

## SKEPTICISM UNHINGED\*

**Abstract:** *The paper explores the anti-skeptical bearing of the kind of hinge epistemology I have developed in Extended Rationality. A Hinge Epistemology. It focuses, in particular, on the moderate account of perceptual justification, the constitutive response put forward against Humean skepticism, and the denial of the unconditional validity of the Closure Principle, which is key in rebutting Cartesian skepticism. Along the way, a comparison with Wittgenstein's own views in On Certainty and with the positions held by other prominent hinge epistemologists, particularly Moyal-Sharrock, Pritchard and Wright, is provided.*

**Keywords:** *Hinges, perceptual justification, constitutivism, extended rationality, Humean skepticism, Cartesian skepticism, Closure principle, Transmission failure.*

### 1. Introduction

Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* are at the roots of the ever-accelerating trend in contemporary epistemology, which goes under the label of "hinge epistemology". Key to this trend is the acknowledgement of the philosophical significance of the idea that justification and knowledge of empirical propositions always take place within a system of assumptions, or "hinges". Such hinges, Wittgenstein maintains, are the scaffolding of our thoughts (OC 211), the foundations of our research and action, (OC 87–8), and of our doubt and enquiry (OC 151). Here are the passages where Wittgenstein introduces them:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system [of assumptions]. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments; no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument.

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

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\* I would like to thank an anonymous referee for helpful comments on the penultimate version of this paper.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.  
(OC 105, 341–343)

In this paper I revisit the main anti-skeptical thrust of the kind of hinge epistemology I have been developing since my *Extended Rationality. A Hinge Epistemology* (Coliva 2015). In doing so, I move away from the letter, if not the spirit of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, to claim that propositions like "There is an external world". "I am not a BIV", etc. play a rule-like role, while remaining truth-apt. Furthermore, I maintain that they are constitutive of epistemic rationality and therefore rational, even though unjustifiable. On this extended sense of rationality, understood as comprising both justified beliefs and those assumptions which make the acquisition of justification possible, hinges turn out to be rational and, thanks to them, knowledge of large swaths of reality possible. Thus, the extended rationality view allows us to unhinge skepticism, both in its Cartesian and Humean form.

## 2. Moderatism and Humean Skepticism

What does it mean to say that all investigations take place within a system of assumptions? Think of "A goal has just been scored." We take the experience of seeing a ball roll between two poles to justify that proposition only thanks to already taking for granted that a football match is being played. For that experience could be just the same if a different game were being played, such that a ball rolling between those poles would not constitute scoring a goal. If so, however, a different proposition (or set thereof) would be justified; for instance, that an own goal has just been scored. This idea can be extended to many different cases. One key move consists in noticing that this insight can actually be brought to bear on the main assumption challenged by (Humean) scepticism;<sup>2</sup> namely, "there are physical objects", understood as mind-independent, continuously existing entities. Consider, for instance, a hand-like experience: just by itself it could equally justify "Here is a hand", "I am hallucinating having a hand"; "I am a BIV (a brain in a vat) who is having

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2 Some Wittgenstein scholar would dispute the legitimacy of this move from an exegetical point of view, by appealing to OC 35 where Wittgenstein declares "There are physical objects" nonsense. However, in Coliva (2010, Ch. 3) I have maintained that, from an exegetical point of view, Wittgenstein is contesting the philosophical use of that sentence, as if there could be a legitimate ontological dispute between realists and idealists and the former, like G. E. Moore, could object to the latter by insisting on that truth. He is not objecting at all, however, to its use as a "piece of terminological instruction", to remind everyone that the category of physical objects belongs to our conceptual scheme (see OC 36). This, in my view, as we will see in sect. 3, can actually be coupled with the idea that "there are physical objects" is true, at least in a minimal sense and is, after all, a proposition, which has a rule-like role, rather than an empirical one.

a hand-like experience”, and so on. Hence, taking that experience to partly justify “Here is a hand”, rather than any of the other propositions compatible with that very experience, depends on already taking for granted that we are interacting with a world populated by physical objects, that our sense organs mostly work correctly (and, possibly, some other propositions, for example “I am cognitively lucid and not a victim of massive perceptual and cognitive deception”). Hence, we can take our perceptual experience as bearing on the question of what reality is like, i.e. of whether there is in fact a hand in front of us, only by taking for granted that there are physical objects with which we are causally interacting. If we doubted that there were, we could no longer consider that experience as being evidentially significant for that specific enquiry, since we could no longer take for granted that that experience is formed in response to the presence of a mind-independent physical object. Rather, it would then be compatible with alternative hypotheses, such that there are only collections of sense-data for instance. Thus, if we did not accept a hinge like “There are physical objects”, it would not be rational for us to rule the alternative sense-data hypothesis out. Hence, to be rational, we should also reinterpret all specific beliefs as being about collections of sense-data, and not as being about specific physical objects *qua* mind-independent entities.

Notice, moreover, that the general propositions I claim must be assumed in order for our experiences to bear legitimately onto other propositions about mid-size objects in our environment, so that the latter are justified, are not needed to give us an indefeasible justification for these more specific empirical propositions. *Ceteris paribus* – that is, given those very assumptions and experiences – we could still be facing papier-mâché hands, for instance. What we need those assumptions for is to be able to overcome what one might call our “cognitive locality” – that is, the representations given to us through perception. Thus, we need those assumptions in order justifiably to go beyond our experiences and bring them to bear on a universe populated by physical objects, whose precise identity and properties can, of course, still escape us in certain circumstances. To be more precise: if a certain kind of evidence *e*, like a perceptual experience, is compatible with mutually incompatible kinds of propositions, namely propositions about mid-size physical objects (P) or about BIVs being stimulated so as to have those experiences, say, absent any causal interaction with the relevant physical objects (Q), in order for *e* to accrue to a justification for propositions of kind P rather than Q, some extra condition has to be met. It is only in this way that we will have a justification for propositions of kind P and will be within our rights in taking a given experience, which is a mind-*dependent* kind of evidence, to bear on propositions about mind-*independent* objects.

Hence, a key claim in *Extended Rationality* is that perceptual justification can take place only thanks to a system of very general assumptions, such as

“There is an external world” (or “There are physical objects”), “My sense organs work mostly reliably”, “I am not a victim of massive perceptual and cognitive deception”, and so on. A problem as old as the very history of epistemology – epitomized by “Agrippa’s trilemma” – concerns the epistemic status of these assumptions. In the quest for justification, each horn of this trilemma is thought to be problematical: either we end up providing circular justifications; or we embark on an infinite regress; or else, we stop with unjustifiable and therefore a-rational and arbitrary assumptions.

Suppose we hold that each assumption, in its turn, needs to be warranted, in order for it to generate perceptual justification, together with the appropriate kind of experience. For, one may think, it is only if these assumptions are justified that our ordinary empirical beliefs will rest on secure grounds and will therefore be justified. Consider the football case: it is only if I am independently justified in believing that a football match is being played that my experience of seeing a ball roll between two poles provides a justification for “A goal has just been scored.” I think that in this case there is no dispute. Why not? Because it is indeed very easy to see how that assumption can be *independently* justified, for instance: I know that I paid for a ticket to the football match between teams A and B in the stadium where I am now sitting, watching the game; or, I know that every Sunday a football match is played in the stadium where I am, roughly at this time, and that today is Sunday; or else, if I am watching the match on television, I know that it has been advertised as the football match between the two teams; or that commentators keep repeating that this is a crucial football match, or saying that the team that prevails will win the World Cup, and I know that the World Cup is a football tournament; and so on.

Yet, as soon as we move away from the football example, things become much more complicated, for an independent justification for the relevant background assumptions is impossible to attain. Consider a historical case, like Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz, or the very general proposition that the Earth has existed for a very long time before our birth (see OC 183). One might think that the latter proposition is justified by a lot of our specific historical beliefs based, in their turn, on testimonies, both personal and documentary, often recorded in academic texts. However, those testimonies and documents could be just the same and yet have appeared and been recorded in academic books only a few minutes back. Therefore, clearly, it is not to be expected that a justification for such a general proposition could be obtained by inferring to it starting with premises that are justified just as long as that very proposition is taken for granted. That kind of justification would ultimately be circular and it would be no justification at all.

Nor is it to be expected that justification for it could ensue from coherence between it and our further beliefs. Justifications are epistemic goods – to put it in general terms – that should speak to the truth of what they are supposed to justify. Yet, starting with the same evidence – apparent testimonies,

documents and academic records – we could just as well produce a different and yet entirely coherent system of propositions. In that system the general assumption is that the Earth has just been created replete with everything we find in it and the corresponding specific empirical propositions are like “It looks as if Napoleon won at Austerlitz about three centuries ago.” Nothing makes the first system of beliefs more likely to be true than the second one. If we deem otherwise it is either because we are more used to it and therefore think that it is epistemically kosher; or else it is because we consider its specific beliefs justified and think that this, in turn, gives us a justification for its basic presuppositions. However, in the former case, we would conflate our willingness to endorse a given system of beliefs with proof of its truth and, in the latter, we would try to provide a circular justification for its basic assumptions, starting from beliefs that are justified only insofar as those very assumptions are taken for granted.

Another possibility is to think that we have a priori justification for “The Earth has existed for a very long time.” Where would that justification come from, though? Intuition is an appealing answer, but only shortly, because one then faces the problem of explaining its nature and workings. This remains one of the philosophically most arduous tasks.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we have some kind of a priori yet inferential justification, coming from reflection on the very meaning of the terms involved. Notice, however, that this would immediately be hostage to the particular theory of meaning we are prepared to subscribe to. For it is only by relying on inferential-role semantics, which may take either a holistic or a molecularist form, that we can sensibly claim that, for instance, it is constitutive of the meaning of “Earth” that it has existed for a very long time.<sup>4</sup> Yet, a direct referentialist could simply say that “Earth” refers to the planet we are all living on now, whether it has existed for a very long time or only for five minutes, and that this is the meaning of “Earth.”

Faced with this kind of difficulty – to repeat, distrust in justifications for general assumptions, stemming from specific beliefs that would be justified only by already taking them for granted; as well as in coherence theories of justification, and mistrust in intuition and in inferential a priori justifications stemming from meaning-constitutive considerations – recent years have seen the emergence of yet another proposal, which belongs to the a priori camp broadly construed. This proposal provides for non-evidential warrants, called “entitlements”, for very general background presuppositions, such as, “The Earth has existed for a very long time.” Entitlements however, at least in the way they are currently thought of,<sup>5</sup> are not meant to speak to the truth of these propositions. Yet, if this is the case, it is very hard to

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3 I discuss some contemporary attempts in Coliva (2015, Ch. 2).

4 Molecularist semantics identify some core inferences as constitutive of concepts, whereas holistic ones take all inferences licensed by a given concept to be constitutive of it.

5 Cf. Wright (2004), examined in Coliva (2015, Ch. 2 and 4).

see how entitlements could be genuine epistemic warrants for them, since they are neither evidential warrants nor guides to the truth of the relevant propositions, capable of providing a viable solution to the original problem they were meant to address; namely, the problem of how these general assumptions could actually be epistemically justified.

Similar considerations to the ones just rehearsed for “The Earth has existed for a very long time” could be made for “There is an external world”, “My sense organs work mostly reliably” and “I am not a victim of massive perceptual and cognitive deception”, which, arguably, are the presuppositions thanks to which our sensory experiences can be taken (defeasibly) to justify our beliefs about specific mid-size objects in our environment. If this were the situation, since we can provide neither immediate nor mediate justifications for these propositions, it would seem that the skeptical outcome would ensue. That is to say, it would seem that the only plausible alternative would be to hold that these are just a-rational assumptions and that, even if we think we are justified in believing ordinary empirical propositions, we are not.

I think that in broad outline this is the path that (save for considerations regarding coherence and entitlements) led Hume to his skepticism. However, it is again Hume who, to my mind, offered the first seeds to try to escape it, as paradoxical as that might seem. These seeds were developed much later on, in a different direction, by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, as I think Peter Strawson was the first to recognize in his *Scepticism and Naturalism. Some Varieties* (1985).

According to Hume, we cannot help believing that there is an external world, so that our sensory experiences are constantly brought to bear on a world populated by mid-size objects that are taken to exist independently of our minds, even when they are not directly perceived by us. For Hume, it is part of our psychological constitution that we cannot but form beliefs and devise actions accordingly. That is the way we live. That is the human condition; but notice that, for him, the human condition is the Humean condition of being forced by nature to follow certain forms of psychological and practical conduct that fall outside rational sanction. Rationally, however, we have to recognize that our most basic beliefs are not justified and neither are our more specific empirical beliefs based on perceptual evidence.<sup>6</sup>

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6 This is not universally accepted by Hume scholars. Constantine Sandis (“Hume as a hinge epistemologist”, paper presented at the Second Hinge Epistemology Conference, Paris July 1–2 2019), for instance, contests this and claims that Hume held that ordinary empirical beliefs are justified. He also thinks that for Hume there might be a sense in which even the general assumption that there are physical objects may be justified. This would turn Hume in an anti-skeptic philosopher. I am not a Hume scholar and I am not in a position to challenge this interpretation on a textual basis. In the following, I will be engaging with a kind of skepticism, inspired by at least some remarks in Hume and by some of their more traditional interpretations whereby we are not epistemically justified in holding that there is an external world and, for that reason, that assumption is not epistemically rational.



Wittgenstein, in contrast, put forward the view that even though we cannot justify these very general assumptions (or indeed, in his view, even more specific ones which are equally necessary for certain sorts of empirical practices and inquiries), we cannot help but make them thanks to our upbringing within a community that shares language and certain epistemic practices or, more generally, a *form of life*. However, his idea was that the human condition is not the Humean one at bottom. Hence, there is no unbridgeable gulf between what reflection imposes on us and what we cannot help doing, given our psychological and more culturally determined nature. That is, between the recognition that all justification for ordinary empirical propositions rests on unwarrantable assumptions, and going on living *as if*, thanks to those assumptions, our ordinary beliefs were justified. Thus, the human condition, in Wittgenstein's view, is one in which we simply have to recognize that whatever degree of justification we possess for our ordinary empirical beliefs, and that we *do* in fact possess, it takes place within a system of assumptions, which are neither justified nor justifiable.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Wittgenstein, the human condition is importantly different from the Humean one, primarily because justifications are indeed possible, at least for ordinary empirical propositions, but only thanks to a system of unwarrantable assumptions.

This is the kind of picture about the structure of perceptual justification that I present and defend in some detail in *Extended Rationality*. It can be seen, among other things, as the attempt to make good one of the horns of Agrippa's alleged trilemma. According to that trilemma, no justification is ever possible because there are no immediately justified propositions, which can serve as the basis for all others,<sup>8</sup> and so the quest for justification ultimately leads to an infinite regress; nor can justification be produced in a circular way<sup>9</sup> or by resting on unjustified assumptions. The view I present

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Once the moderate architecture of perceptual justification is endorsed, the possible consequence that also ordinary empirical beliefs may not be epistemically justified, if that general assumption is not, would be blocked. For such a justification is not needed in order to have perceptual justifications for ordinary empirical beliefs. Also Cartesian skepticism would be blocked since Closure would not hold and hence, from the fact that we have no epistemic justification for "I am not a BIV" it would not follow that one has none for holding "Here is my hand" based on one's current visual experience (see sect. 4).

7 Recall the citation from OC 105. See also OC 359 and 559.

8 The attempt to build on that horn of the trilemma would lead to foundationalism. Both Pryor's (2004) and Wright's (2004) views can be seen as different ways of defending it. In Pryor we have immediate justification for ordinary empirical beliefs, thanks to perception and in the absence of defeaters, and from them derive a justification for very general propositions such as "There is an external world." In Wright, in contrast, we have an entitlement – that is, a non-evidential justification – directly for those very general assumptions and, thanks to it and to an appropriate course of experience, a justification for ordinary empirical beliefs.

9 The attempt to build on this horn of the trilemma would lead to various forms of coherentism, whose fault is that they could give rise to maximally coherent, yet

and defend in *Extended Rationality* agrees that, when it comes to very general propositions, such as “There is an external world”, we cannot immediately justify them (whatever that might mean as we have briefly explored above). Nor can we justify them in a circular way by dint of beliefs that are justified only as long as these assumptions are already taken for granted. However, it aims to vindicate the idea that even if these assumptions are neither warranted nor warrantable, they can serve to produce a justification for ordinary empirical propositions, once we enjoy the appropriate kinds of experience.

I call this view the “moderate” conception of perceptual warrant, as it can be seen as lying in between the so-called “liberal” view, proposed in recent years by Jim Pryor (2004), and the “conservative” view defended mostly by Crispin Wright (2004). In outline, the first one corresponds to the intuition that perceptual justification is immediate. As long as there are no defeaters, our perceptual experiences give us an immediate justification for ordinary empirical propositions such as “Here is a hand.” In contrast, the conservative view has it that a warrant for ordinary empirical propositions can be had only if certain general assumptions are independently justified.

The idea I defend is that, contrary to the liberal position, we need assumptions to overcome our cognitive locality – that is, if we want to form defeasibly justified beliefs about specific physical objects in our environment based on our experiences. Yet, contrary to the conservative view, these assumptions need not be warranted, for, in fact, they cannot.<sup>10</sup> For present purposes, let me stress that the moderate architecture of the structure of perceptual warrant just says that a specific empirical proposition P, for instance “Here is a hand,” is perceptually justified iff one has the relevant kind of experience, such as a hand-like one, and the background assumption that there is an external world is in place (possibly together with other ones such as, “My sense organs are mostly working reliably,” “I am not the victim of massive perceptual and cognitive deception,” and so on), while there are no defeaters. Since this definition is compatible with various ways of thinking of the status of such an assumption, which range from an externalist positing that the world is just like that, to making it the content of a doxastic attitude of a specific subject, moderatism is introduced as a *family* of possible views and not as just one single position. Yet, they would all be different species of the same genus – the genus I call, following the Wittgensteinian metaphor,

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incompatible systems, among which we could make no epistemically sound choice. That is to say, we would have no means to determine which one is the correct one. Or else, we would have to produce locally circular justifications, that is justifications for general propositions like “There is an external world” based on specific propositions, such as “Here is a hand,” which, in their turn, are justified only insofar as we take for granted those very assumptions. In Coliva (2015, Ch. 3) I argue at length why such circular justifications would be no justifications at all.

10 For a detailed discussion of the reasons why these assumptions cannot be warranted, see Coliva 2015, Ch. 2.



“hinge epistemology” – because they all hold that perceptual justifications take place “within a system” (OC 105) of assumptions, that is of propositions that lie outside the route of inquiry and that make justifications within inquiry possible in the first place.

Furthermore, these species of the same genus are compatible with different accounts of how we should think of the content of perceptual experience for the latter partially to constitute a justification for ordinary empirical beliefs. Indeed, it is my conviction that the moderate architecture of the structure of perceptual warrants has been endorsed, in one version or another, by many different philosophers, like naturalists of a Humean persuasion (provided they were prepared to forsake Hume’s skeptical attitude at the reflective level), Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, and naturalists inspired by him, like Strawson. In addition, pragmatists would turn out to be moderates, in my view, for they would give a pragmatic and therefore non-epistemic justification for hinges. Furthermore, those externalists about the nature of perceptual justification who are prepared to recognize a role for general assumptions, like Ernest Sosa in recent writings, would count as moderates too.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Humean Skepticism Unhinged

One could then be tempted to think that moderatism inspired by some of Wittgenstein’s considerations in *On Certainty* would offer only momentary relief from skeptical worries for – the train of thought would go – it would remain that if those assumptions are not justifiable, then they may well turn out to be false. Hence, nothing guarantees that our epistemic practices rest on a secure basis. Yet this, according to Wittgenstein, would be right only if it made sense to call those assumptions into question. That is to say, it would be right only if those assumptions were in the business of epistemic appraisal at all. That is, if it made sense to apply to them the very categories of truth and falsity and, more importantly and less contentiously, the very categories of being justified/unjustified, or even known or unknown. But the main thrust of *On Certainty*, at least according to the kind of, so-called, “framework reading” I myself have put forward,<sup>12</sup> is that those very general assumptions are not like empirical propositions of a more general kind, *contra* what G. E. Moore held. Rather, they are similar to *rules*; that is to say, they play a normative role and, like rules, are not subject to truth or falsity, nor to assessment in terms of justification or lack thereof.<sup>13</sup> Compare with “Stop at traffic lights when red.” It is intuitive to think that it does not correspond to a pre-ordinate fact, and so that it does not make sense to think of it as either

11 For a more detailed discussion of why moderates are legion, see Coliva (2015, Ch. 1).

12 See Coliva (2010). See also Moyal-Sharrock (2004).

13 The details of such a reading are developed differently by Moyal-Sharrock (2004) and Coliva (2010) and (2013a, b), but the main thrust is the same.

true or false in any robust sense of that word. Nor, for the same reason, would it make sense to think of it as either justified – that is as supported by further facts or experiences – or as unjustified – as disconfirmed by further facts and experiences. If “There is an external world” or “There are physical objects” are relevantly similar to “Stop at traffic lights when red” then the skeptical worry that, being unjustified, they might turn out to be false would be off target and due to a mistaken conception of the very nature of those “hinges.”

I myself embrace the Wittgensteinian view that justifications for ordinary empirical propositions are possible thanks to a system of assumptions – that is, owing to a system of more general propositions, which, as such, cannot be justified. However, I do not wish to endorse the view that these assumptions are rules, devoid of any descriptive content, if that is indeed Wittgenstein’s considered view on the topic.<sup>14</sup> Yet, if this is a sensible avenue to explore as far as the status of “There is an external world” is concerned, it actually seems to be in danger of re-opening the door to the skeptical challenge. For now, how would one block the conclusion that this is merely an assumption we make which, however, is actually unjustified and therefore not rational, exactly as a skeptic would hold? This is the challenge the extended rationality view I present and defend in Coliva (2015) is meant to face. Accordingly, if either empirical, or coherentist, or a priori kinds of warrant for “There is an external world” are unattainable and entitlements are only putative epistemic warrants, we may defend the epistemic legitimacy of that hinge by claiming that, even though unwarranted, it is in fact *constitutive* of epistemic rationality itself. Just as both rules and moves are part of any game so, I argue, both constitutive assumptions and perceptual justifications, which are possible thanks to them, are part of epistemic rationality. To ban constitutive assumptions from epistemic rationality simply because they are not warranted (as they cannot be), like skeptics do, is due to too narrow and unmotivated a conception of the extent of epistemic rationality. Namely, one that confines it to perceptually justified beliefs only. In contrast, epistemic rationality extends beyond the latter to those very assumptions that make it possible to produce ordinary perceptual justifications and to have the kind of practice (or

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14 As always, with Wittgenstein, things are not entirely clear. My own reading, presented in Coliva (2010) and further developed in Coliva (2013a, b), is that it is possible to distinguish between the content and the role of a sentence. Hence, Wittgenstein’s hinge propositions would indeed be propositions, which, however, have been removed from doubt and inquiry. Therefore, they would play a normative role, while retaining a descriptive content. Think of the draws that serve as instructions to assemble pieces of furniture: they are, at once, pictures, and therefore have a descriptive content, as well as sets of instructions, or rules, regarding how to put pieces together. Indeed, in OC 318–320 Wittgenstein himself points out that the distinction between empirical propositions and norms is not a clear-cut one and that the very concept of proposition is a family resemblance one. I take this to mean that hinges, even though possibly neither true nor false and more akin to rules, would still be regarded by him as propositions. Moyal-Sharrock (2004), in contrast, thinks that they would not.

method) of forming, assessing, and withdrawing from empirical beliefs on the basis of perceptual evidence, which is itself constitutive of our very notion of epistemic rationality. If so, it turns out that we are actually *mandated by epistemic rationality itself* to assume “There is an external world”. However, a rational mandate is not an epistemic warrant – namely, an epistemic good that speaks to the truth of what it is meant to warrant. Humean skeptics are right to think that we have no such warrant for “There is an external world” or “There are physical objects”. However, they are wrong to think that, for that very reason, these propositions fall outside the scope of epistemic rationality and that, for that very reason, we cannot have perceptual warrants for our ordinary empirical beliefs.

One may then worry that even if “There is an external world” and “There are physical objects” are epistemically rationally mandated, they might still be false and hence that the extended rationality view has done little to counter the skeptical challenge. It is here, however, that I think we should ponder more on the semantic assessment of that proposition and, in particular, on what it means to say that it is true. As is familiar, there are at least two broad notions of truth: a realist, mind-independent one, and an anti-realist, evidence-dependent one. According to the former, no matter what we think or judge, a proposition is true (or false) in its own right, because it corresponds (or fails to correspond) to some pre-ordinate, mind-independent fact. What is seldom noticed is that it is only on such a conception of truth that broadly Cartesian skeptical concerns with respect to “There is an external world” make sense. For it is only on such a realist conception of truth that, despite the fact that nothing we take ourselves to know speaks against that proposition, it might still be false. Yet, in order to counter the skeptical challenge we cannot revert to a familiar anti-realist, evidence-dependent view of truth either. For, it is a tenet of hinge epistemology that all specific empirical truths are known (or justifiably believed) only by taking that very general proposition for granted. Yet, as remarked, I do not wish to endorse the (allegedly) Wittgensteinian view, according to which hinges are not truth-evaluable at all.

It is at this junction that I propose to endorse a minimalist view of truth with respect to them. Accordingly, they satisfy certain platitudes: they may enter the disquotational schema, and allow for meaningful negation and embedding in suppositional contexts. So much suffices for predicating their truth. However, the kind of truth-property they enjoy is neither of a robustly realist kind, nor of a familiar anti-realist, evidentialist kind. For, to repeat, on the one hand, the realist conception of truth is the most powerful ally of the kind of skepticism that finds its impetus in the intuition that despite all the evidence we have in favour of any given empirical proposition, and even about hinge assumptions, they could nevertheless all be false. On the other, no evidentialist account of truth could confirm hinges for those hinges are needed in order to have justification in the first place. Hence, all there is to hinges’ truth is what is made explicit through the platitudes we have just

rehearsed. In particular, they are not true because they correspond to a mind-independent reality. Rather, they themselves are conditions of representation of entire swaths of “reality”. For instance, those concerning specific mind-independent physical objects (other minds, the past, the uniformity of nature, etc.). In addition, in a Wittgensteinian (indeed Kantian) spirit, when we are dealing with conditions of possibility of representation, they ultimately depend on us. That is, they depend on the fact that we have a conceptual scheme that countenances mind-independent objects. Hence, hinges like “There is an external world” are true, in a minimal sense, because they belong to our conceptual scheme and make it possible for us to represent specific mind-independent object and to acquire justification and knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions. To suppose that despite all we take ourselves to know hinges such as “There is an external world” and “There are physical objects” might after all be false would depend on still being in the grip of a realist conception of truth, which one would be entitled to endorse in this connection only if there were no other options.<sup>15</sup> In short, it would be the result of a kind of “nostalgia” for a realist conception of truth, which results in our inability to let it go, as it were. Such a realist conception of truth is at the root of many of our philosophical puzzles and anxieties, according to Wittgenstein and several other “anti-representationalists” (a deceptive label, which suggests the impossibility of representing anything, while in fact the idea would be that representations are a function of conceptual schemes that are not themselves reflections of a predeterminate reality). It is in connection with this kind of feeling and attitude toward the realist conception of truth that therapy, in the form of acting on our will, is needed, according to Wittgenstein. For initially a picture of truth holds us captive. Through philosophical reflection, we recognize that much and see how it could be thought of differently and yet cannot help going back to it. It is here that our will has to become stronger and make us finally turn our backs to that picture. Temptations may still occur along the road of our thinking about reality. Yet, each time we will have to fight them. In this sense, philosophy is a constant battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence, as Wittgenstein points out in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, 109).

Hence, the final and specific version of hinge epistemology I endorse has it that thanks to (minimally) true and epistemically rationally mandated assumptions such as “There is an external world,” or “There are physical objects” (and possibly other ones), together with appropriate courses of experience, we can and do have perceptual justifications for ordinary empirical beliefs such as “Here is a hand”. However, to repeat, this is the species of the hinge epistemology genus I endorse. It is not the only possible one; even though I am

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15 Or else, if we were not aware of those options or had decisive arguments against them. This does not seem sustainable with respect to minimalist (or deflationary) accounts of truth. For further discussion of hinges’ minimalist truth, see Coliva 2018a and 2019.

convinced it is the one that has the best prospects of success, because it speaks to the skeptical challenge, albeit by developing an indirect response to it. That is, it is not a response that contradicts the skeptic by providing ordinary epistemic warrants for “There is an external world”. Rather, the extended rationality view is a response that shows that the skeptical quest is somehow illegitimate when it comes to very general propositions like “There is an external world,” as it asks for justifications that cannot be obtained and it is based on too narrow and unmotivated a conception of epistemic rationality and on a realist conception of truth that is by no means the only possible option.

#### 4. Cartesian Skepticism Unhinged

A number of important consequences follow from such a general picture. For example, it follows that the Principle of Closure for justification under known entailment is not unconditionally valid.<sup>16</sup> For “Here is my hand” entails “There is an external world”. Yet, while we can justifiably believe the former (and the entailment), we cannot justifiably believe the latter. Still, in my view, this does not lead to any “abominable conjunction”<sup>17</sup> of the kind “I justifiably believe there is my hand here, but I don’t justifiably believe there is an external world” *sic et simpliciter*. Rather, the kind of conjunction we get, once the extended rationality view is endorsed, is “I justifiably believe that here is my hand, although I don’t justifiably believe there is an external world, I am epistemically rationally mandated to assume there is.” As Harman and Sherman (2011) have pointed out, the threat of abominable conjunctions depends on not paying enough attention to the possibility of there being, in the vicinity of the repudiated notions (i.e. “epistemic justification for beliefs”), subtler ones, such as, in our case, the notion of “rationally mandated assumptions”.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, we have to recognize that beside the kind of warrant transmission-failure principle originally presented by Wright,<sup>19</sup> according to which an argument cannot generate (or enhance one’s previous) warrant for a conclusion if, and only if, the *warrantedness* of its premises depends on already possessing a warrant for its conclusion, there is another kind

16 The precise rendition of the Principle of Closure is a matter of contention. I take it to consist in the following: if P is justified or known, and it is justifiably believed or known that P entails Q, then Q is justified or known too. My reading of the Principle of Closure is therefore such to impose merely a consistency requirement between the epistemic status of the propositions figuring in the entailment. It does not see Closure as a principle capable of generating or enhancing the epistemic status of those propositions. The latter, by contrast, is a property of the Principle of Transmission of epistemic goods such as justification (or warrant) and knowledge.

17 Famously, this is Keith DeRose’s (1995) phrase.

18 There will presently be more on the key notion of assumption.

19 Cf. Wright (1985, 2004).

of warrant transmission-failure principle, which is indeed at issue in the kinds of cases that are of most interest to philosophers.<sup>20</sup> Namely, the one according to which an argument cannot generate (or enhance one's previous) warrant for a conclusion if, and only if, the warrantedness of its premises depends simply on the very *assumption* of its conclusion. It is for this reason that also on the moderate architecture of perceptual warrant, and not only on its conservative counterpart, Moore's argument ("Here is a hand. If there is a hand here, there is an external world. Therefore, there is an external world") is not cogent. Furthermore, it is because of this kind of transmission-failure that bootstrapping arguments designed to produce warrants for very general beliefs, such as "My sense organs are mostly working correctly," out of specific perceptual beliefs justified by means of occurrent perceptions, would not be cogent either.

Denying the unconditional validity of Closure for principled reasons – that is, because of the moderate account of perceptual justification and the latter kind of transmission failure – is a key move to block Cartesian skepticism. For, as is customary nowadays, that form of skepticism can be seen as depending on two crucial ideas. First, that we are not in a position to exclude radically skeptical scenarios, since all our presently available evidence would be compatible with their occurrence. Second, that if we cannot exclude their obtaining, we cannot know (or justifiably believe) ordinary empirical propositions, such as (P) "Here is my hand", based on one's current visual experience. This second assumption is indeed based on Closure. For, if that principle holds, if one cannot know (or justifiably believe) that one is not a BIV (Q), by contraposition, one cannot know (or justifiably believe) that there is a hand (P) where one seems to see it. Thus, if the Closure Principle does not hold unconditionally, it is indeed possible to know (or justifiably believe) P, even if one cannot know (or justifiably believe) (Q) "I am not a BIV", and Cartesian skepticism is therefore blocked.

Compared with other kinds of hinge epistemology, mine does not claim that not-Q is ultimately unintelligible;<sup>21</sup> nor does it claim that Q is not a proposition or the object of a propositional attitude, such that it could not figure in the entailment or as a possible instance of Closure (or of Transmission).<sup>22</sup>

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20 I am adopting Wright's terminology here and accordingly speaking of warrants rather than justifications. I take the terms to be safely interchangeable in this context.

21 For such a position in contemporary epistemology, see Schönbaumsfeld 2016. This is also very much in keeping with Wittgenstein's own pronouncements in *On Certainty* against the very intelligibility of the dreaming hypothesis. I discuss them at length in Coliva (2010, Ch. 3). Arguably, Wittgenstein's remarks are also at the origin of Putnam's (1981) brains in the vat argument.

22 See Moyal-Sharrock (2004) and Pritchard (2016) respectively. Pritchard in my view conflates Closure with Transmission because he thinks that Closure would be a principle, which would allow us to rationally come to believe the consequences of certain premises we already rationally believe. Since, for him, hinges are not the object of any



To repeat, in my view, “I am not a BIV” (or “I am not the victim of a lucid and sustained dream (or of any other massively cognitive deception)”) is a hinge of all our (empirical) inquiries and cannot be independently justified. Rather, it is constitutive of epistemic rationality and, for that reason, it cannot rationally be doubted either. For it is mandated by any rational activity and inquiry into (empirical) reality. Yet, it is truth-apt, albeit in a minimalist sense, and is a proposition, which, as such, can be the object of a propositional attitude and figure in truth-preserving (though non-epistemic generative<sup>23</sup>) entailments. In my view, the kind of attitude we bear to it is not belief, though, if belief is understood as an attitude of holding a proposition true based on reasons and evidence in its favor. That is why I prefer to talk about assuming, rather than believing, in connection with hinges. For assuming is still an attitude of holding a proposition true, which, however, does not have to be mediated by supporting reasons in favour of its contents.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, it should be realized that rejecting the unconditional validity of Closure is not a terrible price to pay. For, after all, Closure, and indeed Transmission of epistemic justification, as we have just seen, remain valid in ordinary cases. That is to say, in those cases in which the propositions on both sides of the entailment are not hinges. Thus, insisting on failure of Closure as a fatal blow to hinge epistemology, at least of the kind I have been defending, is once again the symptom of a kind of nostalgia for certain pictures or “truths”, which, however, there is no reason to consider sacrosanct, especially when all is being suggested is simply redefining their boundaries.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper we have seen how the specific version of hinge epistemology I have been developing since *Extended Rationality* can counter skepticism of both Humean and Cartesian descent. The key move is to realize, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, if not by following the letter of *On Certainty*, that propositions like “There is an external world”, “there are physical objects” and “I am not a BIV” play a rule-like role, as they are constitutive of epistemic rationality and are therefore mandated by epistemic rationality itself. That is, they allow us to represent reality as populated by mind-independent objects and to confidently exercise our cognitive powers to form justified or even

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rational belief, let alone one we form through reasoning, and are the object of visceral commitments instead, Closure does not apply to them and is therefore protected by counterexamples. I have discussed Pritchard’s views at length in Coliva 2016, 2018b. For a different characterization of Closure and a discussion of the difference between it and Transmission, see Coliva (2015, Ch. 3), cf. fn. 15.

23 See fn. 15.

24 For an extended discussion of assumptions, of how they are manifested in action and can be attributed also to a- or pre-linguistic creatures based on certain forms of behavior, see Coliva (2015, Ch. 1).

knowledgeable beliefs about them. This is compatible with retaining the idea that they are true, albeit in a minimalist sense, and can thus figure in entailments. Still, even if “Here is my hand” entails “There are physical objects” and “I am not a BIV”, it does not follow that if we can, and do in fact know the former, we also can and do know the latter. For the Principle of Closure for epistemic operators holds only for ordinary empirical propositions and does so because these very general assumptions cannot in any way be warranted or known. Yet, thanks to the moderate account of perceptual justification, this is in turn compatible with the commonsensical idea that we do in fact have plenty of justified beliefs in and knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions like “Here is my hand”. By retaining this large swath of knowledge and by seeing its assumptions as not lying outside epistemic rationality, thanks to constitutivism and an extended view of epistemic rationality, skepticism can actually be unhinged.

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