

Contrastive Hinge Epistemology

by

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Abstract: In this paper, I outline an account of the structure of perceptual justification that develops Wittgenstein's thought that the possibility of acquiring any degree of justification for our beliefs depends on placing certain propositions outside the route of empirical inquiry, turning them into the “hinges” of our rational evaluations. The proposal is akin to “moderate” accounts of the structure of perceptual justification; however, it conjoins Wittgenstein's insight with explanationist and contrastivist ideas and thus differs in important respects both from such accounts and from other versions of hinge epistemology. I maintain that the basic presuppositions of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value are not totally refractory to evidential assessment, arguing that they can receive some degree of second-order empirical justification via inference to the best explanation. And I address the worry that the account may face the problem of “easy knowledge” by helping myself to the contrastivist view that empirical knowledge is best understood as a three-place, contrastive relation between an agent, a proposition (or fact), and a contrast. This leads me to replace the usual closure principles for epistemic justification and knowledge with corresponding contrastive principles, filling in the final details of contrastive hinge epistemology.

Keywords: hinge epistemology, contrastivism, explanationism, perceptual justification, moderatism, epistemic closure

1. Introduction

IN THIS PAPER, I outline and defend against objections an account of the structure of perceptual justification that develops Wittgenstein's (1969) thought that the possibility of acquiring any degree of justification for our beliefs depends on placing certain propositions outside the route of empirical inquiry, turning them into the “hinges” of our epistemic evaluations. The account can thus be fairly described as an example of “hinge epistemology” (Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock, 2016). However, this label is currently applied to philosophical views that have as much to set them apart as they have in common — and indeed, the view to be defended in this paper differs in some important respects from most of the views that are usually described by that label. Thus, I will start my story at a slightly different place, helping myself to a well-known taxonomy of the accounts of the structure of perceptual justification. This will allow me to situate more precisely my favoured account within the wider family of views described by the term “hinge epistemology.”

According to the familiar story (see, e.g., Silins, 2008), accounts of the structure of perceptual justification fall in two main camps: *conservative* and *liberal* (or *dogmatist*; both labels are used interchangeably when applied to perceptual justification). Conservative epistemologists maintain that the capacity of our perceptual experience to provide justification for our ordinary empirical beliefs depends on our *being independently justified* in accepting such propositions as <There is a material world>, <Our senses provide us with largely reliable information about our surroundings>, and <We are not cleverly deluded brains in a vat>, whereas liberal epistemologists maintain that it merely depends on our *lacking reason to disbelieve* such propositions. However, a number of philosophers have long been proposing views that lie somewhere in between paradigmatically conservative and paradigmatically liberal positions — a circumstance that Annalisa Coliva (2012a, 2012b, 2015) has drawn attention to by collecting a host of closely related such views under the heading of *moderatism*. According to *moderate* accounts of the structure of perceptual justification, the capacity of our perceptual experience to provide justification for our ordinary empirical beliefs depends on our *accepting* (e.g., assuming, presupposing, taking for granted) the propositions in question, which is more than merely lacking reason to disbelieve them but less than being independently justified to accept them.

This claim is central to the accounts of the structure of perceptual justification developed by Peter F. Strawson (1985), Yuval Avnir (2012a, 2012b), and Duncan Pritchard (2016), as well as to the *extended rationality* view propounded by Coliva (2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). It is a claim that places moderate accounts of the structure of perceptual justification squarely within the bounds of hinge epistemology. But of course the Wittgensteinian insight that lies at the core of hinge epistemology also informs the views of philosophers who do not subscribe to moderatism, including Wright (1985, 2004), who clearly belongs to the conservative camp; Harman and Sherman (2004) and Sherman and Harman (2011), who say some conservative sounding things; and Williams (1991) and Moyal-Sharrock (2004), whose positions are perhaps harder to classify. This is why I find it helpful to apply Coliva's label to the account to be defended in this paper: my variation on Wittgenstein's theme is an instance of *moderate* hinge epistemology insofar as it involves the claim that the capacity of our perceptual experience to provide justification for our ordinary empirical beliefs just depends on our accepting such hinge propositions as <There is a material world>, <Our senses provide us with largely reliable information about our surroundings>, and <We are not cleverly deluded brains in a vat>.

This said, I am not attracted to a number of other views that have been variously associated with the key thesis of moderatism, such as that our hinge commitments manifest a naturally or socially implanted disposition to belief

(Strawson, 1985), do not qualify as kosher belief (Coliva, 2015; Pritchard, 2016), are inherently refractory to evidential assessment (Avnur, 2012a, 2012b; Coliva, 2015; Pritchard, 2016), and are the precondition of all rational evaluation (Pritchard, 2016) or even rationally mandatory qua constitutive of the notion of epistemic rationality (Coliva, 2015). As far as I can tell, the account that I propose in this paper diverges in some important respects from all current versions of moderate (and non-moderate) hinge epistemology.

A crucial tenet of the perspective that I propose to explore is that the basic presuppositions of our cognitive projects are not totally refractory to evidential assessment and can indeed receive at least some degree of (second-order) empirical justification, which is not to say that the capacity of our perceptual experience to provide justification for our ordinary empirical beliefs *depends* on their actually receiving it. To make a case for this view, I take a leaf from Richard Boyd's (1973, 1983) book and elaborate on the "(scientific) realist" thought that the execution of a cognitive project based on false presuppositions is highly unlikely to exhibit the striking instrumental reliability displayed by the method by which we form the countless ordinary beliefs that enable us to cope successfully with our environment. This consideration leads to view the instrumental reliability of the epistemic practice of "taking experience at face value" — as I shall henceforth call, for the sake of simplicity, the epistemic practice of forming beliefs about middle-sized physical objects in our local environment on the basis of the deliverances of our senses (absent defeaters) — as an indication of the truth of its presuppositions. The thought I explore is then that the instrumental reliability of this epistemic practice provides *second-order* evidence, whereas perceptual experience does not itself provide first-order evidence of the truth of its presuppositions.

On my version of moderatism, the reason why we should accept the presuppositions of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value is that we routinely engage in that practice and (when we pause to consider the question) claim to be justified in doing so: the proposition that there is a material world is entailed by most of the things that we come to believe by engaging in that practice, whereas propositions such as that we are not cleverly deluded brains in a vat and that our senses provide us with largely reliable information about our surroundings are entailed by bootstrapped "track-record evidence" and/or by our justification claims. If the picture that I am trying to sketch is along the right lines, endorsing a moderate view of the structure of perceptual justification may be just belabouring the platitude that we are committed to accept the consequences of the things we believe.

On the other hand, the reason why I describe my proposal as an instance of *contrastive* hinge epistemology is that it involves the contrastivist view that empirical knowledge, or at least a considerable portion of it, is best understood

as a three-place, contrastive relation between an agent, a proposition (or fact), and a contrast or set of contrasts (Schaffer, 2004, 2005; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008; Morton, 2012). The contrastive aspect of the account shows up in the fact that, unlike fellow moderates Avnur and Coliva, I do not just (heavily) qualify the usual closure principles for epistemic justification and knowledge but replace them with corresponding contrastive closure principles — something that I argue may be instrumental in addressing the usual sceptical challenges to our empirical knowledge.¹

Here, then, is the plan of the paper. In section 2, I spell out the issue between conservative and liberal accounts of the structure of perceptual justification. In section 3, I introduce the moderate account and consider some controversial claims associated to its main versions. In section 4, I outline my own version of hinge epistemology and explain why it should be preferred to other (moderate) version. In section 5, I present and address some objections, and in so doing I add the above-mentioned contrastivist twist to the account. In section 6, I recapitulate the main results of the paper.

2. Moore's Proof, Conservatives, and Liberals

The usual place to start a discussion of accounts of the structure of perceptual justification is Moore's proof of an external world:

- (1) Here is a hand;
- (2) If there is a hand, then there is an external world;
- (3) Hence, there is an external world.

Most commentators find this proof unpersuasive, but there is notoriously little agreement about why, exactly, this little piece of deductively valid reasoning fails to compel most audiences' assent.

Conservative epistemologists (e.g., Wright, 1985, 2004; Davies, 1998, 2000, 2003) maintain that Moore's proof fails because it is incapable of *transmitting* the justification enjoyed by its first premise to its conclusion. An agent who had a perceptual experience as of a hand but who were not justified to believe (or accept) such propositions as that there is an external world, that our senses provide us with largely reliable information about our surroundings, that we are not cleverly deluded brains in a vat etc. in the first place, would not have any justification to believe that there is a hand in front of them — as opposed to, say, that they are hallucinating that there is one. Thus, the diagnosis of conservative

1 Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting "Contrastive Hinge Epistemology" as an appropriate title for this paper.

epistemologists is that Moore's proof fails because being justified to believe (or accept) the proposition that there is an external world is a necessary precondition for acquiring a perceptual justification for the proposition that there is a hand before oneself — a circumstance that prevents the justification one may acquire for the first premise of the argument by looking at one's hand from transmitting to the argument's conclusion.

The general thesis of conservative epistemologists is then that there are some very general propositions such that *being justified* in believing or accepting them is a necessary precondition for our perceptual experience to give us any justification to believe ordinary propositions concerning the external world:

Conservatism: Whenever perceptual experience gives one justification to believe an ordinary proposition concerning one's local environment, one's being justified to any degree to believe that proposition depends on one's having some independent justification to believe or accept other, suitably related, propositions.

Perceptual justification is, in this sense, always *mediated* by the possession of independent justification to believe or accept further propositions.

On the other hand, *liberal* epistemologists (e.g., Pryor, 2000, 2004) deny that being justified to believe (or accept) the proposition that there is an external world is a necessary precondition for acquiring a perceptual justification for the proposition that there is a hand before oneself, insisting that the justification that may be acquired for the first premise of the argument by looking at one's hand does transmit to the argument's conclusion. According to liberal epistemologists, the problem with Moore's proof is merely dialectical; for absent defeaters, perceptual experience does give us *immediate* justification to believe many ordinary propositions about the external world, such justification not depending on our antecedently being justified to believe (or accept) that there is an external world, that our senses provide us with largely reliable information about our surroundings, that we are not cleverly deluded brains in a vat etc. Accordingly, liberalism is often defined as the contradictory of conservatism:

Liberalism: It is not the case that: Whenever perceptual experience gives one justification to believe an ordinary proposition concerning one's local environment, one's being justified to any degree to believe that proposition depends on one's having some independent justification to believe or accept other, suitably related, propositions.²

This is not the place to discuss the respective merits of conservatism and liberalism. A charge that is often levelled against conservative epistemologists is that

² Pryor (2004, p. 363) makes the further claim that for an agent to be able to acquire perceptual justification for the proposition that there is a hand before themselves it is sufficient that they *lack reason to disbelieve* the proposition that there is an external world. However, this further claim should not be built into the definition of Liberalism (Silins, 2008, §1.2).

their view of epistemic justification is over-intellectualistic and/or that they are committed to regard the formation of perceptually justified beliefs as an exceedingly difficult task (Silins, 2008, pp. 118 f.; cf. Wright, 2014, p. 219). On the other hand, liberal epistemologists are often claimed to fall victim to the problem of “easy knowledge” (Cohen, 2002, p. 311) and are open to the charge of being probabilistically inconsistent (White, 2006, pp. 531–537). Needless to say, supporters of both views have attempted to rebut the objections. Other epistemologists, however, have started to look for alternatives.

3. A Moderate Third Way

If liberalism is defined as the contradictory of conservatism, then of course there is no space for other accounts of the structure of perceptual justification. But views that lie somewhere in between paradigmatically conservative and paradigmatically liberal positions have been explored by several philosophers (including Strawson, 1985; Silins, 2008; Avnur, 2012a, 2012b; Wedgwood, 2013; Pritchard, 2016), and Coliva has recently singled out one interesting family of such views by using the term *moderatism* – a term that she applies to her own *extended rationality* view (Coliva, 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

The central claim of *moderatism* can be put as follows:

Moderatism: Whenever perceptual experience gives one justification to believe an ordinary proposition concerning one’s local environment, one’s being justified to any degree to believe that proposition depends on one’s accepting other, suitably related, propositions.

Of course, these are the familiar hinge propositions that there is an external world; that our senses provide us with largely reliable information about our surroundings; that we are not cleverly deluded brains in a vat etc. And the claim that the capacity of our perceptual experience to provide justification for our ordinary empirical beliefs depends on our *accepting* such propositions is shared by Strawson (1985), Avnur (2012a, 2012b), and Pritchard (2016), as well as by Coliva (2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2019).

In terms of the classification introduced in the last section, moderatism qualifies as a form of liberalism because it rejects the view that being justified by perceptual experience to believe a proposition depends in general on having some independent *justification* to believe or accept other suitably related propositions; however, its key claim is that the possibility of acquiring perceptual justification does not merely depend on the absence of reasons to disbelieve but on the *acceptance*, or *assumption*, of such propositions. And this claim goes hand in hand with the idea that the justification enjoyed by the premise(s) of a valid argument can fail to transmit to the argument’s conclusion not only when *being justified* to

believe the conclusion is a necessary precondition of being justified to believe (one of) its premise(s) but also when *accepting*, or *assuming*, the conclusion is a necessary precondition for being so justified — which is the case with Moore's proof. Accordingly, Coliva (2012a) distinguishes the kind of transmission failure exhibited by Moore-style arguments offered in support of hinge propositions from that exhibited by the defective arguments offered in support of ordinary propositions in Dretske's (1970) Zebra and Red Wall cases, as well as in Wright's (1985) Voting and Football Game cases. Coliva argues that the circularity exhibited by Moore's argument and its ilk is not an instance of the type of transmission failure described by conservative epistemologists but of the distinct phenomenon that she calls *transmission failure II*, that is to say, of the specific type of transmission failure that in her view affects arguments *accepting*, or *assuming*, the independently unjustifiable conclusion of which is a necessary precondition of being justified to believe (one of) their premise(s). This, in turn, is connected with the view that hinge propositions are in principle unjustifiable, a view that, following a line of reasoning originally suggested by Wright (1985), she takes to be mandated by the consideration that *any* argument by which one might attempt to justify them would exhibit the sort of circularity that is fatal to Moore's proof.³ I will question the cogency of this line of reasoning in the next section; indeed, I will argue that not all arguments that might plausibly be cited in support of hinge propositions display such a vicious circularity. For the time being, however, suffice it to note that one need not share the negative attitude that (early) Wright, Coliva, and Avnur display towards the justifiability of hinge propositions to agree that arguments *accepting* the conclusion of which is a necessary precondition of being justified to believe (one of) their premise(s) fail to transmit whatever justification may be enjoyed by their premise(s). This is a thesis that I wholeheartedly subscribe to.⁴

Moderate epistemologists part ways on two important issues related to the commitments undertaken with respect to hinge propositions. They describe the nature of such commitments in terms of different *attitudes*, and they ascribe them different *epistemic statuses*. On the first score, whereas Strawson (1985) and Avnur (2012a, 2012b) freely refer to such commitments as *beliefs*, Coliva (2015) and Pritchard (2016) refrain from so doing on the ground that they are removed from the domain of evidential assessment and/or unresponsive to rational considerations. On the second score, the views are even more varied.

3 Coliva does not subscribe to Wright's idea that we may be non-evidentially justified (entitled) to accept the proposition that there is an external world (or, for that matter, other hinge propositions). More on this later.

4 For independent arguments in support of the thesis, see Harman and Sherman (2004, pp. 494–497), Sherman and Harman (2011, pp. 134–137), Avnur (2012a, pp. 303 f.; 314), and Rosenkranz (2012, pp. 701–705).

Strawson (1985) subscribes to the “naturalist,” Hume-inspired view that they are unjustifiable yet “unavoidable natural convictions, commitments, or prejudices [that] are ineradicably implanted in our minds by Nature” (Strawson, 1985, p. 19), a view which he hastens to qualify by the Wittgensteinian caveat that Nature may not be their unique source because socially acquired language-games appear to play a crucial role in their implantation. Strawson’s suggestion is in fact that sceptical doubts “are to be neglected because they are *idle*” (Strawson, 1985, p. 14), as we *cannot help* having the commitments that Nature and socialisation have ineradicably implanted in us. The lesson that Pritchard (2016) takes home from Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* is significantly different: it is that all rational evaluation is essentially “local,” depending as it does on a number of “fundamental commitments that are themselves immune to rational evaluation” (Pritchard, 2016, p. 66). Pritchard endorses the view that such commitments are *constitutive of rational evaluation*, but he does not go so far as to describe the commitments themselves as rational, or rationally held. On the other hand, Coliva (2015) unequivocally states that we are *rationally mandated* to accept the propositions in question in virtue of the fact that their assumption is constitutive of our notion of epistemic rationality. Epistemic rationality, she argues, is not restricted to justified belief but extends “to those very assumptions that [...] make it possible to have the kind of practice of forming, assessing, and withdrawing from empirical beliefs on the basis of perceptual evidence, which is itself constitutive of our very notion of epistemic rationality” (Coliva, 2015, p. 11), which is the reason why she calls her version of moderatism “extended rationality.” Finally, Avnur (2012a, p. 313) describes his own view as very close to Coliva’s, but he never explicitly characterises commitments to (what he sometimes calls) “extraordinary” propositions as rational, let alone as rationally mandated. He writes that “the traditional skeptic is right: our belief that we are not massively deceived is an unwarranted item of mere faith” (Avnur, 2012a, p. 312), which suggests that his attitude towards them may actually be closer to Pritchard’s.

The brand of moderatism that I propose to explore in what follows does not view our commitments to hinge propositions as necessarily falling short of kosher belief, nor does it view them as totally refractory to evidential assessment. And although it is compatible with the suggestion that some of those commitments may be constitutive of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value, it does not involve the view that they are rationally mandated *qua* constitutive of the very notion of epistemic rationality. Let me begin from the alleged refractoriness of hinge propositions to evidential assessment.

4. The Proposal

In his early discussions of Hume-inspired sceptical paradoxes, Wright substantiated the Wittgensteinian claim that the most fundamental presuppositions of our

investigations are themselves removed from the domain of evidential assessment by arguing (a) that no direct evidence can be obtained in their support, and (b) that the failure of Moore-style arguments to transmit justification makes it impossible to acquire any indirect evidence of their truth⁵:

It is utterly unclear how evidence might be amassed that there is an external world, that there are other minds, or that the world has a substantial history at all, which is not evidence specifically for *particular* features of the material world, or for the states of consciousness of *particular* people, or for *particular* events in world history. Direct evidence for these very general propositions [...] is not foreseeable. And indirect evidence [...] [is] ruled out by the sceptic's argument. It follows that they are beyond evidence altogether. (Wright, 1985, p. 437)

Wright's dilemmatic argument is not, however, watertight. Its weakness becomes apparent as soon as it is realised that its conclusion depends on the assumption that running a Moore-style argument is the only way in which one could possibly acquire indirect evidence in favour of a proposition like <There is an external world>. This assumption has been questioned by supporters of explanationist strategies against scepticism (Vogel, 2008, pp. 535 f.); indeed, in the literature there is a variety of suggestions as to other ways in which evidence of the truth of such propositions could be obtained (Beebe, 2017, pp. 173 f.). My own preference is prompted by the reflection that the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value could hardly exhibit the striking instrumental reliability it consistently displays if it were based on false presuppositions.⁶ This reflection provides the starting point for developing a version of the moderate account of the structure of perceptual justification that concerns apparently contingent propositions like <I am not a cleverly deluded brain in a vat> and <My senses provide me with largely reliable information about my surroundings>, as well as "Moorean" propositions like <There is an external world>.

According to the moderate brand of hinge epistemology that I propose to explore (i) acquiring any degree of (claimable) perceptual justification for

5 It should be noted that Wright (2014, p. 230) has eventually come to qualify the claim by making room for a kind of epistemic "alchemy" whereby "the lead of an original entitlement" may be "transformed into the gold of genuine evidential warrant." Although he still maintains that perceptual experience cannot provide a *first-time* justification for believing or accepting a hinge proposition, he is now willing to concede that it can *enhance* an anterior, non-evidential justification that an agent may have for so doing (Wright, 2014, p. 233). Wright has been prompted to admit this possibility by some closure-related issues raised by McGlynn (2014). I do not think that such issues should be taken so seriously, because, as I shall explain in section 5, I am inclined to replace the usual principles of epistemic closure with contrastivist principles of the sort described in Schaffer (2007). Thus, my version of moderatism is rigorously "non-alchemic."

6 This reflection is inspired, as I said at the beginning, by a well-known argument for scientific realism: the argument that a realist account of scientific theories provides the only plausible explanation for the instrumental reliability of scientific methodology (Boyd, 1973, 1983).

believing ordinary propositions concerning our local environment depends on accepting hinge propositions like <There is an external world>; <I am not a cleverly deluded brain in a vat>; and <My senses provide me with largely reliable information about my surroundings> — and yet (ii) it is not the case that we are rationally mandated to accept such hinge propositions in virtue of the fact that their assumption is constitutive of our notion of epistemic rationality. On this account, (iii) arguments à la Moore cannot be expected to provide first-order evidence of the truth of propositions such as that there is an external world; yet, (iv) hinge propositions are not totally removed from the domain of evidential assessment because the striking instrumental reliability of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value may be plausibly taken to provide second-order evidence of their truth. However, (v) the reason why accepting such propositions is a necessary precondition for acquiring any degree of (claimable) perceptual justification for ordinary propositions is not that we can acquire second-order evidence of their truth but that we are rationally committed to believe them by our involvement in the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value. Let me review theses (i) through (v) in turn.

Thesis (i) is just the central tenet of moderatism (the point of the parenthetical qualification that restricts it to justification that the relevant agent can *claim* will be discussed shortly). I understand the required sort of acceptance in a rather straightforward way. Unlike Pritchard (2016, pp. 90–94), I do not think that it must fall short of kosher belief; and unlike Coliva (2015, pp. 34–36), I do not think that it may be as thin as a mere “propositional assumption” in “the abstract space of reasons.” I think that it must be a psychologically real attitude, one that shows up in the agent’s committing themselves, either explicitly after reflectively considering the issue, or at least implicitly in their actions and judgements, to the truth of the relevant propositions. In my view, accepting the relevant hinge propositions in a psychologically real sense is a necessary precondition for acquiring any degree of (claimable) *propositional* justification for ordinary empirical propositions and not just for being able to rationally employ such justification in the formation of well-founded empirical beliefs.

I will have more to say by way of motivating thesis (i) when I get to discuss thesis (v). On the other hand, thesis (ii) just amounts to the rejection of Coliva’s extended rationality view. I have no conclusive argument against it, so I will just explain what prompted me to search for an alternative. My dissatisfaction with the claim that we are rationally mandated to accept the hinge propositions that undergird the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value arises from the fact that propositions like <I am not a cleverly deluded brain in a vat> and <My senses provide me with largely reliable information about my surroundings> are apparently rather different from a proposition like <There is an external world>.

Whereas <There is an external world> does look like the sort of proposition whose assumption might be argued to be constitutive of epistemic rationality, <I am not a cleverly deluded brain in a vat> and <My senses provide me with largely reliable information about my surroundings> just seem to be contingent propositions about the epistemic situation of a specific agent in the world. In view of this, it is far from clear that they should be lumped together with <There is an external world> in an undifferentiated class of basic assumptions mandated by the very nature of epistemic rationality in the way that assuming that there is an external world might perhaps be argued to be. As I stated, I am not offering these considerations as a refutation of the extended rationality view but only as an account of what prompted me to search for further ways in which evidence might be brought to bear upon the propositions in question.

Thesis (iii) is so closely related to thesis (i) that it might just seem to be a straightforward consequence of it. But some philosophers have seriously considered the possibility that a Moore-style argument might be used to perform a sort of “epistemic alchemy” (Davies, 2004, p. 220; cf. McGlynn, 2014 and Wright, 2014, p. 230) on hinge propositions like <There is an external world>, transforming the lead of (nonevidential) rational trust into the gold of genuine evidential justification. Accordingly, one might envisage the possibility of using a Moore-style argument to perform an “epistemic alchemy” that turns mere acceptance into genuine evidential justification. However, I have already said that I believe that there are compelling reasons to think that, if acquiring any degree of perceptual justification for believing ordinary propositions concerning our local environment depends on accepting such hinge propositions as <There is an external world>, arguments like Moore’s proof will be incapable of transmitting to their conclusion any justification that may be enjoyed by their premises. I leave it at that for the time being, but I will have something to say about different kinds of transmission failure and principles of epistemic closure in section 5.

Thesis (iv) articulates the single claim that most clearly sets apart my proposal from those of other fellow moderates and hinge epistemologists generally, namely, that the hinge propositions whose acceptance undergirds the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value are not totally removed from the domain of evidential assessment. To repeat, the reason for this contention is not just that some such propositions appear to involve contingent claims about the epistemic relation of an agent with their environment; it is, rather, that the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value consistently exhibits a striking instrumental reliability, the best explanation of which is that the hinge propositions that must be accepted for it to get going are simply *true*. Thus, although we should not expect to be able to acquire first-order evidence of the truth of those propositions by running epistemically circular arguments like Moore’s proof of an

external world, the striking instrumental reliability of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value provides second-order evidence of the truth of such propositions via an inference to the best explanation that instantiates the familiar pattern of argument commonly used in everyday reasoning and in the natural sciences.

It is important to be very clear about the nature of the *explanandum* that provides the starting point for the inference to the truth of the relevant hinge propositions (Williams, 1977, p. 140 f.; Wright, 2004, pp. 447–449; Beebe, 2009, pp. 615–619; Gifford, 2013, pp. 694–698). Obviously, what needs to be explained is not the truth of ordinary perceptual beliefs formed by taking experience at face value. But it is not their justification either because in the present context it cannot simply be taken for granted that such beliefs *are* justified: arguing that we are justified to accept the relevant hinge propositions because their truth (or justification) is the best explanation of the justification of the beliefs we form by taking experience at face value would not be significantly different from arguing that we justifiably believe (know) that there is an external world because we justifiably believe (know) that there are two hands in front of us — it would just be an abductive variation on Moore's unconvincing theme. There is, however, another *explanandum* that offers a more plausible starting point for the desired inference to the best explanation, namely, what I have called the striking *instrumental reliability* of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value. By this, I mean the striking likelihood that the predictions based on perceptual judgments formed by engaging in that practice will be borne out by further experience. Perceptual justification does not accrue to our beliefs taken in isolation not only because acquiring justification for perceptual beliefs depends on our accepting other suitably related propositions but also because our perceptually justified beliefs fit in a complex web of (perceptual and non-perceptual) beliefs that are related to each other by a variety of logical and explanatory relations. And the striking fact is that these relations yield an immense number of observational predictions which are typically borne out in subsequent experience — and when they are not, we are usually able to devise some plausible explanation of the event, often an independently testable one. This would be highly unlikely if the hinge propositions whose truth is presupposed by engagement in the practice of taking experience at face value were false (which is not to say that there are no possible worlds in which the practice exhibits the striking instrumental reliability it consistently displays *and* those propositions are false, but only that such worlds are extremely unlikely).

If this is roughly correct, the striking instrumental reliability of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value provides *second-order* evidence of the truth of hinge propositions like <There is an external world>; <I am not a cleverly

deluded brain in a vat>; and <My senses provide me with largely reliable information about my surroundings>. This, however, does not mean that ordinary human reasoners taking part in the practice are ipso facto justified to believe such propositions: even if their participation in the practice acquaints them with its striking instrumental reliability, they are highly unlikely to run — indeed, they are highly unlikely to recognise the possibility of running — the inference to the best explanation that would enable them to take the practice's instrumental reliability as a reason for believing those propositions to be true.⁷ However, if ordinary human reasoners cannot typically be ascribed justified belief in such propositions, they are nevertheless *rationally committed* to believe them by the fact that they not only routinely go about forming beliefs concerning their local environment by taking part in the practice itself but on many occasions also claim that such beliefs are epistemically justified. It is precisely in virtue of the fact that agents taking part in the practice incur such rational commitments that accepting those propositions is a necessary precondition for them to acquire any degree of (claimable) perceptual justification for ordinary propositions about their environment. This is actually the content of thesis (v). Thus, let me explain in more detail why I believe that agents engaged in the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value incur the rational commitments in question.

First, consider hinge propositions like <There is an external world>; <There is a physical reality>, and the like, which are entailed or presupposed by most ordinary propositions about middle-sized physical objects in our local environment (the most significant exceptions being perhaps negative existentials like <There isn't any elephant in front of me>). Now, it seems clear that ordinary human believers are rationally committed to believing such hinge propositions by the sheer fact that they believe such ordinary propositions as <Here is a hand> or <Bob has many cows>: it would be irrational for them to believe any of these propositions *and* abstain from believing the hinge propositions they entail or presuppose. Indeed, if ordinary human believers refused, on reflection, to accept such hinge propositions, they would

7 I have argued elsewhere that, in a central and fundamental sense (the sense in which questions of propositional justification are closely connected to questions of epistemic responsibility), an agent can be *propositionally* justified to believe a proposition at a time only if it would be reasonably easy for them to form a *doxastically* justified belief in the proposition at that time. For some purposes, one may of course wish to consider which propositions an agent would be justified to believe “in the abstract space of warrants” (Davies, 2009, p. 338), or “in the abstract space of reasons” (Coliva, 2012b, p. 326; 2015, p. 16), abstracting away from many significant aspects of the agent's epistemic abilities and situation. However, one should not be blind to the fact that the degree of idealisation involved in this exercise inevitably tends to direct attention to a type of epistemic justification that may be in a clear sense unavailable for rational belief-formation to the relevant agent (Volpe, 2017a, pp. 35–40).

be rationally required to give up most of their ordinary beliefs concerning their local environment.⁸

Hinge propositions like <I am not a cleverly deluded brain in a vat> are also entailed or presupposed by many ordinary propositions about middle-sized physical objects in our local environment — not, however, by so many ordinary propositions as entail or presuppose <There is an external world> or <There is a physical reality>. Thus, for instance, <I am not a cleverly deluded brain in a vat> is entailed by <I have two hands> but is neither entailed nor presupposed by <Bob has many cows>. And the relation between propositions like <My senses provide me with largely reliable information about my surroundings> and (most) ordinary propositions about middle-sized physical objects in our local environment is even looser because <My senses provide me with largely reliable information about my surroundings> might be false even if (say) <I have two hands> and <Bob has many cows> were both true. However, it is plausible to maintain that we are rationally committed to believe *all* the hinge propositions that are associated with the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value and not only those that are entailed or presupposed by (most) ordinary propositions about middle-sized physical objects in our local environment. This contention may be substantiated in two different ways.

First, one may argue that by taking experience at face value and coming to form countless justified beliefs which presumably count as knowledge on its basis, we accumulate a massive body of bootstrapped track-record evidence that bears on the truth of such propositions as <My sense organs work mostly reliably>. And whereas such bootstrapped track-record evidence cannot provide a non-circular justification for accepting such propositions, it might nevertheless rationally commit us to accept them in virtue of the fact that it would be incoherent to acknowledge the existence of such evidence *and* reject (or suspend judgement on) those propositions.

Second, one may point to the fact that we do not always content ourselves with forming beliefs about the features of our local physical environment by taking experience at face value but on various occasions engage in an evaluation of the epistemic credentials of such beliefs and end up claiming that they are indeed perceptually justified. This habit would land us in flat contradiction if we did not accept, in addition, those hinge propositions that are not entailed or presupposed by the contents of such beliefs; we would not have the right to claim that this or

⁸ Note that I am not claiming that by refusing to accept, on reflection, the hinge propositions that follow from the content of their ordinary empirical beliefs, an agent would be unable to *form* those very beliefs. Broadly inferentialist considerations about content might suggest such a view, but nothing in my argument depends on accepting it.

that ordinary belief of ours is perceptually justified if we were not disposed to claim that sensory perception equips us with what is, by and large, a reliable way of acquiring information about the physical features of our local environment (Wright, 2014, p. 219). I am more attracted to this second line of reasoning, which is why I have often added the parenthetical qualification “claimable” when talking of perceptual justification. Here, however, I will leave it at that and go on to elaborate on the claim that it is precisely because agents engaged in the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value incur the rational commitments that have just been described that moderatism is true.

The rationale for moderatism outlined by thesis (v) is rather austere: it does not appeal to the naturally or socially implanted dispositions to belief invoked by Strawson’s account, nor does it entail Coliva’s claim that accepting the presuppositions of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value is constitutive of the nature of epistemic rationality. It is closer to Avnir’s (2012a) suggestion that “if settling that p requires believing (or assuming) q, then believing q is required for having warrant to believe p” (Avnir, 2012a, p. 313), even though the key notion is not that of a “question-settling warrant” but of plain belief. To repeat, the thought is that acquiring any degree of (claimable) perceptual justification for believing ordinary propositions concerning our local environment depends on accepting in a psychologically real sense some suitably related hinge propositions *because we are rationally committed to accept such hinge propositions by our engagement in the epistemic practice of forming beliefs about middle-sized physical objects in our local environment on the basis of the deliverances of our senses (absent defeaters)*: if we did not accept those propositions, we would be rationally required to give up most of our ordinary perceptual beliefs as well as the claim that they are perceptually justified. Note that the thesis is that falling short of the rational commitments that arise from engagement in the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value is incompatible not just with the formation of *well-founded beliefs* in ordinary propositions concerning middle-size physical objects in our local environment but with the acquisition of perceptual justification *for believing* those propositions. The claim, in other terms, is not restricted to doxastic justification but concerns propositional justification as well. This is a crucial point because moderatism, like conservatism and liberalism, is supposed to be first and foremost a thesis about the structure of propositional justification. Thus, the claim cannot just be that violating the rational commitments generated by the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value impairs our capacity to form well-founded beliefs in many ordinary propositions because it makes the propositional justification with which perceptual experience endows such beliefs *unavailable for rationally appropriate belief-formation* (Pryor, 2004, p. 365; 2012, p. 285 f.; Davies, 2009, p. 367; Coliva, 2015, p. 15 f.; Volpe, 2017a,

p. 37 ff.) to the relevant agents. And indeed, unless one is working with an exceedingly idealised notion of propositional justification, violating the rational commitments generated by the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value can be shown to preclude the very possibility of acquiring *propositional justification* for believing most ordinary propositions concerning middle-size physical objects in our local environment. This is because, as I have argued elsewhere (Volpe, 2017a, pp. 41–44), the relationship between propositional justification (conceived as a relation that is normative for epistemically responsible behaviour) and doxastic justification is governed by something along the lines of principle

(EJ) S can be (propositionally) justified to believe p at t in virtue of S's having reason(s) R only if it is reasonably easy for S to form a (doxastically) justified belief in p at t ,

where “(EJ)” stands for *Epistemic Justification*. The point is, in a nutshell, that if reflection on what one is propositionally justified to believe is to provide any guidance for one's epistemically responsible behaviour, talk of propositions that an agent is in some suitably idealised sense epistemically justified to believe but whose justification is unavailable for rationally appropriate belief-formation to the agent in question is bound to be totally inconsequential: any notion of propositional justification that can be expected to play a role in providing guidance for epistemically responsible behaviour will have to conform to principle (EJ). And this means that violating the rational commitments generated by the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value will prevent an agent not only from forming (many of) the usual well-founded beliefs that would ordinarily result from engagement in that practice, but also, more fundamentally, from acquiring the propositional justification that perceptual experience would ordinarily provide for forming such beliefs.

If what I have been suggesting is roughly along the right lines, acceptance of the presuppositions of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value may perhaps be described as constitutive of *that* practice, but I think it would be wrong to insist that an agent who denied or doubted their truth would be epistemically irrational. Room should be made, I think, for the possibility of rationally refusing to take experience at face value by consistently construing it in purely “phenomenological” terms, and perhaps also for the possibility of an agent's acquiring empirical justification for such propositions as <I appear to have two hands> and <Bob appears to have two cows> by accepting the “phenomenological” counterparts of our familiar hinge propositions. On the other hand, it seems clear that by refusing to accept the presuppositions of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value, an agent would drastically restrict the range of *reasons* to which they are responsive, dramatically impairing their disposition to

appreciate the epistemic significance of perceptual experience. Here, however, I cannot offer a detailed argument to this effect.⁹

The outcome I have just outlined may strike some as disappointingly minimal. But I think it is an outcome one may learn to live with, especially when it is assuaged by the recognition that it is possible to gain some degree of second-order evidence of the truth of the presuppositions of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value by running an appropriate inference to the best explanation. However, there are some potential objections and misunderstandings that need to be addressed if this claim is to warrant some serious consideration. To these, or at least to some of them, I now turn.

5. Responses to Some Objections

Let me start by clearing up a couple of potential misunderstandings. For one thing, the perspective I have been trying to canvass might be suspected to entail that all perceptual justification is merely *conditional* on the acceptance of the relevant hinge propositions. This would be a confusion: the thrust of my proposal is not that perceptual experience provides merely conditional justification for believing ordinary empirical propositions about our local environment but that, if we did not accept the relevant hinge propositions, we could not transcend our “cognitive locality” by taking such experience to bear on a world of mind-independent physical objects (see Coliva, 2015, p. 39). By accepting those hinge propositions, we enable our perceptual experience to provide us with unconditional (although, of course, defeasible) justification for believing ordinary propositions about middle-sized physical objects in our local environment. The fact that we can acquire such justification only in virtue of our accepting those hinge propositions does not entail that the justification in question is merely conditional any more than the fact that we can acquire it only in virtue of our having well-adapted sense organs and whatever it takes to form the corresponding beliefs.

Another issue worth clarifying is whether my version of moderatism is a form of foundationalism. If justification is taken to be *immediate* just in case what makes one justified to believe a proposition “doesn’t include having justification

9 The purely “phenomenological” propositions for which an agent might arguably earn empirical justification by accepting some suitable hinge propositions are logically compatible with (although much weaker than) their ordinary “realist” counterparts. Could an agent who accepted “sceptical” hinge propositions (and was blamelessly unaware of the possibility of running an inference to the best explanation of the striking instrumental reliability of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value) acquire empirical justification for propositions like <I am a brain in a vat being fed with the experience of having two hands> and <I am a brain in a vat being fed with the experience of Bob’s having two cows>? Here, perhaps a distinction should be made between different kinds of justification, or between having a reason and merely appearing to have a reason, but I have no official position to defend on this issue.

for other beliefs” (Pryor, 2005, p. 183), then any version of moderatism will be committed to the view that perceptual experience provides us with immediate justification for believing many empirical propositions about middle-sized objects in our local environment. Thus, in this sense, my proposal involves a foundationalist view of perceptual justification. However, the key role it assigns to the acceptance of hinge propositions and its negative verdict on Moore’s argument’s ability to prove that there is an external world are hardly compatible with the peculiar kind of epistemic priority that traditional foundationalism ascribes to “basic beliefs.”¹⁰ Thus, the foundationalist commitments associated to my view of the structure of perceptual justification are significantly weaker than those usually associated with paradigmatic foundationalist theories. Whether my account should be classified as weakly foundationalist or coherentist is, in the end, just a verbal issue.

What is not a merely verbal issue is whether by allowing for the possibility of immediately justified beliefs in the sense just described, my favourite version of moderatism faces the problem of easy knowledge (Cohen, 2002). I think it does not. First, consider the bootstrapping issue: “Surely, you cannot acquire justified belief, or knowledge, of the reliability of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value simply by noting that you can form many immediately justified beliefs as a result of engaging in that very process!” (Cohen, 2002, pp. 316–318). I have already noticed that, by taking experience at face value, we presumably keep accumulating bootstrapped track-record evidence that bears on the truth of propositions like <My sense organs work mostly reliably>, and I have also suggested that having such a massive body of evidence might *rationally commit* us to accept those propositions. However, this does not mean that the existence of such a massive body of bootstrapped track-record evidence is going to *justify* us to believe the propositions in question or to put us in the position to *know* that they are true. For it is a sound methodological principle that a general hypothesis is susceptible to inductive confirmation by a set of data only if the probability that counterexamples (if any) show up in the set is sufficiently high, and this is of course not the case with the bootstrapped track-record evidence produced by our engagement in the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value.¹¹

Next, consider the closure version of the problem of easy knowledge: “Surely, you cannot acquire justified belief, or knowledge, that the wall in front of you is not white bathed in red light simply by forming the immediately justified belief

10 By “traditional foundationalism” I here mean the substantive, strong, atomistic and radically internalist philosophical stance described by Williams (2005, pp. 203 f.).

11 I believe I owe this point to Jim Pryor, but I have not been able to locate its source in his published work.

that it is red as a result of your visual experience and then by arguing that if it is red, then it is not white bathed in red light!" (Cohen, 2002, pp. 312–316). The closure version of the problem of easy knowledge can be addressed by observing that Moore-style arguments involving hinge propositions and more mundane pieces of reasoning like those exemplified by Dretske's Zebra and Red Wall cases fail to transmit the justification enjoyed by their premises to their respective conclusions. However, I do not think that the deepest explanation of such failures of transmission lies in a mix of moderate (for arguments involving hinge conclusions) and conservative (for arguments involving "mundane" conclusions) considerations. Indeed, I do not believe that it is unqualifiedly true that one cannot be justified to believe that the wall in front of oneself is red without being justified to believe that it is not white bathed in red light, or that one cannot be justified to believe that the animal one is looking at is a zebra without being justified to believe that it is not a cleverly disguised mule. Here, I part ways with most fellow moderates because I am prepared to accept a very thorough revision of standard closure principles for epistemic justification and knowledge. Whereas Pritchard (2016, chap. 4) argues that such principles can be retained virtually unchanged, and Avnur (2012b) and Coliva (2015, p. 102 f.) maintain that they fail only in sophisticated cases of transmission failure involving "extraordinary" or unjustifiable propositions, I believe (like Dretske) that closure as standardly conceived fails also in cases of transmission failure involving more mundane propositions. Which leads us to the next objection (Avnur, 2012b, p. 6): is such a thorough revision — something close to a wholesale rejection — of standard epistemic closure principles a reasonable price to pay for solving the problem of easy knowledge?

I think it is because the real motivation for taking such a radical attitude towards standard epistemic closure principles lies in the realisation that knowledge — or at any rate empirical knowledge, which is what concerns us here — has a contrastive structure (Schaffer, 2004, 2005; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008; Morton, 2012). According to epistemological *contrastivism*, empirical knowledge is best understood not as a binary relation between an agent and a proposition (or fact) but as a three-place, contrastive relation between an agent, a proposition (or fact), and a contrast (or set of contrasts).¹² Here, I cannot embark on a detailed defence of this claim, nor can I enter the question of its scope: does it apply to all instances of

12 The view that knowledge always involves a contrast term is defended on linguistic and epistemological grounds by Schaffer (2004, 2005), and on the basis of the claim that knowledge requires reasons, and reasons are themselves always "reasons for one thing as opposed to another," by Sinnott-Armstrong (2008, p. 257). For a contrastivist version of the view that propositional knowledge is in a non-trivial sense a relation to facts rather than propositions, see Volpe (2018). I discuss and reject Gerken's (2017) a priori arguments against epistemological contrastivism in Volpe (2021).

empirical knowledge or only to some subclass of them? Moreover, I will leave it as an open question whether it is best construed as a descriptive claim about the adicity of knowledge attributions and knowledge itself (Schaffer, 2004, 2005) or as a proposal to revise the way we usually talk and think about knowledge (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). For present purposes, I just need to point out that, if epistemological contrastivism is either descriptively correct or theoretically illuminating with respect to the instances of empirical knowledge that are at issue here, it is only to be expected that the usual closure principles will not be unrestrictedly valid. This, however, does not stand in the way of devising a plausible account of how justified belief and knowledge extend under entailment. The need to provide such an account is of course the main motivation behind acceptance of the usual closure principles, but in fact an equally satisfactory account can be offered on the basis of the weaker, and indeed more plausible, principles suggested by a contrastivist view of justification and knowledge (Schaffer, 2007). Simplifying a bit,¹³ the contrastive closure principle for propositional justification will be:

Contrastive closure for justification. If you are justified to believe that *p* rather than *q*, and recognise that the proposition that *p* entails the proposition that *r*, then you are justified to believe that *r* rather than *q* (provided the proposition that *r* genuinely contrasts with the proposition that *q*); and if you are justified to believe that *p* rather than *q*, and recognise that the proposition that *s* entails the proposition that *q*, then you are justified to believe that *p* rather than *s* (again, provided the proposition that *p* genuinely contrasts with the proposition that *s*).

And the contrastive closure principle for knowledge will be:

Contrastive closure for knowledge. If you know that *p* rather than *q*, and recognise that the proposition that *p* entails the proposition that *r*, then you are in a position to know that *r* rather than *q* (provided the proposition that *r* genuinely contrasts with the proposition that *q*); and if you know that *p* rather than *q*, and recognise that the proposition that *s* entails the proposition that *q*, then

13 I ignore complications connected with multi-premise closure (see Hawthorne, 2004, pp. 46–50; Schaffer, 2007, pp. 244–246), and rely on an intuitive understanding of the notion of a “genuine contrast” between propositions. Schaffer’s claim that contrastive closure principles do not lead to “immodest knowledge” — that is to say, to knowledge that certain sceptical error-possibilities do not obtain — has not gone unchallenged (Kvanvig, 2008; Kelp, 2011; Hughes, 2013). But the ensuing debate looks to me as a bit of a storm in a teacup, arising as it does from a failure to consider the way in which the contrast terms of knowledge ascriptions — the possibilities that are actually ruled out by the agent’s evidence when those ascriptions are true — are contextually individuated by the live options on the table (Schaffer, 2005, pp. 240–241, 244–245; 2007, 240–242). The point that tends to be forgotten is that, in most cases, the live options that must be eliminated by an agent’s evidence for them to know that things are one way rather than another is expressed by an explicitly articulated contrast proposition *only in conjunction with the tacit presuppositions that shape the context of the relevant knowledge ascription*. Thus, it cannot be taken for granted, as Schaffer’s critics typically do when constructing their purported counterexamples to the claim that contrastive closure avoids epistemic immodesty, that the set of such options is not going to incorporate, along the deductive steps exploited in the relevant cases, previous presuppositions that are not ruled out by the agent’s evidence.

you are in a position to know that *p* rather than *s* (again, provided the proposition that *p* genuinely contrasts with the proposition that *s*).

As I stated, for present purposes it is not necessary to endorse the unrestricted claim that the structure of *any* epistemic justification one can have for believing an empirical proposition, or of *any* knowledge one can acquire by appropriately employing it, is really (or is best conceived as) ternary. If there are binary instances of empirical justification/knowledge, they will lend themselves to being construed as limiting cases of ternary justification/knowledge, and the usual closure principles will plausibly apply to them.¹⁴ However, the ascriptions that are at stake in Dretske's Zebra and Red Wall cases, as well as in Moore's proof of an external world, seem to be paradigmatic cases of ternary ascriptions governed by contrastive closure principles. Thus, if you have a visual experience as of a zebra, you can form a justified belief and come to know on the basis of your perceptual evidence that the animal you are looking at is a zebra rather than, say, a canary; but even if the proposition that the animal you are looking at is a zebra entails the proposition that it is not a cleverly disguised mule, you cannot deductively argue your way from the epistemic position you are in to the point where you can form a justified belief, let alone know, that the animal you are looking at is not a cleverly disguised mule. The reason why you can be justified to believe, and indeed know, that the animal you are looking at is a zebra without being justified to believe, let alone know, that it is not a cleverly disguised mule is that what your perceptual evidence justifies you to believe is that it is a zebra *rather than a canary* (or perhaps any other little bird or animal), the possibility that it may be a cleverly disguised mule not being among the alternatives that it allows you to discount.

By the same token, if you have a visual experience as of a red wall, you can form a justified belief and come to know on the basis of your perceptual evidence that the wall in front of you is red in normal conditions of lighting rather than, say, white bathed in blue light; but even if the proposition that the wall in front of you is red in normal conditions of lighting entails the proposition that it is not white bathed in red light, you cannot deductively argue your way from the epistemic position you are in to the point where you can form a justified belief, let alone know, that the wall is not white bathed in red light. The reason why you can be justified to believe, and indeed know, that the wall is red without being justified to believe, let alone know, that it is not white bathed in red light is that

14 If you are justified to believe that *p* rather than not-*p*, and recognise that the proposition that *p* entails the proposition that *r*, then you are justified to believe that *r* rather than not-*r*; and if you know that *p* rather than not-*p*, and recognise that the proposition that *p* entails the proposition that *r*, then you are in a position to know that *r* rather than not-*r*.

what your perceptual evidence actually justifies you to believe is that it is red *rather than white bathed in blue light* (or perhaps white bathed in yellow light, or yellow bathed in blue light, etc.), the possibility that it may be white bathed in red light not being among the alternatives that it allows you to discount.

Dretske's Zebra and Red Wall cases, but also Moore's proof of an external world,¹⁵ involve arguments that manifestly fail to transmit the positive epistemic status enjoyed by their premises to their respective conclusions. And the reason of such failure becomes clear as soon as we realise that ascriptions of justified belief in (or knowledge of) their premises can be true only on a contrastive construal that makes it impossible to ascribe to the agents in question justified belief in (or knowledge of) their respective conclusions (see Schaffer, 2005, pp. 259–265; 2007, p. 247). Thus, the usual closure principles must go, but careful consideration of the ternary structure of the ascriptions of justification and/or knowledge that are typically harnessed to raise the closure version of the problem of easy knowledge shows that this is as it should be, because only weaker contrastive principles are actually justified — and required to formulate a plausible account of how justified belief and knowledge extend under entailment.

From a contrastivist perspective, instances of both kinds of transmission failure discussed by Coliva arise from the fact that the conclusion of the defective argument is in fact presupposed or taken for granted in the sense that its negation is not among the possibilities that the relevant evidence is expected, and indeed able, to rule out for the agent to be justified to believe the argument's premise. Whether it is a proposition that the agent could get in a position to be justified to believe on different yet ordinary grounds or a hinge proposition that the agent could acquire some degree of justification to believe only by running a sophisticated inference to the best explanation, the point is just that the positive epistemic status of the propositions that we are justified to believe is not transmitted to those of their consequences the acceptance of which makes it possible to acquire their justification in the first place. Thus, there is indeed room for distinguishing between two different kinds of transmission failure, but on my view the distinction boils down to the difference between presuppositions (or assumptions) that are independently justifiable by ordinary, first-order means, and presuppositions (or assumptions) that are independently justifiable only by sophisticated, second-order means. On my view, the presuppositions of this latter sort are not totally removed from the domain of evidential assessment; however, this is not to deny that they play a very distinctive role within our cognitive economies, which is

15 I leave to the reader the easy task of working out the details of an analogous contrastivist account of the failure of Moore's proof to transmit whatever justification/knowledge is enjoyed by its premise to the conclusion that there is an external world.

why I describe my own view as a brand of hinge epistemology. Although the “space” of what we can justifiedly believe or know is shaped by the whole network of presuppositions that underlie our inquiries, it seems clear that the hinge propositions that undergird the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value allow us to surpass our “cognitive locality” in a much more fundamental and pervasive sense than any other presupposition or assumption because their acceptance is what sets in motion the very process of bringing our experiences to bear on a world inhabited by physical objects.

A further worry might be that the claim that accepting the hinge propositions that undergird the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value is just a rational commitment that we incur in virtue of our involvement in that practice deprives us of the answer to external world scepticism provided by the constitutivist versions of moderatism. I admit that, if the treatment of sceptical paradoxes allowed by constitutivist accounts were successful, it would be more comforting than any alternative one can foreseeably come up with on the basis of a non-constitutivist version of moderatism. But I have argued elsewhere that the treatment offered by the extended rationality view is ultimately unsuccessful (Volpe, 2017b, pp. 267–270; for a reply, cf. Coliva, 2017b), and my feeling is that other constitutivist strategies are unlikely to do any better. On the other hand, my favourite brand of moderatism entitles us to regard hinge propositions as amenable to evidential assessment and as capable of receiving some degree of second-order epistemic support. This degree of support may well not be adequate for knowledge, so perhaps we cannot get in a position to *know* that they are true, which is what a proponent of hinge epistemology would be inclined to say anyway. However, the epistemic support that accrues to hinge proposition may well be strong enough to justify us to rationally prefer them to their sceptical rivals. And then there is the contrastivist option. My favoured version of moderatism can be naturally conjoined with a contrastivist approach to the problem of scepticism (Schaffer, 2004, 2005, 2007). In a nutshell, the idea is that ordinary knowledge is compatible with sceptical doubt: by accepting the relevant hinge propositions we can gain (modest) knowledge that we have hands rather than (say) stumps, even if we cannot get in a position to have (immodest) knowledge that we have hands rather than being handless brains in a vat, or that we are not envatted rather than envatted. Sceptical arguments and paradoxes lure us into thinking that ordinary knowledge is incompatible with sceptical doubt by ignoring the covert contrast terms involved in the relevant knowledge attributions and illicitly shifting the contrast to draw their devastating conclusions. But when the contrastive structure of the relevant knowledge attributions is taken notice of, the appearance of incompatibility is dissolved and the possibility of (contrastive) ordinary knowledge vindicated. This said, and of course much more would need

to be said to provide a full-fledged defence of the contrastivist way with the sceptic, I wish to emphasise that solving the problem of scepticism was not the aim of this paper in the first place: a fully worked-out treatment of the issue will have to wait for another occasion.

The last objection I wish to consider focusses on the form of reasoning, or inference method, by which I have claimed it is possible to acquire some support for belief in the hinge propositions that undergird the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value. Inference to the best explanation is ubiquitous in ordinary thought and scientific inquiry, but it does get a bad press in some philosophical circles. If someone is impressed by the best of a bad lot objection (van Fraassen, 1989, p. 143), believes that there are compelling Bayesian reasons to think that explanatory virtues are evidentially irrelevant (Roche and Sober, 2013), or is in any way suspicious of the epistemic standing of inference to the best explanation, the only thing I can do here to alleviate their worries is observe that thesis (iv) can be dropped from my favourite brand of moderatism without turning it into an uninteresting position, and leaving perhaps wider room for developing the contrastivist approach to scepticism that has been sketched in the last paragraph. But the worry might just be that, for all its ordinary and scientific merits, inference to the best explanation cannot be used to provide a non-circular answer to the challenge of external world scepticism because its reliability is contingent upon the specific features of the possible world we happen to live in — and whether the actual world is roughly the way we ordinarily assume it to be, and inference to the best explanation a (mostly) reliable form of reasoning, is precisely what is questioned by external world scepticism (Beebe, 2009). Here again, one might simply grant the point and insist that the version of moderatism proposed in this paper can survive the abandonment of thesis (iv) without losing its main attractions, or one might try to hold on to thesis (iv) by vindicating the application of inference to the best explanation to the issue of external world scepticism with the help of coherentist — or reflective equilibrium — ideas. However, my favourite strategy — one which I can only gesture at in the limits of this paper — would not be to argue that inferring to the best explanation is a reliable form of reasoning *in our world*. Rather, I would argue that inferring to the best explanation is constitutive of rational inquiry because the aim of our inquiries is not just to achieve a delicate balance of truth maximisation and error avoidance, but first and foremost to devise enlightening explanations of the way things appear to us — if you like, “to make sense of ourselves and the world around us” (Schechter and Enoch, 2006, p. 707). If devising enlightening explanations of the way things appear to us is not just an optional activity governed by pragmatic and/or aesthetic norms but a genuinely epistemic activity, it will be plausible to maintain that explanatory virtues can be genuine reasons to think that

a proposition or theory is, *ceteris paribus*, epistemically more satisfactory than its rivals. This is not exactly the same as saying that they can be genuine reasons to believe that a proposition or theory is more likely to be true than its rivals, but it is surely more satisfactory than saying that they can only warrant a pragmatic or aesthetic preference.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have joined the ranks of hinge epistemologists by outlining a moderate account of the structure of perceptual justification that incorporates some explanationist and contrastivist ideas. On my account, acquiring perceptual justification for believing ordinary propositions about middle-sized objects in our local environment depends on accepting, but not on being justified to believe, some suitably related hinge propositions. A key assumption of the account is that the basic presuppositions of the epistemic practice of taking experience at face value are contingent propositions about the make-up of our world and our epistemic place within it. I have argued along explanationist lines that such propositions are not totally refractory to evidential assessment and can indeed receive some degree of second-order empirical justification via inference to the best explanation (but I have also acknowledged that doubts about the appropriateness of employing this form of reasoning in addressing external world scepticism might lead to a less sanguine stance on this aspect of the question). Finally, I have defended my favoured brand of moderatism against some objections, and in so doing I have helped myself to the contrastivist idea that our empirical knowledge of the world typically involves a contrast term — an idea that is admittedly controversial when proposed in its most general form but that has much going for it when easy knowledge or sceptical issues are at stake. Although much more would have to be done to fend off all possible objections and establish *contrastive hinge epistemology* on firmer grounds, I hope that what I have done in this paper can persuade some readers to regard it as deserving closer consideration.

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