Hinge Disagreement**[[1]](#endnote-1)**

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Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to take up two problems that supporters of hinge epistemology have to face: the lost hinge disagreement problem and the problem of rational inertia. The lost hinge disagreement problem challenges the very possibility of disagreeing over hinges. The problem of rational inertia is, in a nutshell, the problem that we can never rationally resolve our hinge disagreements. We first argue that we can make sense of genuine hinge disagreement in a limited but epistemologically significant number of cases by deploying the notion of deflationary truth. Focusing on such cases, we then turn to the problem of rational inertia. We begin with critically examining an attempt at solving the problem that rests on an entitlement version of hinge epistemology championed by Crispin Wright. We then develop a solution to the problem of rational inertia which deploys the resources of the constitutivist version of hinge epistemology. The key contention of the constitutivist-based solution is that a disagreement between a hinge epistemologist and a sceptic concerns the correct explication of the concept of epistemic rationality. Interpreted this way, the disagreement between a constitutivist and a sceptic is not rationally inert: first, a constitutivist offers a reason why we should take her explication of the concept of rationality to be superior to the sceptic’s; and second, a sceptic cannot simply dismiss the constitutivist’s stance as merely dogmatic or *ad hoc*, but must engage with the constitutivist pattern of reasoning head on.

# 1. Whither Hinge Disagreement?

Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty* are at the roots of the ever-accelerating trend in contemporary epistemology which goes under the label of “hinge epistemology.” Key to this trend is the acknowledgement of the philosophical significance of the idea that justification and knowledge of empirical propositions always take place within a system of assumptions, or hinges. Such hinges, Wittgenstein maintains, are the scaffolding of our thoughts (OC, §211), the foundations of our research and action, (OC, §§87-8), and of our doubt and enquiry (OC, §151). For instance, for Wittgenstein, it is only by taking for granted that there are mind-independent physical objects that we can take our perceptual experiences, say as of a tree in front of us, as bearing on the question of what reality is like, that is, of whether there is in fact a tree in front of us. If we doubted that there were physical objects, we could no longer consider such experiences as being evidentially significant for that specific enquiry, since we could no longer take for granted that such experiences are formed in response to the presence of mind-independent physical objects. These experiences would then be compatible with alternative hypotheses, such that there are only collections of sense-data for instance. Thus, if we didn’t accept a hinge like “There are physical objects”, in order to be rational, we should also reinterpret all beliefs not as being about specific physical objects *qua* mind-independent entities, but as being about collections of sense-data.

Wittgenstein had a very wide conception of hinges, including propositions such as “The Earth has existed for a very long time,” “There are physical objects,” “My name is N.N.,” “Nobody has ever been on the Moon,” etc. Irrespective of the differences in generality and plausibility exhibited by these hinges, it seems safe to contend that individuals can disagree about all of them. Consider the following exchanges:

(EARTH)

Mary: The Earth has existed for a very long time.

John: No, the Earth has come to exist with my birth.

(MOON)

Lisa: Nobody has ever been on the Moon.

Marc: I disagree, twelve people have been on the Moon.

(OBJECTS)

Lucas: There are physical objects.

Georg: There aren’t any, Lucas.

(WORLD)

Jane: There is an external world.

June: No, Jane. There is no external world.

On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with describing such cases as instances of disagreement. Moreover, insofar as the disagreement at stake seems to be doxastic in kind, it seems legitimate to wear the epistemologist hat and ask how the involved parties should rationally respond to their disagreement.

However, these seemingly harmless claims are hard to square with the distinctive metaphysical-cum-epistemological profile of hinge propositions. Famously, Wittgenstein regarded hinges as neither true nor false (OC §§196-206); as neither justified nor unjustified (OC §§110, 130, 166); as neither known nor unknown (OC §121); and as neither rational nor irrational (OC §559).

Reading through the extensive contemporary literature on disagreement reveals that such a phenomenon has been variously defined in terms of:

(a) a relation of interpersonal non-cotenability between the two doxastic attitudes held by the disagreeing parties, which would result in irrationality (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014 Worsnip 2019);

(b) a counterfactual relation between the attitudes’ accuracy conditions such that the fulfilment of one’s attitude’s accuracy conditions makes the other’s attitude *ipso facto* inaccurate, where the notion of accuracy is ultimately understood in terms of truth (for full belief) or closeness of truth (for partial belief) (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014, Palmira 2017);

(c) a relation of exclusion between the two attitudes, to be understood in terms of one proposition’s truth strictly entailing the other proposition’s falsity (see Marques 2014).

Since notions such as truth, rationality, and their cognates have variously been taken to constitute central ingredients of what disagreement is, it seems that that there cannot be disagreement over hinges, if they are neither true nor false, and neither justified and rational nor unjustified and irrational. Call this the *lost hinge disagreement problem*.

Moreover, the question of the rational resolution of disagreement does presuppose the existence of shared epistemic standards whereby to assess the rationality of retaining or revising our doxastic stances towards the contested proposition. Since hinge disputes are such that the parties do not share epistemic standards, it seems that cases such as (EARTH), (MOON), (OBJECTS) and (WORLD) couldn’t exhibit the usual normative trappings of disagreement whereby we can rationally resolve our ordinary disputes. As observed by Robert Fogelin in “The Logic of Deep Disagreement” (1985, 6): “the possibility of a genuine argumentative exchange depends […] on the fact that together we accept many things.” Consequently, disagreements over hinges “cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing.” To illustrate the problem, consider (OBJECTS) and suppose that Lucas attempts to provide Georg with reasons in favor of the existence of ordinary mid-size objects. Plausibly, Lucas might reason as follows: since it seems to him, and to us in general, that there are tables, chairs, plants, and the like, we should accept the existence of mind-independent mid-size objects. Georg, however, couldn’t be moved by such a line of reasoning, for he rejects that our sensory experiences are formed in response to mind-independent objects in the first place. Thus, Lucas and Georg’s hinge disagreement is bound to be rationally inert. Call this the *problem of rational inertia*.

This chapter is devoted to exploring solutions to the lost hinge disagreement problem and the problem of rational inertia.

# 2. Solving the Lost Hinge Disagreement Problem

The lost hinge disagreement problem is philosophically significant for two different, albeit related, reasons. First, inasmuch as there is strong pressure to consider (EARTH), (MOON), (OBJECTS) and (WORLD) as *bona fide* disagreements, it seems preferable to endorse such an appearance of disagreement, as opposed to explaining it away. Secondly, as witnessed by the contemporary debate on truth relativism, lost disagreement problems are often mustered in favor of certain philosophical views. In a similar vein, the lost hinge disagreement problem might be taken to speak in favor of an anti-propositionalist interpretation of hinges *qua* rules, which are not subject to truth-conditional evaluation.[[2]](#endnote-2) Roughly put, the argument, in the form of an inference to the best explanation, might go as follows: given that disagreement cannot take place between two rules, the hypothesis that hinges are rules best explains why the lost disagreement problem arises.

However, Wittgenstein’s remarks are not univocal and some passages in *On Certainty* can be taken to suggest the view that hinges, while playing a rule-like role, are still propositions and are minimally truth-apt. If so, then they could be the content of propositional attitudes of acceptance (more on this in a moment) and could be contents on which subjects could, at least conceivably, disagree.

Some of Wittgenstein’s remarks might help us frame the discussion of hinges’ truth:

1. Their truth “belongs to our frame of reference” (OC §83). That is, that we regard them “as certainly true also characterizes [our] interpretation of experience” (OC §145).
2. The truth of our statements is the test of our understanding of these statements (OC §80). “That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them” (OC §81).
3. “The reason why the use of the expression ‘true or false’ has something misleading about it is that it is like saying ‘it tallies with the facts or it doesn't’, and the very thing that is in question is what ‘tallying’ is here” (OC §199).
4. “It is the truth only inasmuch as it is an unmoving foundation of [the] language-games” (OC §403).
5. Their truth is kept fixed by what rotates around them (OC §152), like our methods of empirical investigation (OC §§151, 318), and “the rest of our procedure of asserting” (OC §153).

Hinges make it possible for us to engage in our empirical inquiries and investigations and, for Wittgenstein, they also play a meaning-constitutive role, and are therefore conditions of possibility of meaningful discourse. This, on closer inspection, reveals that the truth of hinges cannot be conceived in purely correspondence-theoretical or evidentialist terms (see Coliva 2018). To illustrate this point, let us take the correspondence-theoretical notion of truth first. It is not in virtue of the obtaining of a certain fact in the world that the proposition that there are physical objects turns out to be true: such a proposition is indeed true “only inasmuch as it is an unmoving foundation of [the] language-games” (OC §403) and not because it “tallies with the facts” (OC §199). Irrespective of whether or not hinges play a meaning-constitutive role, there is good reason to regard general hinges – such as “There is an external world,” “There are physical objects,” – as the conditions of possibility for the existence of representations, be them conceptual or non-conceptual, of what the world is like. To illustrate this point with the case of “There are physical objects”: insofar as our perceptual experiences as of a tree in front of us afford us the means to latch onto a tree, they can do so only if the hinge “there are physical objects” stays put; for otherwise we would not be latching onto anything outside our minds and the very idea of there being *bona fide* representations of an external reality would be jeopardized. Now, a realist account of hinges’ truth would rest on the existence of a correspondence relation between our representations of reality and reality itself; however, the very existence of such a relation cannot be established independently of a frame of reference that rests on hinges such as “There are physical objects”. Thus, since the very explanation of truth in terms of correspondence is ultimately grounded on and explained by the truth of certain hinges, such as “There are physical objects”, we cannot in turn explain the truth of such hinges in terms of correspondence.

As for evidentially-constrained accounts of truth (see e.g. Putnam 1981, Wright 1992), the problem is that they heavily rely on the idea that statements are true just in case they enjoy warrants exhibiting a distinctive epistemic pedigree – that is, that they cannot be defeated by improvements or enlargements of one’s state of information (see Wright 1992: 42). Now, take a hinge such as “There are physical objects.” Surely, if propositional at all, this proposition is empirical in kind. Thus, the kind of evidence in its favor has to be sensory. And yet, as is familiar from traditional Cartesian skeptical worries, that evidence would be compatible with its being produced in ways which do not depend on any causal interaction with physical objects. Hence, it seems that the evidence we have cannot justify, in and of itself, the belief in the existence of physical objects. An argument such as G. E. Moore’s celebrated proof, far from producing a warrant to believe that there is an external world, would rather expose the kind of epistemic circularity involved in any such attempt. For the conclusion should already be taken for granted in order for the premises to be warranted in the first place.

Even if traditional realist and anti-realist conceptions of truth cannot be harnessed to make sense of what it is for hinge propositions to be true or false, we can vindicate the truth-aptness of hinges. For the failure of realist and anti-realist conceptions of hinges’ truth should not lead us to a wholesale rejection of the idea that truth may be sensibly predicated of hinges in a way that obeys disquotational schemas. Furthermore, hinges can be embedded in conditionals, and thus be semantically assessed, or be embedded in meaningful negations, at least in further conditional statements. This would make the truth-predicate a device of disquotation and generalisation with no *sui generis* metaphysical nature. In a deflationary fashion (see Horwich 1998), then, all there is to be said about (hinges’) truth is captured by instances of the equivalence schema:[[3]](#endnote-3)

(ES) <p> is true if and only if p.

Thus,

(ESobj) <There are physical objects> is true iff there are physical objects

together with platitudes about negation, conditionals (and possibly some more, see Lynch 2009, Pedersen and Wright 2016, Wright 1992 and 2012) would be all there is to predicating truth of that proposition. The virtue of such an approach would be to maintain the very possibility of predicating truth for these kinds of problematic propositions while eschewing the problems that beset any of its possible stronger renderings.

To forestall misunderstandings, though, we should hasten to emphasise that this explanation of the truth-aptness of hinge propositions does not – nor is it meant to – cover all cases that fall under Wittgenstein’s broad conception of hinges. Surely, the statements at issue in (MOON) and (EARTH) are not conditions of possibility of representation and, plausibly, the statement at issue in (MOON) should not be counted as a hinge at all.[[4]](#endnote-4) So, we shall henceforth sidestep these cases and focus on disagreements over general hinges, such as those found in (OBJECTS) and (WORLD). This restriction allows us to have the only part of the cake worth eating, that is, the general hinges which are most relevant to our epistemological concerns, and eat it too, to wit, to make room for their truth-aptness.

Vindicating the truth-aptness of hinge propositions is the first step towards solving the lost hinge disagreement problem. The second (and last) step consists in showing that the minimalist approach just sketched affords the means to recover a genuine notion of doxastic disagreement. It takes a bit of care to explain why (OBJECTS) and (WORLD) are cases of disagreement, since there is some debate as to whether our doxastic commitment towards hinges is to be spelled out in terms of the traditional notion of belief (see Kusch 2018, Neta 2019), or else whether we should appeal to other doxastic attitudes, such as “assumption” (Coliva 2015), “trust” (Wright 2004), or “(visceral) commitment”/“conviction” (Pritchard 2016, 2018).[[5]](#endnote-5)

In light of both of Wittgenstein’s own remarks about the role of hinges and the subsequent development of hinge epistemology, we had better not understand our doxastic commitment towards hinges in terms of belief. This can be seen irrespective of whether or not we adopt a purely functionalist or normativist approach to the type-individuation of belief. Suppose that the cognitive mechanisms of belief formation, revision and retention are geared towards truth-tracking. This suggests that the function of belief, in our cognitive architecture, is to afford us a correct representation of what the world is like. However, entertaining hinge propositions such as “There are physical objects” would not fulfil the function of representing what the world is like, for hinges are to be seen as conditions of possibility of the existence of cognitive propositional attitudes about specific physical objects, geared towards truth-tracking. As for the normativist approach, its core contention is that belief is the cognitive attitude which is subject to a certain norm that individuates it. The relevant norm has been variously spelled out in terms of evidence, knowledge, epistemic justification, (correspondentist) truth, and the like. However, hinges are such that no evidence can be produced in their support, for all empirical evidence would presuppose them, and this should lead us to think that hinges cannot be epistemically justified (and therefore known) in the same way as the propositions we ordinarily believe; moreover, we have argued earlier that hinges’ truth cannot be explained in correspondentist terms. Hence, it seems that none of the usual norms that have been variously taken to govern belief could be satisfied in the case of hinges. Therefore, if those norms are also meant to type-individuate belief, it seems that we should conclude that hinges cannot be believed.[[6]](#endnote-6)

As has emerged previously, well-worked accounts of doxastic disagreement focus primarily on the phenomenon of disagreement in belief. Yet, insofar as attitudes such as assumption can be sensibly assessed for their (minimal) truth or falsity in virtue of their being cognitive − as opposed to conative − propositional attitudes, we can extend definitions of disagreement in belief that ultimately rely on the notion of truth (see e.g. Marques 2014, Palmira 2017) so as to make sense of disagreement in assumption.

We shall remain neutral on the question of what disagreement really is, and how it manifests itself across its doxastic varieties. For insofar as we accept that all varieties of doxastic disagreement are unified under the eminently plausible idea that an opposition in what two parties hold as true is integral to the very notion of *doxastic* disagreement, we can maintain that two parties assuming the truth and falsity of the same proposition respectively do disagree about it. This provides us with a neat solution to the lost hinge disagreement problem.

# 3. The Problem of Rational Inertia

As seen above in §1, there is a legitimate epistemological aspiration to rationally resolve our disagreements. On the face of it, though, this aspiration is bound to be frustrated in the case of hinge disagreement. To illustrate, by assuming the hinge “There are physical objects” in (OBJECTS), Lucas *ipso facto* subscribes to a given system of epistemic evaluations and practices, namely a system in which we can rationally form, retain, and revise beliefs towards mind-independent objects, we can criticize or praise individuals for correctly or incorrectly forming such beliefs, and so on. By assuming a hinge incompatible with this system, Georg subscribes to a different system of epistemic evaluations and practices, one in which we can rationally form, retain, and revise beliefs bearing on sense-data only. On reflection, if Lucas had to incorporate the hinge “There are no physical objects” into his epistemic system, this would render his epistemic practices *eo ipso* irrational, for it would no longer make sense for him to form or retain beliefs about tables and chairs, nor could he be criticized for not believing that there’s a tree in front of him in virtue of a perceptual experience as of a tree in front of him. The same would happen, *mutatis mutandis*, if Georg had to incorporate “There are physical objects” into his epistemic system. Thus, insofar as the very practice of rationally resolving a disagreement rests on the given epistemic system we end up subscribing to in virtue of the set of hinges we assume, if the object of the disagreement is the truth or falsity of such a set of hinges, it follows that the parties would have to give up their own epistemic systems in order for them to be able to appreciate, or even have access to, whatever reasons the other party may produce in favor of their view. This, in a nutshell, is the problem of rational inertia.

On closer inspection, however, the problem of rational inertia runs even deeper than this. As is well-known, recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in the question of whether disagreement carries any distinctive epistemological significance. Focusing on so-called “peer disagreement,” that is, disagreements between individuals who reasonably take each other to be equally well-positioned epistemically *vis-à-vis* a given issue, epistemologists have asked whether the discovery of such disagreements provides us with higher-order counterevidence, evidence on the epistemic pedigree of our doxastic attitudes bearing on the contested issue. And yet, it seems that peer hinge disagreement is simply impossible: insofar as our judgements of epistemic parity/superiority/inferiority are epistemic, and insofar as such judgements hold in virtue of the given set of hinges we assume, it follows that we cannot have reasons to regard someone assuming a different set of hinges as being our peer, superior, or inferior. That is to say, we cannot pronounce ourselves on the epistemic credentials of somebody accepting a different set of hinges from ours. For any evaluation of the epistemic credentials of an epistemic agent is relative to the epistemic practices we endorse against the background of a set of hinges. Thus, insofar as our opponent is committed to a different set of hinges, she cannot be epistemically evaluated or assessed, for she simply endorses an epistemic system, with its characteristic hinges, which is alternative to ours. Rather than an “epistemic peer” she would therefore be an “epistemic alien.”

The foregoing shows that the problem of rational inertia is not only that we can’t rationally resolve hinge disagreements, but it is also the problem that we are unable to establish the epistemic significance or insignificance of such disagreements by making judgements concerning the epistemic credentials of our opponents.

Drawing on two recent developments of hinge epistemology, we will focus on two different strategies to tackle the problem of rational inertia.

## 3.1 The Problem of Rational Inertia and the Entitlement Version of Hinge Epistemology

In a number of writings (e.g. Wright 2004, 2014), Crispin Wright has argued for the existence of non-evidential and unearned warrants, called *entitlements*, for those propositions which act as general background presuppositions of our cognitive projects. Putting into question such presuppositions, Wright argues, would make us stop regarding the project as significant and even doubt the very feasibility of carrying it out. Moreover, there is no sufficient reason to take these presuppositions to be false, and every attempt to justify them would call for other presuppositions whose epistemic status is no more secure than the one of the initial presuppositions, thereby launching an infinite regress about their justification.

In a Wittgenstenian fashion, Wright maintains that hinges such as “There is an external world” and “My sense organs work mostly reliably” are the presuppositions thanks to which our sensory experiences can be taken to provide (defeasible) justification for our ordinary empirical beliefs about mid-size objects in our environment. Wright agrees here with the Humean sceptic[[7]](#endnote-7) that our experiences can do so only if those background presuppositions are themselves warranted. Yet, the Humean sceptic can be defeated since, even if we cannot earn warrants for such presuppositions through the collection of empirical evidence, nor can we reach such warrants through a priori reflection, there exist non-evidential warrants - entitlements - for trusting such presuppositions.

In a recent paper, Chris Ranalli harnesses the entitlement version of hinge epistemology to take up the problem of rational inertia. Ranalli (2018) off by distinguishing three senses in which the problem of rational inertia can be taken up. Here they are (see also Lynch 2016):

Rational resolvability: A and B’s disagreement over p is rationally resolvable if and only if there is some doxastic attitude D that A and B can jointly take to p which is the (uniquely) rational attitude for A and B to have towards p.

Rational Response: A and B rationally respond to their disagreement over p if and only if there is some doxastic attitude DA that A takes to p which is the (uniquely) rational attitude for A to take to p, and there is some doxastic attitude DB that B takes to p which is the (uniquely) rational attitude for B to have to p.

Rational Persuasion: A rationally persuades B to adopt A’s doxastic attitude D to p if and only if there is a set of premises accepted by A that A can appeal to in an argument that rationally ought to persuade B into adopting D towards p (and vice versa).

[Ranalli 2018: 3-4]

Against the backdrop of such a three-fold distinction, Ranalli argues for two claims. First, two parties entitled to incompatible hinges are bound to rationally respond to their disagreement by retaining their respective trust towards such hinges. Secondly, in cases where one party fails to trust a common hinge for reasons that are independent of apparent evidence, that party ought to trust that hinge as well. Here is such a case (Ranalli 2018, 27-28):

(INDUCTION DISAGREEMENT)

A\* and B\* meet and become aware of their disagreement about the reliability of induction. A\* trusts that induction is reliable (Q), while B\* trusts that induction is unreliable (~Q). Moreover, A\* hasn’t viciously avoided inquiry into whether induction is reliable, and neither of them have evidence sufficient for believing that induction is unreliable. However, B *merely* trusts that ~Q, as she has so far avoided inquiry into whether Q, and has adopted trust that ~ Q because of her pessimistic psychological tendencies, saying that ‘induction is unreliable’. Nevertheless, both A\* and B\* believe many shared propositions on the basis of induction (e.g., the sun will rise tomorrow, the trees near our communities will not start flying, etc.), and ordinarily employ inductive methods in their reasoning. B\* is just unaware of the fact that many of her beliefs and patterns of reasoning are based on or employ induction, while A\* is aware of this fact. Indeed, A\* and B\* trust all of the same hinge propositions, except for Q.

Ranalli’s idea is that ~Q is not a background presupposition of B\*’s cognitive project. For B\* frequently adopts inductive reasoning as a basis for her beliefs, and therefore has no sufficient reason to take Q to be false. For this reason, B\* ought to revise her attitude and trust Q.

Summing up: the entitlement-based solution to the problem of rational inertia is that we can always rationally respond to hinge disagreements by retaining our entitlements to trust different hinges; we can sometimes rationally resolve such hinge disagreements. However, we can never rationally persuade the opponent to assume the set of hinges we assume, because the reasons we would produce in favour of our hinges would always presuppose them.

We are happy to organise our discussion around the three-fold distinction used by Ranalli and re-think the problem of rational inertia as pertaining to rational resolvability, rational responsiveness and rational persuasion. Now, the entitlement-based approach to these three aspects of the problem of rational inertia is unsatisfactory, for various reasons. For one thing, it is a well-known complaint against Wright’s entitlements that they are merely pragmatic, and not fully epistemic, in kind (see Coliva 2015, Jenkins 2007, Pedersen 2009, Pritchard 2007. C.f. Wright 2014). Insofar as we have stressed that the problem of rational inertia seems to call for a distinctively epistemic, as opposed to pragmatic, solution, we’d better not rely on a solution to the problem whose epistemic nature is, in fact, highly disputable.

Moreover, even granting that entitlements are genuine epistemic warrants, it is unclear whether such a strategy really makes room for the rational resolution of disagreement. Take for instance (INDUCTION DISAGREEMENT). We agree that (INDUCTION DISAGREEMENT) elicits the intuitive verdict that B\* should in the end rationally commit herself to the hinge “Induction is reliable.” However, this verdict can be easily explained by taking it to be issued by the rational requirement to be coherent. That is to say, the reason why it seems that B\* should assume (or trust) that induction is reliable is that, by doing so, she would align her higher-order beliefs about how to form beliefs with her first-order beliefs. This explains why B\* should assume that hinge without committing ourselves to the existence of entitlements. We therefore doubt that cases such as (INDUCTION DISAGREEMENT) speak in favour of the existence of Wright’s entitlements.

Finally, we should register our dissatisfaction with the fact that the entitlement-based approach to the problem of rational inertia precludes a rational resolution via persuasion. As has emerged previously, the problem of rational inertia manifests itself in a variety of ways, chief amongst them the fact that there is no way to make sense of the possibility of offering reasons in favour of one’s own stance, which can be acknowledged as such - even if ultimately discarded - by our opponent. By acknowledging that we cannot rationally resolve our hinge disagreements via persuasion, the entitlement-based approach gives it up. In the next section we pursue an approach which, we believe, can do better on this count than the entitlement strategy just reviewed.

## 3.2 Constitutivist Hinge Epistemology and the Problem of Rational Inertia

In this section we will assess the prospects for a solution to the problem of rational inertia that harnesses some of the main tenets of the constitutivist version of hinge epistemology developed in Coliva (2015). Constitutivist hinge epistemology is best seen as a systematic attempt to defeat a certain kind of Humean sceptic. The target Humean sceptic holds the following two theses: first, we have evidential warrants for ordinary empirical propositions, such as “Here is a hand”;[[8]](#endnote-8) secondly, we cannot empirically or a priori warrant general propositions, such as “There is an external world”, which are entailed by ordinary ones. It has to be stressed that, contrary to the Wittgensteinian version of hinge epistemology, constitutivist hinge epistemology recognizes as hinges only very general propositions, such as (WORLD) and (OBJECTS), that are constitutive of entire domains of discourse (such as physical objects), or that are constitutive of universal practices of acquiring evidence.

A constitutivist agrees with a Humean sceptic that warrants for ordinary propositions are possible thanks to a system of hinges which, as such, can neither be a priori/empirically justified, nor can be rationally held in virtue of unearned warrants which entitle us to trust them. However, a constitutivist points out that epistemic rationality is grounded in our epistemic practices, which are shared by both (Humean) sceptics and non-sceptics. These practices—for example, forming, revising, retaining and evaluating our beliefs based on sensory experience—do make sense only if certain hinges, such as “There is an external world,” “Our sense organs are by and large reliable,” stay put. Thus, by being conditions of possibility of our epistemic practices, such hinges are constitutive of epistemic rationality itself. Hence, it turns out that we are actually *mandated by epistemic rationality itself* to assume “There is an external world”. Importantly, a rational mandate is not an epistemic warrant—namely, an epistemic good that speaks to the truth of what it is meant to warrant.

Our epistemic practices can be illuminated by an analogy with games with constitutive rules. Just as constitutive rules individuate a game for what it is and make it possible for us to play it, and just as both rules and moves are part of any game, both hinges and perceptual justifications are part of the “game” of giving reasons for forming, retaining and revising our ordinary empirical beliefs in light of the experience we acquire through our senses.

Now, insofar as it is possible for this “game” to take place only if we assume that our senses are reliable and that there is an external world, a Humean sceptic is an epistemic agent who ultimately wants to play such a “game” while, at the same time, rejecting the very rule that constitutively defines it.

The constitutivist version of hinge epistemology provides us with a novel framework for systematising the problem of rational inertia. In particular, a constitutivist and a Humean sceptic agree on the claim that epistemic rationality is grounded in our practices. A constitutivist maintains that assuming hinges is constitutive of epistemic rationality and that hinges are therefore rational even though they are unwarrantable. By contrast, a Humean sceptic precisely denies this claim: for her hinges are not constitutive of epistemic rationality. This, together with the additional negative claim that hinges are not (a priori or empirically warrantable), leads a Humean sceptic to conclude that hinges are not rational. Thus, a constitutivist and a Humean sceptic might be taken to disagree on how we should explicate the very concept of epistemic rationality. More precisely, a Humean sceptic subscribes to the following (see Coliva 2015: 129-30):

**Narrow Rationality**: It is epistemically rational to believe only evidentially warranted propositions

By contrast, a constitutivist holds the following:

**Extended Rationality**: It is epistemically rational to believe evidentially warranted propositions and to assume those unwarrantable propositions that make the acquisition of perceptual warrants possible in the first place and are therefore constitutive of ordinary evidential warrants.

As a consequence, a sceptic holds that the concept of epistemic rationality should be rationalitynarrow, whereas a constitutivist maintains that the concept of epistemic rationality should be rationalityextended.

This, on the face of it, appears to be a *conceptual* – as opposed to a merely *descriptive* – disagreement. Now, conceptual disagreements come in different fashions. For instance, two parties may be said to disagree if one of them uses a concept *C*, such that some object *a* falls within its extension, while the other refuses to do so, thereby denying that for any object *a*, *a* falls under *C*.[[9]](#endnote-9) Alternatively, parties may agree with respect to the constitutive inferences that individuate a concept *C*, while disagreeing about some of its non-constitutive inferences.[[10]](#endnote-10) Finally, they may disagree about the constitutive inferences that individuate a given concept *C*, thus ending up having different, although possibly partly overlapping concepts. We submit that the latter form of conceptual disagreement is the one relevant to the debate between a Humean sceptic and a constitutivist. While they do overlap on some constitutive inferences--they both hold that if a specific empirical proposition is perceptually justified, believing it would be epistemically rational--they diverge on the inference that would licence the application of the concept epistemic rationality to hinges. This, however, is a constitutive inference of rationalityextended. Hence a Humean sceptic and a constitutivist entertain this latter kind of conceptual disagreement.

Having clarified the nature of the conceptual disagreement amongst a constitutivist and a Humean sceptic we are in a better position to take up the problem of rational inertia. The disagreement indeed bears on the question of whether or not it is epistemically rational to assume hinges – that is, whether or not the concept of epistemic rationality should be rationalityextended – in order to make sense of our first-order epistemic practices. As we see it, considerations about which concept of rationality, i.e. rationalityextended or rationalitynarrow, is the best one are going to be considerations whereby the disagreement can be *rationally* resolved in one way or another. The dialectical situation is the following. A constitutivist will maintain that rationalityextended is better than rationalitynarrow for the latter cannot coherently account for the rationality of the practice, which a Humean sceptic engages in, since that practice would rest, by her lights, on arbitrary hinges. In contrast, a constitutivist can coherently account for the rationality of the practice and of the hinges which make it possible, since, thanks to rationalityextended those hinges are themselves rational, even though unwarrantable.

The foregoing strikes us as a perfectly legitimate way in which a disagreement about hinges could be amenable to a rational resolution – one which favours a constitutivist position over a sceptical one. Thus, it seems that a constitutivist version of hinge epistemology can offer a solution to the problem of rational inertia understood as the problem of how rationally to resolve disagreements over hinges.[[11]](#endnote-11)

To reiterate, the conceptual disagreement between a constitutivist and a sceptic can be rationally resolved: insofar as both parties to the disagreement aim to account for our first-order practices, we had better prefer an explanation of the rationality of the practices which rests on rationally mandated, as opposed to merely arbitrary, hinges. It of course remains to be seen whether these considerations can offer a solution to the problem of rational inertia understood as the problem of how *rationally to persuade* the opposite party in a hinge disagreement. That is to say, the question is whether it is possible for the constitutivist to rationally persuade a sceptic to acknowledge that hinges such as “There is an external world” are rational, and therefore that the concept of rationality should be explicated by rationalityextended and not by rationalitynarrow.

To be clear, the issue is not whether a constitutivist succeeds in the mission of actually convincing a sceptic that the concept of rationality should be understood in the extended way. Rather, the best way of looking at the problem of rational inertia *qua* problem of rational persuasion consists in asking whether or not the considerations offered by the constitutivist in favour of resolving the conceptual disagreement in a given way are such that they can be acknowledged as such by a sceptic, and not simply dismissed as question-begging or utterly incomprehensible.

Bear it in mind that, according to the constitutivist version of hinge epistemology, the rationality of our practices would be left unexplained if it was meant to rest merely on arbitrary assumptions. This is what, ultimately, should move us towards explicating the concept of rationality via rationalityextended and not via rationalitynarrow. That is to say, rationalityextended is to be accepted in virtue of its superiority *vis-à-vis* rationalitynarrow *qua* explanation of the rationality of our ordinary epistemic practice.

On the face of it, this is neither a dogmatic pattern of reasoning, nor does it rely on the existence of a mysterious species of epistemic justification. Hence a Humean sceptic could not object to the constitutivist explanation by retorting that it is question-begging, nor can a sceptic protest that it trades upon mysterious and seemingly *ad hoc* and *sui generis* species of warrant. This suggests that a Humean sceptic should face this disagreement head on and directly challenge the constitutivist claim that explicating the concept of rationality via rationalityextended is the only way to coherently explain the rationality of our ordinary epistemic practice. The very fact that the only way a sceptic can resist this pattern of reasoning is by directly engaging with it, as opposed to simply dismissing it as either prejudicial or *ad hoc*, shows that the disagreement is not rationally inert even in a dialectical sense. Let us repeat the definition of rational persuasion we have accepted above:

Rational Persuasion: A rationally persuades B to adopt A’s doxastic attitude D to p if and only if there is a set of premises accepted by A that A can appeal to in an argument that rationally ought to persuade B to adopt D towards p (and vice versa).

Surely the constitutivist’s claim that the rationality of our practices would be left unexplained if it was meant to rest merely on arbitrary assumptions can feature as a premise in an argument that rationally ought to persuade a Humean sceptic into explicating the concept of rationality via rationalityextended. This shows that a Humean sceptic and a constitutivist can engage in a dispute over hinges that was out of the purview of the entitlement-based approach to hinge disagreement.

We have been focusing on the hinge disagreement between a constitutivist and a Humean sceptic concerning the correct explication of the concept of epistemic rationality. We have maintained that such a disagreement is not rationally inert by arguing that the constitutivist position is superior to the sceptic’s. This said, we deem it instructive to conclude our examination of the problem of rational inertia by touching upon an alternative stance to Humean scepticism that still gives rise to a disagreement with the constitutivist approach to epistemic rationality.

The present challenge is the one an epistemic relativist would press by noticing that there may be different notions of epistemic rationality with their constitutive hinges. In response, it is important to keep in mind that here we are considering hinges of epistemic rationality understood as a notion determined by the kind of epistemic practices human beings engage in. That is, practices of forming and revising beliefs about mid-size physical objects based on the deliverances of our perceptions. Creatures who were altogether different in their epistemic practices – in the sense of forming justifications by utilizing different methods and for different kinds of propositions (i.e. not about physical objects), thus showing a commitment to different hinges – would likely defy conceivability in detail for creatures like us and would show little, if anything, of relevance to an understanding of *our* epistemic situation. Hence, insofar as such a challenge is worth exploring, it would have to deal with creatures like us, who use their senses to acquire perceptual justifications, yet subscribe to different hinges. A good example would be the one of idealists or perhaps phenomenalists. Their view is that the objects of experience are sense data and that physical objects are collections of sense-data, hence they do not subscribe to the hinge that there are physical objects taken as mind-independent entities. However, this view has problems in explaining the objectivity of perceptual content. For it can be shown that our perceptions do not simply represent sense data that are then bound together by our conceptual repertoire to represent objects such as chairs, tables and so on. Furthermore, our perceptions are as of mind-independent objects that have certain physical properties, and which appear to have them even when our proximal stimuli are not uniform.[[12]](#endnote-12) Thus, an idealist or a phenomenalist will have to account for the objectivity of perception while, at the same time, maintaining that the sense data we are immediately aware of are not caused by external objects. We hold out little hope that this project can be successfully carried out.[[13]](#endnote-13)

**4. Conclusion**

We have examined two problems that supporters of hinge epistemology have to face: the lost hinge disagreement problem and the problem of rational inertia. We have argued that we can make sense of there to be genuine doxastic disagreement amongst individuals holding apparently incompatible hinges in a limited but epistemologically significant number of cases, i.e. the cases in which two individuals assume hinges that act as conditions of possibility of representations and can be regarded as minimally true in a deflationary sense.

Focusing on precisely those hinges that can give rise to genuine doxastic disagreements, we have approached the problem of rational inertia, starting from how the entitlement-based version of hinge epistemology takes up such a problem. This view is saddled with an initial worry: insofar as entitlements appear to be pragmatic in kind, we would only have a pragmatic reason to assume hinges such as “There is an external world”. Thus, no *epistemic* inertia would in the end be overcome. Moreover, given the un-earned nature of such entitlements, it would be rationally impossible to make our entitlement to “there is an external world” available to the sceptic who precisely suspends judgement about such a hinge. Therefore, we would not be able to engage in a rational dispute with such a sceptic, thereby making our disagreement with her rationally inert all the same.

We have then developed a new approach to the problem of rational inertia, which deploys the resources of the constitutivist version of hinge epistemology. The first advantage of this approach is that it enables us to precisely locate the disagreement between a hinge epistemologist and a sceptic: the object of their disagreement is the question of how we should explicate the concept of rationality, granted that our ordinary epistemic practices are epistemically rational. The second advantage of the constitutivist approach is that the pattern of resolution of this conceptual disagreement is grounded in purely explanatory considerations: without appealing to the mysterious notion of “entitlement,” and without dogmatic premises, a constitutivist maintains that the concept of rationality should be extended. With this extension we would not be able to explain the overall rationality of our first-order practices. Thus the disagreement between a constitutivist and a sceptic is not rationally inert: first, a constitutivist offers a reason why we should take her explication of the concept of rationality to be superior to the sceptic’s; and second, a sceptic cannot simply dismiss the constitutivist’s stance as merely dogmatic or *ad hoc*, but must engage with the constitutivist pattern of reasoning head on and show where it fails.

Finally, in our view, the absence of potentially off-putting relativistic implications of this constitutivist way of dealing with the problem of rational inertia is to be seen as an additional motivation in favor of this approach to hinge disagreement.

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1. # Notes

   Annalisa Coliva is mainly responsible for §§2 and 3.2 and Michele Palmira for §§ 1, 3.1. The rest of the paper has been written together. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Moyal-Sharrock (2005) has defended the anti-propositionalist reading of Wittgenstein’s hinges. For a critical discussion, see Coliva (2010: chapter 2 and 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Angle brackets are used to mention propositions. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Or, more mildly, it would count as a hinge only insofar as, until around 1969, it went *de facto* unchallenged, due to the unavailability of scientific and technological findings that would have made it possible to call it into question. The kinds of hinge we will be focusing on are the ones that cannot be challenged *de jure*. That is, without thereby renouncing an entire area of discourse and basic methods of inquiry. In the case of MOON, moreover, the disagreement between opposite parties can now be resolved by appealing to empirical and testimonial evidence. This signals the fact that “Nobody has ever been on the Moon” is no longer a hinge for us, but an ordinary empirical proposition. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, assumption, trust, and conviction (or visceral commitment) are different doxastic attitudes. While it is not our aim here to explore the differences between such attitudes, we do think that, ultimately, we had better take assumption to be the relevant type of doxastic attitude to be entertained towards hinges. For assumption does better than visceral conviction/commitment and trust in avoiding the risk of becoming a non-propositional and non-cognitive kind of attitude. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. We are thus regimenting the use of “belief”, which in ordinary language is extremely multifarious, going from holding P true with a justification, to merely having faith in something or even someone. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This is the kind of sceptic Wright focuses on. Key to this position is the idea that justification for ordinary empirical beliefs is not immediate and is possible only inasmuch as, besides a certain course of experience, the collateral assumption that there is an external world is warranted. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This is due to the fact that Coliva (2015) puts forward a moderate account of perceptual justification, according to which, in order to be perceptually justified to believe that P, it is enough to have a certain course of experience with a representational content that P, together with the assumption that there is an external world, absent defeaters. Hence, by a Humean sceptic’s lights, we could have such a justification for ordinary empirical belies like “Here is a tree”, yet none for the assumption that there is an external world that makes the acquisition of justification for those beliefs possible in the first place. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Stroud (2019) mentions the case of Oscar Wilde, who agreed that a given text was profane and disgusting but refused to call is “blasphemous” on the grounds that blasphemous was not part of his conceptual repertoire. Another case in point may be the one of a subject who thinks that some Germans are cruel (e.g. Hitler) while denying that Germans are boche, for she refuses to make use of that concept (since, by definition, it would entail that all Germans are cruel). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. We are assuming here a molecularist account of concepts *à la* Dummett and Peacocke. Accordingly, concepts are individuated by some constitutive inferences. Molecularism stands opposed to both atomism *à la* Fodor and to holism *à la* Quine or Brandom. For a discussion of all these options, see Coliva (2006). An example would be a case in which two subjects agree on focal cases of red, while disagreeing on some at the fringe. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The same would hold in the case of (INDUCTION DISAGREEMENT). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. These are known as perceptual constancies. For a discussion of their relevance to the objectivity of perceptual content, see Burge (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For a more extensive treatment of this kind of relativism, see Coliva (2015, chapter 4, §4) and Coliva (2019a). For a discussion of relativism and various kinds of hinge epistemology, see Coliva (2019b). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)