Extended Rationality & Epistemic Relativism

Natalie Alana Ashton, University of Vienna.

**0. Introduction**

In her recent book *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology* (2015), Annalisa Coliva argues for an account of the justification of our beliefs about the external world that involves ‘extending’ our notion of rationality. She claims that the dominant conception of rationality, on which rationality is understood to be comprised of just the propositions which we judge to be rational, is too narrow. We should extended it to also include unwarranted (and unwarrantable) background assumptions which are essential to our justificatory practices, and thus constitutive of epistemic rationality.

As part of her defence of this view, Coliva considers what she calls the “problem of epistemic relativism”. She offers a characterisation of this ‘problem’, and then divides it into two distinct challenges. One of these, which will not be discussed in depth in this paper, is the challenge of showing that her view does not allow alternative epistemic frameworks which are based on some practice other than observation. The second, which I will focus on, is the ‘observation-based challenge’ - the challenge of showing that her view does not allow alternative epistemic frameworks which are based on the practice of observation. Coliva claims to meet both of these challenges, and she needs to do so if her view is to avoid relativism.

My main aim in this paper is to argue that Coliva fails to meet the second challenge, and thus fails to show that extended rationality does not lead to epistemic relativism. Although this will involve criticising Coliva’s argument against the observation-based challenge, I do not mean this as a criticism of extended rationality as a whole. I will leave open the question of whether her view needs to meet the observation-based challenge - in other words, the question of whether epistemic relativism is a problematic consequence or a plausible philosophical position.

I’ll begin by explaining what Coliva means by ‘extended rationality’ (section 1). I’ll then introduce the conception of epistemic relativism that she initially relies on, and show why it might be thought to follow from her extended rationality view (section 2). I’ll next discuss the observation-based challenge, and Coliva’s attempt to meet it (section 3). I will ultimately show that this response fails, but first I’ll attempt to bolster it as much as possible. This will prove useful as it will suggest a way to modify our characterisation of epistemic relativism.

In the next section (4) I’ll show why Coliva’s response to the observation-based challenge fails. Ultimately, it is because the anti-pragmatist aspect of her view limits the kinds of normative restrictions that she is able to place on epistemic subjects, and so leaves her with fewer resources with which she can rule out the alternative epistemic frameworks in question.

Finally, I’ll conclude (section 5) by suggesting two avenues that future work on extended rationality might take. Unlike Coliva I don’t assume that epistemic relativism is a problem, and so don’t think that her view need to be disregarded if, as I argue, it can be shown to lead to epistemic relativism. Accordingly, the first avenue for future work involves embracing epistemic relativism. The second avenue doesn’t require this, but instead suggests that Coliva broaden her anti-pragmatist stance on extended rationality.

**1. Extended Rationality**

The view that Coliva describes as ‘extended rationality’ is an account of the justification that we have for our beliefs about the external world. Take, for example, a fairly mundane, everyday belief that an epistemic subject might have, such as that there is a cup on the table in front of her. What justifies this belief for this epistemic subject? Coliva’s extended rationality view is intended to provide us with the answer to this question.

There are two key components to this view which we will need to understand if we’re to appreciate the answer that it provides. The first is what Coliva calls “moderatism about perceptual warrants” (Coliva 2015: 18), and the second is a kind of constitutivism about epistemic rationality (Coliva 2015: 34). Let’s take each of these in turn.

Coliva describes her view as *moderate* to help locate it within the logical space of the existing accounts of justification for external world beliefs. She distinguishes two existing camps - a liberal camp and a conservative one - and argues that her view is a middle way between these.[[1]](#footnote-1) She describes the liberal account of justification as follows:

Liberal 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 representational content that P).

(Coliva 2015: 21)

We can understand liberals[[2]](#footnote-2) as making two, fairly minimal, demands on the epistemic subject mentioned earlier. In order to be justified in her belief that there is a cup on the table in front of her she must (1) have a perceptual experience as of a cup on a table in front of her[[3]](#footnote-3), and (2) not have (or perhaps ‘not be in a position to have’) any beliefs which could defeat this experience - for example she can’t believe that she has ingested drugs which are liable to make her hallucinate cups and tables. As long as these two conditions are met, then the liberal will judge that our epistemic subject is justified in her belief about the external world.

The conservative account is more demanding. Coliva describes it like this:

Conservative 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 warrantedly assumed that there is an external world (and possibly other general propositions, such as “My sense organs work mostly reliably”, “I am not the victim of massive cognitive deception”, etc).

(Coliva 2015: 29-30)

Here we can see that the conservatives[[4]](#footnote-4) make two further demands on our epistemic subject. Like the liberal, they think that, to be justified in her belief that there is a cup on the table in front of her, our epistemic subject must (1) have a perceptual experience as of a cup on a table in front of her, and (2) not have (or perhaps ‘not be in a position to have’) any beliefs which could defeat this experience. However, in addition to this they also require that (3) she makes some relevant background assumptions,[[5]](#footnote-5) and that (4) these assumptions are warranted[[6]](#footnote-6).

With these two accounts outlined, we are now in a position to understand the moderate account. Coliva describes it as follows:

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 the content that P) and it is assumed that there is an external world (and possibly other general propositions, such as “My sense organs work mostly reliably”, “I am not the victim of massive cognitive deception”).

(Coliva 2015: 34)

This account of perceptual justification also begins with the two demands familiar from the liberal and conservative accounts. If our epistemic subject is to be justified in her belief that there is a cup on the table in front of her, then she must (1) have a perceptual experience as of a cup on a table in front of her, and (2) not have (or perhaps ‘not be in a position to have’) any beliefs which could defeat this experience.

At this point, the moderate goes further than the liberal, by adding the third demand that the conservative also makes. Namely, that (3) our epistemic subject makes some relevant background assumptions. However, she stops short of full-blown conservatism by not requiring that their fourth condition be met - moderates don’t require that the relevant background assumptions are warranted. In fact, at points she claims that they are *unwarrantable*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

You might be immediately struck by an apparent problem with this moderate view, as I have so far described it. Coliva seeks to give us an account of the justification that we have for our beliefs about the external world, and in doing so claims that these beliefs require general assumptions. She also emphasises that these general assumptions do not need to be, and cannot be, warranted. The problem is with this last claim. If our beliefs about the external world rely on unwarrantable assumptions then it’s not clear that they *are* justified, and so it’s hard to see Coliva as offering us an account of the justification of our beliefs rather than a sceptical story which reveals that these beliefs aren’t justified.

To see why this problem doesn’t apply to Coliva’s extended rationality view we need to explore it’s second component, constitutivism. Coliva explains constitutivism by making an analogy between defining rationality and defining a game (2015: 130). If I were to ask you to explain the game of chess to me, you wouldn’t sit me down in front of a chess board and list every legitimate move that is possible for every possible configuration of the board. And this isn’t just because doing this would be a very inefficient way of communicating to me what the game of chess is, but because it would omit some important aspects of the game. To fully appreciate what chess is I also need to know some background points, like that there are two players who take it in turns to make moves, the playing pieces are distributed between those players according to their colour, the aim is to checkmate one’s opponent’s King, and so on. Coliva takes this to show that a game isn’t constituted merely by the moves made within it, but also by the rules that make those moves possible.

Likewise, if we want to know what epistemic rationality is then Coliva can’t - she reasons - just tell us what propositions count as rational for a given person at a given time. To do this would be to leave out something important about epistemic rationality. She needs to also tell us the unwarrantable assumptions that are required in order for us to carry out rational assessment too. In other words, in the same way that a game isn’t constituted merely by the moves made within it, epistemic rationality isn’t merely constituted by the rational propositions, either. It extends beyond them, such that it is also constituted by the unwarrantable assumptions that make assessment of those propositions possible (2015: 129).

This constitutivist element of extended rationality helps it to avoid the problem mentioned above, because it no longer makes sense to ask whether the assumptions that our beliefs about the external world depend on are justified or not. They are not possible targets of epistemic or rational assessment, instead they are the conditions of possibility on such assessments. So the reason that it seems unclear that they are justified is not because they *fail to be justified*, but because even attempting to classify them as justified (or unjustified) would be a category mistake. With this point in place, the sceptical worry mentioned above is, Coliva claims, avoided.

To summarise the view; Coliva’s extended rationality provides an account of the justification of our beliefs about the external world which is moderate, in that it requires our epistemic subject make background assumptions in addition to the standard requirements of having the relevant perceptual experience and an absence of defeaters, but it doesn’t require that these assumptions be warranted. Extended rationality is also constitutivist, in that these unwarranted assumptions are taken to constitute epistemic rationality, rather than be assessable by it.

Coliva argues for a number of beneficial consequence of this view; she argues that it can resolve Cartesian skepticism (2015: 136), and that it can tell us new things about warrant transmission (2015: 96-108) and related topics (2015: 108-14). She also denies an apparent, and what she calls “devastating” (2015: 120), consequence of the view - that it leads to epistemic relativism. In the next section I will characterise epistemic relativism, and explain why it might appear to be a consequence of extended rationality.

**2. Epistemic Relativism**

Epistemic relativism is a form of relativism which concerns epistemic justification. This is opposed to alethic relativism (relativism about truth) or semantic relativism (relativism about the truth value of different propositions). More specifically, it’s a view on which what it means for a particular proposition to be justified for a particular person is dependent on (relative to) some factor - most often a social or cultural one. Beyond this broad characterisation there are disagreements about exactly what features a view of justification must have in order to be classed as relativist.

I will discuss some of these disagreements in §2.1, whilst also establishing a characterisation of relativism that is faithful to the one Coliva offers. This is important because I want to show that she is unable to block relativism on her own terms, rather than simply redefining relativism and showing that her arguments fail against this new characterisation.

In 2.2 I will show why this characterisation looks likely to follow from extended rationality, and introduce the two kinds of relativist challenge that Coliva distinguishes.

*2.1 Characterising Epistemic Relativism*

Coliva characterises epistemic relativism as follows:

“[T]here may be - either as a matter of fact or in principle - different systems of assumptions, which are mutually incompatible and yet are on a par, that give rise to different and equally valid systems of justification.”

(Coliva 2015: 140)

Hopefully it’s not too difficult to see how this captures the basic notion of epistemic relativism discussed above. The idea is that the factor that justification is relative to, or dependent on, is the relevant system of justificatory assumptions.

Coliva is more specific about her characterisation of relativism in the footnote that follows the sentence just quoted. Here, she suggests that five conditions must be met for in order for epistemic relativism to arise:

(i) There is no objectively valid or epistemically superior epistemic system; (ii) there are different epistemic systems (either theories, or practices of justification, or explanatory principles); (iii) which are all equally legitimate; (iv) but mutually incompatible; (v) and such as to give rise to different sets of justified (or even known) beliefs.[[8]](#footnote-8)

(Coliva 2015: 200)

I think that, for our purposes in this paper, we can streamline this definition, stripping it down to 3 components whilst still remaining faithful to Coliva’s characterisation. These components are as follows:

(ER1) there are multiple sets of general, background assumptions (or epistemic frameworks); (Coliva’s (ii))

(ER2) these epistemic frameworks are incompatible with one another; (Coliva’s (iv) and (v))

(ER3) these epistemic frameworks are equally valid or legitimate. (Coliva’s (i) and (iii)).

This characterisation again captures the central idea that justification is relative to a set of assumptions (or to an epistemic framework). In the remainder of 2.1 I will discuss each component in turn, and show that they collectively represent Coliva’s understanding of epistemic relativism - at least sufficiently for the purposes of this paper. At the same time, I will also clarify some details that will be important when it comes to the second part of this section, which is concerned with how epistemic relativism applies to extended rationality.

First we need to get clear on the nature of the epistemic frameworks (ER1) or epistemic systems (ii), that Coliva considers justification to be relative to. She makes clear that she is talking about justification as relative to the sets of assumptions connected with “*basic* epistemic practices” (Coliva 2015: 141). Further, she says that an epistemic practice is basic when it doesn’t rely on other epistemic practices. So for example, the practice of observation is a basic epistemic practice, but the practice of astrology, which relies on the practice of observation (e.g. observations of the night’s sky), is not. We can take the epistemic frameworks in ER1 to be associated with basic epistemic practices too, and so to successfully capture the idea expressed by (ii).

Next we need to specify what Coliva means by incompatibility (iv-v). There are two ways in which frameworks could be incompatible, which can be explained with reference to Martin Kusch’s (*forthcoming*) notion of ‘exclusiveness’. According to Kusch, two frameworks will be incompatible, or exclusive, in the *question-centred* sense if there are yes/no questions to which they provide different answers. They will be incompatible, or exclusive, in the more-specific *practice-centred* sense if they provide these different answers because they have different “concepts and concerns” (Kusch forthcoming: 8).

We will see in the next section that Coliva distinguishes two kinds of relativist challenge, which I think correlate with these two kinds of incompatibility. One challenge matches up to the question-centred kind (it involves frameworks that provide different answers to certain yes/no questions than our own framework, but rely on the same basic practice), whilst the second matches up with the practice-centred kind (it involves frameworks that give these different answers because they rely on a different basic practice). It’s unclear whether Coliva intended her incompatibility conditions - (iv) and (v) - to directly correspond to these two senses of incompatibility, but this is not so important for our purposes. In this paper I will only discuss the first kind of challenge in detail, and so ER2 need only be understood as capturing the question-centred sense of incompatibility.

Finally, we need to understand the sense in which epistemic frameworks are required to be equally valid (ER3) or legitimate (iii), with none of them being objectively superior (i). This notion is best explained by thinking about *ranking* epistemic frameworks, where equality means an inability to carry out such a ranking. There are two ways in which epistemic frameworks could resist being ranked - they might resist being *objectively* ranked, if there is no way to rank them independently of any particular framework, or they might resist being *subjectively* ranked, if it’s not possible to rank two frameworks *even relative to some other, third framework*.

It seems clear that resisting objective ranking is what Coliva has in mind in (i). It might be argued that the inclusion of (iii) as a separate condition is an attempt to capture resistance to subjective ranking as well, but this strikes me as an overly strong relativist condition, and one that Coliva has little reason to include.[[9]](#footnote-9) I thus think it’s better to assume that Coliva intended (i) and (iii) to capture different aspects of a resistance to objective ranking, and so ER3 should be understood as concerning objective validity too.

So, conditions ER1-ER3 capture the important aspects of Coliva’s characterisation of epistemic relativism. Unless otherwise indicated, from now when I talk about epistemic relativism being true, or possible, or following from extended rationality, I am referring to a situation in which the conditions ER1-ER3 are satisfied.

I should note two more points about this characterisation before moving on. First, I have so far characterised Coliva’s understanding of epistemic relativism according to the aspects of it that she mentions explicitly. In section five I’ll introduce a fourth condition. I haven’t discussed this here as it only arises in her response to the observation-based challenge (and then only implicitly), and so it will be easier to explain after this challenge has been properly introduced.

Second, notice that I haven’t referred to epistemic relativism as a ‘problem’ at any point (other than when referencing Coliva’s views). I think that whether it is problematic or not is an open question, and one that can’t be settled in this paper.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the second part of this section I’ll talk about relativist ‘challenges’, but to be clear: I am simply following Coliva’s terminology, and don’t endorse the claim that they must be overcome if extended rationality is to be shown to be *plausible*, rather than just non-relativistic.

*2.2 Two Relativist Challenges*

With our definition of epistemic relativism laid out, we now need to establish why extended rationality might be thought to give rise to these three conditions, and so to lead to epistemic relativism. In the process, we will see that a distinction can be made (and is made by Coliva) between two different kinds of epistemic relativism.

Remember that Coliva’s extended rationality is committed to the idea of epistemic frameworks, which are comprised of sets of basic, background assumptions, and that on her view these assumptions are unwarranted. Coliva only discusses one epistemic framework when outlining extended rationality, but if there were more than one (i.e. if ER1 was satisfied) then they would both be comprised of unwarranted assumptions, and so would be equally legitimate (i.e. ER3 would also be satisfied).

To see this, consider how an attempt to rank the legitimacy of two frameworks would go. As we saw earlier, ranking different frameworks would involve evaluating their constituent parts. Their constituent parts are the unwarrantable assumptions which cannot - by definition - be evaluated epistemically. Thus, any attempt to rank frameworks would be stalled before it began.

What this means is that, on Coliva’s view, whenever ER1 is satisfied then ER3 is satisfied too. Therefore, the question of whether epistemic relativism follows from extended rationality simply amounts to the question of whether there are any epistemic frameworks which are incompatible with our own. And as it’s not immediately obvious why there shouldn’t be, the question of relativism is pressing.

As we have just seen, the key issue when it comes to connecting epistemic relativism and extended rationality is the possibility of incompatible frameworks. But as we saw in the first part of this section, there are two kinds of incompatibility. This means that there are two ways in which extended rationality could lead to epistemic relativism.

The first way it could lead to epistemic relativism would be via frameworks that are incompatible with our own in the question-centred sense - i.e. frameworks that simply provide different answers to sets of yes/no questions than our own, or that give rise to different sets of beliefs than our own. The second way would be via frameworks that are incompatible with our own in the practice-centred sense - i.e. frameworks that provide these different answers/beliefs specifically because they are tied to different practices, and so involve different concepts or concerns to ours.

As Coliva is concerned specifically with showing that extended rationality does not lead to relativism, she articulates these two ways as ‘challenges’ to be overcome (Coliva 2015: 119-122). Although I don’t think this is the best way to approach relativism, I will keep to her choice of words, and call these the *observation-based*, and the *alternative practice* ‘challenges’[[11]](#footnote-11):

The Observation-based Challenge: to rule out the possibility of any frameworks other than our own that are based on the same practice(s) as ours.

The Alternative Practice Challenge: to rule out the possibility of any frameworks other than our own that are based on (a) practice(s) other than ours.

Coliva offers responses to both challenges. However, in order to show that she fails to block the connection between extended rationality and epistemic relativism I only need to show that her response to one of these challenges fails, and so I will only discuss one of them - the first one - in depth.[[12]](#footnote-12) This will be the focus of the next section.

**3. The Observation-based Challenge**

The first of the two challenges that Coliva has set herself is to rule out the possibility of any frameworks other than our own that are based on the same practice as ours - i.e. alternative frameworks based on the practice of observation. I’ll begin this section by filling in how Coliva understands the details of this challenge, and then outline her response to it. I’ll follow this by offering an adapted, more general version of her response, which I claim better reflects the challenge. I’ll then focus on the 4th premise of this response, which I claim is inadequately supported, and suggest a way that Coliva’s remarks could be taken to provide support for this premise. As we’ll see, this involves positing an additional fourth condition on epistemic relativism.

Coliva begins her response by considering what an alternative observation-based framework would look like, and determines that it would be very similar to the framework associated with idealism (2015: 142). As we noted in the previous section, she claims that the key assumption associated with the practice of observation is the assumption that there is an external world. So, her line of thought seems to be, an alternative observation-based framework would be one that did not contain the assumption that there is an external world, and this is, roughly, what idealism amounts to.

Her next move is to compare the account of perceptual content that (she claims) such a framework would rely upon with the account of perceptual content which she discussed in the first chapter of the book. Idealism relies on a phenomenalist account, according to which we experience a stream of low-level properties like colour, and temperature, without representing them *as of objects*. According to Coliva, this account is implausible:

“[O]ur perceptual experience is *objective*. That is to say, it represents not just subjective variations, like changes in temperature [… r]ather it gives us representations as of objects and properties “out there”. Thus, phenomenalists cannot rescue the very content of our perceptual experience. For, in their view, subjects just have sensations of colours, and so on, without objectifying them”.

(Coliva 2015: 142)

And the implausibility of this account of perceptual content is, it seems, the reason that Coliva thinks the idealist framework is not a plausible alternative:

“[Phenomenalists] cannot offer a suitable account of our perceptual experience, which could be taken as a sound alternative explanation.”

(Coliva 2015: 144)

If the idealist framework is the only alternative available and it’s not a plausible alternative, then it seems that it can be ruled out and so the observation-based challenge has been met.

Let’s summarise this argument as follows:

1. Idealism relies on there being subjects whose experiences aren’t represented as of (mind-independent) objects.
2. Our best accounts of perceptual content say that our experiences *are* represented as of (mind-independent) objects.
3. Idealism doesn’t rely on a good account of perceptual content.
4. If Idealism doesn’t rely on a good account of perceptual content then it isn’t a plausible alternative and can be ruled out.
5. Idealism isn’t a plausible alternative and can be ruled out.

As it stands, I think that this argument misses out something important, and this is due to the way that Coliva has set up the problem. She presumes that the idealist framework is the only alternative available, but this is not the case.

The idealist framework fits the bill, i.e. it doesn’t involve the assumption about the external world, because it denies the assumption in question - we could think of it as involving the contrary assumption that there is no external world. Perhaps any framework which does this would count as some kind of an idealist framework, and this is why Coliva treats it as the only candidate. But there is another possibility - a framework could omit an assumption by instead being agnostic about the relevant assumption . Rather than involving the contrary assumption, that there is no external world, we might think of it as involving a disjunctive assumption - something like “Either there is an external world, or there is not”. In other words, we should also consider the kind of framework associated with Pyrrhonian skepticism.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This point doesn’t make a huge different at this stage, because Coliva would likely make the same response to the Pyrrhonian framework as she does to the idealist one - she’d say that it isn’t plausible because it doesn’t provide a good account of human experience. However, I will argue later that this response fails, and so it will be useful to have all the options on the table to ensure that any following discussion takes all of them into account.

In light of this, it will be better to deal with a slightly more general argument, that retains the same structure as Coliva’s own:

1. The potential alternative frameworks rely on there being subjects whose experiences aren’t represented as of (mind-independent) objects.
2. Our best accounts of perceptual content say that our experiences *are* represented as of (mind-independent) objects.
3. The potential alternative frameworks don’t rely on a good account of perceptual content.
4. If the potential alternative frameworks don’t rely on a good account of perceptual content then they aren’t plausible alternatives and can be ruled out.
5. The potential alternative frameworks aren’t plausible alternatives and can be ruled out.

I take it that premise 1\* is uncontroversial. Premise 2\* is perhaps more controversial, but this isn’t something that I want to discuss here.[[14]](#footnote-14),[[15]](#footnote-15) Premise 3\* follows from premises 1\* and 2\*, and so given that I am not taking issue with either of them I have no problems to raise for premise 3\* either. Where I think the argument goes wrong is in premise 4\*. The problem is that premise 4\* is not obvious - why does a plausible alternative framework need to rely on a good account of perceptual content? - and Coliva draws her conclusion before offering a defence of it.

Having said that, Coliva makes some useful remarks following this argument which I think can be used to construct a defense of 4\* on her behalf. Doing so will reveal something interesting about her understanding of epistemic relativism (namely, that she implicitly considers it to involve a fourth condition, in addition to the three that we discussed in section 2).

Here’s the relevant passage:

This [the claim that phenomenalists lack a good account of perceptual content], of course, is not to say that their views do not represent possible scenarios, logically and even metaphysically. It only means that they would be unsuitable as *alternative accounts of our human experience*. Yet, any form of relativism that is not compatible with the distinguishing traits of human experience would be quite toothless and not worth taking seriously, at least within a project - like the present one - of understanding the human condition.

(Coliva 2015: 144, italics in original)

I think that there is an attempt to defend premise 4\* here, but that we need to do some work to draw it out. First, note that Coliva is making two claims about alternative frameworks. The first is that failing to rely on a good account of perceptual content means being incompatible with human experience. We can capture this claim with the following conditional:

If a potential alternative framework doesn’t rely on a good account of perceptual content, then it isn’t compatible with human experience.

The second claim is that frameworks which aren’t compatible with human experience can’t give rise to interesting forms of relativism. This claim is based on the (unarticulated, but crucial) idea that not being compatible with human experience means not being a plausible alternative framework. This idea about plausibility (along with a further assumption, that epistemic relativism requires plausible alternative frameworks,) is what allows Coliva to rule out certain frameworks and so block epistemic relativism. This unarticulated idea can be captured with a second conditional:

If a potential alternative framework isn’t compatible with human experience, then it isn’t a plausible alternative (and so can be ruled out).

Combining these two conditionals gives us support for 4\*:

If a potential alternative framework doesn’t rely on a good account of perceptual content then it isn’t a plausible alternative (and so can be ruled out).

So, we have found some support for 4\* (at least for now).

Note that to arrive at this Coliva had to make a claim about what is required for epistemic relativism: the alternative frameworks must be compatible with human experience. I’m sympathetic to this idea - a version of epistemic relativism based on frameworks which could only be adopted by aliens, and other hypothetical subjects very different from ourselves, probably would be uninteresting. So, let’s add a fourth condition on to our characterisation of epistemic relativism to reflect this.

I take it that the biological category ‘human’ isn’t as important as the subjects’ similarity to us, and so I’m going to phrase this condition in terms of alternative frameworks needing to be useable by *subjects like us*. So, we can now think of Coliva as characterising epistemic relativism as the meeting of the following four conditions:

ER1) there are multiple sets of general, background assumptions (or epistemic frameworks);

ER2) these epistemic frameworks are incompatible with one another;

ER3) these epistemic frameworks are equally valid or legitimate;

ER4) these epistemic frameworks are useable by subjects like us.

In the next section I want to show that, even with this fourth condition in place, and support for 4\* established, Coliva is unable to show that epistemic relativism does not follow from her view.

**4. Reasons and Human Experience**

In this section I will show that Coliva isn’t in a position to assert the first conditional that she offered in support of premise 4\* - she can’t say that failing to rely on a good account of perceptual content makes a framework incompatible with human experience, or unuseable by a subject like us. I’ll demonstrate this by considering the kinds of reasons that Coliva might try to offer in support of this claim, and then showing that neither of them are compatible with the view that she has so far defended. With support for 4\* undermined, Coliva’s response to the observation-based challenge cannot go through.

How might Coliva try to argue that the Pyrrhonian and idealist frameworks are unavailable to subjects like us? One possibility that immediately presents itself is to point out the difficulty and danger of using these alternative frameworks. Coliva might point out that subjects using Idealist and Pyrrhonian frameworks wouldn’t pay proper attention to dangers in their environment, like speeding cars and angry bulls and steep drops, because they don’t assume the existence of the external world.[[16]](#footnote-16)

These are all good reasons to avoid using alternative frameworks, but (as Coliva notes herself, in response to another objection) these are practical, or pragmatic, reasons. Earlier in the book (2015: 67-9), when Coliva is motivating extended rationality, she argues that pragmatic reasons are not relevant to rationality. As such, ruling out alternative frameworks on the basis of pragmatic reasons is not an option for her. What she needs are *purely epistemic* reasons to think that alternative frameworks are not an option for subjects like us.

We can see what kind of epistemic reason Coliva might try to offer if we look at her response to, what she names, the Oblomovian challenge (Coliva 215: 145-7). This challenge is based on the idea that someone might accept Coliva’s extended rationality view, and yet choose to opt out of using the rational framework that she describes. Her response to this is to point again to the constitutivist aspect of her view. She reminds us that epistemic rationality is *constituted by* the framework in question, and so this is the sense in which it is epistemically “kosher” (2015: 146). In other words, the Oblomovian can opt out of the framework that she describes if they want to, and Coliva doesn’t see it has her job to convince them not do this. Instead, her job is simply to define epistemic rationality, and to point out that they will sacrifice this if they choose not to use the framework that she describes.

Note that this point about constitutivism is the only epistemic reason that Coliva is able to offer. Other epistemic reasons will either be ones which are part of the epistemic framework, and so using them would mean circularity, or they are independent of the framework, which would mean that she were offering framework-independent support for the propositions that make up the framework which is again a move that isn’t possible on Coliva’s view. The constitutivist point is therefore Coliva’s only recourse.

The trouble is, that this response is not suitable when it comes to the observation-based challenge. Perhaps this response works when we only focus on the Oblomovian challenge - if someone wants to opt out of epistemic rationality then that’s up to them.[[17]](#footnote-17) But the observation-based challenge is not just about opting *out of* epistemic rationality, it’s about opting *into an alternative rationality*, and if Coliva’s only recourse to this is to point to constitutivism and state again that the framework she describes *just is* epistemic rationality, then she is insisting upon the very point that is at issue. The only epistemic reason that Coliva can offer is useless in this situation.

In this section I’ve shown that Coliva is unable to support 4\*. She can’t claim that frameworks which lack a good account of perceptual content are unavailable to subjects like us, because both pragmatic and epistemic reasons are unavailable to her. As such, she’s not in a position to rule out the Pyrrhonian and idealist alternative frameworks, and so can’t respond to the observation-based challenge.

**5. Conclusion**

I have argued that Coliva’s extended rationality view does not have the resources to respond to the observation-based challenge. In order to argue that certain frameworks are implausible, where implausibility is tied to the possibility of being used by subjects like us, Coliva needs to provide reasons that subjects like us can’t, or shouldn’t, use those frameworks. She can’t offer pragmatic reasons to this effect without contravening her own claim about purely epistemic reasons being the only kind relevant to rationality, and she can’t offer epistemic reasons without contravening her claim that the assumptions that constitute the frameworks are unwarrantable. As such, she can’t respond to the challenge, and so is unable to show that her view does not lead to epistemic relativism.

A move commonly made at this stage in a dialectic is to say that epistemic relativism is implausible, and so conclude that the view in question, which appears to lead to relativism and has no resources available to block this claim, should be abandoned. I do not want to make this move. Instead, I want to highlight two strategies that Coliva, or others interested in her extended rationality view, could adopt in moving forward.

The first strategy is to embrace epistemic relativism, and to explore what a relativist extended rationality would look like and what consequences it would have. In the preceding discussion I have taken some steps towards narrowing down the kind of relativism that follows from extended rationality; I have explained that it is one on which justification is relative to frameworks, and these frameworks are tied to basic epistemic practices, resist objective ranking and are accessible to subjects like us.

The next stage of this relativist strategy is to explore the significance of multiple rationalities. For example, it would be interesting to explore what acknowledgment of multiple rationalities would mean for our epistemic practices. (Should we aim to change our practices in light of equally legitimate alternatives? Should we change our attitudes towards the results of these practices?) Questions about the value of rational belief would also be worth asking (does acknowledging that there are multiple competing sets of rational belief devalue the idea of ‘rationality’?).

The second strategy is to modify the claim that only purely-epistemic reasons are relevant to rationality. Crispin Wright (2014) has recently responded to the kinds of criticisms that Coliva has made of his view, acknowledging that he depends on a kind of pragmatism, but maintaining that it is a particular, *epistemic* species of pragmatism. He claims that this epistemic pragmatism is still able to respond to the sceptical problem, and so perhaps it is also fit to ground rationality. If so, then Coliva would have more resources to draw on to support the claim - that subjects like us cannot use alternative frameworks - required to respond to the observation-based challenge and block epistemic relativism.

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1. Aidan McGlynn has questioned the cleanness of this divide in an unpublished piece. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Coliva has in mind Jim Pryor (2000; 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note that I am simplifying things slightly. Coliva talks about “the appropriate course of experience”, where I have focused just on the ‘typically appropriate’ case, i.e. an experience with the representational content of the belief in question. This simplification doesn’t have any significant consequences for our purposes. I will make the same simplification in my discussion of the conservative and moderate accounts below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The primary defender of this view is Crispin Wright (2004; 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Conservatives think that, without these general background assumptions, an experience as of P isn’t able to justify a belief in the content of P. Coliva discusses this idea under the heading of “transcending our cognitive locality” (2015: 25-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See pp. 66-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. She states her reason for this as a kind of process of elimination - she argues in chapter 2 that neither a priori nor evidential epistemic warrants for background assumptions are satisfactory, and thus epistemic warrants for them are “extremely hard to come by” (Coliva 2015: 85). It’s worth also noting, however, that she is also influenced by Humean and Wittgensteinian ideas of assumptions that are in some sense “necessary” (2015:7-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. She also mentions a previous book (Coliva 2009), where she discusses this definition of relativism in more detail. Interested readers who are competent in Italian may also refer to this text. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It makes sense that Coliva would consider a lack of objective ranking to be a possible consequence of a framework view, as she is essentially advocating the idea that epistemic evaluation (which presumably includes ranking) is dependent on (in the sense that it is constituted by) a framework. I don’t see any reason for her to suggest the stronger claim about subjective ranking. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The most frequently-cited, and one of the few, contemporary, book-length discussions of epistemic relativism is Paul Boghossian’s (2006) *Fear of Knowledge*, which argues against the plausibility of relativism. Two other discussions are particularly relevant given the Wittgensteinian undertones of Coliva’s view - Michael Williams’s (2007) paper, which is also anti-relativist, and Martin Kusch’s (*forthcoming*), which is more optimistic about relativism’s prospects. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Coliva’s formulations of these are on pg. 142. Her formulations are more specific, as at this point in her explanation she has already established that the key assumption distinguishing ‘our’ framework and others is to do with the existence of the external world. I will introduce this step in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For Coliva’s discussion of the second challenge, see pps.144-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pyrrhonian skeptics aim to suspend judgement about propositions about the external world, affirming only propositions concerning ‘appearances’ or sense experiences. So they would suspend judgement about the proposition “there is a cup on the table before me”, and only affirm propositions like “it appears to me that there is a cup on the table before me” and “there is either a cup on the table before me or there is not” (see Annas & Barnes 2000). It seems to me that there epistemic framework is one which does not include the assumption of the external world, but also does not deny it. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For example, Austen Clark (2000) has defended an account of perceptual content on which we represent low-level properties, like colour, at particular locations, without representing them as instantiated in ordinary objects. Thanks to Alex Miller Tate for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Coliva discusses the issue of perceptual content in more depth in Ch 1. §5 (2015: 43-56). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There’s reason to doubt how dangerous and difficult using these frameworks would need to be. Berkeley argues that his idealist view is completely compatible with common sense (Berkeley 1999: §36-7) and, indeed, it’s not obvious that accepting that objects like speeding cars are collections of ideas rather than material objects means that one would have to behave any differently towards them. The Pyrrhonian framework has been associated with dangerous behaviour, but again it’s unclear to what extent this is a necessary consequence of accepting it (see Bett 2014, §5). There is no need to get bogged down in these details though; as we will see, there are independent reasons why Coliva can’t rely on practical reasons like this to rule out alternative frameworks. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Although note that anyone who thinks that rationality is an inherently normative notion will worry about this aspect of Coliva’s view. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)