

Hinge Epistemology

Hinge epistemology – a label introduced by Coliva (2015) and Coliva & Moyal-Sharrock (2016) – is a rapidly growing trend in present-day epistemology. It builds on Wittgenstein’s insight in *On Certainty* (1969 OC, hereafter) that justification and knowledge always depend on a system of prior certainties, or “hinges”. Wittgenstein writes in OC (341-343):

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

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

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.

Often connected to Wittgenstein exegesis (see *Wittgenstein’s Epistemology*, this volume), hinge epistemology has been subject to various developments over the years. The focus has been primarily on the nature and epistemic status of hinges; the bearing of hinge epistemology on the issue of perceptual justification and knowledge; its anti-skeptical import, and its consequences for the Closure-principle and for relativism (INSERT REFERENCE TO THE RELEVANT ENTRIES). Here we will review some of its most prominent versions.

Although Michael Williams would likely resist being considered a hinge epistemologist, his *Unnatural Doubts* (1991) has been the first book-length attempt to develop a position in contemporary epistemology which is explicitly indebted to Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* and which is not meant (just) as an exegesis. According to Williams, skeptical doubts are unnatural because they “depend ... on theoretical commitments that are *not* forced on us by our ordinary ways of thinking about knowledge, justification, and truth” (1991: 31–32). In his view, skepticism is rooted in a version of foundationalism, according to which at the foundations lie mind-dependent truths, such as the Cartesian Cogito, or impressions, ideas or sense data. Foundationalism, according to Williams, depends on a realist, mind-independent view of the structure of justification and knowledge. The revolutionary element in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* – Williams holds – is the idea that knowledge and justification stem from our epistemic practices, which are premised on specific, contextually dependent hinges, or “methodological necessities”. Such hinges, moreover, are ordinary empirical propositions like “The Earth has existed for a very long time”, “Instruments and figures do not appear and disappear out of their own accord”, which are hinges of history and geology, and of scientific and mathematical research, respectively. Furthermore, what is a methodological necessity in one of our epistemic practices could become an object of investigation in a different one. For instance, “I have hands” could be a hinge in ordinary circumstances, while becoming subject to verification after a car accident. Connectedly, whether a proposition is a hinge is not something that we can read off its content but can only determine by attending to the role it plays within a specific context. Moreover, Williams (1991: 119) claims that “independently of all such influences, a proposition has no epistemic

status whatsoever. There is *no fact of the matter* as to what kind of justification it either admits or requires”. Contrary to Wittgenstein’s position, however, for Williams, philosophical doubts are intelligible even though they rest on questionable assumptions. Yet, once these assumptions have been exposed, we should no longer be bothered by them. For it is only if we are committed to foundationalism and epistemological realism that we find skeptical arguments threatening at all.

Over the years, Crispin Wright (1985, 2004) has developed a form of hinge epistemology according to which, in contrast, there is much to learn from skepticism: unless we are justified in believing that there is an external world (and possibly other “heavy-weight assumptions” **INSERT REFERENCE TO DRETSKE HERE**, such that we are not dreaming/BIVs, etc.), we cannot be justified in believing ordinary empirical propositions, such as “Here is my hand”, based on an experience with a hand-like content. For such a reason, arguments like Moore’s proof **INSERT REFERENCE TO MOORE HERE**, instead of being responses to skepticism, ironically exemplify it. For they exhibit what Wright calls “transmission failure” of warrant. Wright is also skeptical of a priori arguments designed to justify these heavy-weight assumptions. Still, he thinks that the key passages in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (OC 341-343) provide an alternative, so far missed by epistemologists. Namely, the idea of an *entitlement*, which is a non-evidential warrant for the “cornerstones” or hinges of our most basic epistemic practices and of our conceptual scheme, such as “I am not now dreaming/a BIV”, and “There is an external world”. According to Wright, warrant comes in two species: either as evidential warrant – *a priori* or *a posteriori* – for our beliefs; or else, as an entitlement – i.e., a non-evidential warrant. Accordingly, we are entitled to *accept* hinges, where acceptance differs from belief in its input conditions, as it does not depend on a posteriori or a priori evidence. Thus, according to Wright, skepticism rests on an unduly restrictive conception of warrant, which countenances only evidential ones.

Furthermore, he thinks that skeptical paradoxes represent a “crisis of intellectual conscience” (Wright 2004: 167, 209–211) and primarily challenge our ability to *claim* we are within our (epistemic) rights in holding on to certain cornerstones or hinges. By appealing to entitlements for those hinges that figure as conclusions of arguments such as Moore’s, Wright is able to counter the skeptical outcome of those arguments. True, we do not have evidential warrants for those propositions, yet we have non-evidential ones for them. Moreover, thanks to such entitlements for their background presuppositions, ordinary empirical beliefs based on perception, such as “Here is my hand”, turn out to be justified. Finally, since warrant is a disjunctive notion for Wright, arguments like Moore’s that start with evidentially warranted premises preserve Closure for such an epistemic operator (**INSERT REFERENCE TO THE CLOSURE PRINCIPLE HERE**), even if the conclusion is *non-evidentially* warranted.

Moyal-Sharrock’s (2005) version of hinge epistemology rests on what she takes to be Wittgenstein’s groundbreaking realization, in *On Certainty*, that our basic certainty is neither epistemic nor propositional but enacted and grammatical. Only such a reading, she contends, takes Wittgenstein’s insight to its full realization; that is, solves the infinite regress of justification epitomized by Agrippa’s trilemma (**INSERT REFERENCE TO AGRIPPA’S TRILEMMA HERE**), thereby dissolving radical skepticism. If knowledge requires justification, if we are not to endlessly seek justification, there must

be some *basic* beliefs that are not open to doubt and therefore not susceptible of justification. “Hinge certainties” (or simply “hinges”) are these basic beliefs. The non-epistemic nature of hinges is guaranteed by the logical impossibility of justification and verification as regards our assurance of them. Our basic certainties are not arrived at by reasoning or justification, nor are they arrived at by induction – i.e., they are not *grounded on*, or *justified by* experience, even though they may be *conditioned* or *caused* by certain facts (OC 429, 131). Thus, whereas basic certainty may be *experiential* – manifested, embedded in or caused by experience – it cannot be *empirical* – i.e., inferred or reasoned from experience. Our basic certainty, therefore, is *a-rational*, animal and it is likened to a “direct taking-hold” (OC 510-511).

Hinges are manifest, *qua hinges*, only in action, according to Moyal-Sharrock. Although they look like humdrum empirical or epistemic propositions, hinges are in fact ways of acting which, when conceptually elucidated, can be seen to function as rules of grammar for they underlie “our operating with thought (language)” (OC 401). Because of their meaning-constitutive role, grammatical rules make no sense when uttered within the language game. To utter a hinge certainty in the flow of ordinary discourse is to speak nonsense. Although we can formulate rules of grammar in heuristic circumstances such as in philosophical elucidation or in teaching language to a child, such formulation in non-heuristic circumstances is senseless.

Some commentators have expressed resistance to the non-epistemic and the non-propositional features of hinge certainty. This, according to Moyal-Sharrock, is due to two deeper layers of resistance. 1) It is difficult for epistemologists to give up the idea that knowledge is our fundamental form of conviction. Still, that is a psychological, not a logical difficulty, in her view. 2) Propositionality is difficult for the epistemologist to give up because its absence makes room for the “animal” in epistemology, and we seem to give up our grip on the rational. But what *On Certainty* shows us, according to Moyal-Sharrock, is that our distrust of the animal (the *a-rational*) and our reliance on propositions are both excessive. It is only by realising that putting ways of acting into sentences is only a means of elucidating our basic, animal, certainty that we can find the “rock bottom of our convictions” (OC 248).

Duncan Pritchard’s (2015) version of hinge epistemology too takes seriously Wittgenstein’s remarks emphasizing the animal, visceral, nature of what he calls our “hinge commitments”. Like Moyal-Sharrock, he considers them as primarily manifest in a primitive certainty that imbues our actions. Unlike Moyal-Sharrock, however, Pritchard considers hinge commitments as a *sui generis* propositional attitude, different from belief, acceptance, presupposition, assumption, hypothesis, alief, trust, etc. Pritchard regards our hinge commitments as *a-rational* in virtue of the framework role that they play in our practices of rational evaluation. In particular, since the framework provided by the hinge certainty is required in order for rational evaluations to occur, it follows that our hinge commitments cannot be themselves subject to rational evaluation, and hence are *a-rationally* held. Therefore, hinge commitments are not ordinary knowledge-apt (“K-apt”) *beliefs* (while they may not fail to be beliefs in the folk sense of that term, which is an umbrella notion, in that it applies to many kinds of propositional attitude). For they are reasons-unresponsive, as one’s certainty is unaffected by the recognition that one has no rational basis for their truth.

Moreover, according to Pritchard, our hinge commitments to specific propositions, such as that one has hands (in normal conditions) or that one's name is such-and-such, are manifestations of an underlying *über hinge commitment*, the content of which is that one's overall worldview is not radically and fundamentally mistaken. This overarching certainty, according to Pritchard, needs to permeate one's actions for one to enter the game of reasons and be a rational subject at all.

Thus, on Pritchard's proposal, hinge commitments to specific propositions are essentially quotidian and concrete in nature, as only everyday commitments of this kind would manifest the animal certainty that is embodied in the *über hinge commitment*. Pritchard therefore rejects the idea made by other hinge-epistemologists that our hinge commitments can include heavy-weight assumptions like "there is an external world".

Regarding Closure-based radical skepticism, Pritchard argues that the point of Wittgenstein's proposal is to highlight a faulty philosophical picture, according to which *universal* rational evaluations are possible. This picture is incoherent because it is in the very nature of what a rational practice involves that it is local – i.e., that it rests on a-rational hinge commitments. Hence, both the radical skeptic and the traditional anti-skeptic are making a fundamental mistake in attempting to undertake universal rational evaluations (whether to undermine our epistemic practices, in the case of radical skepticism, or to legitimate them, in the case of traditional anti-skepticism).

Closure-based formulations of radical skepticism depend on incoherently undertaking a wholesale rational evaluation of our beliefs (e.g., by drawing inferences to the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses). Still, Pritchard doesn't reject Closure, which, properly understood, is harmless in this regard, as it is essentially a synchronic principle that involves the formation of a K-apt belief based on a competent deduction. Crucially, however, on Pritchard's view one can neither have a K-apt belief in a proposition that one is hinge-committed to, nor acquire such a K-apt belief via competent deduction. The Closure-based formulation of the radical skeptical argument is thus neutralized, as radical skeptics cannot derive their skeptical conclusion.

Contrary to Wright (and Coliva), Pritchard doesn't argue that appealing to hinge commitments enables us to counter all forms of radical skepticism. In particular, he contends that Underdetermination-based formulations of radical skepticism – like the one exemplified by Moore's proof according to Wright's reading – are logically distinct from Closure-based formulations, and that the hinge commitment strategy is ineffective against them. This is why he combines hinge epistemology with epistemological disjunctivism (ADD REFERENCE TO EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM) as part of what he calls a "biscopic" treatment of radical skepticism. Accordingly, we know and, consequently, are justified in believing that, e.g., there is a hand where we see one, because seeing a hand involves directly taking in the object, without the need for prior justification for a heavy-weight assumption like "There is an external world".

In contrast, Annalisa Coliva's (2015) version of hinge epistemology is meant primarily to address this form of skepticism, which, following Wright, she calls "Humean skepticism". Unlike Cartesian, Closure-based skepticism, Humean skepticism does not depend on envisaging far-fetched scenarios, involving BIVs, demons, or lucid and sustained dreams, but on adhering to a certain conception of

perceptual justification, such that it is not simply by having a certain course of experience that one has a justification to believe a proposition about specific physical objects in one's surroundings like "Here is my hand". Rather, it must also be taken for granted that there is an external world (and possibly other "heavy weight" assumptions, such as that one's sense organs are working reliably), which is responsible for the experiences one is having. Humean skepticism, however, challenges the rationality of this assumption by pointing out how it cannot itself be justified through experience – as this would be circular – or by means of a priori reasoning. If so, a Humean skeptic concludes, it is not epistemically rational and is as arbitrary – epistemically speaking – as it may be psychologically compelling for creatures like us.

To meet the Humean challenge, Coliva (like Wright) departs considerably from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, by restricting hinges to those "heavy-weight" assumptions, which make the acquisition of perceptual justification possible. She then argues that thanks to such assumptions, we can take the content of our experiences at face value to form defeasible justifications for beliefs about objects in our surroundings. Indeed, this is the gist of her "moderate" account of perceptual justification, which she contrasts with Jim Pryor's (2004) "liberal" one – according to which no assumption is needed – and with Wright's (1985, 2004) "conservative" one, according to which a justification (or warrant) for it is required.

Consequently, according to Coliva, arguments such as Moore's proof cannot generate a justification for the conclusion since they fail to transmit justification from the premises to the conclusion. Yet, *pace* Wright, they do not do so because a *warrant* for the latter would be needed to have a justification for the former, but because the *assumption* of that very conclusion is needed to have a justification for the premises. Coliva, moreover, is critical of Wright-style entitlements, and, failing any other form of justification for these heavy-weight assumptions, she holds that Closure for justification and knowledge fails in the case of Moore-style arguments, and in all other cases in which the conclusion of an argument would be a heavy-weight assumption which is necessary, in its turn, to have a justification for the argument's premises. Thus, according to Coliva, Closure does not hold unrestrictedly. Yet, its failure in such cases is compatible with its retention in all those cases in which ordinary empirical propositions are involved. This, in turn, allows Coliva to counter Cartesian skepticism by holding that "I am not a BIV" plays a hinge-like role and must be presupposed for perceptual justification to be possible. Therefore, even if we don't justifiably believe we are not BIVs, say, we can still justifiably believe or know ordinary empirical propositions like "Here is my hand".

Coliva then goes on to confront the skeptical challenge of redeeming the epistemic rationality of unjustified and unjustifiable "heavy weight" assumptions. That is where her constitutivist view comes in. Accordingly, it is true that hinges themselves are beyond epistemic appraisal. Yet, she also thinks that we are *mandated* by epistemic rationality itself to accept them. For they are constitutive of the practice of acquiring evidence for or against ordinary empirical propositions, which is itself constitutive of epistemic rationality. On a Wittgenstein-inspired epistemology, notions such as the one of epistemic rationality don't hang in the air. Rather, they depend on the human practice of forming, assessing, and withdrawing from beliefs about physical objects based on one's perceptual evidence. Hence, either a skeptic is a skeptic about epistemic rationality itself, or else, if merely a skeptic about

hinges, a skeptic won't be allowed to conclude that they fall beyond epistemic rationality. For, though unjustifiable, hinges are part of epistemic rationality as they are its constitutive elements. To exclude them from epistemic rationality would then be a categorical mistake just like the mistake of excluding rules from a game simply because they aren't moves *within* the game. The skeptical mistake would thus reside in holding on to too narrow a notion of epistemic rationality, which confines it only to evidentially justified propositions, whereas it extends also to its constitutive hinge assumptions.

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Abstract: This entry presents the main tenets of "hinge epistemology" – a relatively new trend in epistemology inspired by Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty*. It focuses on the respective contributions of Michael Williams, Crispin Wright, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, Duncan Pritchard and Annalisa Coliva, with special emphasis on their different accounts of the nature and epistemic status of hinges.

Short 'bio': Annalisa Coliva is Professor in the Department of Philosophy, at the University of California, Irvine. Coliva's research interests include epistemology, history of analytic philosophy and the philosophy of mind. Coliva's books include *Moore and Wittgenstein. Scepticism, Certainty and Common Sense* (2010), *Extended Rationality. A Hinge Epistemology* (2015) and *Wittgenstein Rebinged* (2022). Coliva is the editor in chief of the *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*.