

## Extended Rationality & Epistemic Relativism<sup>1</sup>

Natalie Alana Ashton

### 1. Introduction

In her book *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology* (2015), Annalisa Coliva puts forward an anti-sceptical proposal based on the idea that the notion of rationality extends to the unwarrantable presuppositions “that make the acquisition of perceptual warrants possible” (2015: 150). These presuppositions are commonly the target of sceptical arguments, and by showing that they are on the one hand unwarrantable, but on the other are constitutive components of rationality itself, she reveals that they are beyond rational doubt and thus avoids scepticism.

Part of Coliva’s defence of using extended rationality in this way involves distancing it from relativist interpretations, which she describes as “devastating” (2015: 120). She proposes two ways that someone might attempt to formulate epistemic relativism from her extended rationality view, and argues that both would be unsuccessful because they require describing alternative conceptions of rationality which are “unintelligible” (in the first case), or “inconceivable” (in the second).

The superficial claim of this chapter is that Coliva’s arguments, as they stand, are insufficient to dismiss relativism. She fails to show that the conception of rationality needed for the first formulation of relativism is unintelligible, and overestimates the significance of the second formulation’s conception turning out to be inconceivable. But I also highlight a deeper problem: neither formulation follows a realistic blueprint for relativism, and so these were the wrong possibilities to consider in the first place. To address this issue, I propose a third, more plausible, way in which someone might attempt to formulate relativism on the basis of Coliva’s account. I leave open whether this strategy is successful, or whether a version of Coliva’s criticisms apply to it too.

I’ll start by outlining Coliva’s extended rationality view in §2. I’ll then introduce and critique her understanding of epistemic relativism in §3. In §4 I’ll explore her response to relativism, which involves offering her relativist two options for developing their view, and arguing that neither is successful. I’ll argue that her argument about the first option is incomplete, and her argument about the second option misses the point. Then in §5 I’ll return to some of my earlier criticisms of her understanding of relativism and use them to suggest a third, more suitable option that she could offer the relativist. I’ll conclude in §6, and clarify what the consequences are for extended rationality. Unlike Coliva, I don’t think that relativism is ‘devastating’ to her anti-sceptical proposal.

First though, I want to make a brief comment on the way Coliva (like many anti-sceptics who discuss relativism) tends to talk about, and envisage arguments for, alternative epistemic systems. Most card-carrying relativists begin their arguments by pointing to examples of differences in

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<sup>1</sup> [funding information omitted for blind review]

actual epistemic systems, and proceed by arguing that none of these systems can be independently justified.<sup>2</sup> Coliva already concedes - in fact argues for - the claim that there is no justification independent of epistemic systems (that's a direct consequence of the extended rationality view), and so this theoretical point is not what is in question. Her quarrel with the relativist is instead over the claim that all humans (actual and possible) necessarily share one form of rationality and one epistemic system. She thinks this claim is true, and the relativist's task is to argue that it is not.

It's important to flag this up, for two reasons. Firstly, it serves as an important reminder that the central arguments discussed in this paper aren't arguments made by relativists themselves. There are better arguments for relativism than those found here. Secondly, emphasising this point highlights the extent to which this debate takes place on Coliva's terms; the burden is on the relativist to show that there can be alternative epistemic systems, rather than on Coliva to show that there is one single system, and the options for accomplishing this are delineated by Coliva too.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Coliva's 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 a fairly mundane, everyday belief that an epistemic subject might have: "there is a cup on the table in front of me". We tend to think that, and act as though, a belief like this is justified, but we might wonder whether we're right to do so. Are beliefs like this really justified? And if so, what justifies them? Coliva intends her view to answer these questions and tell us what justifies beliefs like this for the epistemic subjects that hold them.

To understand her answer, we need to appreciate two key components of the view. 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.

### *Moderatism*

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.

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

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper I'll talk about Kuhn (1962), Williams (1974), Kusch (2012; 2016) and Rovane (2013).

<sup>3</sup> It's also worth noting the language that Coliva deploys. When she talks about alternative systems she talks refers to them as alternatives to 'our' epistemic system, meaning the system belonging to all actual and possible humans. This is an idea, and therefore a phrasing, that the relativist would disagree with. For the sake of simplicity I'll keep her phrasing and refer to 'our' epistemic system throughout. But I won't like it.

(typically an experience with representational content that P).

(Coliva 2015: 21)

So, according to Coliva, liberals<sup>4</sup> make two, fairly minimal, demands on epistemic subjects. Going back to our previous example, our epistemic subject will be justified in her belief that there is a cup on the table in front of her so long as she (1) has a perceptual experience as of a cup on a table in front of her<sup>5</sup>, and (2) does not have (or perhaps ‘is not in a position to have’) any beliefs which could defeat this experience - for example if 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)

So, according to Coliva, conservatives<sup>6</sup> make two further demands on our epistemic subject. Like liberals they think that to be justified in her belief she must have the perceptual experience of a cup on the table (as in 1) and no defeaters (as in 2), but they also require that (3) she makes some relevant background assumptions<sup>7</sup> and (4) these assumptions are warranted<sup>8</sup>.

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)

So this account also begins with the two demands we saw in the liberal and conservative

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<sup>4</sup> She has in mind Jim Pryor (2000; 2004).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> The primary defender of this view is Crispin Wright (2004; 2014).

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> See pp. 66-7.

accounts. If our epistemic subject is to be justified in her belief she must have the perceptual experience of a cup on the table (as in 1) and no defeaters (as in 2). It also includes the demand that she make some relevant background assumptions (as in the conservative's 3). However, the moderate doesn't make the conservative's fourth demand: they don't require that these background assumptions are warranted. In fact, at points, Coliva claims that they are unwarrantable.<sup>9</sup>

So, we now know what moderatism is. You might already be struck by an apparent problem with this view. Coliva is attempting to give us an account of the justification that we have for our beliefs about the external world. Along the way she tells us that these beliefs require general assumptions, and that these general assumptions do not need, and cannot have, warrant. But doesn't this lack of warrant undermine any justification that we might want to attribute to the subject? If her beliefs about the external world rely on *unwarrantable* assumptions then it's not clear that she is justified in believing them at all. It seems that Coliva has failed to give us an account of the justification of our beliefs, and instead has offered a sceptical story, which reveals that we can't be justified in them at all.

This is where the second part of Coliva's extended rationality view - constitutivism - comes in.

### *Constitutivism*

Constitutivism is a claim about what justification *is*. Coliva explains it with 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 down in front of a chess board and list every legitimate move that's possible for every conceivable configuration of the board. 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 be an incomplete method - it would omit some important aspects of the game. To fully appreciate what chess is I also need some background information, like: there are two players; these players 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 also needs to tell us the unwarrantable assumptions that are required in order for us to carry out rational assessment. In other words, in the same way that a game isn't constituted merely by the moves made within it, epistemic rationality isn't constituted merely by the set of rational propositions. It extends beyond them, and is also constituted by the unwarrantable assumptions that make assessment of those propositions possible (2015: 129).

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<sup>9</sup> 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).

So, that's constitutivism. How does that help with the sceptical problem identified above? The problem was that Coliva's account of how our beliefs are justified says that these beliefs rely on unwarranted assumptions - which sounds like an admission that they're not justified at all.

The solution that constitutivism offers is a different way of viewing these assumptions, which doesn't preclude them from offering the epistemic support that our beliefs need in order to be justified. Coliva takes this constitutivist idea from a passage of Wittgenstein, which is widely understood as a response to just this kind of sceptical worry. The passage compares unwarranted assumptions to hinges (this is why Coliva calls her view 'a hinge epistemology'):

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

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

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

This passage points out that doors rely on fixed hinges in order to turn, even though the hinges themselves don't turn. (In fact, the stability of the hinges is part of what makes the door's turning possible). Pointing this out doesn't undermine our explanation of doors turning, or suggest that they don't really move after all. In the same way, Coliva thinks that once we recognise that our unwarranted assumptions are different in kind from our perceptual beliefs (the former are like the hinges, the latter like the door) we should be happy to allow them to stay fixed and unquestioned, and for that fixity to be part of the explanation of how other beliefs are justified. The assumptions themselves don't need to be justified, just as the hinges themselves don't need to move.

To summarise the view then; 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. This raises an apparent sceptical worry. However the view is also *constitutivist*, in that these unwarranted assumptions are taken to constitute epistemic rationality, rather than to be assessed by it. This is supposed to respond to the sceptical worry, and so completes Coliva's answer to the question of what justifies our beliefs about the external world.

The question the rest of this paper will try to answer is whether or not this view leads to a form of epistemic relativism.

### 3. Epistemic Relativism

In this section I'll introduce Coliva's characterisation of epistemic relativism and explain how it deviates from characterisations that relativists themselves have offered (Kuhn 1962; Feyerabend 1962; Williams 1974; Rovane 2013; Kusch 2016). I'll also hint at some ways that these deviations create problems for Coliva's responses to relativism - something I'll explain in full in §5. I'll conclude by making clear why epistemic relativism - both on Coliva's characterisation and when properly understood - might be thought to follow from the extended rationality view.

Let's begin with Coliva's characterisation of relativism. According to Coliva, epistemic relativism is the view that:

“there may be - either as a matter of fact or in principle - many 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”.

(2015: 140)

We can break this down into three central, relativist criteria. According to Coliva, for relativism to be true there must be:

- multiple systems of basic assumptions, which are;
- mutually incompatible, and which;
- give rise to equally valid systems of justification.

I'll discuss each of these criteria in turn, and then make clear why someone might argue that extended rationality meets (or lays the groundwork for meeting) them, and thus leads to epistemic relativism.

#### *Multiple Systems of Basic Assumptions*

Let's start with the first criterion: *multiple systems of basic assumptions*. There are two ways to interpret the 'multiple systems' aspect of this criterion: it might be taken to require that there are at least two actual epistemic systems that we can point to in use in the world, or it might only be taken to require that there are at least two epistemic systems, and leave open the question of whether some of these could be hypothetical, or possible, systems. Either of these interpretations is sufficient for relativism, which only needs to deny the absolutist idea that there is a single, necessary, and system-independent standard of justification. Coliva seems to have in mind the second interpretation as her discussion is almost entirely restricted to the possibility of hypothetical systems. As this is the more permissive of the two interpretations, I take it that relativists would find this aspect of the criterion to be unproblematic.

Things are more complicated when it comes to Coliva's understanding of what these systems are. On the page following her initial statement of relativism, Coliva clarifies that by 'epistemic systems' she means basic epistemic practices (such as observation) and their associated assumptions (2015: 141). And she says that a basic epistemic practice is a practice which is

necessary for other epistemic practices and which does not presuppose any other epistemic practice.<sup>10</sup> For example the practice of (forming beliefs on the basis of) perception is basic, because it is necessary for the operation of other epistemic practices - such as gaining testimony from books - and it doesn't presuppose any other practice. The practice of (forming beliefs on the basis of) astrology, on the other hand, is *not* basic, because it presupposes another epistemic practice, namely perception - you have to perceive the stars in order to interpret them.

So far, so good. But there are two places where Coliva's treatment of epistemic systems is problematic. First is her discussion of which basic assumptions are associated with our epistemic system. When she first introduces the moderate account she mentions a number of propositions which are essential to our justificatory practices. In addition to her central case - "there is an external world" - she suggests that perception might also require "other general propositions" such as "My sense organs work mostly reliably" and "I am not the victim of massive cognitive deception" (2015: 34). In addition to these we can add the notion of object that Coliva's relativist discussion focuses on. A first pass at articulating this might be: 'objects are mind-independent'.

However, on closer inspection we can see that the notion of object Coliva talks about in fact involves several assumptions. She talks about "physical objects in our surroundings, taken as mind-independent entities", and "objects and properties 'out there'", combining mind-independence with physicality - existing in time and space (2015: 142). I'll return to this issue and explain why it causes a problem for Coliva's treatment of relativism in §5.

The second place where Coliva's understanding of epistemic systems is lacking is in her description of the relationship between basic assumptions and basic practices. It's reasonable to assume that Coliva thinks the relationship will be a close one, as basic assumptions and basic practices are jointly constitutive of epistemic systems, and they presumably arise and evolve in tandem with one another. If, as our epistemic system were developing, assumptions and practices changed entirely independently of one another, then the epistemic system would likely run into problems. However, all Coliva explicitly says about this relationship is that basic practices have "respective" (2015: 141) and "characteristic" (2015: 142) assumptions. Again, this ambiguity raises problems in Coliva's response to relativism, which I'll explain in §5.

She doesn't give us much insight into how she sees this relationship, beyond saying that basic practices have "respective" (2015: 141) and "characteristic" (2015: 142) assumptions. But we can assume that the relationship between these will be quite close, as they are together jointly constitutive of epistemic systems.

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<sup>10</sup> Coliva's definition as it's written in the text is that a basic epistemic practice is one that is necessary for other practices and "does not presuppose *other instances of itself*" (pg 141, my italics), but this seems like a mistake. The example of a non-basic practice that Coliva offers is astrology, which she says is non-basic because it relies on observation (another basic practice), *not* because it relies on itself (which it doesn't). (The definition that Coliva's wording suggests would also be implausibly broad - any basic practice which wasn't circular would count as basic.) So I think the definition of basic practices that I'm attributing to Coliva is both the one she actually intended, and closer to being correct, than the definition she gives.

### *Mutual Incompatibility*

Now let's talk about the second criterion: *mutual incompatibility*. This criterion is required to ensure that the different epistemic systems don't collapse into one another. If different systems are compatible in a way which means they can share a common standard of justification then, again, it's hard to see how this kind of relativism is interestingly different from absolutism.

However, there are a number of different ways that two systems could be 'incompatible'. On the one hand, the requirement that different systems be mutually incompatible could mean that there need to be questions to which someone using one system would answer 'yes', and someone using a different system would answer 'no'. This is what Martin Kusch (2016) has called 'exclusiveness', which itself falls into two different kinds (2016: 34). All forms of relativism require a minimal level of exclusiveness to ensure that there really are multiple systems, instead of several fragments of one larger system. On the other hand, the call for 'incompatibility' could mean that it's not possible to translate the propositions of one system into those of the other (and vice versa). The various relations that could be described this way have been referred to using the term 'incommensurability' (e.g. Kuhn 1962; Feyerabend 1962; Williams 1974; Rovane 2013).

It's important to have a clear sense of which kind of incompatibility a particular form of relativism requires, because some forms of exclusiveness are in tension with some forms of incommensurability. At least at first glance, if two different systems are incommensurable - the propositions of one cannot be translated into the propositions of the other - then it's hard to see how they could also be exclusive - how those propositions could exhibit disagreement.<sup>11</sup> Coliva is not careful with her use of this term, which I'll flag up as each instance arises.

### *Equal validity*

Let's now turn to Coliva's third criterion for relativism: *equal validity*. This criterion captures the relativist's rejection of the absolutist claim that systems can be ranked hierarchically, and is therefore the most theoretically significant of the three claims.

Whilst this anti-hierarchical sentiment is crucial to relativism, and so there certainly is a need for some criterion which can capture this, Kusch (2016) has highlighted a problem with using equal validity to do this. First, Kusch notes that equal validity makes a stronger claim than the anti-hierarchical sentiment (2016: 35). It doesn't say that the systems can't be ranked - it says that ranking them results in a tie. Then, he points out that this is stronger claim presupposes a neutral, system-independent position from which to make such a judgement. But this is one of the absolutist presuppositions that the relativist wants to reject (2016: 35). If a relativist were to commit themselves to this stronger claim their view would be inconsistent, and a charitable,

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<sup>11</sup> This is not a problem for all versions of exclusiveness, as Martin Kusch has shown (2016: 34) - which is precisely why it's important for anyone criticising relativism to be precise in their characterisations of it.



non-dogmatic investigation into the possibility of relativism should not include it as a requirement - at least if a less problematic alternative is available.

So, before our discussion proceeds we need to consider whether an alternative criterion could capture the relativist's anti-hierarchy commitment. Kusch suggests the criterion, first discussed by Williams (1974: 225), of 'non-appraisal', which says that "for a reflective person the question of appraisal of (at least some other) [epistemic systems] does not arise" (Kusch 2016: 35-6). Discussing this commitment in detail would take us too far from the topic at hand, and so I won't do this here. Rather, I'll take the fact that there's at least one candidate alternative out there to mean that using equal validity - which is known to be problematic - is not an acceptable way to proceed, and will instead replace Coliva's equal validity requirement with a placeholder criterion.

The placeholder I'll use is 'non-neutrality': there can be no neutral (or system-independent) way of evaluating different systems (Kusch 2016: 35). This criterion captures the anti-hierarchy commitment the relativist needs, without making stronger claims which presuppose the absolutist commitment the relativist intends to reject, and without taking on any additional theoretical baggage.

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

- multiple systems each of multiple basic assumptions, which are;
- mutually incompatible (in a specified sense), and which;
- cannot be ranked neutrally, or independent of a system.

#### *From Extended Rationality to Epistemic Relativism*

Now that we have an accurate, if unrefined, picture of what epistemic relativism is we can address why Coliva's extended rationality view might (be thought to) lead to it. Remember that on Coliva's view the assumptions that constitute rationality and (along with our basic practices) contribute to our epistemic systems are unwarrantable. They are nevertheless justified (in fact mandated) by the rationality that they constitute, and so have a kind of epistemic authority, but this authority is system-dependent. The idea of system-independent justification doesn't even make sense on a view like this where epistemic evaluations have to be made against a backdrop of rationality-constituting assumptions.

This means that the extended rationality view is committed to non-neutrality and so meets the third, and most theoretically significant, of the criteria for epistemic relativism. Once a view has been shown to embrace non-neutrality, the question of whether that view leads to relativism becomes the question of whether there are, or there could be, other epistemic systems which are incompatible with our own. Coliva attempts to answer this question negatively: it's not possible for there to be alternative epistemic systems which are incompatible with our own. In the next section I'll explain and criticise the arguments she offers in support of this answer.

#### 4. The Relativist's Dilemma

Based on the argument discussed above, Coliva's imagined relativist needs to show that it's possible for there to be more than one epistemic system - ie. at least one set of basic assumptions (and associated basic practice) in addition to, and incompatible with, our own. She calls this the 'relativist challenge'. If her relativist can succeed in showing that there can be "alternative basic epistemic practices of forming beliefs about objects in our surroundings, with different characteristic assumptions", then Coliva should concede that her view leads to epistemic relativism (2015: 141-2).

However Coliva argues that this cannot be done. Her strategy is to force her imagined relativist into a hopeless dilemma - she offers her relativist two options for attempting to meet the challenge she has issued, and claims that both are guaranteed to fail. Option 1 is to find or describe an epistemic system which is comprised of an *alternative practice* to our own (ie. something other than observation) used in conjunction with our familiar notion of object. Option 2 is to find or describe an epistemic system which is comprised of our familiar practice of observation, but used in conjunction with an *alternative notion of object*.

Coliva argues that neither option can lead to a satisfactory account of relativism. She claims that the first fails on grounds of conceivability, and the second on grounds of intelligibility. I don't think she supports either claim adequately. In the remainder of this section I'll explain Coliva's grounds for dismissing each of the options she's offered her relativist, and show why these reasons fall short.

##### *The 'Inconceivability' of Alternative Practices*

As we saw above, option 1 is to find or describe an epistemic system which is comprised of an *alternative practice* to our own (ie. something other than observation) which is used in conjunction with our familiar notion of object.

Coliva begins her discussion of this option by claiming that we can't easily imagine humans (or creatures relevantly similar to humans) who form beliefs about the external world without observation (2015: 144). So, she says, in order to imagine the kind of epistemic system that this option demands, we are forced to consider "completely alien creatures" like "angels or God" who form beliefs about their surroundings through 'rational intuition' (2015: 144).

The problem with attempting to formulate relativism in this way, she claims, is that such hypotheses are beyond conceivability, and so will lead only to "ineffectual" forms of relativism (2015: 144). Here's Coliva on this point in full:

"Yet on closer examination these hypotheses [ones involving alien creatures with rational intuition] defy our conceivability powers. For rational intuition, in their case, would not be like seeing, only with the mind's eye (what would such an eye be?); or intuiting the presence and features of material objects through an analysis of the concepts involved to entertain those concepts. Therefore, although we should remain open to these hypotheses, they

would make relativism utterly ineffectual. For a relativist challenge to be worth taking seriously the alternative should at least be intelligible to us.” (Coliva 2015: 144)

For the moment let’s put aside the question of how easily we can imagine humans forming beliefs about the world through some process other than observation, and accept Coliva’s claim that on this version her relativist is forced to think about ‘alien’ creatures. Her key claims about these kinds of scenarios are that they defy conceivability, and that conceivability is required for effectual relativism. To assess either claim we need to have a clear idea of the kind(s) of conceivability in question, but Coliva doesn’t make these readily available. She seems to imply that these scenarios aren’t conceivable in even the most minimal sense (they “defy our conceivability powers”) - but this claim would be implausibly strong, as we’ll see below - and she doesn’t touch on the question of what kind of conceivability is needed to motivate relativism at all (2015: 144).

David Chalmers (2002) has distinguished several different elements of conceivability, and we can draw on some of these to begin filling in the gaps. According to Chalmers, a statement *S* is *negatively conceivable* for a subject “when that subject, after consideration, cannot rule out *S* on a priori grounds” (2002: 149). In contrast, *S* is *positively conceivable* “when one can imagine a situation that verifies *S*” (2002: 150). In addition, *S* is *prima facie conceivable* for a subject “when *S* is [positively or negatively] conceivable for that subject on first appearances”, and *ideally conceivable* when *S* is still conceivable “on ideal rational reflection” (2002: 147).

Coliva has to concede that the hypotheses she’s discussing are at least *prima facie* negatively conceivable, because shortly after the passage quoted above she claims that the practice described in this imagined scenario is compatible with our own practices (2015: 144). It wouldn’t be possible to make such a claim about compatibility - at least not a meaningful one - about a scenario which had to be ruled out a priori after the slightest consideration. So the hypotheses in question are at least conceivable in this very minimal sense. The most charitable interpretation of the quoted passage therefore sees it as attempting to show that the hypotheses in question fall short of positive conceivability - i.e. that no positive conceptions of them can be formed.

I don’t think Coliva has done enough to show that the hypotheses in question fall short of positive conceivability. She tells us, briefly, that two ways to attempt to flesh out the details of these hypotheses would fail, but she doesn’t tell us why these two ways are the only (or are they just the most likely? The most salient?) ones. Nor are we given much explanation of why it is that she thinks they would fail.

I’m tempted to say that in fact we might be able to positively conceive of aliens, or even (to return to the issue I put aside earlier) humans who can form beliefs about the world through some process other than observation. There are countless fictional and mythical scenarios involving creatures gaining beliefs about the world through dreams and visions, or through telepathy or other “sixth senses”, all of which we can comprehend to some level of detail.

Coliva would likely argue that these scenarios can’t be imagined in sufficient metaphysical detail

to provide the basis for a suitable relativism, but this brings us to the further question of what standard of conceivability ‘effectual relativism’ requires. Again, Coliva doesn’t give us much on this point. We can probably infer that Coliva thinks relativism requires some form of positive conceivability (as that seems to be what she’s arguing the hypotheses in question fall short of), but she owes us a much more substantial, explicit explanation of what she has in mind here. Until she provides this, Coliva can’t be said to have done enough to dismiss option 1.

Now let’s move on to discuss the second option that Coliva offers to her imagined relativist.

### *The ‘Unintelligibility’ of Alternative Notions of Object*

Recall; option 2 is to find or describe an epistemic system which is comprised of our familiar practice of observation, but used in conjunction with a different basic assumption - specifically, an *alternative notion of object*.

Our familiar notion of object is that objects are physical, mind-independent, and ‘out there’ in the external world. Coliva says that an epistemic system that adhered to a different notion of object would be equivalent to phenomenalism. She doesn’t reference any particular phenomenalist views or arguments but it’s safe to suppose that she has in mind something like a Berkeleyan view, on which beliefs are still formed in the same way that we form them (namely on the basis of observation), but objects are not mind-independent and are rather collections of ideas (Berkeley 1996).

Coliva’s objection is that this kind of epistemic system is ‘unintelligible’ and, as a result, can’t support a relativism that’s “worth taking seriously” (2015: 144). Her argument for this focuses on a philosophical discussion of scientific work on perception (Burge 2010). The message she takes from this discussion is that science agrees that we have the notion of object that she says we do: “our perceptual experience is objective” - it’s about external, mind-independent objects.

Let’s accept this claim for the sake of argument.<sup>12</sup> We have a particular notion of object that the phenomenalist’s epistemic system doesn’t share. What Coliva still needs to persuade us of is that such an epistemic system is “incapable of explaining the very content of our experiences” (2015: 145) and that lacking this capability makes it unable to support relativism.

Coliva offers some reasons for thinking that a system without our notion of object would be incapable of explaining the content of our experiences. She doubts that it could explain how we are able to group different perceptions to be as of one object, how human infants and non-human animals can have representations, and what warrants our inferences to objective causes (2015: 142-3). She draws this conclusion too quickly though, failing to engage with any of

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<sup>12</sup> There’s room to push back against this claim, because it’s not clear that there really is scientific consensus on this point. 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.

Berkeley's arguments that deal with exactly these objections (Berkeley 1996: §§34-81).

Of course we might ultimately disagree with Berkeley's arguments and agree with Coliva's - there aren't many convinced phenomenalists around. But this isn't a problem for the relativist. Coliva thinks that the inability of an alternative system to explain the content of our experiences shows that they are 'incompatible' with our own, and that this is a mark against them. But if anything, it's the opposite. Coliva is demanding that the alternate system in question explain the content of our experiences *as confirmed by our science*. In other words, she's asking that the results of one system (ours) be evaluated according to the rational standards of another system (the phenomenalist's). This is not something a relativist - who endorses a relativised picture of justification - would strive for.

We can see this if we look at what relativists themselves have said about this matter. Thomas Kuhn, whose work provoked the contemporary debate on relativism in science, argued that different scientific paradigms, far from being able to explain one another, are methodologically and semantically *incommensurable* - they create distinct 'worlds' of meaning and practice (1962). Bernard Williams (1974) and Carol Rovane (2013) endorse less radical notions of incommensurability than Kuhn does in their work on moral relativism, but neither of them require anything that sounds like the 'full' intelligibility that Coliva demands. Far from it; Williams says that relativism requires "notational confrontation", which means that changing from one system to another would mean giving up one's "hold on reality" (1974: 222), whilst Rovane describes alternative systems as "profoundly unavailable to us, not because we view them as mistaken, but because we do not stand in any rational relation to them at all" (2013: 105).<sup>13</sup>

Despite Coliva's claims that an alternative system which fails to explain the experiences of someone using our own can only lead to a "toothless" relativism (2015: 144), this failure of explanation would not worry an epistemic relativist - indeed, this is an outcome that they would expect. So, Coliva has failed to show that option 2 is untenable.

In this section we've seen Coliva's attempts to show that neither of the options she offers her relativist will lead to a satisfactory version of relativism. I've argued that she fails with both. There may be better arguments one could make to support Coliva's conclusions, and I don't want to rule that out. But what I want to do instead is shift the conversation away from these two options, which I think show a failure to properly understand relativism. They're not options which would appeal to a relativist in the first place. In the following section I'll consider what a more suitable option would look like.

## 5. A More Suitable Relativist Option

In §3 I flagged up two issues with Coliva's understanding of the first relativist criterion. Her lack

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<sup>13</sup> Rovane's articulation of the relationship between different systems is particularly pertinent, because for Coliva different systems are different rationalities. The idea that they could explain one another when they are beyond each other's conditions of explanation is not just counter to relativism, but counter to Coliva's own understanding of extended rationality.

of clarity at this early stage revealed a lack of understanding of what the relativist needed, which translated into offering them options which were wholly unsuitable for their purposes. This created the impression that they couldn't make their view work consistently, when in fact they were being forced to attempt to do so from an unsuitable starting position. Returning to these two issues now will enable me to show what a more suitable relativist option would look like.

The first problem was with Coliva's discussion of which basic assumptions are associated with our epistemic practices. I said that, although Coliva acknowledges that there may be a number of these (and gives examples of several), her discussion only focuses on notion of object - which itself combines at least two assumptions. Having seen the role that notion of object plays in her response to relativism, we're now in a position to see the problem that this oversimplification causes.

The purpose of Option 2 was to give the relativist the opportunity to describe an alternative system that used different basic assumptions to our own. However, Coliva's discussion focused entirely on a system which rejected our notion of object.<sup>14</sup> This robbed the relativist of the option to describe alternative systems which differ from ours due to their other assumptions. A more suitable option would allow the relativist to attempt to describe a system which assumes the same notion of object as our own but, for example, doesn't assume that we are not victims of massive cognitive deception.

The second issue that I flagged up was with Coliva's description of the relationship between basic practices and basic assumptions. She doesn't give us much insight into how she sees this relationship, beyond saying that basic practices have "respective" (2015: 141) and "characteristic" (2015: 142) assumptions. But we can assume that the relationship between these will be quite close, as they are together jointly constitutive of epistemic systems.

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

To summarise the outcomes of this section: offering the relativist a more suitable option would mean offering them an option which (i) allows that an alternative system could retain our notion of object whilst varying other basic assumptions, and (ii) recognises that changes in basic assumptions will affect changes in the basic practice.

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<sup>14</sup> I suspect that Coliva's preoccupation with this assumption is due to implicitly conflating relativism with scepticism and the issue of whether or not there is an external world. This is not uncommon. Epistemic relativists deny that there is absolute justification, and so are often - mistakenly - understood to deny that there is justification at all. (When in fact they allow for, and positively defend, the existence of relative justification, and don't necessarily take issue with the claim that there is an external world.)

## 6. Conclusion

My central aims in this paper were to critique Coliva's characterisation of relativism, and her response to it. In doing the first, I identified and refined three relativist criteria. Relativism requires multiple epistemic systems comprised of multiple basic assumptions, these systems must be incompatible in at least some minimal sense which prevents them from collapsing into one another and may extend up as far as full incommensurability, and there can be no neutral, system-independent way to rank these systems.

In completing my second central aim I identified several ways in which the options Coliva offered her imagined relativist were inadequate, and suggested some ways to provide a more suitable option, by allowing that an alternative system may differ from our own in ways other than by rejecting our notion of object, and by acknowledging that basic practices and basic assumptions are closely related and so changes in one will result in changes in the other.

I don't know whether it is possible to meet the relativist criteria identified even using the more suitable option I described. As I said in the introduction, this isn't the usual way that relativism is argued for and so the odds aren't in the relativist's favour when beginning from the starting point that Coliva takes. But I've shown that relativism has not yet been ruled out as a consequence of Coliva's extended rationality view.

One final point is especially pertinent given the topic of this volume. I hope that separating the distinct elements of relativism, as I have done, makes clear that relativism - if it were to follow from extended rationality - does not ignite familiar sceptical worries. Relativists don't dispute that justification is possible, they just argue that it is relative to epistemic systems. And on a system which is constituted by assumptions about the existence of the external world, our perceptual beliefs can be justified in exactly the way that Coliva describes. Of course on different epistemic systems and different forms of rationality which aren't constituted by these assumptions, this may not be the case. But that does nothing to undermine *our* system and the justification it provides. Even if relativism proves to be a consequence of Coliva's extended rationality, her response to scepticism still stands.

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