***Disagreement Unhinged, Constitutivism-Style***

Annalisa Coliva (University of California, Irvine) and Michele Palmira (Complutense University of Madrid)

**Abstract**

Hinge epistemology maintains that that our justification and knowledge of empirical propositions always take place within a system of hinge propositions, such as that there exists an external world. Hinge epistemology has to dispel the worry that disagreeing over hinges is rationally inert. In a companion piece (Coliva and Palmira 2020), we offer a constitutivist solution to the problem of rational inertia by maintaining that a Humean sceptic and a hinge epistemologist disagree over the correct explication of the concept of epistemic rationality. In this paper we explore the implications of such a solution. First, we clarify in what sense a disagreement over genuine hinges would be a conceptual disagreement. Secondly, we use considerations about the (alleged) rational inertia of hinge disagreement to offer a test whereby to demarcate genuine hinges from merely entrenched beliefs. Thirdly, we offer a response to the shm-challenge, that is, the challenge of explaining why we have reason to engage in the epistemic practices hinges are constitutive of in the first place. Fourthly, we argue that the constitutivist approach to hinge disagreement does not result in a relativist view.

**1. A constitutivist solution to the problem of rational inertia**

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein articulates the idea – at the center of the “hinge epistemology” movement in contemporary epistemology – that our justification and knowledge of empirical propositions always take place within a system of assumptions, or hinges. Hinges, according to Wittgenstein, are neither true nor false (OC 196-206); are neither justified nor unjustified (OC 110, 130, 166); are neither known nor unknown (OC 121); and are neither rational nor irrational (OC 559). In *On Certainty*, hinges constitute a rather heterogeneous class: propositions such as “The Earth has existed for a very long time,” “There are physical objects,” “My name is N.N.,” “Nobody has ever been on the Moon,” were all regarded as hinges by Wittgenstein. On the face of it, these propositions can all constitute the object of a disagreement amongst individuals. However, insofar as the question of the rational resolution of disagreement does presuppose the existence of shared epistemic standards whereby to assess the rationality of retaining or revising our doxastic stances towards the contested proposition, it seems that disagreeing over hinges is rationally inert. Consider the following disagreement:

(OBJECTS)

Lucas: “There are physical objects”.

Georg: “There aren’t any, Lucas”.

As observed by Robert Fogelin in “The Logic of Deep Disagreement” (1985: 6): “the possibility of a genuine argumentative exchange depends […] on the fact that together we accept many things”. Consequently, disagreements over hinges “cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing”. To illustrate the problem, consider (OBJECTS) and suppose that Lucas attempts to provide Georg with reasons in favor of the existence of ordinary mid-size objects. Plausibly, Lucas might reason as follows: since it seems to him, and to us in general, that there are tables, chairs, plants, and the like, we should accept the existence of mind-independent mid-size objects. Georg, however, couldn’t be moved by such a line of reasoning, for he does reject that our sensory experiences are formed in response to mind-independent objects in the first place. Thus, Lucas and Georg’s hinge disagreement is bound to be rationally inert.

In Coliva and Palmira (2020), we offer a solution to the problem of rational inertia from the perspective of a constitutivist version of hinge epistemology. We focus on a disagreement between a constitutivist hinge epistemologist and a Humean sceptic. Importantly, a constitutivist and a Humean sceptic agree on the claim that epistemic rationality is grounded in our practices. However, while a constitutivist maintains that assuming hinges is constitutive of epistemic rationality and that hinges are therefore rational even though unwarrantable, a Humean sceptic precisely denies this claim: hinges are not constitutive of epistemic rationality, for her, and are therefore not rational, since they are unwarrantable. Thus, a constitutivist and a Humean sceptic might be taken to disagree on how we should explicate the very concept of epistemic rationality. More precisely, a Humean sceptic subscribes to the following (see Coliva 2015: 129-30):

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

By contrast, a constitutivist holds the following:

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

As a consequence, a sceptic holds that the concept of epistemic rationality should be rationalitynarrow, whereas a constitutivist maintains that the concept of epistemic rationality should be rationalityextended. This, on the face of it, appears to be a *conceptual* – as opposed to a merely *descriptive* – disagreement.

In Coliva and Palmira (2020), we argue that the disagreement between a sceptic and a constitutivist bears on whether or not the concept of epistemic rationality should be rationalityextended – in order to make sense of our first-order epistemic practices. As we see it, considerations about which concept of rationality, i.e. rationalityextended or rationalitynarrow, is the best one are going to be considerations whereby the disagreement can be *rationally* resolved in one way or another. The dialectical situation is the following. A constitutivist will maintain that rationalityextended is better than rationalitynarrow for the latter cannot coherently account for the rationality of the practice, which a Humean sceptic engages in, since that practice would rest, by her lights, on arbitrary hinges. In contrast, a constitutivist can coherently account for the rationality of the practice and of the hinges which make it possible, since, thanks to rationalityextended those hinges are themselves rational, even though unwarrantable.

In this paper, we clarify and expand on this approach to the problem of rational inertia. First, we delve a little more into the nature of the conceptual disagreement between a sceptic and a constitutivist (§2). Secondly, we take up the problem of demarcating between hinges and systemically entrenched beliefs (§3). Thirdly, (§4) we approach a classic objection to any form of constitutivism originally put forward by Enoch (2006). Lastly, we explore the connections between a constitutivist solution to the problem of rational inertia and relativism (§5).

**2. Hinges and conceptual disagreement**

The disagreement between a sceptic and a constitutivist is conceptual, as opposed to merely descriptive or factual. To explain what the distinction amounts to, let us start with an easy case.

(BALD)

Alice says: ‘John is bald’.

Matthew says: ‘Nuh uh, John is not bald’.

Suppose we are in a context where Alice and Michael share all the relevant information about John’s hair, e.g. they both know the exact number, length and texture of his hair. Suppose that Alice nonetheless utters ‘John is bald’ and Matthew replies by uttering the negation of the sentence uttered by Alice. In this case, Alice’s utterance does not add new information about John’s hair, but it rather conveys what the relevant contextual standard of baldness is and how the adjective should be used in that context. This use of adjectives and negation has been dubbed *metalinguistic* (see e.g. Horn 1989). If we take Alice and Matthew to be using the adjective ‘bald’ in a metalinguistic rather than descriptive way, we should conclude that they do not disagree about whether John is bald. That is, their disagreement is not descriptive. Rather, they disagree about how the adjective should be used in that context, thereby engaging themselves into a *metalinguistic negotiation* (see Plunkett and Sundell 2013) about how the term should be used in the context. Metalinguistic negotiations need not necessarily be verbal, in that they can be negotiations about what entities concepts, conceived here as the mental counterparts of words, should apply to. Therefore, call disagreements about what entities concepts *should* refer to – as opposed to what these concepts *do* refer to – *conceptual* disagreements.

The very notion of a metalinguistic negotiation, understood via examples like (BALD), seems to suggest that such a negotiation takes place against a certain common background. The two parties think that the boundaries of the concept bald should be drawn in different places given the present context, but they do not seem to have views about what bald should refer to which differ radically from one another in all contexts. So it might well be the case that the parties agree on what bald should apply to in most clear cases, but they disagree about specific ones (see also Stroud 2019 on this). More precisely, Alice and Matthew disagree on non-focal applications of the same concept C (bald, in this case).

As argued by Sarah Stroud (2019), however, there are two other ways whereby conceptual disagreement can manifest itself. On the one hand, there are cases where one party rejects a concept entirely, whereas the other accepts it. Stroud mentions the case of Oscar Wilde, who agreed that a given text was profane and disgusting but refused to call it “blasphemous” on the grounds that blasphemous was not part of his conceptual repertoire. That is, Wilde was not objecting to the extant characterization of the concept blasphemous. Rather, he was objecting that it could ever be correctly applied to describe a state of affairs. Put it in more general terms, the disagreement between Wilde and his opponents was about whether a given concept C has any correct descriptive application, such that C(a) would come out true.

On the other hand, there are cases in which the two parties fully share a conceptual repertoire but end up classifying the facts differently without thereby disagreeing on what the facts are. Stroud mentions the case of A’s friend, call him Sam, who “recently slept with someone and then cruelly never returned any of that person’s calls, knowingly breaking that person’s heart” (Stroud 2019: 23). Stroud imagines that A, *qua* Sam’s friend, is going say that Sam is a really transparent and genuine person who does not give false hopes and makes always plain where he stands. Now, it is easy to imagine that some other person B who is not Sam’s friend nor is she related to him in any special way, will say that Sam has behaved sadistically and has been way too much insensitive. Stroud points out that even if the proposition *that there’s never an artifice with Sam* is not in any descriptive/factual sense incompatible with the proposition *that Sam has been insensitive*, and even if A and B share the same conceptual repertoire, they are disagreeing about which concepts to use in order to characterise Sam’s behaviour. More precisely, A and B do not disagree over the different concepts C1 and C2 they utilize to describe Sam’s behaviour. Nor do they disagree with respect to whether C1 and C2 can have any correct descriptive application. Rather, they disagree with respect to whether the application of C1 or of C2 to the situation at hand would count as a correct application of either C1 or of C2. While A thinks the situation at hand licences the use of C1, B thinks that it does licence the use of C2, which is incompatible with C1.

We can now bring the foregoing discussion of the varieties of conceptual disagreement to bear onto the disagreement between a constitutivist and a sceptic. As we shall see, the disagreement between a constitutivist and a sceptic is not easily amenable to any of the varieties identified by Stroud. This, in our view, reveals the existence of another variety of conceptual disagreement, which has not yet been discussed in the literature.

Bear it in mind that a constitutivist and a sceptic do agree on certain facts, e.g. that our beliefs in ordinary propositions are justified, that it makes sense to form beliefs in light of certain sensory inputs, and so on. Yet, they disagree about what the concept of epistemic rationality should be like. For, as we have seen, a sceptic subscribes to rationalitynarrow, whereas the constitutivist maintains that the concept of epistemic rationality should be rationalityextended. Now, this does not seem to be a mere metalinguistic negotiation. For a constitutivist and a sceptic are not merely negotiating where to fix the boundaries of the concept epistemic rationality in a given problematic context, while at the same time agreeing on what the extension of the concept should be like in clear cases. It is unclear whether a sceptic’s predicament is similar to Oscar Wilde’s. Surely a Humean sceptic might claim, *à la* Oscar Wilde, that she lacks the concept of extended rationality and is therefore unable to apply it in order to offer a description of both the epistemic practices and the assumptions on which they hinge. However, there is a crucial asymmetry between Oscar Wilde’s case and the disagreement between a sceptic and a constitutivist hinge epistemologist: while Wilde does *not* use the term “blasphemous” to evaluate a text, a Humean sceptic *does* employ an epistemic vocabulary – including predicates such as “justified”, “rational”, and the like – to evaluate beliefs. Thus, insofar as a Humean sceptic acknowledges that certain beliefs are epistemically rational, a constitutivist can retort that the sceptic’s use of those terms can make sense only if they pick out rationalityextended. Notice that in order for this kind of reply to carry over to the case of Oscar Wilde, one should implausibly maintain that Wilde’s use of the term “profane” can make sense only if it picks out blasphemous.

As to the third variety of conceptual disagreement brought up by Stroud, bear it in mind such a variety of conceptual disagreement arises when the two parties fully share a conceptual repertoire. However, it is unclear whether a sceptic and a constitutivist can be said to share a conceptual repertoire. Even if rationalityextended comprises rationalitynarrow, this might well not suffice for sameness of concept possession. To see this point, let us operate with a broadly inferentialist-constitutivist account of concept possession to the effect that one possesses a concept C just in case one assents to a set of inferences which constitutively identify C.[[1]](#footnote-1) Consider the following inference: “If *p* is a proposition in light of which sensory experiences can afford us warrants for our ordinary empirical beliefs, then it is rational to assume p”. A constitutivist does assent to such an inference, whereas a Humean sceptic does not. Thus, in order to defend the claim that a constitutivist and a sceptic fully share a conceptual repertoire, it must be the case that this inference is not concept-constitutive. However, this inference is precisely the locus of the disagreement between a sceptic and a constitutivist, for the former denies that such an inference should be regarded as constitutive of the concept rational, whereas the latter maintains that it should be. So, it would be implausible to say that such an inference is not concept-constitutive. As a consequence, given that a sceptic would not assent to such an inference, it is doubtful that a sceptic and a constitutivist fully share a conceptual repertoire. The moral then is that hinge disagreements, as described by Coliva and Palmira (2020) and in the present paper, constitute a new brand of conceptual disagreement, one which has not yet been acknowledged in the current literature. In particular, they exemplify cases in which parties to a dispute disagree over the correct understanding of a given concept C (in our case rational).

We can also connect the foregoing with recent discussions about conceptual engineering. While our first case of conceptual disagreement concerns the non-focal applications of a given concept C, parties to a debate do share, the second case is one of conceptual revision, comparable to those cases in which one may want to refrain from using concepts like boche, terrone,[[2]](#footnote-2) faggot, etc. to describe a state of affairs, precisely because of their derogatory implications. For the latter are not part of the state of affairs picked out by these concepts – that is, being German, or coming from the South of Italy, or being homosexual – but only of the evaluation that some groups may give of such states of affairs. Refusing to apply these concepts is therefore a political act because it means that one wants to distance oneself from those people who share the derogatory evaluation of the situation at hand.

The third case, in contrast, is just a case where people who share two (or more concepts) disagree over some of their possible applications. Now, if those are non-focal applications, then that does not impinge on their respective understandings of those concepts. However, should the disagreement concern focal applications, then that would also mean that they have altogether different concepts. For instance, if, faced with whales, they insisted on categorizing them differently, as fish and as mammal respectively, they would exhibit a conceptual difference with respect to those very concepts. For, for A, say, fish would comprise (roughly) anything that lives under water and swims; whereas for B it would only be applicable to those creatures who, besides living under water and swimming, say, are not viviparous. Conversely, while for A mammal could only be applied to creatures who do not live underwater, while sharing other characteristic features, for B it could also be applied to creatures who, while sharing those features, happen to live underwater. Biologists throughout the history of the discipline have debated these classificatory issues for a long time. For such issues have a bearing on what is going to be regarded as the correct description of certain states of affairs, which in turn can affect our understanding of certain events. For instance, if there are mammals that live underwater, mammals that live outside water can be seen as developing out of those. In contrast, if there are no mammals that live underwater, it is more difficult to advert to an explanation of the presence of mammals outside water, which hinges on the idea of their development from those marine creatures.

This brings us to the fourth and last case we have discussed. As we saw, parties to a debate differ with respect to the canonical inferences licensed by a given concept C (rational in our case). Hence, they differ on what counts as the correct characterization or understanding of that concept. The superior explanatory power of the constitutivist version is a reason to prefer that proposed characterization to its sceptical counterpart, or so we have argued. Yet, structurally, this kind of conceptual engineering is very typical in philosophy, where, for millennia, philosophers have, de facto, disputed over the correct characterization of key concepts such as truth, knowledge, justification, rationality, not to mention good, right, etc.

In the remainder of the paper, we take up three potential problems that a constitutivist approach to the problem of rational inertia has to face.

**3. Hinges or entrenched beliefs? The Demarcation Problem**

The driving thought behind any kind of constitutivism in philosophy is that engaging in a practice requires of the participants to hold fixed whatever is constitutive of that practice, on pain of falling short of engaging in it. Focusing on the practice of forming rational beliefs on the basis of the deliverances of senses, hinge constitutivism identifies certain propositions, such as that *there exists an external world*, as constitutive of that belief-forming practice.[[3]](#footnote-3) This makes that hinge constitutive of our concept of epistemic rationality. However, the metaphysical task of identifying which propositions are constitutive of a rational practice and which are not is non-trivial, as it requires solving what we henceforth dub the “Demarcation Problem”.

The Demarcation Problem is the problem of giving a criterion whereby to distinguish between those hinges that are constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality, and those entrenched beliefs of ours which are not. To illustrate the problem, it must be kept in mind that Wittgenstein had a very wide conception of hinges, including propositions such as “The Earth has existed for a very long time”, “There are physical objects”, “My name is N.N.”, “Nobody has ever been on the Moon”, etc. Surely Wittgenstein could have easily regarded “Nobody will ever land on the Sun” as a hinge. Let us contrast this very proposition with “There is an external world”. These two propositions have a common feature: it is very hard for us to call them into doubt, not to mention to give them up. Those propositions are so deeply entrenched in our theoretical and practical lives that they are rarely foregrounded in our psychology when we attempt at explaining, or rationally reconstructing why we think what we think, and why we do what we do. Yet, while the constitutivist hinge epistemologist takes “There is an external world” to be constitutive of our concept of rationality, the proposition “Nobody will ever land on the Sun” does not fall within the purview of the constitutivist thesis. This raises the question as to how we can demarcate between hinges and deeply entrenched beliefs. This question is what we call the Demarcation Problem.

The Demarcation Problem affects any version of hinge epistemology, irrespective of one’s favourite answer to the problem of rational inertia. Perhaps surprisingly, though, the problem of rational inertia can be reverse engineered to give rise to what we call the Demarcation Test.

*Demarcation Test*

1. Take a deeply entrenched proposition and envisage a disagreement about it.
2. Ask whether the disagreement can be rationally resolved by appealing to empirical or a priori reasoning.
3. Use an affirmative or negative answer to reverse engineer the hinge-status of the target proposition:
   1. If affirmative, the proposition is not a hinge;
   2. If negative, the proposition is a hinge.

To apply the Demarcation Test to “Nobody will ever land on the Sun”, we then consider:

(SUN)

Lucy: “Nobody will ever land on the Sun”

Luc: “I disagree, someone will”.

It seems that (SUN) can be resolved empirically. Perhaps we might not have available to us all the empirical information we need to settle the question one way or another, but surely this question can be settled empirically. Thus, “Nobody will ever land on the Sun” is a deeply entrenched proposition, but it is not a hinge. By contrast, if we envisage a disagreement about (WORLD) “There exists an external world”, the problem of rational inertia tells us that such a disagreement cannot be solved by appealing to empirically or a priori evidence. Therefore, that proposition is a hinge. In particular, this is so because a debate over (WORLD) cannot be solved by appealing to empirical evidence. For anything we regard as empirical evidence is premised on taking for granted that there are physical objects, which are manifested to us through our senses, etc.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This has important consequences for the fate of hinge epistemology as a comprehensive framework capable of accounting for a variety of phenomena, going from the structure of perceptual justification and empirical knowledge, to skepticism, relativism, deep disagreement, testimonial justification, epistemic injustice and more (see Coliva 2020a) and for the individuation of the hinges relevant to each of these cases.[[5]](#footnote-5) That is, if faced with a disagreement over whether P is a hinge, we realize that solving it would engage us in a debate that would either presuppose P itself, or would have us abandon or doubt of the significance of the epistemic practice of which P is a constitutive element, we should recognize the hinge-role of P. In particular, that helps us better qualify the conditions under which returning a negative verdict over the possibility of resolving the disagreement actually plays a hinge-demarcating role. In particular, the negative verdict should not be just due to a lack of empirical evidence at a given moment in time, or to a lack of cognitive or practical wherewithal. The negative verdict germane to the demarcation of hinges needs to depend on the fact that any evidence we would be appealing to in order to resolve the debate would have to either presuppose the very hinge under consideration, or else have us abandon, or doubt of the significance of the epistemic practice of which P is a constitutive element.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**4. The shm-challenge**

In this section, we consider a different challenge that all varieties of constitutivism have to face; namely, the so-called “shm-challenge”. To introduce it, suppose that it is constitutive of following etiquette to place silverware in order of use from the outside to the inside. Surely *if* we are to engage in this practice, we ought to place silverware in that order. And yet, a normative question looms: “What reason do I have to engage in the practice of following etiquette?”. As Philippa Foot rightly observed (1972: 309): “Considerations of etiquette do not have any automatic reason-giving force, and a man might be right if he denied that he had reason to do ‘what’s done’”.

The shm-challenge extends the normative question we sensibly raise about etiquette to any kind of practice or enterprise to which a constitutive story applies. David Enoch originally raises the shm-challenge by focusing on constitutivism about practical reason. Constitutivism about practical reason harnesses a given thesis about the metaphysics of agency, namely that agents have a constitutive aim (variously identified in self-constitution, self-understanding, and so on), to derive substantive norms of practical reason and morality (e.g. Korsgaard 2009) and/or to ground the objectivity of practical normativity (e.g. Korsgaard 2009 and Velleman 2009). Enoch writes:

Classify my bodily movements and indeed me as you like. Perhaps I cannot be classified as an agent without aiming to constitute myself. But why should I be an agent? Perhaps I can’t act without aiming at self-constitution, but why should I act? If your reasoning works, this just shows that I don’t care about agency and action. I’m perfectly happy being a “Shmagent”—a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency but not “shmagency”) of self-constitution. I am perfectly happy performing “shmactions”—nonaction events that are very similar to actions but lack the aim (constitutive of actions but not shmactions) of self-constitution.

[Enoch 2006: 179]

According to hinge constitutivism, a hinge such as there exists an external world is constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality since, without it, we could not make sense of the practice of forming justified beliefs about mind-independent concrete objects on the basis of perception. From this fact about our epistemic practices, we derive a substantive norm of epistemic rationality to the effect that we ought to assume that hinge. The norms governing our epistemic practices, the hinge constitutivist maintains, are universally binding for creatures like us. Thus, hinge constitutivism should also face its shm-challenge, whose pattern of reasoning can be put as follows:

Classify my beliefs as you like. Perhaps I can’t form rational beliefs without also assuming hinges, but why should I have rational beliefs? I’m perfectly happy having shmrational beliefs — non-rational beliefs that are very similar to rational beliefs, in that they are formed by responding to the deliverances of senses, which I hold without also assuming hinges. While it might well be the case that we need rationalityextended to make sense of the normativity and rationality of first-order epistemic practices, we certainly do not need that concept to vindicate their shmnormativity and shmrationality. So, why do we need to have rational, as opposed to shmrational, beliefs?

The shm-challenge has it that asking why we should engage in our epistemic practices (or in the exercise of our agency) is just like asking why we should follow etiquette. That is, we ought to assume hinges only if we have agreed to take part in the epistemic game, just like we ought to place silverware in a given order only if we have agreed to take part in the etiquette game.

The shm-challenge presupposes the possibility of raising a normative question about why to engage in a certain practice by stepping outside of that prectice. Constitutivists about practical reason such as Ferrero (2009) and Velleman (2009) have attacked this very presupposition by arguing that agency is inescapable. The driving thought is that while it certainly is up to us not to place silverware in a given order while, at the same time, asking why we should place silverware in that order, it seems that we cannot coherently stop being agents and ask why we should be rational agents. This pattern of reply carries over to the epistemic realm. The shm-challenger asks us why we ought to engage in our first-order practices and therefore assume their constitutive hinges. Yet, the very fact of asking for a reason is itself a move within the epistemic game. Hence, it seems that we cannot stop participating in our epistemic practices and ask why engage in those practices. That is, to ask the normative question of why we should form rational beliefs is to ask a question that only those individuals who participate in the epistemic practice of asking for and giving reasons can ask. In this sense, our epistemic practices are inescapable. The shm-challenge threatens self-defeat.

This said, it is important to clarify how hinge constitutivism conceives of the inescapability of our epistemic practices, and how an appeal to inescapability redeems the objectivity of the norms governing such practices. Some versions of constitutivism about practical reason seem to maintain that the inescapability of agency comes in a very strong modal flavour: it is metaphysically necessary and a priori true that we cannot but be agents, i.e. individuals whose bodily movements constitutively aim at self-constitution (in Korsgaard’s version) or self-understanding (in Velleman’s version).[[7]](#footnote-7) If this way of conceiving of inescapability were correct, then there should be some sort of unintelligibility about a challenge to the rationality of assuming hinges and to the epistemic practices we follow. On closer inspection, however, we can conceive of the existence of alternative epistemic practices, which would make the shm-challenge intelligible. If idealism or phenomenalism were correct, for instance, then the objects of experience would be sense data and not physical objects. Thus, our epistemic practice of forming beliefs on the basis of deliverances of our senses would issue justified beliefs about sense data, and not about mind-independent objects. Therefore, if idealism or phenomenalism were correct, the hinge that there are physical objects taken as mind-independent entities would not be constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality and there would not be any reason to assume it.

The problem with idealism or phenomenalism is not that these views are unintelligible or inherently incoherent. For this reason, if one were to disagree over how to explicate the concept of epistemic rationality by taking an idealist or a phenomenalist stance, that conceptual disagreement would be intelligible and far from rationally inert. Rather, as argued in more detail in Coliva (2015) and Coliva and Palmira (2020), the problem is that idealism and phenomenalism simply fail to offer a plausible account of how we experience reality given the kinds of creatures we are. This is what ultimately grounds explicating the concept of rationality in the way suggested by hinge constitutivism.

The foregoing observations helped us to clarify the notions of inescapability and objectivity at play in the hinge constitutivist argument in favour of the rational assumption of hinges. There is no intrinsic necessity to our epistemic practices and their respective constitutive hinges, as things could have gone otherwise and we are in no position exclude the truth of idealism or phenomenalism a priori. Thus, the realist-sounding project of deriving necessary and a priori truths about epistemic normativity from what is constitutive of our epistemic practice strikes us as ill-grounded. However, this is not to deny that our epistemic practices are inescapable *given the kinds of beings we are*. In fact, even if we focus on improved versions of ourselves, that is subjects whose cognitive powers finitely extend our own in such a way as to allow them to attend to the epistemically relevant features of their environment in a thoughtful and free from bias way, we are bound to acknowledge that such subjects will have to form justified beliefs about mind-independent objects through perception. Thus, while such improved versions of ourselves might decide not to place silverware in a certain order thereby falling short of following etiquette, it would not be up to them to have perceptual experiences as of objects in their environment and form the correspondent (justified) perceptual beliefs. Our epistemic practices are, so to say, *humanly* inescapable.

As has emerged previously, hinge constitutivism derives a substantive epistemic norm, viz. that it is rationally mandatory to assume the hinge “there exists an external world”, from what is constitutive of the practice of forming *rational* beliefs through perception. This is an objective principle of epistemic rationality: it requires of us to assume that hinge universally, irrespective of our own motives, desires, background and foregrounded beliefs. However, the objectivity of epistemic norms is not established by an independent *sui generis* normative reality, which makes their contents true, nor does it rest on some alleged metaphysically necessary features of our epistemic practices, which we are bound to acknowledge a priori. Rather, human inescapability ensures that the normative truths we derive from what is constitutive of our epistemic practices are objective in virtue of what the human condition is like. Call, this, if you will, “constitutivism with a human face”.

As we see it, insisting that the kind of normativity that is vindicated by constitutivism would not be objective (or objective enough) is simply to assume a realist construal of the notion of objectivity, a construal which is prejudicial against constitutivism. This said, it’s also important to stress that constitutivism does not make the naturalistic-driven claim that our epistemic practices are rational simply because they are our own. While constitutivism agrees with naturalism in rejecting the existence of a *sui generis* normative reality, constitutivism goes beyond naturalism by making a substantive claim about what’s constitutive of our concept of epistemic rationality. Such a claim is key to accounting for the rationality of our epistemic practices and responding to the Humean sceptic. That constitutivism is not a notational variant of naturalism can also be appreciated by looking at Hume’s own reaction to his sceptical arguments: [[8]](#footnote-8) Hume adopted a form of naturalism which only allowed him to sidestep the sceptical doubt by regarding it as unnatural, thereby falling short of redeeming the rationality of hinges. By contrast, constitutivism does offer a way to vindicate the rationality of hinges.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**5. Hinge Constitutivism and Relativism**

In the previous section, we have argued that hinge constitutivism ensures the existence of objective epistemic norms without either buying into the existence of a sui generis normative reality or making objectionably strong modal claims about what is constitutive of our epistemic practices. Yet, there is debate over whether hinge epistemology, *qua* a distinctive epistemological framework, somehow leads or is committed to some form of relativism (see Kusch 2018 for an affirmative answer, Coliva 2019b for a negative one). Of course, if hinge epistemology were in the end committed to relativism, this would undermine our argument in favour of the objectivity – understood in the anti-realist fashion articulated above – of epistemic norms.

A way to make progress with this question is to focus on whether a solution to the problem of rational inertia requires accepting a relativist stance. We will argue that the constitutivist-based solution to the problem of rational inertia avoids any commitment to relativism.

Insofar as the disagreement between the constitutivist and the Humean sceptic she is engaging with takes place against an agreement on epistemic practices and first-order epistemic judgements, it should be clear that constitutivism does not lead to epistemic relativism. For epistemic relativism would indeed require a difference in epistemic principles giving rise to different and incompatible sets of first-order judgements which are on a par epistemically. By contrast, the constitutivist and the sceptic do agree that certain of our ordinary empirical beliefs are justified, they concur on which these justified beliefs are (or we can safely assume that they do), and they also concur on the fact that sensory evidence is a valid source of epistemic justification for such empirical beliefs.

Carol Rovane, in recent years (2012), (2013), has developed a multimundialist view, according to which different frameworks give rise to alternative perspectives on what the world is like which are logically and normatively insulated from one another. The idea is that from the truth or justifiedness of *p* in a given framework, nothing follows for the truth or epistemic status of *p* in an alternative framework. Applying this idea to hinges, we may think that people holding different hinges would occupy normatively insulated epistemic worlds, such that their respective hinges would not be in any logical and normative relation with one another. In light of the logical and normative insularity claim, this form of relativism would chime well with the view that hinges are not truth-apt; for insofar as we do allow predications of truth that obey the equivalence schema, the alleged logical insulation would be lost. However, it is one of the selling points of Rovane’s multimundialist view that it dispenses with the logical possibility of disagreement across alternatives. Thus, this understanding of relativism would not recover the idea that people may disagree over hinges. Since the very problem of rational inertia does rest on the possibility of there being hinge disagreement, Rovane’s multimundialism would not be suited to characterise the alleged relativistic implications of this version of hinge epistemology.

We might then take Bernard Williams’s *relativism of distance* to offer a better relativistic framework than Rovane’s. Williams (1985) advances a distinction between what he calls “notional confrontations” and “real confrontations”. While notional confrontations can take place against different cultures, systems, and so on insofar as such different cultures or systems subscribe to logically contradictory verdicts, real confrontations can only take place within a given culture or system and they are the only ones that allow for normative resolutions. Extending Williams’s relativism of distance from morality to hinges, we can indeed make room for the idea that people do not share - and disagree over - hinges, because they are propositionally contradictory. Yet, they do not really engage in rational disputes between them. For doing so is actually impossible from within any given camp, since reasons are internal to the epistemic framework that produces them and cannot be appreciated from within a different framework. Thus, if people do engage in disputes about hinges, they soon leave it at that and proceed along their own separate ways, like parallel lines that are not going to meet. As is apparent, while Rovane’s multimundialism is logical (and even conceptual), Williams’s relativism of distance, applied to hinge epistemology, seems to give rise to a kind of epistemological multimundialism: people occupy altogether different spaces of reasons, such that the reasons they each have are not visible/available to the other party.

However, the constitutivist solution forces a Humean sceptic to occupy the same epistemological world as ours, as it were. Indeed, it must be kept in mind that a Humean sceptic and a constitutivist agree on the following: first, our first-order practices of forming, revising, retaining, and assessing ordinary beliefs exhibit the distinctive mark of epistemic normativity. That is to say, ordinary beliefs can be justified/un justified, it can be rational or irrational to retain or revise them, and so on. Secondly, justifications for ordinary beliefs are possible thanks to a system of hinges. Thirdly, such hinges cannot be in turn a priori or empirically justified, nor can they be justified in virtue of the existence of entitlements to trust them.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, a constitutivist and a Humean sceptic do agree on these three epistemological theses. Moreover, once we appreciate the conceptual nature of the disagreement between a constitutivist and a sceptic (§2), we also come to realise that a constitutivist challenges a sceptic on a neutral field of battle, that of explaining a phenomenon – i.e. the normativity of first-order epistemic practices – whose existence is also acknowledged by the sceptic. The constitutivist’s view that we should explicate the concept of rationality in terms of rationalityextended rests precisely on the idea that the it would be a mystery to claim that our first-order practices are rational and that rationality somehow depends on a system of arbitrary assumptions like a Humean sceptic would have it. Thus, the challenge to the sceptic is about something she is committed to, namely the justifiability of ordinary beliefs. Surely, a sceptic might try to rebut the constitutivist’s argument in favour of rationalityextended but it seems inappropriate to claim that such an argument would not be visible to a Humean sceptic.

Finally, a constitutivist hinge epistemology does not lead to conceptual relativism either. Let conceptual relativism be the view that there might be different conceptual schemes that describe the world in many different ways, none of which is intrinsically correct or superior to the other, while being incompatible with one another. Applying this template to our case, constitutivist hinge epistemology would have relativistic implications only if it were part of the view that different and incompatible explications of the concept of epistemic rationality were equally legitimate. Yet, as argued above, the constitutivist is in a position to argue that rationalityextended is better than rationalitynarrow, for only by adopting an extended notion of rationality are we able to fully vindicate the rationality of our fist-order epistemic practices.

**6. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored the implications of a constitutivist approach to the problem of hinge disagreement. We have clarified in what sense a disagreement over genuine hinges would be a conceptual disagreement, showing that it constitutes a distinctive kind of conceptual disagreement. To this end, we have argued that the parties to a hinge disagreement are neither trying to determine how best to use the concept rational given they conversational context they currently occupy; nor is one of them refusing to use rational to describe our epistemic practices on account of not possessing the concept; nor is there a refusal of one party to apply rational despite the fact that both parties are disposed to follow the canonical pattern of use of a concept one must have an implicit grasp of and be disposed to follow in order to count as a competent user of that concept. Rather, it is a disagreement about the correct understanding of the very concept of rationality.

We have then turned to two problems that a constitutivist approach to hinge disagreement should face. The first is to demarcate genuine hinges from merely entrenched beliefs. The second is the so-called shm-challenge, that is, the challenge of explaining why we have reason to engage in the epistemic practices hinges are constitutive of in the first place. We have shown how the problem of rational inertia can be reverse-engineered to provide us with a demarcation test. The demarcation test offers guidance on how to carry out the metaphysical task of identifying what is constitutive of our epistemic practices. We have then responded to the shm-challenge, by describing the distinctive kind of inescapability – what we called “human” inescapability – enjoyed, for instance, by the practice of forming rational beliefs about mind-independent concrete objects on the basis of perception. Human inescapability, we claim, is what underwrites the fact that the epistemic norms governing our epistemic games are universally binding for creatures like us. Finally, we have shown how a constitutivist approach to the problem of hinge disagreement does not have relativistic implications.

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1. See Brandom (2000) for a full-blown inferentialist account that holds that any inference licensed by a concept enters its individuation; or Peacocke (2004) for a molecularist account that holds that only certain canonical inferences licensed by a given concept enter its individuation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is an Italian term used to designate people coming from the South of Italy in a disparaging way. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This enables us to set hinge constitutivism apart from *belief* constitutivism. Belief constitutivism (see e.g. Flowerree 2018, McHugh 2012, Velleman 2000, Wedgwood 2002) is the view that since belief constitutively aims at truth, engaging in the practice of believing requires conforming to norms that specify truth-related standards of correctness for believing propositions. The claim that belief aims constitutively at truth is controversial, as it is open to a number of different interpretations, each of which should face distinct challenges (see e.g. Côté-Bouchard 2016). Hinge constitutivism, by contrast, makes no claim about the constitutive aim of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nor can it be resolved through purely a priori considerations. For an in-depth discussion of this alternative, see Coliva 2015, chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Let us briefly compare and contrast our test with other criteria for the identification of hinges. Allan Hazlett (2006: 205) writes: “I mean by *hinge propositions* those propositions p such that belief that p is a necessary condition on rationally having a lot of knowledge”. We take our demarcation test to be superior to Hazlett’s proposal for two main reasons: for one thing, different versions of hinge epistemology (see e.g. Coliva 2015, Pritchard, 2016, Wright 2004) maintain that hinges cannot be believed. So, Hazlett’s criterion – unlike our demarcation test – could not be employed by such hinge epistemologies. For another, children may not attain the epistemic status of “rationally having a lot of knowledge” despite having perceptual warrants for ordinary perceptual beliefs, something which in turn requires that the proposition *that there exists an external world* be a hinge for them too. Thus, Hazlett’s criterion – unlike our demarcation test – would not be able to tell whether that proposition is a hinge for all subjects who are capable of having perceptual warrants. Crispin Wright (2004: 191) suggests identifying hinges like this: “P is a presupposition of a particular cognitive project if to doubt P (in advance) would rationally commit one to doubting the significance or competence of the project”. We take our demarcation test to be in the spirit of Wright’s proposal. The test, we believe, improves upon Wright’s criterion by replacing the somewhat vague notion of significance (or competence) of a cognitive project with the more precise notion of (a priori or empirical) resolvability of a disagreement. We are grateful to an anonymous referee for urging us to consider these alternative proposals. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The former verdict is what accounts for the hinge role of “There is an external world” for the practice of forming and revising empirical beliefs based on perceptual evidence; the latter is what accounts for the hinge role of “The attested is a reliable informant” for the practice of forming and revising beliefs based on testimony. See Coliva (2015) and Coliva (2019a) for in-depth discussions of each of these hinges. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The same seems to be true of belief constitutivism. For instance Côté-Bouchard (2016: 3183) takes belief constitutivism to vindicate the claim that “there is necessarily a good reason to conform to epistemic norms”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on the relation between constutivism and naturalism see Coliva (2015: 4.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We are grateful to an anonymous referee for asking us to say more on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An in-depth discussion of the difference between Coliva’s constitutivist version of hinge epistemology and Wright’s entitlement version of hinge epistemology can be found in Coliva (2015) and Coliva (2020b). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)