

Propositional and Doxastic Hinge Assumptions*

Annalisa Coliva

Department of Philosophy

University of California, Irvine

0. Introduction

In *Extended Rationality. A Hinge Epistemology*, I put forward a moderate account of perceptual justification, according to which a belief about specific material objects that P is perceptually justified iff, absent defeaters, one has the appropriate course of experience (typically an experience with content that P), and it is *assumed* that H “there is an external world” (and possibly other general propositions, like “My sense organs work mostly reliably”, “I am not the victim of massive cognitive deception”, etc.).¹

Since, in my view, “There is an external world” is a “hinge” proposition – for it makes the acquisition of perceptual justification possible –, the crucial issue is to determine the nature of hinge assumptions. Do they have to be doxastically assumed by a subject in the process of offering a justification for her belief that P , or can we think of these assumptions as being operative at the propositional level? And what would that mean?

* I would like to thank the editors of the volume and Robert Audi for very useful comments to a previous version of this paper. As always, any remaining mistakes are my sole responsibility.

¹ One word of caution about my terminology. Like in Coliva (2015), I will be talking about assumptions in the following. Now, in ordinary parlance, we may also refer to them as beliefs. I have no qualms with that, provided one didn't build into the notion of belief the fact that it must be based on some kind of evidence that would make it suitable for knowledge (as Wright 2004 and Pritchard 2015 do, for instance). If one did, then the terms “assumption” and “belief” would no longer be interchangeable, for reasons that will become apparent in the following.

Furthermore, Robert Audi has suggested that I should call them “presuppositions”, since this would better fit the case, I will consider in the following, of a child who does not have the conceptual resources to entertain their contents but behaves in conformity with them. I think the terms are largely interchangeable and by “assumption” I certainly don't mean anything that would be incompatible with Audi's suggestion. Should a reader find that terminology more perspicuous, they could substitute “presupposition” for “assumption” (and their cognates).

In this paper, I defend various interlocking claims. First, that there is a legitimate sense in which hinge assumptions are to be cashed out, first and foremost, at the propositional level, or “in the abstract space of reasons”. Second, that this does not pre-empt the possibility that they also obtain at the doxastic level (§1). To such an end, I spell out what assuming a hinge proposition at the doxastic level amounts to, in such a way that even subjects who do not have the conceptual resources to entertain its content may be granted with such an assumption.

I then distinguish three possible senses of assuming doxastically that H (§2): one hypothetical, one categorical, and one factual. I claim that while both the second and the third sense are compatible with the moderate account of perceptual justification, only the second is compatible with the development of a non-dogmatic response to skepticism and is therefore preferable.

Along the way, I compare and contrast my account of hinge assumptions with Gilbert Harman’s and, in closing I defend it from objections raised by Crispin Wright (§3).

1. Propositional and doxastic hinge assumptions

The moderate account of perceptual justification consists in the following:

Moderate account of perceptual justification: a belief about specific material objects that P is perceptually justified iff, absent defeaters, one has the appropriate course of experience (typically an experience with content that P) and it is assumed that (H) there is an external world (and possibly other general propositions, e.g. “My sense organs work mostly reliably”, “I am not the victim of massive cognitive deception”, etc.)

Moderates, like liberals, such as Pryor (2000, 2004), and conservatives, such as Wright (1985, 2004), are concerned, foremost, with propositional justifications. Propositional justifications are those justifications there are, in the abstract space of reasons, for propositions which may become the content a subject’s belief. When that happens and the belief is held based on those justifications, then the belief is doxastically justified. Hence, it is not required that subjects be able to entertain the proposition that there is an external world. Even less is that required that, were they able to entertain it, they had to do so explicitly any time they go

about forming a perceptual justification for their ordinary empirical beliefs. The basic idea, therefore, is that the information that there is an external world figures as one of the constitutive ingredients of perceptual justification “in the abstract space of reasons”. What this metaphor means, in my view, is simply that *qua* theorists is incumbent upon us to specify the constitutive conditions of perceptual justification for propositions which may be the object of subjects’ beliefs. In this respect, our activity is no different from the one of mathematicians producing a proof of a given theorem. The steps in the proof need not be believed or even grasped by ordinary folks, who may nonetheless appeal to the theorem and take it to be justified.² Nor do they need to be believed by mathematicians as they develop the proof, although most of the times they are. Rather, they are propositions appropriately related to one another, such that the theorem, which is in fact another propositions, turns out thereby to be justified. Thus, the propositions which enter any step of the proof constitute the justification of the conclusion, irrespective of being believed either by ordinary folks or theorists. Similarly, the conditions, which we, *qua* theorists, identify as constitutive of propositional justification for empirical beliefs based on perception, need not be believed or grasped by ordinary folks who may nonetheless be justified in believing those empirical propositions, once the constitutive conditions for perceptual justification are satisfied and those beliefs are formed on appropriate bases. Within such an abstract specification of the conditions that need to obtain for perceptual justification to be possible, the proposition that there is an external world needs to be posited. For, only by doing so, it is possible for a subject’s perceptual evidence – e.g. as of a hand – to be legitimately taken to bear onto the truth of a proposition about a material object – e.g. “Here is my hand” – , which may in turn be the content of a subject’s belief. Absent such an assumption, that experience would equally speak in favor of the skeptical counterpart of the latter proposition – e.g. “I am a handless brain in a vat hallucinating having a hand” (see [White 2006](#)). This way, moderatism can overcome the crucial problem of liberalism.

Contrary to conservatives, however, moderates do not further require that such an assumption be justified – evidentially or otherwise (*contra* Wright 2004, but also [Wedgwood 2013](#) and [Sosa 2013](#)). Its positing is either considered a- or only pragmatically rational (see [Strawson 1985](#), [Wittgenstein 1969](#), [Pritchard 2016](#), [James 1896](#)), or else as epistemically rational because constitutive of epistemic rationality itself ([Coliva 2015](#)).

² On the assumption that the theorem is actually proved.

Pursuing the analogy with mathematical proofs, the assumption of a hinge proposition is comparable to the positing, within the proof, of one or more of the theory's axioms, which are typically considered to be true, at least within the theory, and, once fixed, aren't (non-circularly) provable within the theory.³

Like liberals and conservatives, moderates too are internalist with respect to justification. Nonetheless, all that is required to that end is that the hinge assumption be graspable and articulable *at least in principle* by subjects endowed with the relevant conceptual repertoire. That is, the minimal condition that needs to be satisfied in order for the moderate account to fall within the internalist camp is that of not positing assumptions that would be beyond subjects' intellectual grasp, because the concepts necessary to grasp them would be unattainable at least for subjects relevantly similar to human beings with respect to their cognitive capacities. It is not required of every subject to have them. Compare again with mathematics: many concepts involved in mathematical reasoning are clearly not possessed by every subject. All it is required is simply that such concepts be attainable by at least some of them. Clearly, the concept of an external world fulfills such a condition.

Yet, there is also a sense in which those subjects who do have the relevant conceptual repertoire could be able to entertain it and take it as a datum, which they could, on occasion, make explicit, and from which they could proceed in order to *claim* perceptual justification, thanks to concomitant appropriate sense experiences.

Therefore, there are in fact two, equally legitimate senses in which we can say that the assumption that there is an external world is one of the constitutive ingredients of perceptual justification. The first sense may be called "propositional" and means simply that the proposition that there is an external world does figure as a constitutive ingredient of perceptual justification in the abstract space of reasons. That is, it is a crucial piece of information that we, *qua* theorists, need to posit for perceptual experience to have a bearing onto the truth of a proposition about specific material objects. Add to that that it must be graspable and articulable, at least in principle, for the ensuing justification to be of an internalist fashion. The second, call it the "doxastic" sense, has it, instead, that such a proposition should actually be entertained by subjects endowed with the relevant conceptual repertoire and be part of what they would offer were they requested to make explicit their own justifications for holding that there is a red table in front of them, say. In this doxastic sense, what

³ Of course, they would be (non-circularly) provable if different propositions within the theory were selected to play an axiom role. Yet, once fixed, axioms are the starting points of any proof and thus cannot be non-circularly derived within the theory.

I call “assumptions” are relevantly similar to Gilbert Harman’s “implicit commitments” (Harman 1986, p. 44). I do not, however, subscribe to Harman’s “conservativism”, according to which “one is justified in continuing fully to accept something in the absence of a special reason not to” (Harman 1986, p. 46). For the absence of defeaters is not enough for me, like for any moderate, to produce a justification for a given proposition one is implicitly committed to.

Given such a distinction, the problem sometimes raised against both conservatives and moderates – that is, that an assumption such as H figures as part of the justification for one’s belief that P seems to preclude the possibility that young children and the unsophisticated could have a perceptual justification for their beliefs about specific material objects – is preempted. For their beliefs can be propositionally justified. At most, what the moderate view would entail is that such a propositional justification would be rationally unavailable to children and the unsophisticated, since they would not possess the concepts necessary to entertain it.

Yet, I contend that they can be granted with a doxastic justification for their beliefs even in the absence of the ability to entertain such an assumption (or presupposition, see fn. 1), let alone to articulate it. Consider a child who were unable to entertain the proposition that there is an external world, or that there are physical, mind-independent objects, and who would thus be unable to offer it as part of her grounds for her perceptually based beliefs. One could still grant her with that assumption, provided she were able to take part in a practice which has that very assumption as its rational precondition. Hence, suppose the child said things such as “The red table is in the kitchen. I saw it a moment ago”, while she is not there seeing it, or “Someone has removed the red table from the kitchen”, while she is in the kitchen and realizes that the red table she saw not long ago isn’t there anymore. We could then say that, at least implicitly (or tacitly), she is considering the table as a mind-independent object and is taking her experiences to bear onto a belief about such a kind of entity. Hence, even if she does not have the concept of an external world (or of a physical object) as such and is in no position to make explicit her assumption to that effect, she should be granted with a conception of physical objects as mind-independent entities, as implicitly (or tacitly) as that might be.

Hence, the assumption that there is an external world or at least that there are mind-independent objects, can be granted, in the doxastic sense, also to children and unsophisticated creatures, if they meet the previously mentioned requirements. Furthermore, it can certainly be granted to those subjects who, while having the necessary conceptual repertoire, do not explicitly consider it each time they form a belief based

on the deliverances of their perceptual experiences, so long as they themselves meet the same requirements imposed on children and the unsophisticated.⁴

To summarize the distinctions introduced thus far:

To assume H propositionally: in the abstract space of reasons, a proposition H is posited (as a constitutive element of the propositional justification for a specific class of propositions C).

To assume H doxastically⁵: a proposition H (which is a constitutive element of the propositional justification for a specific class of propositions C) is either grasped and possibly appealed to in the course of claiming one's justification for a proposition P, belonging to C; or else, it is such that a subject can participate in an epistemic practice that has H as one of its rational preconditions.

2. Assuming doxastically – three varieties

Another issue worth-considering at this stage is what it means to assume that there is an external world in this doxastic sense. In particular, we have to distinguish three possible species of “assuming” doxastically.

⁴ Mikkel Gerken raised the following objection. Suppose that a person had just opened her eyes for the first time and made no assumption about the existence of an external world. By the lights of the moderate position, she could not justifiably believe that she has a hand in front of her (supposing for the sake of argument she had those concepts). Now contrast her with a subject, who assumes that there is an external world and could then justifiably believe that there is a hand in front of her, given the moderate conception of perceptual justification. Clearly, however, the two seem to be epistemically on a par, while moderatism predicts they are not. I think this objection is useful because answering it allows me to further clarify the moderate view. If we are concerned with propositional justification, both are equally justified. If we are concerned with doxastic justification, so long as the first subject has the concept of a hand as a mind-independent entity, she could be granted with the relevant assumption, even if she had never entertained the proposition that there is an external world.

⁵ The term “doxastic” is typically taken to involve belief. In the present use of the term, that is not entailed. We are in fact talking about contents of assumptions, which, as we have seen, are not beliefs, at least not if belief is taken to involve having reasons in support of its content (cf. fn. 1).

First, there is a hypothetical (or suppositional) kind of assuming that merely entails acting *as if* a proposition were true. This would be the sense in which one may entertain an assumption in thought and see what would follow from it, without any special commitment to its truth, or even while thinking (or knowing) that it is in fact false.

In this sense “assuming” would be similar to Harman’s “tentative assumptions” (1986, pp. 46-7), which he thinks may be corroborated by future investigations and later on turned into full acceptances. Full acceptances for Harman, however, are attitudes for which one has collated enough evidence to stop inquiring into them. According to him, this is enough to enable a subject to *take* oneself to *know* that a given proposition is true (cf. p. 47). I do not follow Harman’s latter suggestion though, for, in my view, hinge assumptions are not knowable, properly speaking. For the putative justifications we could have for them would depend on already taking them for granted. As I have argued at length in Coliva (2015, chapter 3), this form of bootstrapping justification involves us in a vicious circle. Hence, in my view, whatever evidence we may have for them (i.e. everything we do know does in fact speak in favor of them) does not actually play a justificatory role with respect to them.

Secondly, there is a categorial kind of assuming that involves the *commitment* to the truth of what figures as its content, without thereby entailing that one’s assumption is correct because it is a fact that things are thus and so. Finally, there is a factual kind of assuming that holds a given proposition for a *fact*. The second and third sense of “assuming” differ insofar as it is one thing to be committed to the truth of a given proposition, while it is a different thing to hold it for a fact. This terminology may not be entirely transparent, since one could give deflationary readings of “holding for a fact”. So, a profitable way of thinking about the distinction is to reflect on the direction of fit. In the former case, it is because the subject holds the target proposition true that things are taken to be as the proposition describes them. In the latter case instead, it is because things are as the proposition describes them that the subject holds that proposition true. To sum up:

Hypothetical assuming_D: to act or judge as if a given proposition were true, even if one is uncommittal with respect to its truth or even if one believes or knows that it is in fact false.

Categorial assuming_D: to be committed in one’s acts and judgments to the truth of a given proposition.

Factual assuming_D: to hold a given proposition for a fact.

Now, I think the second and the third option are both consistent with the moderate position, while the first is not, because it is merely suppositional. However, my own preferences go to the second one. Hence, the mode of assumption characteristic of the moderate position, *as I am characterizing it*, has it that the truth of “There is an external world” is not dogmatically posited, even if it is a tenet of the theory that in our actions and thoughts we are committed to it. In the usual terms of the Euthyphro contrast, the mode of assumption I have in mind is metaphysically anti-realist. This does not mean to say that it is irrealist or idealist – for there is a commitment to the truth of “There is an external world” – but it is not realist either, for no claim is made that it is because it is a *fact* that there is an external world that one is making the corresponding assumption.

Externalist theories of knowledge and justification, in contrast, ultimately do that. For consider: externalist theorists typically say, “given that it is in fact the case that there is an external world, with which we causally interact, thus-and-thus follows”. Hence, they hold the existence of the external world for a fact and then start building their respective theories from there. However, if one’s epistemology is ultimately driven by the idea of taking skepticism seriously, this casts doubts on the prospects of any externalist account, including disjunctivist accounts,⁶ or virtue-theoretic ones *à la* Sosa.⁷ For it is simply question-begging to assume for a fact that there is an external world in the face of skeptical worries, which challenge the rational legitimacy of such an assumption.

Still, one might think that this way of characterizing the moderate position makes it immediately unsuitable to meet any skeptical challenge. For it seems that a skeptic is precisely inviting us to provide a justification to believe that it is indeed a fact that there is an external world, while the moderate position is not committed to that H being a fact.

As I have argued at length elsewhere (Coliva 2018, 2021), this is not true. For, first, the most powerful antidote to any argument based on radically skeptical scenarios, which raise the possibility that, in ways that

⁶ Disjunctivist accounts, like McDowell (1982, 1986, 1995) and Pritchard (2015), take it for a fact that, at least in good case scenarios, when we are actually perceiving, there is an external world with which we are causally interacting. Yet they are quite impotent to assuage the skeptical worry concerning how we can know of being perceiving (as opposed to hallucinating) and thus of being causally interacting with an external world.

⁷ See Sosa (2021), who embraces an externalist moderate position.

are totally unknowable to us, there is no external world (or we are BIVs, etc.), is to avoid thinking of truth as mind-transcendent. That is, as a correspondence between our representations and mind-independent facts, whose obtaining is in principle unknowable to us. Furthermore, the most interesting kind of skeptical challenge, which is one of Humean descent, can be met by redeeming the rationality of the basic assumptions on which perceptual justifications rest. Since on the extended notion of rationality I have been proposing since Coliva (2015) that is not a matter of having justifications that bear on the truth of such assumptions, that skeptical challenge can in fact be met.⁸

Let us recap the main features of the moderate position as I have been characterizing it so far. According to such a view, our perceptual justifications depend on a certain course of experience, absent defeaters, together with some very general assumptions, viz. that there is an external world (but also that we are not victims of lucid and sustained dreams, or even that our sense organs are mostly reliable). These have to be understood, in the first instance, as propositions that figure as constitutive ingredients of our perceptual justifications in the abstract space of reasons, together with appropriate kinds of experiences and absent defeaters. This way, contrary to the liberal view, we can actually surpass our “cognitive locality” – that is, we can take our experiences to bear on a realm of mind-independent entities. This is of course compatible with the fact that our specific justifications are defeasible and that we may be mistaken about the identity, the properties and even the existence, on a given occasion, of an object. Since no justification for these general assumptions is required, the fact that it is difficult to see how there could be any does not make the justifications based on them impossible to obtain, contrary to what would happen on the conservative view.⁹

Furthermore, the moderate position, as I have been characterizing it, has a story to tell about what it means doxastically to assume that there is an external world. It consists in being committed, in our thoughts and actions, to the existence of an external world. Moreover, to assume doxastically that H does not entail that subjects ought to explicitly entertain its content, or even be able to do it. Rather, it is enough for them to comply with a practice that has as its rational precondition the commitment to the existence of an external world. Of course, this is entirely compatible with the fact that those subjects who do have the necessary

⁸ Due to space limitations, I will not go over the issue. I will take it up in §3, in connection with objections raised by Wright. I refer interested readers to Coliva (2015, chapter 4).

⁹ For criticism of Wright’s notion of entitlement, see Pritchard (2005), Jenkins (2007), Williams (2012), Coliva (2015, 2020b).

conceptual apparatus ought to be able, on occasion and if requested to offer their grounds for their perceptually-based specific empirical beliefs, to mention such an assumption.

In sum, the moderate position holds that we do have perceptual justifications for our ordinary empirical beliefs, but these arise only within a system of assumptions – or “hinges” –, which, while not being in turn justified, or even justifiable, make it possible for us to transcend our cognitive locality and therefore take our experiences to bear onto a world populated by mind-independent entities. Obviously, the most serious challenge the moderate position has to face is the one posed by a kind of skepticism, of Humean descent, that challenges the claim that such an assumption is after all rational, and non-arbitrary, as no justification for it can be provided. I have already taken it up in several writings (Coliva 2015, 2020a, b, 2021) and here I won't go over its details once again. Rather, I will consider it in the context of answering some objections recently levelled by Crispin Wright against the moderate account of perceptual justification and the constitutive account of epistemic rationality.

3. Wright's objections

In light of the preceding, in this section I consider a few objections raised by Crispin Wright (2012) against the moderate account as I have been developing it. According to Wright, moderatism is “a genuine additional possibility” (Wright 2012, p. 476) besides the liberal and the conservative account of perceptual justification. Wright proposes an interpretation of my position and explicitly acknowledges that “it may be that the interpretation I will consider is not exactly what Coliva has in mind” (ibid.). As part of his interpretation, Wright writes: “For one thing, it seems to me that Coliva's suggestion is very much more easily received at second level than at first level” (ibid.) According to Wright, that is, the moderate account is more plausible when taken as a view about *claims* regarding the justifiedness of our empirical beliefs, than if taken as an account of the architecture of perceptual justifications. The reason he offers is the following:

That an unreflective thinker may acquire a perceptual warrant for a particular belief just in virtue of the course of her perceptual experience, without any consideration of authenticity-conditions and defeaters, is common ground both for the dogmatist [i.e. liberal] and for the conservative who regards the satisfaction of the relevant authenticity-conditions as a matter of entitlement. (...) Their disagreement is about the supporting architecture of perceptual justification thereby obtained: the dogmatist holds that the warrant is conferred purely by the occurrence of the relevant perceptual experience; the conservative

holds that the perceptual experience confers warrant only in a context in which there is either independent reason to believe that a given authenticity-condition is satisfied, or a right to take it for granted [...] even if [...] the thinker concerned is in no position to consider it. In other words: although the entitlement-conservative augments his conception of the justificational architecture of a perceptual belief with the thesis that thinkers are rationally entitled to trust in satisfaction of the relevant authenticity-condition, what he requires of the thinker if she justifiably forms a belief on the basis of her experience is exactly what the dogmatist requires. (Wright 2012, pp. 476-477)

Here Wright is adamant that, as remarked in §1, his conservative position is primarily an account of propositional justification (or warrant, as he prefers to call it). Moreover, it does not require subjects consciously to entertain, let alone be able to grasp the non-evidential justification (the entitlement, in Wright's terminology) there is for the relevant "authenticity-conditions" – that is, in this case, that there is an external world. In this respect the conservative view is on par with the liberal one. They diverge only with respect to the conditions they think should obtain to have propositional perceptual justification.

Yet, Wright goes on to claim that, for this very reason, the moderate account cannot be considered an alternative to either. Here is his argument:

[O]n Coliva's proposal, at least on the natural understanding of "assume" as denoting a propositional attitude, something more would seem to be needed: the thinker will also have to make some assumptions, whatever exactly 'assuming' is taken to consist in. Thus when presented at first level, Coliva's proposal can seem *more* demanding of the thinker than either entitlement-conservativism or dogmatism – and consequently open to the children-and-intelligent-animals kind of objection that moves the dogmatist in the first place. (Wright 1992, p. 477)

The problem, however, is that moderatism, as I have construed it in Coliva (2015) and explained in §1, does not require subjects to assume anything, at the level of propositional justification. Yet this fact does not make it collapse onto the liberal position. For the difference is precisely that for a liberal it is enough, for perceptual justification for an empirical proposition P to obtain, that one had the appropriate course of experience, absent defeaters. For a moderate, in contrast, just like a conservative, that is not enough. The hinge proposition H – or

in Wright's terminology, the authenticity-condition H – needs to be posited as part of the informational setting which makes perceptual justifications possible. In other words, at the level of propositional justification, the moderate account is more like the conservative than the liberal one. They differ merely in the further requirement that for such a positing to be rational it should be justified (evidentially or otherwise). Whereas the conservative imposes such a requirement – whence also its labeling a “skeptical” account¹⁰ – the moderate denies it. Since I take it, at least for Wright, the conservative account of the structure of perceptual justification is perfectly intelligible, so should the moderate one. Or else, neither is.

Taking himself to have shown that the only level at which the moderate account is plausible is at the level of claims, Wright cashes it out as follows.

[A] fully reflective, explicit thinker does need to take ownership of anything she recognizes as an authenticity-condition and, if she can muster no evidence on its behalf, to acknowledge that she is taking its satisfaction on trust. (...) What sets the ‘third way’ apart is rather (...) that – apart of course from the thinker's having the relevant perceptual experiences – that is *all* that needs to be in place (...). In particular, there is no call for some (...) non-evidential warrant for the assumption concerned. (Wright 2012, p. 477-478).

The problem here is that, as explained in §2, I don't require subjects to take ownership of the authenticity condition, while lacking a justification for it, in order for them to count as *doxastically* assuming H. Of course, they might do so, but they don't have to, as the second disjunct in the definition clearly states:

To assume H doxastically: a proposition H (which is a constitutive element of the propositional justification for a specific class of propositions C) is either grasped and possibly appealed to in the course of claiming one's justification for a proposition P, belonging to C; or else, it is such that a subject can participate in an epistemic practice that has H as one of its rational preconditions.

¹⁰ Wright follows skeptics in holding that, unless H is justified (or warranted), it is not rational. Contrary to skeptics, however, he believes that H *can be* justified, albeit non-evidentially.

Yet, according to Wright, it would be problematical for subjects to claim a justification for P, based merely on assuming H, while having no justification for it. Of course, I can see the worry here – it is the typically skeptical worry that, absent such a justification, that assumption is no more epistemically rational than any other one incompatible with it. Yet notice, first, that this worry is not in the least assuaged by embracing Wright’s notion of entitlement. For Wright-style entitlements are not justifications (or warrants) that speak to the truth of the proposition they are meant to justify (Wright 2004, p. 206). Second, the worry can indeed be assuaged by providing a story, like the constitutive one we will review momentarily, which explains why, despite not being justified, H is epistemically rational.

And here comes Wright’s third objection, against the plausibility of the constitutive view, based on his own interpretation of it, which is worth quoting in full.

[Coliva] suggests [that] there are certain assumptions that are *constitutive* of rational empirical enquiry. It is not that making them is sustained by certain special considerations that serve to explain why it is rational so to do. Rather, rational empirical enquiry simply *is* an activity in which these assumptions are made and allowed to govern the enquirer’s conception of the evidential significance of various types of occurrence. To ask *why* they are rational — Coliva doesn’t say exactly this, but it would seem to be in keeping with what she does say — is to ask a question incorporating a mistake very similar to that made by someone who asks what it is in the nature of Chess that mandates playing it on a board of 64 squares, 8x8, alternating black and white. [...]

If this interpretation is broadly correct, then Coliva’s third way is a [...] “paradigm case” response to scepticism. [...] [I]f it really were constitutive of our conception of rational empirical enquiry to assume that there is an external material world, then there should be a kind of unintelligibility about a sceptical challenge to the rationality of this assumption which would be at odds with the sense of paradox created by the best sceptical arguments that challenge it. (...) How can a thesis about what is primitively constitutive of a concept be controversial? And how, if it can, might it be recognized to be correct?

(Wright 2012, pp. 478-479)

I find this objection quite perplexing. First, my account is an account of epistemic rationality itself. In fact, it is in large part a standard account of it, as evidenced by the following definition.

Epistemic Rationality Extended: For a subject S, it can be epistemically rational both to believe perceptually justified propositions and to assume those unjustifiable propositions that make the acquisition of perceptual justifications possible in the first place and are therefore constitutive of them.

That is, no skeptic disputes that epistemic rationality consists in providing epistemic justification for or against specific empirical beliefs.¹¹ What I add to that is simply making it explicit that the production of such justifications constitutively depends on taking for granted certain assumptions (or “authenticity-conditions”, in Wright’s terminology). Just like constitutive rules are essential to the games they constitute because otherwise moves within them would either be impossible or lose their point, so there are basic assumptions that are essential to epistemic rationality because without them the moves within it – that is, justifications for (or against) ordinary empirical propositions – would either be impossible, or lose their point (i.e. their epistemic significance). Thus, I take myself to be providing an explanation primarily of what epistemic rationality *is*, like other theorists before me have taken themselves to be providing accounts of what knowledge is, or of what warrant is (including Wright). It is not required, to such an end, that ordinary folks, or even theorists of different persuasions, should find those accounts intuitive, or that they should spontaneously assent to them, in a fashion similar to what, according to generative linguists, native speakers of a language should do when presented with a well-formed sentences of their language, say.

Indeed, any so-called “over-riding” solution to skeptical paradoxes depends on proposing accounts of the central notions involved that somewhat depart from their typical, or pre-theoretical understanding.¹² Of course, in order not to sound *ad hoc*, these solutions need to make a case that the typical understanding is somewhat misleading. And indeed I do claim, based on the reasons we have just rehearsed (however briefly), that sticking to a narrow

¹¹ A cautionary note: for the purposes of this paper, which is centered on the notion of perceptual justification, I am not adding the adjective “perceptual” to qualify the form of epistemic rationality considered here.

¹² Other prominent examples of over-riding solutions to skeptical paradoxes are semantic contextualist accounts of knowledge claims, and Wright’s own account of non-evidential warrants (or entitlements).

conception of epistemic rationality is wrong. To be sure, it is understandable to some extent, since we typically dispute the rationality of *ordinary* empirical beliefs, and do not discuss the status of the hinge assumptions that are constitutive of their justification. Yet, it is mistaken nonetheless.

Now, it is true that I am no Platonist, and that I think that (at least many) concepts are grounded in practices – or in use, as Wittgenstein would have put it – and that if an account of a given practice is constitutive of a concept it should be eventually recognized as such by conceptually endowed and reflective creatures. Yet, this is inessential to the proposal, from an epistemological point of view. That is, the epistemological proposal I am making does not stand or fall with the correctness of this account of concepts. For example, one could have a purely externalist account of concepts, which typically severs the connection between the identity conditions of concepts and their recognition from the first person point of view (think of ‘water’/‘twater’ and H₂O/XYZ) and still hold that epistemic rationality extends to its constitutive assumptions.

Yet, I do think that skeptics – and theorists like Wright who follow them in their request for justification (or warrant) of assumptions constitutive of epistemic justification – are actually blind to an essential feature of the practice they engage in and, to the extent that that practice is constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality, also to one of the constitutive inferences of that concept. This is not as unusual as Wright thinks. Take any concept we have: it typically takes some doing to individuate its constitutive inferences and it is certainly not required that ordinary folks should be able to individuate them or even spontaneously assent to them, once they are presented with them. What counts, rather, is how they actually go on inferring and judging. If those actions are carried out in conformity with the inference rules individuated by theorists, that is all is required to grant subjects with some implicit (or tacit) acceptance of those constitutive inferences.

Notice, moreover, that Wright’s own claim that we should recognize non-evidential warrants – “entitlements” as he calls them – alongside evidential ones is certainly not any better off in this regard. First because it entails that the term “warrant” – and the corresponding concept – is ambiguous between earned (evidence-based) and unearned (non-evidence-based) warrants in a way that would typically escape ordinary folks and theorists of a different persuasion, like skeptics. Second because unearned warrants, contrary to earned ones, do not speak to the truth of the proposition they warrant (Wright 2004, p. 206). Therefore, they are not just different in provenance from earned one, but also in their fundamental properties. This makes it suspect to consider them as a subspecies of ordinary warrants (or justifications). It would be a bit like noting that chairs are those objects we can sit on, irrespective on the number of legs, and then say that a pole is a chair even if we cannot sit on it, maybe because it has a leg.

What is more, it should be noted that skeptics of a Humean descent, *qua* human beings, do carry out their activities and make judgements, even about the justifiedness of ordinary empirical beliefs, in conformity with the assumption that there is an external world. As I have argued in other writings (Coliva 2015, 2020a), Humeans can actually be moderates with respect to perceptual justifications and admit that, once the relevant conditions are met, we are justified in believing that there are specific physical objects in our surroundings, while simply insisting that the basic assumption that there is an external world is a-rational, because it isn't supported by any epistemic reason, either a priori or a posteriori, nor can it be. Rather, that assumption comes natural to us because of our psychological make-up (Hume), or because of our upbringing within a community that takes it for granted (Strawson, as an interpreter of Wittgenstein). More importantly, I do not think that skeptics should really object to my constitutive account, once presented with it. That is, they could perfectly well agree, after some prompting and consideration, that the notion of epistemic rationality is extended:

Epistemic Rationality Extended: For a subject S, it can be epistemically rational both to believe perceptually justified propositions and to assume those unjustifiable propositions that make the acquisition of perceptual justifications possible in the first place and are therefore constitutive of perceptual justifications.

Rather than

Epistemic Rationality Narrow: For a subject S, it is epistemically rational to believe only perceptually justified propositions.

Yet, they could raise another kind of objection – namely, the typically epistemic realist worry that if we have no epistemic justification for assumptions such as “There is an external world”, then our practice would not be objective – that is, somewhat tracking a mind-independent reality – and would thus be arbitrary – that is, epistemically on par with other practices that have as their constitutive assumptions propositions incompatible with it. This is a worry that neither I nor Wright with his notion of entitlement propose to address head-on. For, to repeat, his entitlements do not speak to the likely truth of “authenticity-conditions”. (I have taken up this kind of objection in detail in Coliva 2015 (chapter 4), 2018, 2021 and Coliva & Palmira 2020, 2021).

Let us now turn to Wright's final objection, which again is worth citing in full.

My second, related reservation has to do with the question of what fixes the *identity* of concepts with the kind of normativity — I take it to be relevantly similar — exhibited both by concepts of epistemic rationality and concepts of morality. It seems to me, as to many, that it is possible in principle for cultures to have enormously divergent moral codes, major discrepancies in the things that they are prepared to classify as good, or obligatory, without raising any significant question whether all are exercising genuine, shared concepts of the *moral good* and the *morally obligatory*. Moral concepts can permit all kinds of divergent and *outré* applications without any questions being raised, necessarily, whether it is indeed concepts of the morally good and obligatory that are being applied. So my suspicion [...] is that such concepts have, in effect, *no* paradigms, no canonical in-rules, as it were. What unifies morally evaluative concepts across communities whose fundamental moral standards are radically different is rather (...) a common conception between the communities concerned of the *consequences* of classifying a type of action as moral. [...]

[I]f that is correct, then the sceptical challenge is not to be silenced by the suggestion that the rational can only be what we most fundamentally call ‘rational’. The model does not imply that there will always be a good challenge to explain *why* a particular kind of action in particular circumstances is morally good; or why a particular pattern of belief formation is rational. But the challenge is at any rate not to be stifled by the assertion that it enters primitively into our concepts of the good, or the rational, that they respectively embrace that kind of action, and that pattern of belief-formation.

If this is right, [...] then the basic claim of the third way about the constitution of our concept of epistemic rationality should give way to a thesis about the epistemic value of [...] an uncritical acceptance of the existence of an external material world. The argument should be, not that the rationality of such acceptances is part of what we mean by “rational” but, substantively, that they are an essential part of any form of enquiry that is harnessed to the essential goals of enquiry: truth, knowledge, the avoidance of error, understanding, and the construction of an integrated, systematic and powerfully predictive framework of belief. (Wright 2012, p. 480)

As we saw, the extended rationality claim is about epistemic rationality itself, and it is a claim to the effect that the assumption of the existence of an external world is indeed an essential part of any genuinely epistemic inquiry. Yet, reflecting on concepts, I am not entirely clear about what suggestion is being made here. Is Wright perhaps

embracing a form of semantic atomism, whereby inferences are not constitutive of concepts? In that case, radically diverging communities would merely diverge in their applications of the same concept. Yet, the theoretical question remains: what is the concept of epistemic rationality at play? And this question would be hard to answer since no appeal to canonical inferences could be made. Yet it would be necessary to answer it to be in a position to determine which applications of that concept are right or wrong. Now, Fodor (1998) notoriously proposed to think of concepts roughly as labels for properties and of properties, like being a dog, as the property of eliciting the emergence in our minds of a given concept, such as the concept *dog*, upon causal interaction with (typical) dogs. I would find Wright's leaning towards such a view surprising given his anti-realist and Wittgensteinian proclivities,¹³ but maybe he has changed his mind as of late. Still, in the case of a theoretical concept like the one of epistemic rationality, it is not clear what kind of properties we could have been in causal contact with such as to become endowed with that concept. All we have ever causally encountered (in this area) are practices of considering certain empirical beliefs rational and others irrational, while taking for granted that they were about mind-independent physical objects. Yet, if no inference is ever constitutive of a concept, even asking the question whether the concept of epistemic rationality that comports with that practice is extended or not would be illicit.

Or maybe the suggestion is that we should forget about the concept of epistemic rationality and talk about epistemic rationality itself. In that case, the claim I should make, according to Wright, is that assumptions such as "There is an external world" "are an essential part of any form of enquiry that is harnessed to the essential goals of enquiry: truth, knowledge, the avoidance of error, understanding, and the construction of an integrated, systematic and powerfully predictive framework of belief" (*ibid.*). Yet, if this is the suggestion, then I don't see in what way I have not already conformed to it. For it has always been part of my defense of the constitutive account that either skeptics, in a Pyrrhonian vein, are going to live and judge without making the assumption that there is an external world, thereby forsaking knowledge and running incredible risks all the time, since there is no reason to think that they should be worried of crossing a street, say, if they had a visual appearance as of a

¹³ Indeed, for Wittgenstein, the meaning of terms, and *mutatis mutandis* the identity of concepts, is determined by definitions, which often appeal to paradigmatic examples (e.g. "*This* is good/rational" or "*This* is called 'good/rational'"), and by an agreement in judgements about what counts as good/rational. Thus it would be entirely in keeping with his views to hold that if communities radically diverge about either, they would not assign the same meaning to 'good'/'rational' and would have different concepts of good and rational.

fast-approaching car; or else, in a Humean vein, they would already live in conformity with it, as we just saw. In this latter case, their skepticism would be merely hypothetical, or, at most, regarding the concept of epistemic rationality itself. Yet, since, as maintained in Coliva & Palmira (2020), only the extended concept would comport with the practice they would abide by, the extended version of it should be preferred. For reflect: if Humeans engage in the practice of providing reasons for or against ordinary empirical beliefs, and consider it rational, how could they account for the rationality of the practice if, by their lights, it would rest on *a*-rational assumptions? Hence, in response to such Humeans, one should insist that the extended rationality view allows one to claim or preserve harmony between our epistemic practices and the constitutive inferences of the concept of epistemic rationality.

Thus, to conclude, I think there are interesting issues about the concept of epistemic rationality which could have a bearing on how we ultimately want to cash it out, to best account for the harmony between that very concept and our epistemic practices. Yet, my proposal is primarily one about epistemic rationality itself and, as such, it does not stand or fall with any specific claim about the concept of epistemic rationality.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, I have clarified what it means for a hinge proposition like “There is an external world” to be propositionally and doxastically assumed, given a moderate account of the structure of perceptual justification, such as the one presented in Coliva (2015) and defended in a number of subsequent writings. Those clarifications have been brought to bear on several objections raised by Wright (2012) against the moderate account of perceptual justification and the constitutive account of epistemic rationality. If I am right, both accounts do not succumb to Wright’s criticisms and are worth taking seriously in contemporary debates about the structure of perceptual justifications and the nature of epistemic rationality.

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