest that their beliefs are true; they can also rule out, among others, cases of “poor deception” in which their beliefs were false in an easily recognizable way. Pritchard argues that  $S_1$  is in a better epistemic position insofar as she is in possession of factive reflectively accessible

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<sup>38</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 77-81.

reasons for her paradigmatic perceptual beliefs. He claims that  $S_1$  actually can exploit this by recognizing the factivity of her reasons and deducing that her belief supported by this reason must be true. This is a capacity that  $S_2$  lacks: her reasons are neither factive nor are they reflectively accessible. The latter is important, for it explains why  $S_2$  can think that she has the exact reasons that  $S_1$  actually has. From a disjunctivist perspective she is ignorant about the non-factive nature of her reasons, and this explains her deception.<sup>40</sup>

I will not discuss this response to the distinguishability problem in greater depth, although that would be necessary to evaluate it. But note the fact that Pritchard thinks that if we have reflective access to our reasons, we *can* recognize the factive nature of our reasons and deduce from this that our beliefs are true. Of course, he commits himself only to the claim that we can have such reasons in instances where we *already have* knowledge, which is an important restriction for his response to the access problem. But this brings us back to the question whether it is open to the disjunctivist to accept (APC) and say that we can recognize our factive reasons and deduce the truth of the target proposition  $p$  in a case where we did not already know that  $p$ .

I think that the disjunctivist cannot take that route because it would make her response to underdetermination-based skepticism question-begging. Suppose that  $S_1$  takes a route to knowledge that  $p$  by recognition of her factive reason  $R_1$ . Suppose again a subject  $S_2$  who is in an indistinguishable skeptical scenario. For the scenarios to be indistinguishable,  $S_2$  must mistakenly think (or be in a position to come to think) that she has  $R_1$ , although she in fact only has the non-factive misleading reason  $R_2$ . If  $S_2$  reflects on her  $R_2$ , she will (by the reasoning discussed above) be led to think mistakenly that  $R_2$  is factive and also infer that  $p$  is true. We can here see that the subjects cannot discriminate between  $R_1$  and  $R_2$ .

But this is where underdetermination-based skepticism comes in again. The skeptic may now argue that  $S_1$  cannot gain knowledge by reflecting on  $R_1$  because she cannot discriminate  $R_1$  from  $R_2$ . After all, what better evidence does  $S_1$  have for thinking that she is in possession of  $R_1$  than  $S_2$ ? Here, the disjunctivist cannot appeal to the reflective accessibility of  $R_1$  without begging the question because the skeptic is *disputing* the claim that  $S_1$  can know that she *has*  $R_1$  given that she cannot discriminate between  $R_1$  and  $R_2$ . That is to say, if the disjunctivist claims that  $R_1$  is somehow self-presenting as a factive reason, the skeptic will (justifiedly) object that this is exactly what the underdetermination problem questions, for how can  $R_1$  be

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<sup>40</sup> Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, 91-100.

self-presenting if it is indistinguishable from  $R_2$ ?  $S_1$  needs some other grounds for knowing that she has  $R_1$ .

The question then is: what could be the basis for  $S_1$  knowing that she has  $R_1$ ? Obviously, it is an introspective basis, but as we have just seen the kind of introspection relevant here is fallible. The disjunctivist now could try to apply her basic strategy again and claim that  $S_1$  has a factive and reflectively accessible introspective reason  $R_3$  for believing that she is in possession of  $R_1$ , whereas  $S_2$  merely has a misleading non-factive reason  $R_4$  for believing the same thing.  $R_3$ , the disjunctivist could argue, is better rational support than  $R_4$  because it is factive and reflectively accessible. But, of course,  $R_3$  and  $R_4$  are also indistinguishable, giving rise to a new underdetermination-based skeptical problem: Can  $S_1$  know that she has  $R_3$ ? The skeptic here could force the disjunctivist into an infinite regress of reasons. Crucially, this type of regress would be vicious, for the disjunctivist would at no level be able to fully address underdetermination-based skepticism. Therefore, the disjunctivist would also beg the skeptic's question by deferring to higher-order reasons.

To avoid this problem, the disjunctivist needs to deny (APC), thereby not allowing the possibility of *achieving* knowledge by reflection on one's factive reasons. Again, this is not a problem for Pritchard, for he only allows this type of recognition and deduction of the target proposition in cases where one *already has* knowledge of it. It is, however, a serious problem for disjunctivists wishing to "bite the bullet" on the access problem.

#### IV. A Dilemma for Disjunctivism

The above considerations put us in a position to formulate a dilemma for epistemological disjunctivism. The description of this dilemma will, at this point, largely be a summary of what has already been said, so I can be brief. Let us begin with the disjunctivist premise of the dilemma:

*Premise:*

In some cases of knowledge, we have reflectively accessible factive empirical reasons for our empirical beliefs in the sense that we can recognize by reflection that our reasons are factive.

This is then followed by this question:

*Question:*

Is it (a priori) possible that a subject S possesses a reflectively accessible factive

empirical reason  $R$  for the empirical proposition  $p$ , but  $S$  does not know that  $p$ ?

*First horn: No.* The disjunctivist can claim that such a case is not possible, i.e. can be ruled out *a priori*. This, as we have seen, will then subject her to the basis\* problem: how can our (empirical) knowledge be plausibly based on reflectively accessible reasons if such reasons *guarantee* knowledge? The basing relation should be understood as some kind of cognitive process – otherwise it disqualifies itself from serving as an explication of our justification. But such a process cannot be assumed to take place necessarily, i.e. we cannot plausibly know *a priori* that if  $S$  has a reflectively accessible factive reason  $R$  that  $S$  underwent a cognitive process *following* her possession of  $R$ , for such a process can only take place contingently. It thus seems that the possession of  $R$  *presupposes* that  $S$  knows that  $p$ , leaving no room for the kind of basing relation most disjunctivists are looking for.

*Second horn: Yes.* The disjunctivist can answer affirmatively and thereby say that there is a possible case  $C$  in which  $S$  possesses a reflectively accessible empirical reason  $R$  for the empirical proposition  $p$  but does not know that  $p$ . But this will make  $C$  a problem case with respect to the access problem:  $S$  here has a path to knowing that  $p$  by just reflecting on  $R$ , for  $S$  can recognize that  $R$  is factive and then deduce that therefore  $p$  must be true. Although this is only possible given that  $S$  has the empirical reason  $R$ , this kind of route to knowledge is by itself problematic. Worse, however, is the fact that admitting this route to knowledge in  $C$  will deprive the disjunctivist of a satisfactory response to underdetermination-based skepticism. Because  $S$ 's knowledge in  $C$  would not be directly based on  $R$ , but on the recognition of  $R$ 's factivity, the skeptic can now object to  $S$  knowing that  $R$  is factive by pointing to the fact that  $S$  cannot distinguish  $R$  from a non-factive reason in a corresponding skeptical scenario. The disjunctivist here will either beg the question by pointing to  $R$ 's factivity (which the skeptic claims  $S$  is ignorant about), or she will need to open up an infinite regress of reflectively accessible factive reasons: a reason for the fact that she is in possession of  $R$ , a reason for the fact that she possesses that reason and so on. This regress, besides being highly implausible, will at no point satisfy the skeptic, either.

It is not quite clear, which of the horns Pritchard is picking, but he seems to lean towards the first one. The fact that he describes the barn case as one in which one lacks reflective access to one's seeing a barn clarifies that at least the example he provides is not one in which one has reflective access to a factive reason. Apparently, he understands the basis problem as a problem that only applies to seeing (that  $p$ )

and arises due to the entailment thesis; but he glosses over the version of the problem that arises out of the entailment\* thesis or the necessity thesis.

## V. The Dilemma and Other Versions of Epistemological Disjunctivism

So far, I have only discussed Pritchard's particular version of epistemological disjunctivism. Let me end by briefly commenting on the question to what extent the dilemma formulated above applies to other versions of epistemological disjunctivism that have the same ambition to address skepticism (omitting views such as Millar's which have no such ambition). I will comment on a version of disjunctivism that replaces "propositional" perception ("seeing that...") with object perception, and on a contextualized version of disjunctivism.

Let me begin with non-propositional epistemological disjunctivism. The idea is that instead of claiming that in paradigmatic cases of perception, we have a factive and reflectively accessible *propositional attitude* with respect to what we perceive, one merely claims that in such cases we have reflectively accessible factive perception of the objects we perceive. This view is most explicitly advocated by Craig French, but has also been alluded to by Charles Travis.<sup>41</sup>

French developed this view in response to the basis problem. Remember that to rebut the entailment thesis Pritchard claimed that in the barn case one sees *that there is a barn*. French quite convincingly argues that this is intuitively not the case. However, it is very plausible that in this example one *sees a barn*.<sup>42</sup> The idea here is that Pritchard cannot provide a plausible case of propositional seeing without knowing, but it is easy to provide a case of object perception without knowing that there is such an object – the barn case already counts as such an example. French therefore suggests that we instead claim that in paradigmatic cases of perception our rational support consists in *seeing x* or *seeing an F thing*. This is, of course, compatible with the disjunctivist thesis that we have reflective access to this support. These locutions are also factive, i.e. seeing an *x* or an *F* thing implies that there actually is an *x* or an *F* thing.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> French, "The Formulation," Charles Travis, "The Silences of the Senses," in his *Perception: Essays After Frege* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23-58, here 29-33.

<sup>42</sup> French, "The Formulation," 91-93.

<sup>43</sup> French, "The Formulation," 96-102. French points out that this is actually just a specification of Pritchard's formulation of the core thesis of disjunctivism (see above) which only states that the rational support in paradigmatic cases of perception is factive and reflectively accessible, but does not incorporate any commitment to propositionality (*ibid.*, 95).

On this view it is clear that there are many cases like the barn case in which one sees an object without knowing that there is such an object. What is again unclear, though, is whether there are (possible) cases in which one has *reflectively accessible* factive perceptual reasons without knowledge. It may be easier for advocates of this strand of epistemological disjunctivism to claim that there are, but either way the dilemma arises as above. If there are no such cases possible, then it seems dubious how these reasons can serve as a basis for our beliefs and knowledge, which is supposedly to arise through a contingent process out of them, and yet also necessarily guarantee this knowledge. If there are such cases, then in these cases one has a purely reflective path to knowing that, say, there is a barn by recognizing the factive nature of one's seeing a barn and simply deducing that there is a barn. Also, just like above, if one just accepts that this is possible, cases like these seem to beg the question against the skeptic: one cannot simply claim that seeing that there is a barn just is a self-presenting reason when the skeptic is arguing that we cannot discriminate between seeing a barn and seeing a barn façade. Alternatively, the *recognition* of the fact that one is seeing a barn could itself be construed as a factive reason, but this would lead to an implausible infinite regress that would not provide a response to the skeptic, either.

Let me now turn to the idea of a contextualized version of epistemological disjunctivism. This view has been suggested, although not fully endorsed by Ram Neta.<sup>44</sup> Neta champions a version of epistemological disjunctivism that is open to both propositional and non-propositional reasons.<sup>45</sup> In his earlier work, Neta has argued that the extent to which we have evidence (and we might here read: reasons) may depend on context. In most "contexts of epistemic appraisal," our evidence does

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<sup>44</sup> Ram Neta, "Contextualism and the Problem of the External World," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (2003): 1-31 and "A Refutation of Cartesian Fallibilism," *Noûs* 45 (2011): 658-695; see also Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 147-52. In "Contextualism and the Problem," Neta develops the idea that our evidence depends on the context, but does not yet defend a disjunctivist account of it. In "A Refutation," along with other papers, he endorses such an account but does no longer elaborate on the context-sensitivity of the accessibility of evidence or reasons. He does, however, make an exception for circumstances where a question asked "defeats [his] justification" (Neta, "A Refutation," 665), and he later writes this (*ibid.*, 669):

According to the Cartesian Infallibilist view that I am describing, to have empirical knowledge, we must have reflective access to infallible empirical reasons. Fortunately, I claim, we *often* have this.

<sup>45</sup> Neta, "A Refutation," 686.

support conclusions about the external world, but in skeptical contexts, it does not. He argues that *S* has evidence *E* for *p* only if *E* favors *p* over some alternatives relevant in the context of epistemic appraisal, which for him means that *E* allows *S* to discriminate between *p* and a relevant alternative. He further argues that when we raise a (skeptical) hypothesis *H* that is not ruled out by *S*'s evidence, we restrict *S*'s evidence to those mental states that *S* would also have in *H*. Connecting this with disjunctivism, this would mean that when the skeptic brings up, say, the Evil Demon scenario (which we cannot rule out in the sense that we cannot discriminate between it and the world as we ordinarily think it is), she restricts our evidence – or let us say reasons – and rules out any factive reasons we might have that we would not have in the Evil Demon scenario. Our reasons would then mainly consist of “seemings” and phenomenal appearances. Thus, in such a context, we have no definitive reasons to believe that we have hands, but in ordinary contexts, we have such reasons.<sup>46</sup> The view here is that it depends on the context which reasons we *have*. A maybe even more plausible version of this position would be one according to which it depends on the context which reasons we *have access to*.

This position is attractive because it can address both skeptical problems, whereas unqualified Pritchard-style disjunctivism fails to address the closure-based problem. But what about the dilemma I posed above? It seems that with respect to the first horn, the situation is roughly the same: if there are no (possible) cases in which one has reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, then the basis\* problem will be just as pressing. However, if one allows such cases – and Neta's openness to object perception as a factive reflectively accessible reason suggests exactly that – the situation is somewhat different. There remains the worry that in such cases, there is a reflective path to knowledge, which one may find psychologically implausible. What does not arise, however, is the concern about begging the question against skepticism. One can argue that those reasons are just self-presenting in an ordinary context, but not so in a skeptical context. In such a skeptical context, we would not have access to, or not even have, factive reasons that, say, we have hands; but in an ordinary context, there are such reasons available. If the contextualist disjunctivist thus is willing to “bite the bullet” and accept that there is a purely reflective path to knowledge in cases of reflectively accessible factive reasons, then she will be able to hold this position in the face of the dilemma I have raised.

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<sup>46</sup> Neta, “Contextualism and the Problem,” 21-25. See also Jessica Brown, “Contextualism about Evidential Support,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 92 (2016), 329-354.

## **Conclusion**

I have posed a dilemma for epistemological disjunctivism purporting to show that while it may be able to address some of the three “core problems” Pritchard discusses, it cannot address all of them at the same time. While I have focused on Pritchard’s version of disjunctivism, the dilemma also applies to versions that replace propositional perception with object perception. The contextualized version of epistemological disjunctivism fares better: if one claims that there are cases of reflectively accessible factive reasons without knowledge, one is still committed to a perhaps implausible reflective path to knowledge in such cases, but at least one should then not be charged with begging the question against skepticism.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> I would like to thank Michael Williams for useful conversations about some ideas in this paper and three anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback on earlier versions of it.