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Article

Epistemic Anti-Mastery and the Fragility of the Bayesian Subject: Marguerite Porete and the Architecture of Epistemic Agency

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Abstract

Debates on ontological underdetermination—from scientific realism to Bayesian epistemology—typically assume that epistemic agents remain structurally intact even when evidence fails to determine theory. This paper argues that such debates tacitly preserve a “posture of mastery”: indeterminacy is treated as a problem for theory selection rather than as a destabilization of epistemic agency itself. I introduce the concept of *epistemic anti-mastery* to describe a rational reconfiguration of epistemic posture under conditions of radical opacity. Through a structural reading of Marguerite Porete’s account of annihilation in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, I demonstrate that: (i) Bayesian conditionalization presupposes an architectural stability that radical underdetermination undermines; (ii) scientific realism’s convergence rhetoric depends on an untenable mastery-orientation; and (iii) under structural opacity, epistemic anti-mastery is rationally required. The aim is conceptual intervention: rational engagement requires revision of epistemic stance rather than refinement of theoretical control.

Keywords: epistemology; underdetermination; Bayesian epistemology; scientific realism; epistemic agency; structural opacity; theory choice; Marguerite Porete

1. Introduction

Underdetermination has been understood primarily as a relation between theory and evidence. From Duhem’s holism to Quine’s web of belief, the thesis holds that empirical data may support multiple incompatible theoretical systems [1,2]. Later refinements, including Bayesian reconstructions and Stanford’s “problem of unconceived alternatives,” preserve the same structural picture [3]. Recent work continues to refine these debates, examining how historical unconceived alternatives bear on contemporary theory choice [4] and whether methodological practices can constrain underdetermination [5].

Yet across these debates a tacit assumption persists: *epistemic agency remains stable*. The knower deliberates among alternatives, updates credences, or suspends belief. Even when theories fail to determine truth, the posture of epistemic mastery—the stance of theoretical control—remains intact.

This paper challenges that presupposition. I argue that radical forms of underdetermination do not merely constrain theory; they expose a structural tension in the posture of epistemic mastery itself. If opacity is fundamental rather than provisional, continued insistence on theoretical capture may become epistemically misplaced—indeed, *irrational*.

To illuminate this possibility, I develop a structural reading of Marguerite Porete’s account of annihilation in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. My claim is not that Porete anticipates modern epistemology, but that her articulation of annihilation offers a model of *epistemic anti-mastery*: a reconfiguration of epistemic agency under conditions of radical opacity.

I argue that epistemic anti-mastery is not merely a possible response to underdetermination but may be rationally *required* when opacity is structural. This argument proceeds through three critical demonstrations: that Bayesian epistemology presupposes architectural stability undermined by radical

underdetermination; that scientific realism's convergence depends on mastery-orientation; and that proportionality between epistemic aspiration and epistemic condition mandates anti-mastery under persistent opacity.

2. Underdetermination and the Preservation of Agency

The Duhem–Quine thesis asserts that empirical evidence underdetermines theory [1,2]. Laudan has argued that underdetermination is often overstated [6], while Stanford reframes it historically through the “problem of unconceived alternatives” [3]. Recent scholarship examines whether historical patterns of unconceived alternatives support inductive pessimism about current theories [4], and how methodological commitments might mitigate underdetermination [5]. Bayesian epistemology formalizes uncertainty through probabilistic updating [7], though recent work questions whether Bayesian methods remain stable under radical uncertainty [8].

Despite disagreements over scope, these accounts share a structural presupposition: *epistemic agents retain deliberative mastery*. The agent evaluates alternatives and updates credences. Underdetermination constrains what can be known, but not the *stance* from which knowing is pursued.

Recent work on scientific realism preserves this structure. Structural realists argue that while theoretical content may be underdetermined, structural features persist across theory change [9]. Contemporary realists seek to refine success-to-truth inferences [10] or navigate ontological relativity [11]. The agent's mastery is relocated rather than relinquished.

The possibility I explore is more radical: what if opacity reaches beyond theory to destabilize the epistemic posture itself?

3. The Posture of Mastery

Epistemic mastery can be characterized by three structural features:

1. **Subject–object separation:** The knower stands apart from the known as evaluator and controller.
2. **Orientation toward capture:** Knowledge aims at conceptual possession or explanatory control.
3. **Provisional opacity:** Indeterminacy is treated as a temporary obstacle, solvable through better methods or refined theory.

This posture pervades contemporary epistemology. Even skepticism preserves mastery in a negative register: the skeptic withholds assent but retains authority over judgment. The architecture of agency—the subject's commanding position relative to its object—remains intact.

Feminist epistemology has critiqued mastery-oriented models of knowledge [12,13], with recent work exploring how epistemic oppression operates through conceptual structures [14]. Embodied cognition challenges the separation of knower from known [15]. Yet these critiques often focus on *content* or *context* rather than on the *posture* of epistemic agency under radical opacity.

The structural orientation toward mastery is rarely examined because it is deeply embedded in epistemic practice. It functions as background architecture rather than explicit commitment.

4. Porete's Annihilation: Textual Grounding

In *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Marguerite Porete describes a progression through seven states toward divine union. The climactic state involves *anéantisement*—annihilation of self-will and self-assertion. The annihilated soul “does naught for God” and “leaves to believe many things which she once believed” ([16], p. 279, 285).

Crucially, annihilation is not described as ignorance but as transformation. The soul ceases to claim epistemic mastery over divine reality. As Porete's character Love declares: “God makes no ado about his work, and this soul then has no ado about that with which God has no ado” ([16], p. 279). The soul relinquishes the posture of grasping.

Porete describes earlier states as characterized by *epistemic vertigo*: the recognition that rational striving fails to secure divine comprehension. State 4 involves discovering that neither works nor

intellect yield union. State 5, the “far night,” is radical apophasis where positive theological knowledge collapses. The response is not intensified inquiry but surrender of the posture of appropriation.

What is structurally significant is not the theological object (God) but the reconfiguration of agency. The annihilated soul ceases to stand over against its object as master. Porete writes that the soul “has no will, for her will is oned to the will of God” ([16], p. 290). This is not heteronomous submission but dissolution of the commanding epistemic stance.¹

A structural reading abstracts from doctrinal content and identifies key features:

- Relinquishment of epistemic appropriation.
- Suspension of subject–object domination.
- Acceptance of radical opacity without compensatory assertion.
- Continued engagement without claim to final capture.

Annihilation thus models epistemic reconfiguration—a transformation of posture rather than content.

5. Inverted Solipsism and the Dissolution of Centrality

Traditional solipsism collapses the world into the self: only the subject’s experiences are certain, and external reality becomes construct or inference. The epistemic subject occupies the commanding center.

Porete’s annihilation performs the inverse: the self relinquishes centrality and dissolves its claim to epistemic primacy. Rather than world disappearing into self (solipsism), self disappears into world (annihilation).

This *inverted solipsism* does not deny reality; it repositions the subject within it. The epistemic subject ceases to occupy the commanding center of cognition. As Porete writes, the soul becomes “alone in love” ([16], p. 273)—not in isolation, but in dissolution of epistemic mastery.

The phenomenological difference is critical. Solipsism produces existential isolation (“I am all that exists”). Porete’s annihilation produces radical interconnection (“I am nothing; the whole persists”). Both involve destabilization of the subject–object polarity, but with opposite experiential and epistemic valences.

This structural feature is what renders Porete philosophically relevant beyond theological contexts: annihilation articulates a reconfiguration of epistemic posture under conditions where mastery becomes untenable.

6. Epistemic Anti-Mastery Defined

Epistemic anti-mastery involves:

1. **Recognition of structural limits:** Acknowledging that certain forms of opacity are fundamental rather than provisional.
2. **Suspension of domination-oriented cognition:** Relinquishing the stance that treats knowing as theoretical capture or explanatory control.
3. **Continued engagement without claim to final determination:** Pursuing inquiry while abandoning expectation of epistemic closure.

Anti-mastery is neither skepticism, quietism, nor anti-intellectualism. It does not deny knowledge; it revises the stance from which knowledge is pursued.

The key move is structural rather than contentful: anti-mastery questions not what is known but the posture from which knowing proceeds. Under radical opacity, the aspiration to mastery may itself be epistemically misplaced.

The distinction from skepticism is fundamental. Skepticism, from Pyrrhonian *epochē* to contemporary formulations, withholds assent while retaining judgmental authority [19]. The skeptic stands apart from the object, evaluating evidence and suspending belief when determination fails.

¹ Recent Porete scholarship confirms this reading, emphasizing the subject’s structural transformation rather than merely mystical experience [17,18].

Anti-mastery differs structurally. It questions not only the deliverances of cognition but the posture of epistemic domination itself. Where skepticism suspends *belief*, anti-mastery suspends the presumption of *mastery*.

Consider Pyrrhonian *ataraxia* (tranquility). The skeptic achieves peace through suspension of judgment, but the architecture of agency remains: the subject evaluates, finds equipollence, and withholds. The commanding position persists in negative mode.

Anti-mastery reconfigures this architecture. It does not merely withhold judgment; it relinquishes the stance that positions the subject as arbiter standing over against its object. The dissolution is not of belief but of the epistemic posture that demands final determination.

Practically:

- Skepticism: "I cannot determine which theory is true, so I withhold assent."
- Anti-mastery: "The aspiration to determine truth through theoretical mastery may itself be structurally misplaced."

The skeptic preserves epistemic sovereignty while declining to exercise it. Anti-mastery questions sovereignty itself.

7. Concrete Applications in Epistemic Practice

To clarify the practical difference, consider three domains where underdetermination arises.

7.1. Cosmological Underdetermination

Contemporary cosmology faces underdetermination between multiverse theories and single-universe models. Evidence accessible from within our universe may be insufficient to determine which framework is correct [20].

Mastery stance: Seeks decisive empirical tests or theoretical superiority criteria. Treats indeterminacy as provisional. Maintains that physics should *in principle* determine cosmological structure.

Anti-mastery stance: Engages multiverse theories and alternatives while relinquishing expectation of empirical adjudication. Continues inquiry—examining coherence, explanatory power, mathematical elegance—without presuming these yield unique determination. Accepts structural limits on cosmological knowledge.

7.2. Confirmation Theory

Bayesian confirmation theory models evidential support through probability updating. Yet choice of priors remains underdetermined by evidence [7]. Recent work questions whether objective priors exist [21] or whether radical uncertainty undermines updating [8].

Mastery stance: Seeks objective priors or convergence theorems showing that priors "wash out" asymptotically. Treats prior-dependence as a problem requiring solution.

Anti-mastery stance: Engages Bayesian reasoning while accepting that priors reflect epistemic situation rather than deficiency. Continues updating without presuming convergence to unique posterior.

7.3. Theory Choice in Quantum Mechanics

Interpretations of quantum mechanics (Copenhagen, many-worlds, Bohmian, etc.) may be empirically equivalent [22].

Mastery stance: Seeks hidden variables, novel predictions, or metaphysical parsimony to determine "correct" interpretation. Treats interpretive pluralism as temporary.

Anti-mastery stance: Engages interpretations as tools for understanding quantum phenomena without presuming unique determination. Explores conceptual resources of each framework while relinquishing expectation that physics must yield singular metaphysical picture.

In each case, anti-mastery differs from skepticism. The skeptic withholds assent; anti-mastery reconfigures what counts as successful epistemic engagement.

8. Objections and Responses

8.1. Objection 1: Mysticism is Irrelevant to Epistemology

Objection: Mystical annihilation is inseparable from theological commitments and therefore philosophically irrelevant.

Response: Structural features may be abstracted from doctrinal content. Just as Stoicism informs contemporary virtue epistemology without importing ancient cosmology [23], Porete’s annihilation can illuminate epistemic posture without theological endorsement. Recent virtue epistemology increasingly recognizes the importance of intellectual humility [24,25]—a concept structurally similar to anti-mastery though typically not extended to the architectural level I propose.

8.2. Objection 2: Anti-Mastery Collapses into Relativism

Objection: If epistemic mastery is relinquished, what prevents collapse into “anything goes” relativism?

Response: Anti-mastery is not abandonment of rational constraint. It continues evidential evaluation, coherence assessment, and theoretical comparison. What changes is the *aspiration*: not theoretical capture but ongoing engagement. Norms of inquiry persist; expectation of mastery does not.

8.3. Objection 3: This is Just Pragmatism

Objection: Doesn’t pragmatism already reject correspondence-truth in favor of instrumental success?

Response: Pragmatism redefines truth in terms of utility [26,27]. Anti-mastery does not redefine truth; it reconfigures epistemic *posture*. One can accept correspondence truth while recognizing that the stance of mastery may be structurally inappropriate under certain conditions.

8.4. Objection 4: Science Requires Mastery

Objection: Scientific progress depends on aspiring to theoretical mastery.

Response: This conflates *inquiry* with *mastery*. Anti-mastery does not oppose investigation or theorizing. It questions whether these activities require orientation toward final capture. Historically, science has progressed through theory replacement, not convergence to final truth. Anti-mastery accepts this: theories are revisable tools for engagement.

9. Argument I: The Fragility of the Bayesian Subject

Bayesian epistemology presumes a stable epistemic architecture within which belief revision occurs. A probability space is defined; hypotheses are representable; priors are assignable; updating proceeds by conditionalization:

$$P(H \mid E) = \frac{P(E \mid H) \cdot P(H)}{P(E)} \tag{1}$$

This formalism requires:

- The hypothesis space $\mathcal{H}$ is fixed and well-defined.
- The updating agent at time t_1 is structurally continuous with the agent at t_2 .
- The probability function P remains coherent across updates.
- The epistemic architecture is closed: all relevant hypotheses are representable.

However, radical underdetermination raises a deeper possibility: that the space of hypotheses itself is not fixed. If unconceived alternatives are structurally inevitable [3,4], then the hypothesis space is dynamically incomplete. The updating subject does not merely revise credences within a fixed architecture; *the architecture itself may be destabilized*.

Conditionalization presumes invariance of the updating function. Yet if conceptual scheme, evidential interpretation, and hypothesis formation are all revisable at structural levels, the stability of the updating agent cannot be presupposed. Recent work on radical uncertainty suggests that Bayesian methods may fail when the space of possibilities itself is unstable [8]. Consider:

- The probability space Ω may be incomplete relative to unconceived alternatives.
- The hypothesis set $\mathcal{H}$ may be structurally revisable.
- The updating function itself may not remain well-defined across conceptual revisions.
- Convergence theorems assume closed hypothesis spaces; under structural opacity, this cannot be guaranteed.
- Recent debates on imprecise probabilities [28] and the objectivity of priors [21] highlight these tensions.

More radically: if Porete’s structural insight holds—that radical opacity destabilizes not merely theories but the epistemic subject itself—then the agent at t_2 is not architecturally continuous with the agent at t_1 . The very identity of the updating subject becomes underdetermined.

Bayesian mastery depends on *architectural continuity*: the presumption that epistemic structure remains sovereign across revisions. Under radical opacity, this presumption is undermined. The agent’s conceptual scheme—not merely its contents—may be subject to the very underdetermination it confronts.

Epistemic anti-mastery does not reject probabilistic reasoning. It rejects the presumption that epistemic architecture remains invariant under structural opacity. Bayesian updating becomes a local tool rather than global framework. Mastery, as stable architectural updating, becomes a metaphysical commitment rather than neutral method.

10. Argument II: Realism as a Teleology of Capture

Scientific realism frequently appeals to convergence: mature scientific theories approximate underlying structure [29]. This aspiration presupposes that epistemic inquiry culminates in representational capture. The rhetoric of “getting closer to truth” depends on an orientation toward eventual mastery.

Recent realist work attempts to refine this convergence claim [10] or navigate ontological relativity [11,30]. Yet these refinements preserve the fundamental orientation: realism aims at truth-approximation.

Under conditions of structural underdetermination, however, convergence cannot be assumed. If unconceived alternatives remain inevitable [3,4], then epistemic progress may not approximate final theory but reconfigure understanding within persistent opacity.

Consider the dialectic:

- **Realism:** Science aims at truth; mature theories approximate reality.
- **Anti-realism:** Empirical adequacy suffices; truth claims overreach [31].
- **Anti-mastery realism:** Engagement without presumption of final capture.

Epistemic anti-mastery does not deny realism. It rejects the posture that realism entails eventual domination of structure. It reframes realism as *participatory engagement* rather than *representational capture*.

The alternative is stark: either realism presupposes mastery-orientation (convergence toward final theory), or realism must be reinterpreted in anti-mastery terms (structured engagement within persistent opacity). If structural underdetermination is permanent, realism’s commitment to convergence becomes a form of epistemic overreach.

Anti-mastery preserves realism’s core intuition—that theories engage mind-independent reality—while relinquishing the aspiration to final capture. This is not deflationary; it is proportional. Realism without domination remains realism.

Realism must choose:

- **Mastery Realism:** Presumes convergence despite opacity (Risk: Irrationality under structural opacity).
- **Anti-Mastery Realism:** Reframes realism as participatory engagement (Benefit: Coherence under opacity).

If opacity is structural, mastery-oriented realism becomes untenable.

11. Argument III: From Possibility to Rational Requirement

Thus far I have argued that epistemic anti-mastery is a *possible* response to underdetermination. The stronger claim is that under structural opacity, it may be *rationally required*.

The argument proceeds as follows:

1. **Premise 1:** Radical underdetermination may be structural rather than provisional.
2. **Premise 2:** Epistemic mastery presupposes eventual theoretical capture.
3. **Premise 3:** Structural opacity undermines the coherence of capture.
4. **Conclusion:** Continued mastery-orientation becomes epistemically disproportionate—potentially irrational.

If opacity is permanent, insistence on capture becomes *epistemic overreach*: the assertion of mastery where mastery cannot be secured. Rational response requires *proportionality* between epistemic aspiration and epistemic condition.

Epistemic anti-mastery therefore emerges not as optional humility but as rational reconfiguration under structural opacity. It preserves inquiry while relinquishing domination-oriented expectation. The alternative is persistent mismatch between aspiration and condition.

Consider an analogy: If a detective insists a murder must be solvable despite structural limits (destroyed evidence, closed epistemic access), continued insistence on solution becomes irrational. Proportionality requires accepting limits while continuing engagement. The detective can investigate without presuming closure.

Similarly, under structural epistemic opacity, continued orientation toward final capture may be irrational. Anti-mastery is not mystical resignation; it is *epistemic proportionality*.

The question is not “Can we achieve mastery?” but “Is mastery-orientation coherent given our epistemic situation?” If the answer is no, anti-mastery becomes rationally required.

12. Broader Implications

12.1. Reconceptualizing Underdetermination

Current debates treat underdetermination as a problem of *theory selection*: which framework should we adopt when evidence fails to decide [5]? This presumes that the proper response involves choosing (or suspending choice among) theories.

Anti-mastery suggests an alternative: underdetermination may signal that epistemic mastery is structurally inappropriate. The proper response is not better selection criteria but reconfiguration of epistemic stance.

12.2. Epistemic Virtue Theory

Virtue epistemology emphasizes character traits of good knowers [32,33]. Yet most accounts presume mastery-orientation: virtues aim at truth-attainment.

Anti-mastery suggests additional virtues: epistemic humility not as modesty about what one knows, but as relinquishment of mastery’s aspiration [24,25]; openness not as considering alternatives, but as accepting that determination may be structurally unavailable.

13. Why This Matters: Mastery and Contemporary Deadlocks

Contemporary epistemology faces several persistent debates where progress has stalled. I suggest these reflect tacit commitment to mastery.

Simulation arguments assume we should *determine* whether we inhabit base reality or simulation [34,35]. Yet from within, evidence may be insufficient. Mastery demands determination; anti-mastery accepts engagement without closure.

Fine-tuning arguments in cosmology presume we should *explain* universal constants through multiverse theory or design [36]. Yet explanation may require epistemic access we lack.

Theory choice in quantum mechanics remains unresolved despite decades of debate [22]. Mastery seeks the correct interpretation; anti-mastery engages interpretive pluralism as rational stance rather than temporary failure.

In each case, epistemic anti-mastery offers an alternative to continued insistence on mastery: not abandonment of inquiry, but reconfiguration of what counts as rational engagement under radical opacity.

14. Conclusions

Underdetermination is typically framed as a problem for theory. I have argued that in radical form, it challenges the architecture of epistemic agency itself. The posture of epistemic mastery—orientation toward theoretical capture and explanatory control—may become epistemically misplaced when opacity is structural rather than provisional.

Through a structural reading of Marguerite Porete's account of annihilation, we see a model of epistemic anti-mastery: reconfiguration of epistemic posture that relinquishes domination-oriented cognition while preserving rational engagement.

I have demonstrated that epistemic anti-mastery is not merely a possible response but may be rationally required under structural opacity. Bayesian epistemology presupposes architectural stability that radical underdetermination undermines. Scientific realism's convergence depends on mastery-orientation. Under persistent opacity, proportionality between epistemic aspiration and epistemic condition mandates anti-mastery rather than continued overreach.

The significance of this proposal lies in exposing an unexamined assumption in contemporary epistemology: that epistemic mastery remains intact even when theoretical control fails. If that assumption is unwarranted—if radical opacity destabilizes mastery itself—then the problem of underdetermination is not merely theoretical. It is architectural.

Whether one accepts epistemic anti-mastery as viable depends on whether one accepts that certain forms of opacity are fundamental. If they are, then rational response may require not better mastery, but different posture altogether.

Marguerite Porete, burned for heresy in 1310, articulates a stance contemporary epistemology is only beginning to recognize: that under conditions of radical opacity, the dissolution of epistemic mastery may be not mystical surrender but rational reconfiguration.

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