Certainty's Bulwark at Rationality's Edge? Reframing the Disagreement between Humean Skeptics and Constitutivist Hinge Epistemologists

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Abstract This paper critically examines Coliva and Palmira's characterization of the disagreement between Humean skeptics and hinge epistemologists as a distinctive kind of conceptual disagreement. Humean skepticism requires evidential justification for all rational beliefs, presenting a narrower conception of rationality. This contrasts with constitutivist hinge epistemology, which posits that our unwarranted hinge propositions — the basic certainties which makes the justifications for ordinary empirical propositions possible — are constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality, thus they are also rationally accepted by us. Coliva and Palmira (2020, 2021) argue that this divergence reflects a conceptual disagreement over the conception of epistemic rationality, implying a dispute about how the concept of epistemic rationality should be understood. Their strategy is two-fold: they first mentioned Stroud's (2019) categorization of conceptual disagreement, but contended that the disagreement between Humean skeptics and hinge epistemologists represents a novel kind of conceptual disagreement that Stroud's categorization cannot encompass. They suggest this new framing allows for a rational resolution of the disagreement; second, they argue that the extended conception of rationality is superior because it coherently accounts for the rationality of our epistemic practices. However, I contend that both parts of their two-fold strategy fail. Even if the disagreement is conceptual, it can be understood as a type of disagreement within Stroud's categorization; therefore, it does not represent a novel type of disagreement. Additionally, I argue that they misinterpret the skeptic's stance. Skeptics do not assume that our epistemic practices are rational; rather, they doubt the rationality of these practices and the possibility of knowledge. Therefore, for a skeptic, there is no advantage from a conceptual proposal that makes a coherent account of the alleged rationality of our epistemic practices.

Keywords: Hinge Epistemology, Humean skepticism, Epistemic rationality, Wittgenstein, Constitutivist

0. Introduction

The disagreement between Humean skepticism and constitutivist hinge epistemology centers on the nature of the basic certainties — namely, the hinge propositions — and

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their role in our epistemic practices. Humean skeptics, demanding evidential justification[1] for all rational beliefs, present a narrower conception of rationality (see Coliva 2015). This narrow view challenges how the unwarrantable hinge propositions such as "There is an external world" can make the genuine warrant for our first-order empirical propositions.

In contrast, constitutivist hinge epistemology proposes an extended conception of rationality that embraces the basic certainties, namely hinge propositions, as constitutive elements of our epistemic framework. This view argues that certainties, while lacking evidential justification, are essential for the very possibility of knowledge and rational belief. They are not merely assumed, but rather are rationally accepted as necessary preconditions for our epistemic practices.

Coliva and Palmira (2020, 2021) argue that this divergence reflects a conceptual disagreement over the conception of epistemic rationality, implying a dispute about how the concept of epistemic rationality should be understood. Their strategy can be divided into two parts: they first mentioned Stroud's (2019) categorization of conceptual disagreement, but contended that the disagreement between Humean skeptics and hinge epistemologists represents a novel kind of conceptual disagreement that Stroud's categorization cannot encompass. They suggest this new framing allows for a rational resolution of the disagreement; second, they argue that the extended conception of rationality is better than the skeptic ones, because the former can coherently account for the rationality of our epistemic practices.

This paper argues for two points. First, I will argue that even if the disagreement is conceptual, it can be understood as a type of disagreement within Stroud's categorization; therefore, it does not represent a novel type of disagreement. Second, I will argue that they misinterpret the stance of Humean skeptics. They characterize the Humean skeptic's stance as assuming that our epistemic practices are rational, and that's why Coliva and Palmira think the narrow conception of rationality cannot coherently explain the rationality of epistemic practices is a shortcoming of this conception. However, I argue that Humean skeptics do not bear such an assumption, the theoretical starting point of skeptics is to doubt the possibility of our knowledge and the rationality of our epistemic practices. Therefore, for a Humean skeptic, there is no advantage from a conceptual proposal that making a coherent account of the alleged rationality of our epistemic practices.

1. Humean skepticism

Testo Humean skepticism represents a rigorous approach to knowledge and belief, grounded in the principle that rational acceptance requires evidential support. This philosophical stance posits that for any belief to be considered rational, it must be grounded by evidential warrants. Such a view presents a narrow conception of rationality, limiting what can be considered rationally held to only those propositions with evidential warrants. Coliva and Palmira (2020: 21) characterize Humean skeptics as holding two theses:

1. We have evidential warrants for ordinary empirical propositions.
2. We cannot empirically or a priori warrant general propositions, which are entailed by ordinary ones.

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[1] In this paper, I use the terms "justification" and "warrant" interchangeably.

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According to Coliva and Palmira, Humean skeptic acknowledges that we can have evidential warrants for ordinary empirical propositions[2]. For instance, the proposition that "Here is a hand" is evidently warranted when we perceive our own hand. However, the second thesis introduces a significant constraint: general propositions such as "There is an external world" cannot be warranted either empirically or a priori. This skeptical approach recognizes the existence of what hinge epistemologists term "hinge propositions." Hinge propositions are fundamental assumptions that make our justification for ordinary empirical knowledge possible. However, Humean skeptic argues that these hinge propositions, lacking justification themselves, cannot be rationally held. This skeptical approach challenges the rationality of our ordinary epistemic practices, by pointing out our ordinary epistemic practices are grounded on arational hinge propositions.

According to Coliva (2015: 130), Humean skepticism defines epistemic rationality as follow: it is epistemically rational to believe only evidential warranted propositions. This strict definition forms the cornerstone of the skeptical stance, setting a high bar for what can be considered rational belief. The implications of Humean skepticism are profound. It challenges our claims to what can be rationally held and the possibility of knowledge. This skeptical approach serves as a persistent reminder of the limits of human knowledge.

To reiterate, Humean skepticism maintains a narrow conception of epistemic rationality, contending that no proposition can be rationally accepted without evidential warrants. On the other hand, constitutivist argues for an extended conception of epistemic rationality that includes unwarrantable hinge propositions. We will see the constitutivist's account of epistemic rationality in the following section 2.

2. Constitutivist hinge epistemology

Coliva's constitutivist hinge epistemology posits that hinge propositions are necessary for epistemic justification and cannot themselves be justified evidentially; nonetheless, these hinge propositions are epistemically rationally accepted by us[3]. According to Coliva, constitutivist holds the below conception of Epistemic Rationality:

- Epistemic Rationality ER: it is epistemically rational to believe evidentially warranted propositions and to accept those unwarrantable assumptions that make the acquisition of perceptual warrants possible. (Coliva 2015: 129)

In contrast, as I mentioned in section 1, Humean skepticism conceives epistemic rationality in the following way:

- Epistemic Rationality SK: it is epistemically rational to believe only evidential warranted propositions. (Coliva 2015: 130)

For Humean Skeptics, our basic assumptions like "there is an external world" lack justification, thus we are not holding them rationally.

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[2] I disagree with the characterization of the skeptic's stance as holding the first thesis. Instead, I contend that Humean skepticism does not take the rationality of our everyday epistemic practices for granted, as discussed further in section 5 of this paper.

[3] There are alternate accounts of hinges that differ in their interpretation of the nature of hinges and the role they play within our epistemic practices. See Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Wright (1985) and Pritchard (2015) etc.

Coliva argues that Humean skeptic's notion of epistemic rationality is too narrow[4] and misconceives the structure of justification and knowledge; this skeptic's notion of epistemic rationality cannot coherently account for the rationality of our epistemic practices. Coliva contends that "hinge propositions", similar to the rules of a game[5], are necessary preconditions for the very possibility of justification and knowledge, they are constitutive of epistemic rationality. And, just as it is nonsensical to critique the rules of a game by pointing out that they do not constitute a move within the game, it is misguided to demand evidential justification for these hinge propositions.

Moreover, Coliva and Palmira (2020: 22) used the relation between a game and its constitutive rules as an analogy for the relation between our epistemic practices which form beliefs based on perception and hinges. We cannot engage in those epistemic practices without accepting hinges like "there is an external world" and "our perceptions are normally reliable", because those hinges make the perceptual justification for ordinary empirical propositions possible, just as we cannot engage in a game without following its rules. Coliva and Palmira point out that Humean skeptics want to engage in the game but reject the rules that constitute the game[6]. Thus, it is unreasonable for Humean skeptics to exclude the hinge propositions from epistemic rationality, it is like excluding the constitutive rules from a game[7].

3. Conceptual Disagreement

Before examining Coliva and Palmira's identification of the disagreement between constitutivists and Humean skeptics as a distinctive kind of conceptual disagreement, let's first review Sarah Stroud's distinction of different types of disagreement.

3.1 Sarah Stroud's classification

Stroud's classification of disagreement, as presented in her paper "Conceptual Disagreement" (2019), provides a nuanced framework for understanding different types of disagreements that can arise between individuals. Stroud begins by characterizing disagreement in general as requiring an object of disagreement about which the disputants take opposite positions[8]. She then delineates three distinct categories of disagreement.

The first category is propositional disagreement, which is perhaps the most familiar form. In this type, the issue at hand can be formulated as a propositional question "P?" For example, two people might disagree about whether it rained yesterday. One asserts that it did, while the other denies this claim. Whether in everyday life or philosophical discussions, this type of disagreement often occurs.

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[4] See Coliva (2015: 11): "To ban constitutive assumptions from epistemic rationality simply because they are not warranted (as they cannot be), like skeptics do, is due to too narrow and unmotivated a conception of the extent of epistemic rationality."

[5] See Coliva (2022: xx): "Just as both rules and moves are part of any game so, I argue, both constitutive assumptions and perceptual justifications, which are possible thanks to them, are part of epistemic rationality."

[6] See Coliva and Palmira (2020: 22): "a Humean sceptic is an epistemic agent who ultimately wants to play such a 'game' while, at the same time, rejecting the very rule that constitutively defines it."

[7] See Coliva (2022: 19): "To exclude them from epistemic rationality would then be a categorial mistake just like the mistake of excluding rules from a game simply because they aren't moves *within* the game."

[8] See Stroud (2019: 16): "when A and B disagree, the object of their disagreement is the x on which, or with respect to which, they take opposite positions."

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The second category Stroud identifies is practical disagreement. Here, the issue can be framed as a practical question: "Shall we do x?" This type of disagreement is to be settled by practical rather than theoretical reasoning (see Stroud 2019: 17). For instance, a couple might disagree about whether to go to the movies or a baseball game for their evening entertainment. The resolution of such disagreements often involves decision-making and action.

The third and perhaps most intriguing category Stroud introduces is conceptual disagreement. This type typically arises in the field of conceptual ethics and involves normative questions regarding concept use. For example, disputants might disagree on whether we should classify things by whether they are F or not, or whether we should use a particular concept to categorize a given experience to draw attention to certain aspects rather than others[9].

Stroud further elaborates on conceptual disagreement by presenting three subcategories. In the first[10], disputants disagree on how to draw the boundary of a concept in specific contexts, while agreeing on what the concept should refer to in most cases. This can be seen as a dispute about what the concept in issue should mean in a particular situation.

The second subcategory of conceptual disagreement occurs when one disputant accepts a concept while the other rejects it entirely[11]. The rejecting party does not necessarily disagree with the characterization of the concept, but rather denies that the concept can impose a notional cut on the world, which would divide things into that which is F and that which is not-F (suppose the concept in issue is F)[12]. This results in the disputants having different conceptual repertoires[13].

In the third subcategory[14], disputants share the same conceptual repertoire and agree on the facts, but they classify those facts differently. They have the same understanding of the relevant facts, but they draw attention to different aspects of the fact or object in the given situation. Their apparent disagreement is indeed a disagreement, not merely difference, they are using different concepts to capture what they think is worth noticing and what is important in that particular situation (see Stroud 2019: 25).

By delineating these various forms of disagreement, Stroud provides a valuable framework for understanding and analyzing disagreements in both philosophical discourse and everyday life. Her analysis demonstrates that disagreement is a multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond mere propositional disagreement, encompassing practical decisions and conceptual choices as well.

3.2 Coliva and Palmira's identification of the disagreement

Coliva and Palmira (2020) argue that the disagreement between a constitutivist hinge epistemologist and a Humean skeptic is best understood as a conceptual disagreement about the proper explication of the concept of epistemic rationality. Coliva and Palmira

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[9] See Stroud (2019: 25): "We diagnose conceptual disagreement when there are good grounds to attribute to one party an affirmative answer, and to other a negative answer, to a question like 'Should one classify people according to whether or not they are Krauts?' or 'Is Fness the most important thing to attend to in this situation?'"

[10] More details of the first subcategory, see Stroud (2019: 19-20).

[11] More details of the second subcategory, see Stroud (2019: 20-22).

[12] The term "notional cut" refers to a conceptual division imposed on things (can be physical or abstract) through a particular concept. It's not a physical division, but rather a separation created by how we think about things. The concept acts as a filter, allowing us to group certain aspects of reality together and separate them from others.

[13] According to Stroud (2019: 22), a conceptual repertoire of a person is such that the set of concepts he actively deploys.

[14] More details of this third subcategory, see Stroud (2019: 20-25).

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(2020: 23) identify three kinds of conceptual disagreements, though this list might not be exhaustive:

1. Disagreement about the extension of the concept in question, i.e., whether a given object falls under that concept.
2. Agreement on the constitutive inferences that individuate the concept, while disagreeing about some of its non-constitutive inferences.
3. Disagreement about the constitutive inferences that individuate the concept, resulting in different and possibly overlapping concepts.

According to Coliva and Palmira, the disagreement between constitutivists and Humean skeptics is an instance of the above third type of disagreement, it centers on whether the below inference is constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality:

▪ 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.

The constitutivist holds that this inference is indeed constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality, while the Humean skeptic maintains the opposite view. Both constitutivists and skeptics agree, however, that the inference "If p is a justified proposition, then believing p would be epistemically rational" is constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality. Consequently, while their conceptions of epistemic rationality are not identical, they do partially overlap.

Coliva and Palmira (2020, 2021) argue this disagreement represents a new variety of conceptual disagreement, which cannot classified under Stroud's accounts of conceptual disagreement. This disagreement is neither a mere metalinguistic negotiation, nor a case where one party entirely rejects a concept, nor a case where parties fully share a conceptual repertoire but classify facts differently. The result is that the skeptic and constitutivist have different, though potentially overlapping, concepts of epistemic rationality, stemming from their disagreement over which inferences should be considered constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality.

4. Classifying the disagreement to the correct kind

As we see in section 3.2, the Humean skeptic argues that the 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" is not constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality. In contrast, the constitutivist believes that this inference is indeed constitutive of the concept of epistemic rationality. According to Coliva and Palmira, the disagreement can thus be understood as a dispute over whether this specific inference is truly concept-constitutive for the concept of epistemic rationality. The Humean skeptic rejects this inference as being part of the defining characteristics of epistemic rationality, while the constitutivist accepts it as a necessary component of the concept.

However, I contend that this disagreement aligns more closely with the second kind of conceptual disagreement from Stroud's classification[15]. This kind of disagreement occurs when one party rejects a concept entirely, while the other accepts it. The disagreement can be understood as follows: Humean skeptics accept the narrow

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[15] Namely, the second subcategory of conceptual disagreement that I mentioned in the subsection 3.1 of this paper.

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concept of epistemic rationality but entirely reject the extended one held by constitutivists, because Humean skeptics exclude a particular inference as constitutive of the concept. Constitutivists, in turn, entirely reject the narrow concept of epistemic rationality and endorse an extended version.

One might object to my classification by arguing that neither the Humean skeptic nor the constitutivist entirely rejects the concept held by the other. This is because they both agree that the inference "If p is a justified proposition, then believing p would be epistemically rational" is constitutive of their respective concepts of epistemic rationality. As indicated in section 3.2, their concepts of epistemic rationality do partially overlap.

However, I contend that whether a party entirely rejects a concept does not depend on whether the concept they reject overlaps with the one they accept. There are indeed cases where the concepts proposed by two parties overlap, yet they do not entirely reject each other's concepts. Suppose Tom defines human beings as rational animals, while Ray defines human beings as political animals. In this instance, we can see the overlapping aspects of their concepts of human, both in their intensions and their extensions. For the overlapping of their intensions, both concepts share a common constitutive part: being animals. On the other hand, regarding their extensions, the things they refer to overlap as well; rational animals can also be political animals, and vice versa. In the above case about the concepts of human, it can be said that Tom does not entirely reject Ray's concept, and vice versa, because there are overlapping elements in both the intensions and extensions of their concepts.

Nevertheless, I believe there is no sharp line between entirely rejecting a concept and partially rejecting it, and I don't think that the Humean skeptic is merely partially rejecting the constitutivists' concept of rationality. Although there is overlap between the concepts of rationality proposed by Humean skeptics and constitutivists, there is no overlap in the extension of their concepts. I think it does not make sense to say that constitutivists merely partially reject the Humean skeptic's concept of rationality, given that Humean skeptic's concept prohibits any rational belief, while the constitutivists' concept allows for many rational beliefs. Once we accept this point—that Humean skeptics and constitutivists are rejecting each other's concepts entirely—we can frame the disagreement using Stroud's second type of conceptual disagreement. I see no reason to suggest a novel type of conceptual disagreement that would complicate our classification.

In my view, Coliva and Palmira just indicate more details about the disagreement, such as the constitutivist's reasons for rejecting Humean skeptic's narrow conception of epistemic rationality, but this indication does not make the disagreement shift to another kind of conceptual disagreement.

To sum up, this reinterpretation of the disagreement challenges Coliva and Palmira's view that their disagreement represents a new variety of conceptual disagreement, by framing it within Stroud's existing framework.

5. The misidentification of skeptics' position

The characterization of Humean skepticism presented by Coliva and Palmira in their analysis [16] appears to misrepresent the fundamental position of skepticism. This misidentification leads to a problematic framing of the disagreement between Humean skeptics and constitutivists. Let's examine this issue more closely.

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[16] See section 1 of this paper and Coliva and Palmira (2020: 21)

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Coliva and Palmira characterize the Humean skeptic as holding the view that "We have evidential warrants for ordinary empirical propositions, such as 'Here is a hand'". They further suggest that the disagreement can be rationally resolved in so far as both skeptics and constitutivists "aim to account for our first-order practices"[17]. However, this characterization fundamentally misunderstands the skeptical position.

The theoretical starting point of the Humean skeptic's position is questioning the very possibility of knowledge and the rationality of our epistemic practices. This crucial aspect is not adequately captured in Coliva and Palmira's characterization. Contrary to what might be assumed, skeptics do not necessarily presuppose that our first-order epistemic practices are rational. In fact, challenging this very assumption lies at the heart of the skeptical project.

The skeptic's primary concern is to challenge whether we can truly justify our ordinary empirical propositions, given that the foundation of our epistemic practices rests on unwarrantable hinge propositions. A more accurate understanding of the Humean skeptic's position would encompass the advocacy for suspension of judgment about our knowledge claims, rather than accepting that we have evidential warrants for ordinary empirical propositions.

Given this more precise characterization, the skeptical challenge to the certainty of our knowledge is reinforced. It's important to note that the skeptic does not aim to "account for the rationality of our first-order epistemic practices" but rather to question their very foundations. In this light, the skeptical position serves as a crucial check against constitutivists' acceptance of hinge propositions as the foundation of our epistemic practices. This acceptance appears to endorse a form of dogmatism in our epistemological inquiries. The skeptics pushes us to critically examine the very foundation of our epistemic practices.

Someone might think there is an inconsistency between my two objections[18]. They think that my first objection assumes Humean skeptics accept a narrow concept of rationality, while my second objection assumes that Humean skeptics reject the concept of rationality at all, in which case the second objection would override the first. The following is my response. My first objection assumes that Humean skeptics accept a narrow concept of rationality; however, this assumption does not imply that they believe there is any proposition meets the criteria of that narrow concept. Let's read their narrow conception of rationality again:

▪ Epistemic Rationality SK: It is epistemically rational to believe only evidentially warranted propositions.

This concept of rationality does not imply that there is any belief that is evidentially warranted. My second objection assumes that the core of Humean skepticism is doubt about whether there is any belief that is evidentially warranted. Therefore, there is no inconsistency between my two objections.

To sum up, Coliva and Palmira's framing of the disagreement between skeptics and constitutivists needs reconsideration. This mischaracterization undermines their attempt to resolve the disagreement through considerations of which concept of epistemic rationality best accounts for our epistemic practices. From the skeptic's perspective,

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[17] See Coliva and Palmira (2020: 24): "the conceptual disagreement between a constitutivist and a sceptic can be rationally resolved: in sofar as both parties to the disagreement aim to account for our first-order practices, we had better prefer an explanation of the rationality of the practices which rests on rationally mandated, as opposed to merely arbitrary, hinges."

[18] Thanks to one of the anonymous referees who raised this point, I am reminded of the kind of challenge I would face, and this motivates me to clarify my arguments in response to it, which will make my point much clearer.

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Coliva and Palmira's approach already concedes too much and fails to address the core skeptical challenges to the possibility of knowledge and justified belief.

6. Conclusion
In this paper, I have argued for two key points. First, I have attempted to correctly identify the kind of conceptual disagreement that exists between constitutivist hinge epistemologists and Humean skeptics. I contend that this disagreement can be framed as an instance of the second kind of conceptual disagreement outlined in Stroud's framework. This means that there is no need to assume a novel kind of conceptual disagreement, which would unnecessarily complicate the classification. The disagreement centers around the rejection of the narrow conception of epistemic rationality by constitutivists, who instead endorse an extended conception. This aligns with Stroud's second kind of conceptual disagreement, where one party rejects a concept entirely, while the other accepts it.

Secondly, I have argued that Coliva and Palmira have underestimated the challenge posed by Humean skepticism. They assume that skeptics would agree that our epistemic practices are rational, but I believe the nature of skepticism is to suspend judgment on such issues rather than to admit the rationality of our epistemic practices. Thus, the theoretical starting point of skeptics would not be attempting to provide a coherent explanation for the rationality of our epistemic practices. This means the disagreement between Humean skeptics and constitutivists cannot be resolved in the way Coliva and Palmira suggested. Their strategy of framing the disagreement as conceptual and then arguing for the superiority of the extended conception of rationality based on its ability to account for the rationality of our epistemic practices fails to address the fundamental skeptical challenge. Skeptics do not assume the rationality of our epistemic practices, and thus, the coherence of such an account is not a relevant factor in their evaluation of the extended conception of rationality.

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