**Hinges, radical skepticism, relativism and alethic pluralism**

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1. **Introduction**

In this paper, I respond to criticisms raised in three contributions to the present volume. Namely, Luca Zanetti’s paper on “Inescapable hinges. Steps towards a transcendental hinge epistemology,” Natalie Ashton’s on “Extended rationality and epistemic relativism,” and Sebastiano Moruzzi’s on “Hinge epistemology and alethic pluralism.” I would like to thank all of them for engaging in such a thought-provoking way with my work. Even when points of disagreement emerge, I think all of them share a sympathy for the “Hinge Epistemology” program, as we may call it. Since it has always been my highest hope that that program could take off the ground and find other supporters, it is for me a dream come true to see such an involvement with my ideas.

1. **Reply to Luca Zanetti**

In his paper, Luca Zanetti takes hinge epistemology a step further in the search of inescapable hinges. That is, hinges that would be inescapable for a kind of global skeptical inquiry. This requires the following:

if you try to raise a doubt about the norm, you are putting yourself under the authority of that very norm, for the norm is constitutive of the very practice you are engaged in when you attempt to doubt it. Zanetti (2020: XXX)

According to Zanetti, we can develop this idea in the service of hinge epistemology, “by showing that there are inescapable hinges which can’t be coherently doubted for in doubting them one is committing oneself to their truth” Zanetti (2020:XXX).

According to Zanetti, another key element of this project is to acknowledge that inescapable hinges would be the ones one would be committed to if one were engaging in a cognitive activity which is not necessarily the one whose hinges one is trying to evaluate (on this issue, see Zanetti (2020: XXX)).

This point is very reminiscent of Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions. Yet, one may think that hinge epistemology stands opposed to such a distinction insofar as its main tenet is that any inquiry, no matter how general it might be, is always characterized by adherence to specific hinges. Thus, there is no inquiry from ‘nowhere’, as it were. That is, there is never any inquiry which is absolute, and which is not constrained by its characteristic hinges.

Zanetti would agree but ultimately, I believe, he adheres to a certain conception of philosophy, and of epistemology in particular, conducted under the aegis of radical skepticism, which is characterized by the very idea of proceeding in the most general way as possibly, calling into doubt everything it possibly can. Only once one reaches this point of perfect insularity from everyday epistemic practices and commitments, could one then reflect and find out what is truly inescapable. Descartes discovered the cogito following this path. But we know by now the fate of that enterprise. Apart from the difficulty of reconstructing our knowledge of the world, starting from there, the kind of self-defeat skeptics would incur if they were to doubt of the hinge of that kind of inquiry—that is, “My reasoning powers are broadly reliable”—would not secure the truth of that very hinge, once one is allowed to doubt of everything, including the reliability of the practice which led one to discover that hinge. Thus, a global (or transcendental, as Zanetti calls it) hinge epistemology would face serious difficulties. Indeed, more serious ones than the kind of hinge epistemology I defended, because it would annihilate the power of reason, as it were. Or, to put it less emphatically, it would annihilate the possibility of using reason to counter the final objection that the inescapability of hinges does not secure their truth. As I have claimed in my *Extended Rationality* (2015), as well as in “What anti-realism about hinges could possibly be” (2018), and as I will return to in my reply to Moruzzi, that challenge needs to be addressed. But we cannot even try to do that if we end up in a position in which skepticism about reasoning and hence philosophizing appears to be legitimate. Thus, I am not very hopeful that a transcendental hinge epistemology could be coherently developed.

One might reply that according to Zanetti, once we reach inescapable hinges any further doubt about them would presuppose them and hence would be self-defeating. As he writes:

Furthermore, notice that in order to show that some hinge is escapable it is not enough to show that it is possible to raise a doubt about it. Even plausible candidate inescapable hinges like ‘there is a distinction between truth and falsity’ can be doubted. What makes hinges inescapable is that any doubt with respect to them will presuppose them. Inescapable hinges are special in that in order to doubt them one must presuppose their truth, or, to put it differently, while doubting them one is also thereby committed to take them as true. This feature might explain why doubting inescapable hinges is to be engaged in an incoherent, or self-stultifying enterprise. But the point remains that even if a hinge is inescapable, it doesn’t follow that it is impossible to doubt it. It might however follow, as I will suggest, that it is impossible to coherently doubt it Zanetti (2020: xxx).

Yet, even granting the self-stultifying character of a doubt, which called into question the very activity of thinking, exemplified by doubting with its characteristic hinges, the point about the truth of the inescapable hinges one would thereby find remains. As Zanetti himself acknowledges:

It is important to note in this connection a point of divergence between hinge epistemology and constitutivism about normativity. The former propose transcendentally modest anti-sceptical strategies, whereas the latter attempt to offer transcendentally ambitious anti-sceptical arguments. Noticing that some propositions are inescapable hinges doesn’t entail that these propositions are true. Thus, noticing that TRUTH is an inescapable hinge doesn’t entail that TRUTH is true. Constitutivist theories of normativity appeal to the fact that some norms are inescapable in order to show that their authority is unconditionally valid. In this respect their strategy is ambitious, whereas hinge epistemologists go modest. Zanetti (2020: xxx).

Zanetti does not seem to notice the devastating consequences of this concession for the project of a transcendental hinge epistemology. The Cartesian skeptic can get to a doubt where she recognizes that her doubting presupposes a given hinge. She can even realize that calling that hinge into doubt would be self-defeating, and yet ask if that hinge is true, after all. But to answer that question she needs to rely on her reasoning and hence on that very hinge, while admitting that its inescapability does not guarantee its truth. She would go on and on in an endless circle of asking a question she is in no position to answer. For all she could do is to reason to an answer and then find out that that reasoning was carried out while keeping certain hinges fixed, and yet this would be no sign of their truth. Thus, I remain skeptical—pun intended—about the prospects of a transcendental hinge epistemology.

If this much is on the right track, then the best prospect for a hinge epistemology is to go local. Thus, it is no real objection to my (local) hinge epistemology that it is unable to answer global skeptical challenges, as Zanetti charges in this passage:

We might grant Coliva’s claim that it is better, for practical reasons, to play the game of epistemic rationality (what I have called ‘empirical inquiry’) rather than any other game that we might be able to play. Furthermore, we might also grant her extended rationality view, provided that we appreciate that its anti-sceptical import is at best local. For Coliva fails to address the sort of challenge about inescapability that I am raising. The challenge is not to show that to be engaged in empirical inquiry is better (from a prudential point of view) than to be engaged in the sort of cognitive activity we engage in when we raise the sceptical challenge. The point is rather that the possibility of raising this sceptical challenge puts pressure on the claim that it is rational unconditionally to assume WORLD. Maybe it is rational conditionally, that is, insofar as one is engaging in empirical inquiry. But the possibility of challenging WORLD shows that the extend rationality view needs more resources to show that WORLD is rational unconditionally. Zanetti (2020: XXX)

This is not all. Notice that when faced with Cartesian skepticism, and the hypothesis of dreaming or of an evil demon which could hinder our reasoning powers, my brand of hinge epistemology would proceed as follows. First, it would identify the hinges of each of these inquiries, and then it would reclaim their truth, albeit in a minimal sense (on this issue see Coliva (2015, 2018) and §4 below), and argue against the legitimacy of the kind of correspondentist conception of truth which allows a Cartesian skeptic to raise the final question: “I acknowledge that *H* is a hinge of inquiry, *I*, and that it is inescapable. But is *H* true?”. Thus, I think that, in general, hinge epistemology should go local, and then devise a strategy for answering a question which is bound to be asked and that needs to be tackled.

To clarify. When one reaches such inescapable hinges and realizes that their inescapability does not guarantee their truth, either one dogmatically posits it (in an externalist spirit); or else, one has to go back to the challenge and defuse it. How? As I have proposed in Coliva (2015, 2018), by going deflationist about the truth of hinges. That way, one can say that they are true and yet neutralize the correspondentist spin a skeptic would give to the question “*H* is a hinge of inquiry, *I*, and is inescapable. But is *H* true?”. Moreover, insisting that hinges are conditions of possibility of representation (as well as conditions of evidential significance) should assuage any residual worry, or angst. More specifically it would diagnose the angst skeptical doubts raise as due to subscribing to too narrow a conception of truth (as well as to too narrow a conception of epistemic rationality, if the extended rationality view I defended in Coliva (2015) is right).

It also merits note that I developed my own version of hinge epistemology in response to a form of Humean skepticism. This form of skepticism is importantly different from its Cartesian counterpart. For it does not raise disquieting scenarios, such as the hypothesis from dreaming or the possibility of an evil demon. As I characterize it, it may even grant that we have evidential justifications for our ordinary empirical beliefs. Yet, it would raise the issue of the epistemic rationality of the hinges that are constitutive of epistemic rationality. In a sense, the Humean skeptic I am considering is a local, not a global skeptic.

And although, clearly, when such Humean skeptics are engaged in purely rational inquiry they are not engaging in empirical inquiry and they are not, momentarily, operating under the normative pressure of WORLD (i.e. the hinge “There is an external world”), they are reflecting on the nature of empirical rationality and on the status of WORLD, as they themselves understand that notion. My claim is that given that they understand epistemic rationality as consisting in forming, assessing and withdrawing from empirical beliefs based on the deliverances of our perceptual apparatus, they have an understanding of that very notion that commits them to WORLD. Thus, it is not particularly relevant that

… WORLD is both biologically escapable and dialectically escapable. So, while it is enough to argue—as Coliva does—that the biological escapability of empirical inquiry is compatible with empirical inquiry being preferable than any other activity available to us, the extended rationality view has no resources to answer the sceptic who is challenging not so much the prudential value of the practice, but the truth, and hence the epistemic rationality of its constitutive commitments. Zanetti (2020: XXX)

That is, even if creatures unlike us did not find WORLD compelling, because they would have different epistemic practices and therefore a different notion of epistemic rationality (with its own characteristic hinges), WORLD is a hinge for the kind of skeptic I am engaging with.

Furthermore, I am not sure WORLD is biologically escapable, at least in normal conditions (which are the only ones that matter from a biological point of view). And perhaps it is also worth-noting that skeptics are just our philosophical alter-egos. Hence, the kind of inquiry they engage in is conducted within the parameters of the human condition, even if they take that inquiry to extremes. For they ask for epistemic justification of those very hinges that make epistemic justification possible in the first place.

One further thing worth mentioning is that, while in *Extended Rationality* I did defend WORLD based on prudential reasons (not biological ones), I did change my mind on that score. In fact, already in “What anti-realism about hinges could possibly be” (Coliva 2018: 286 n. 15), I suggested that it may be constitutive of our identities as inquirers of the empirical world to take WORLD for granted. Thus, inasmuch as we are the kind of inquirers we are, we cannot but hold on to that hinge. The point would certainly need more elaboration than I can offer here. Yet, I thought it worth recording that I am moving away from the merely prudential defense of WORLD I proposed in my earlier writings on the topic.

Still, since *Extended Rationality*, I have provided an answer to the challenge that hinges may be (locally) inescapable and yet this may not secure their truth. Of course, one may disagree with the answer I have offered, but this is not the topic of Zanetti’s paper but of Moruzzi’s, to which I will return in closing.

1. **Reply to Ashton**

In a sense, Ashton’s paper is the symmetric opposite of Zanetti’s. While Zanetti would like to identify hinges that are as universal and global as possible, Ashton would like to defend a kind of hinge epistemology which is more open to relativism than mine. If for Zanetti I am too much of a localist, if not of a relativist; for Ashton I am not enough of a relativist.

But what kind of epistemic relativism does she have in mind? Here is a quote that answers the question:

This leaves us with 3 slightly different criteria for relativism. After critically evaluating Coliva’s characterisation, we’ve found that for relativism to be true there must be:

1) multiple systems each of multiple basic assumptions, which are;

2) mutually incompatible (in a specified sense), and which;

3) cannot be ranked neutrally, or independent of a system (…).

Now that we have an accurate, if unrefined, picture of what epistemic relativism is we can address why Coliva’s extended rationality view might (be thought to) lead to it. Ashton (2020: xxx, my numbering)

Let me begin by saying that, as argued in Baghramian and Coliva (2020), there is a variety of positions that have been considered to incorporate key relativist insights. Some have maintained that incommensurability is the key feature of relativism. They have cashed out the notion in very different ways, though, varying from untranslatability (this is the kind of relativism Davidson attributes to Kuhn (1962) and Feyerabend (1962) and that he goes on to criticize in his celebrated paper “On the very idea of a conceptual scheme” (1974)), to multimundialism (Rovane 2013)—that is, the idea that alternatives are mutually intelligible, but normatively insulated, such that they neither contradict nor are they compatible with each other.

Various other theorists have taken equal validity as the key feature (or at least one of the key features) of relativism (Kölbel 2002, Wright 2006, Boghossian 2006, MacFarlane 2014). Ashton, however, defers to Kusch for a criticism of this idea. She writes:

Kusch (2016) has highlighted a problem with using equal validity to do this. First, Kusch notes that equal validity makes a stronger claim than the anti-hierarchical sentiment (2016: 35). It doesn’t say that the systems can’t be ranked—it says that ranking them results in a tie. Then, he points out that this stronger claim presupposes a neutral, system-independent position from which to make such a judgement. But this is one of the absolutist presuppositions that the relativist wants to reject (2016: 35). If a relativist were to commit themselves to this stronger claim their view would be inconsistent, and a charitable, non-dogmatic investigation into the possibility of relativism should not include it as a requirement—at least if a less problematic alternative is available. Ashton (2020: XXX)

Surely equal validity is a strong notion, but it is also very likely to be at a core of the vast majority of relativist positions, which are after the idea that different *x*s (epistemic or moral systems, ontologies, conceptual schemes, etc.) returning different and incompatible verdicts (re: what is justified/known, morally permissible/impermissible, an object, etc.) are on equal footing. For none of them is more grounded in a putative (epistemic, moral, ontological, conceptual) independent reality than any other. Rankings of principles and values within normative systems and choices between such systems, then, are ultimately due only to pragmatic factors (broadly construed, to include personal preferences, ideologies, aesthetic considerations or even political ones). Indeed, on this notion of relativism, as a relativist, that is as a *theorist* who propounds a relativist position, you must be able to make sense of this possibility. As a *user* of a given epistemic/moral/conceptual/ontological system then you will have to endorse one of them, but as a theorist, at least, you must be able to make sense of this parity intuition. There does not seem to be anything incoherent in that. At most, it may create problems if it were to be translated into action, because it would appear to clash with having an objectively grounded motivation for using one system over the other. Yet again, it is part of the relativist credo that such an objective grounding is impossible. Hence, by relativist lights, one is perfectly well within one’s rights in choosing one system over another based solely on pragmatic considerations (broadly construed).

Now, according to Ashton, my brand of hinge epistemology commits me to relativism, because it complies with the third requirement of “true” relativism, unless I can satisfactorily show that there cannot be “alternative epistemic systems which are incompatible with our own” (Ashton (2020: XXX)). But she argues that I haven’t satisfactorily shown that.

Yet, before following Ashton’s underlying recommendation that I should embrace relativism and happily live with it, let us consider her objections. Following my own discussion, she first considers option (a) different methods same basic assumptions.

Ashton goes into a lengthy discussion of whether we can imagine creatures that can have epistemic practices (or methods) very different from the basic one we use to form justified beliefs about physical objects in our surroundings, namely observation, while sticking to our own hinges, such as WORLD. It is worth noting that I myself grant that these creatures are somewhat conceivable. Thus, I don’t see why she charges me of holding—implausibly—the opposite (Ashton (2020: XXX)). However, first, these are not easily imaginable creatures because they would have to know of the presence of an object here and now in front of them through something like an act of purely rational intuition (just imagining a different sensory apparatus would not be enough to support the kind of possibility I am discussing). Second, even granting that we can make full sense of that possibility, these creatures would be so unlike us that their existence would show very little about our own epistemic system and, in particular, regarding the possibility that there could be alternative such systems that creatures *sufficiently like us* could actually employ to form justified beliefs about physical objects in their surroundings. Third, and this is something Ashton simply does not notice at all, even if we could imagine such creatures and even if they endorsed an epistemic system we would like to take seriously, to bolster the idea of at least a virtual kind of relativism, it is built within the hypothesis that their methods, as different as they are from ours, would return the same verdicts. That is, that there is a computer here and now in front of ‘us’, say (here ‘us’ would include both humans and these very different creatures). Thus, their alternative epistemic system would not support any form of relativism. For they would not return different and incompatible verdicts, thus flouting condition (2) of Ashton’s ‘true’ relativism.

Ashton’s criticism of the second option—(b) same methods, different basic assumptions—is equally perplexing. Here the idea would be to imagine creatures who, while using our same epistemic methods to form justified beliefs about objects in their surroundings, would not hold on to our basic assumptions. That is, they would not hold on to WORLD. Since these creatures have (theoretically) existed and were in fact phenomenalists, if not idealists, the issue becomes whether such a philosophical position can support a form of epistemic relativism.

In *Extended Rationality*, I claim that a phenomenalist would have serious trouble making sense of the content of our perceptual experiences, which is as of objects with certain perceptual properties. Ashton does not seem to see the force of this remark and appears to think that it is very much open to discussion. Yet, she mentions none of the relevant literature concerning the content of perception. Had she paid attention to that literature, I think she would have concurred that it is fair to say that nowadays it is the consensus view that we can perceive objects well before exercising a conceptual apparatus. Even John McDowell, who, in the philosophical literature, has been the main supporter of the opposite view (see McDowell 1994), has now changed his mind (see McDowell 2009), at least to some extent. Yet, whether or not you happen to be a non-conceptualist about the content of perception, it is definitely a discredited view that in perception we just have a bundle of sense data, which need to be grouped together through the exercise of concepts to give rise to objects of perception. I have dealt extensively with these issues in several of my writings (on this issue see Coliva (2003, 2016)) including *Extended Rationality* (2015: chapter 1), and it would have been nice to see a more informed engagement with this kind of literature.

Second, and considering the preceding, the allegation that I do not consider Berkeley’s objections is quite surprising. For I am not engaging in that section (Coliva 2015: chapter 4, §4) with anyone’s views in particular. After all, that is just a section of a book that deals with skepticism, primarily, not with relativism, or with idealism and phenomenalism. Yet, even so, why engage with Berkeley who, by our contemporary lights, held an implausible view of perception?[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, which objections are so devastating that Ashton does not even take the time to rehearse them to show that I cannot deal with them?

The next passage in Ashton’s chapter is worth citing in full:

We can see this if we look at what relativists themselves have said about this matter. Thomas Kuhn, whose work provoked the contemporary debate on relativism in science, argued that different scientific paradigms, far from being able to explain one another, are methodologically and semantically incommensurable—they create distinct ‘worlds’ of meaning and practice (1962). Bernard Williams (1974) and Carol Rovane (2013) endorse less radical notions of incommensurability than Kuhn does in their work on moral relativism, but neither of them require anything that sounds like the ‘full’ intelligibility that Coliva demands. Far from it; Williams says that relativism requires “notational confrontation”, which means that changing from one system to another would mean giving up one’s “hold on reality” (Williams 1974: 222), whilst Rovane describes alternative systems as “profoundly unavailable to us, not because we view them as mistaken, but because we do not stand in any rational relation to them at all” (Rovane 2013: 105).

Kuhn’s appeal to incommensurability is the least sustainable form of relativism. It has been amply—and I would say effectively—criticized by Davidson (1974), overall.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, it is not the kind of relativism, which would be applicable here. As is well known, that kind of relativism emerged from considerations pertaining to the history of science and had to do with the idea that different theories may utilize the same vocabulary and yet mean very different things. Examples would be the different notion of atom in Democritean physics and in Bohr’s theory; or the different concept of mass in Newtonian and relativistic physics.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, we do understand the idea that an object could consist of the sensory impressions it produces in us. The issue is rather whether such a view is tenable at all. In *Extended Rationality*, I have claimed that it isn’t. To repeat, I claim that within the dialectical context of discussing the possibility of there being creatures that use the same epistemic methods—that is, sensory perception like ours—to arrive at a different conception of what surrounds them (which was indeed what Berkeley was arguing for, based on a theory of perception which is nowadays discredited). If Ashton has in mind a different dialectical context, probably one in which we are not after all considering creatures like us, then she should have said so explicitly. Yet, if so, her criticism would simply not be applicable to what I am discussing in that section of the book.

Regarding Ashton’s claim that Williams’ notational confrontations and Rovane’s multimundialism do not require full intelligibility, I am baffled. First, I am baffled dialectically, because there is nothing here, which is unintelligible. To repeat, we do understand the phenomenalist conception of an object. The point is that it is not tenable, once we consider creatures like us. It is not tenable because it rests on a mistaken conception of experience, which in all likelihood would have to embrace our ordinary notion of a physical object (or even worse, buy into the weird notion of a substratum) to make sense of the features of human sensory experience, thus resulting in an incoherent picture of human perception.

Second, I am baffled by the way Ashton presents Rovane’s views. According to Rovane, the problem is not unintelligibility. Indeed, Rovane presents her position—which she defends mostly with respect to the ethical domain—with an example in which two women belonging to two different cultures (contemporary rural India and urban America) disclose to each other their moral viewpoints (on this isse, see Rovane (2013: chapter 1)). They have a thorough conversation and understand each other’s point of view. Still, given their different moral values and respective rankings (concerning, for instance, personal freedom, respect of traditions, compliance with family expectations, etc.), they end up embracing two altogether different views of what is morally right/wrong or permissible/impermissible, which stand in no logical relation to one another. They are neither compatible, nor contradictory. Thus, for Rovane, the two women end up living in two different moral worlds, which are normatively disjoint. Yet these different worlds are (at least potentially) intelligible to them (that is, as the conversation unfolds, these differences would emerge as non-eliminable, yet they would not be incomprehensible). Still, neither of them could go over to the other world and live the life it dictates (unless they went through some kind of transformation of their moral perspectives; that is, something like a conversion).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Notice, however, that Rovane and Williams are (mainly) concerned with morality. Rovane is indeed very careful to delimit the scope of her multimundialist view. I doubt, therefore, that she would extend it to the case of physical objects and our perception of them.[[5]](#footnote-5) Furthermore, she herself discounts merely conceivable alternatives as something worth taking seriously, especially in the factual domain.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, appealing to Kuhn, Williams and Rovane does not seem to bring any grist to Ashton’s mill. That is, it does not bring grist to the idea that phenomenalism is an alternative worth taking seriously. Nor does it bring grist to the idea that even more far-off options regarding perception and objects could motivate a relativist stance.

The next paragraph by Ashton is again worth citing in full:

However, when it comes to outlining the options that her relativist could take to support their view, Coliva treats basic practices and basic assumptions as though they can be cleanly separated. Relativists are given the option of holding our basic assumptions fixed and varying our basic practice, or of holding our basic practice fixed and changing our basic assumptions. If our basic practices and basic assumptions are closely connected then we shouldn’t expect to get positive results using either of these options. A more suitable option would instead allow that making changes to basic assumptions will have an effect on our basic practices, and vice versa. Ashton (2020: XXX)

Now, my constitutive view hinges precisely on the idea that basic assumptions are a function of our basic epistemic practices. That is, due to the kind of basic epistemic practice of forming, withdrawing and revising justified beliefs about objects in our surroundings based on perception, we end up holding on to certain basic assumptions, which are constitutive of that basic epistemic practice. Furthermore, I hold that the very notion of epistemic rationality both skeptics and non-skeptics alike make use of depends on that practice. That is why its basic assumptions are inescapable for *all* parties to the dispute.

What I tried to do next, then, is to consider objections to that view by considering alternative possibilities. For clarity of exposition, I divided them into two categories: same methods (or practices) but different basic assumptions; or different practices and same basic assumptions. As we saw, neither of these alternatives seems to be able to bring grist to the relativist mill.

What would it mean to present the alternatives as Ashton recommends? Well, consider a different practice, like the one we envisaged by considering angels and God, with even different basic assumptions. If the latter were something like the ones I attributed to phenomenalists, we would end up considering an option, which would be the worst of two worlds. Assuming its full intelligibility, it would be of no relevance whatsoever for creatures like us. For we don’t rationally ‘intuit’ the presence of objects, and we do not have perceptual access only to sensory experiences (conceived as an unstructured given). *Extended* *Rationality* has the ambition of presenting an account of *human* perceptual experience and its ability to provide justified beliefs about physical objects in our surroundings. It is no objection to my view to entertain the notional possibility that different creatures, with altogether different forms of access to reality, could end up with different sets of justified beliefs, if at all. Notice, moreover, that *Extended* *Rationality* primarily aims at responding to the *skeptical* challenge. That challenge, in its turn, concerns the status of the *human* condition with respect to the possibility of forming justified beliefs about physical objects and hence of having knowledge of them. Thus, these half-baked notional variants are simply dialectically irrelevant.

Hence, in the end, I agree with Ashton’s final remark: “Even is relativism proves to be a consequence of Coliva’s extended rationality”—and as I have said, it is doubtful it does, at least if we are considering an interesting version of relativism, which aims at presenting an alternative to *our* practices/basic assumptions that could really be embraced by *us*—“her response to skepticism still stands.”

1. **Reply to Moruzzi**

Moruzzi’s paper engages with my “What anti-realism about hinges could possibly be” (2018) and the kind of minimalist view about hinges I develop there. The key take-home message is that hinges’ truth should be understood in deflationary terms and that this is also compatible with alethic pluralism, insofar as propositions within specific domains may be true in virtue of different alethic properties—ranging from correspondence, to superassertibility and coherence.

Moruzzi himself (Moruzzi and Ferrari 2019) is an alethic pluralist and has tried to make room for the unorthodox position according to which alethic pluralism is compatible with deflationism about the truth of propositions belonging to specific domains. His favorite example is, for reasons I am not going to rehearse here, the domain of propositions about taste (e.g. “Sushi is tasty” and the like). He calls his view “Ecumenical alethic pluralism” and sees it as hanging on two conditions. (1) A modification of the network analysis employed in standard alethic pluralism, to avoid incorporating normative principles which go beyond the deflationist analysis; and (2) blocking Wright’s Normative Argument. As is well known, in *Truth and Objectivity* (1992), Wright developed an argument against deflationism, to the effect that the notions of truth (T) and warranted assertibility (WA) have divergent extensions. Now, just for the records, Wright’s argument is not sacrosanct (see for instance Miller 2001). Yet, let us assume it poses a fundamental challenge, consisting in noticing that T and WA do not commute in the same way when embedded in negation. Here is Miller’s reconstruction of the argument (Miller 2001: 528-29):

I. If ‘true’ functioned merely as a device for affirming that a proposition complies with norms of epistemic justification, it ought not to commute with negation;

2. ‘True’ does (indeed, must) commute with negation;

3. So ‘true’ cannot function merely as a device for affirming that a proposition complies with norms of epistemic justification.

The argument for premise (2) goes as follows. The equivalence schema, at the heart of the deflationist account, ensures that for any proposition p

ES. It is true that p↔p

Negating both sides of (ES) gives

1. It is not true that p↔not-p

Substituting ‘not-p’ for both occurrences of ‘p’ in (ES) gives

1. It is true that not-p↔not-p.

Assuming transitivity of the biconditional, we get the result that truth and negation commute as prefixes:

1. It is not true that p↔it is true that not-p.

The argument for premise (i) is that in general, we cannot soundly infer

1. It is the case that not-p is warranted from
2. It is not the case that p is warranted.

This is clear from a case where our total state of information is neutral, in the sense that we have no evidence bearing on either p or its negation. In such a case (v) holds but (iv) does not: we have no warrant to assert p, but neither do we have a warrant to assert not-p. The deflationist is thus forced, via the core argument, away from the … claim that the basic use of ‘true’ is to endorse a proposition as complying merely with norms of epistemic justification…

The first condition posed by Moruzzi does not seem to me particularly problematic. We will have to remove the normative principles from the network analysis of the concept of truth. Wright’s platitudes (see Wright 1992) seem to me perfectly in keeping with that.

The second challenge—that is, blocking Wright’s inflationary argument against deflationism—, does not seem to be even a challenge, when taken in connection with hinges. For the key idea is that hinges are simply not possible substitutes for P, when we consider substituting T with WA. Indeed, hinges are never warrantedly assertible, for reasons explored at length in *Extended Rationality*. Thus, predicating truth of them cannot be equivalent to endorsing them as warrantedly assertible. Furthermore, not even their negations are warrantedly assertible. Thus, we couldn’t get to (iv), which would then clash with (v).

Hence, I do not see the problem, Moruzzi takes to be “the crucial problem.” That is, that “in PF [Propositional Framework, i.e. my view] hinges lack warrant by definition and since they can be true or false, the potential extensional divergence between warrant and truth—which is the crucial step of the normative inflationary argument—is assured” Moruzzi (2020: xxx).

On the contrary, hinges’ truth would be just plain truth (more on this notion shortly) and to predicate it would not amount to endorsing the proposition as complying with norms of warranted assertibility. This may be something traditional deflationists did not make room for. Yet, I take it to be a benefit of coupling deflationsim with alethic pluralism that it opens up new, and possibly unexpected, avenues.

Notice, moreover, that Wright (1985) too ended up presenting a deflationary account of hinges’ truth. Therefore, it would be weird if he himself held that view while also considering his own argument against deflationism applicable to hinges.[[7]](#footnote-7)

One of Moruzzi’s claims is worth citing in full:

It might be replied that hinges have the epistemic property of being rationally mandated and thus that the potential extensional divergence can be blocked. This reply is not sufficient for blocking the Normative Argument since also need the assurance that hinges are true in order to exclude any possible divergence in extension between being true and being rationally mandated. However, the claim that hinges are true is not part of PF.

Now, it is part of my view (if not of Wittgenstein’s[[8]](#footnote-8)) that hinges are true (albeit in a minimal sense). Thus, I do not see any problem meeting the challenge, even if hinges are taken to constitute a separate domain of propositions. To repeat, the problem does not arise, precisely because P’s truth, in the case of hinges, does not ever coincide in normative force with their being warrantedly assertible.

Moving on to the issue of whether hinges do constitute a separate domain or whether they belong to no domain of discourse, let me say the following. If they are conditions of possibility of representation, they are conditions of possibility of any domain of discourse. For instance, WORLD is a condition of possibility of the empirical domain; but also of the moral domain insofar as that domain necessarily depends on the presence of people and other sentient beings, and therefore of physical entities of that kind. Similarly, MINDS—“There are other minds”—is a condition of possibility of morality, as well as of taste discourse. Clearly, we can formally group hinges together—we indeed talk of them as a genus with various instances. Yet, hinges would not constitute a domain in the same sense in which propositions about taste or morality, say, constitute their characteristic domains. Why so? Because the latter constitute a domain given their *aboutness*. “Sushi is tasty,” “Rhubarb is disgusting,” “This wine is delicious,” etc. are all propositions about gustatory properties of certain edible or drinkable items (ditto, *mutatis mutandis*, for “Killing innocent people is wrong” and “Stealing is wrong”). Hinges, in contrast, would constitute a domain not because of their shared aboutness, but only because of the similar *role* they would play with respect to some of our inquiries and practices.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Let us now move to Moruzzi’s main objection. If we hold

(A-CLOSURE) If ˂P˃ has an alethic property T, and ˂P˃ entails ˂Q˃, then ˂Q˃ has the alethic property T.

then, given two further intuitive principles, this leads to

(COLLAPSE) MOON (“The Earth has one moon”) and WORLD (“There is an external world”) have the same truth property. Moruzzi (2020: xxx).

Here is the conclusion Moruzzi reaches:

COLLAPSE seems to bar the possibility that hinges have a different truth property from the other empirical propositions: the truth-property of empirical propositions leaches, so to say, to hinges—call this problem the Alethic Leaching Problem. Does COLLAPSE really involve the Alethic Leaching Problem for HAP [Hinge Alethic Pluralism]? I think that the answer to this question depends on whether the alethic pluralist framework of HAP is moderate or strong. Moruzzi (2020: xxx).

He then discusses how different versions of Strong Alethic Pluralism (SAP) handle the problem. In particular, he considers the revision of (A-CLOSURE) they propose.

(A-CLOSURE\*) If ˂P˃ has an alethic property T1 and ˂Q˃ has an alethic property T2, and ˂P˃ entails ˂Q˃, then either T2 = T1, or the having of a truth property partially grounds the having of the other.

Yet, according Moruzzi, even this version of (A-CLOSURE) would not help the cause of a hinge alethic pluralist. Here is why:

How does A-Closure\* fit with HAP in the case of WORLD and MOON? If there is not grounding relation between the having of the truth-property of the truth-property of MOON and the having of the truth-property of WORLD, then A-Closure\* implies COLLAPSE. So the question is whether or not any of these grounding relations holds. Since WORLD has the deflationary property, it cannot have any grounding role, so, the only option is that the having of the truth property of MOON—i.e. MOON corresponds to the fact– ground the having of the truth-property of WORLD—i.e. WORLD’s deflationary truth. I don’t see how this grounding relation can be defended, but if a story can be told then HAP coupled with strong alethic pluralism can avoid COLLAPSE and hence the Alethic Leaching Problem. Moruzzi (2020: xxx).

Yet, I do not see why we should buy into this new A-CLOSURE principle. In particular, the appeal to a grounding relation seems necessary only within the framework of a strong alethic pluralism that dispenses with any intermediary between the predicate ‘true’ and the alethic property that it is supposed to pick out (and that according to SAP, varies from context to context). Yet, a moderate form of alethic pluralism would not dispense with any such intermediary. Some versions of moderate alethic pluralism hold that ‘true’ expresses a generic truth property, individuated through the usual set of platitudes, which may be manifested or realized differently in different domains. Furthermore, in some cases, ‘true’ may just pick out this generic property. In that case, the proposition whose truth is thus predicated would be just plain true. This plain or generic truth property would be applicable to hinges, and possibly to logical truths, as Michael Lynch (2013) has maintained. This is the kind of alethic pluralism I think gives us the best prospects of success. Moruzzi, however, disagrees. Here is what he writes:

But is the adoption of moderate alethic pluralism a viable option for HAP? I will argue that it is not. In a nutshell, the reason lies in the fact that existing versions of moderate alethic pluralism are incompatible with having a deflationary truth-property among the domain-specific truth-properties. Moruzzi (2020: xxx).

He then concludes as follows:

The Alethic Leaching Problem forces to extend deflationism to all empirical propositions vanishing thus the appeal to alethic pluralism as a strategy to answer the Alethic Challenge. As a consequence the only stable position for pursuing the third line of response to the Alethic Challenge is to adopt MAD (Monist Alethic Deflationism).

Moruzzi considers my reply, according to which we should opt for moderate alethic pluralism along the lines indicated previously, but objects to it too. He writes:

Coliva has replied that the Alethic Leaching Problem can be avoided by attributing to hinges just the generic property which is deflationary (and no further local truth-property). … Hinges … would constitute a case of barely plain truth—i.e. propositions that are true-as-such without depending on any domain-specific truth property. This option fits well also with the idea that hinges belong to no domain. Moreover cases of bare plain truth have been later acknowledged also in Lynch (2013, 37) in relation to logical truths. According to Lynch logical truths are barely plainly true “not because its truth depends on some other truth, but simply because its truth is basic and ungrounded on the actual truth-value of any proposition.” (Lynch 2013: 37, italics mine). Moruzzi (2020: xxx).

Now, according to Moruzzi, Lynch’s position with respect to logical truths is implausible. He then concludes that it is implausible for hinges too. However, Moruzzi’s argument is dubious. For it would work only if there was a strong analogy between hinges and logical truths. Yet, this is far from obvious. After all, hinges are contingent not necessary propositions; and they are not tautologies. Thus, Moruzzi’s argument from analogy seems to me dialectically impotent (even assuming it was correct against Lynch’s position, which is not something I wish to either defend or contest here).

Thus, to sum up, my view is that hinges are plainly true, in the sense that their truth is exhausted by the Equivalence Schema and similarly harmless platitudes. When we consider entailments between propositions with different alethic profiles, such as MOON and WORLD, what is preserved is plain truth. MOON manifests plain truth in virtue of its correspondence with facts. Similarly, if we consider the entailment between MR HYDE [It is bad of Mr Hyde to kill innocent women] and MINDS [There are other minds], assuming that MINDS is a hinge, MR HYDE manifests plain truth in virtue, if you will, of the fact that there is universal agreement on the moral badness of killing innocent women. WORLD, in contrast, is just plain true.

If this is right, then, I do not see why we have to abide by (A-CLOSURE)\*. A different kind of alethic closure principle could be proposed, along the following lines.

(A-CLOSURE)\*\*: If <P> has an alethic property T1 and <Q> has an alethic property T2, and <P> entails <Q>, then either T1 = T2, or the having of a truth property is a manifestation of plain truth.

Clearly, hinges would fall into the latter disjunct, since, being plain true, they would necessarily manifest it.

Finally, that A-Closure\* is problematic can be seen also by reflecting on inferences such as this:

If pigs grunt, 2+2=4; Pigs grunt; therefore 2+2=4

where the idea that P’s truth-property would partially *ground* Q’s truth property, in a pluralistic framework and assuming that the truth of P is of a correspondentist kind, while the truth of Q amounts to something like provability within a theory, is simply out of the question.

If we want to explain the validity of that inference, then, the most, and indeed the best we can do, in a pluralistic framework, is to say that both P and Q manifest plain truth, which is preserved across the entailment, while being guaranteed (in this particular case) by P’s and Q’s being true in virtue of different alethic properties.

Furthermore, it seems to me that any inclination towards A-CLOSURE\* may be due to a conflation between Closure-principles (let them be alethic or epistemic ones) and Transmission-principles. Yet, as I have argued at length elsewhere (on this issue, see Coliva (2012, 2015: chapter 3)), the former are merely syntactic principles and are not supposed to explain how the truth of Q, is derived from that of P, or how the warrantedness of Q is derived from that of P across a valid entailment. Only Transmission-principles do aim at explaining that and it seems to me that only the latter would require the grounding of the truth of Q in the truth of P.

To conclude, the issue of the compatibility between hinges’ truth and alethic pluralism is a difficult and fascinating one. While I still do not see why we should abandon any hope of success, I want to remain open-minded. In the worst-case scenario, I’ll go MAD[[10]](#footnote-10)!

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1. While I am no naturalist in philosophy, I do think that philosophy of mind in general and the philosophy of perception in particular cannot proceed without caring about the plausibility of their claims vis-à-vis our best science. That still leaves ample margins for dissenting views but still forecloses on some others. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On this issue, see Baghramian and Coliva (2020: chapter 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On this issue, see Baghramian and Coliva (2020: chapter 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a discussion of Rovane’s position, see Baghramian and Coliva (2020: chapter 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. She is very clear, for instance, that her multimundialist view does not even apply to different scientific theories (see Rovane (2013: chapter 3)). The reason why she holds that is that despite their different theories (and ensuing scientific practices) “scientists share a great many other points of agreement” (Rovane (2013: 166)), about the phenomena their respective theories aim to explain. She has very anti-phenomenalist sentiments when she claims “I have taken for granted that all of the natural facts are mind-independent, and that minded things are equipped by their cognitive abilities to learn some of those facts—not as they *appear* but as they really are.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Rovane (2013: 179). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. He did partially change his mind in Wright (2004) but for unrelated reasons and without any afterthought about hinges’ truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In fact, there is quite a lot of disagreement among Wittgenstein scholars as to whether in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein held that hinges are neither true nor false, or whether he held that they are minimally true. In Coliva (2010) I sided with supporters of the former view, but it is certainly one of the most debatable exegetical issues concerning *On Certainty*. For references, see Coliva (2010: 183-184). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On this way of thinking of hinges, see Coliva (2010: chapter 4, § 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Monist Alethic Deflationist. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)