




# What philosophical disagreement and philosophical skepticism hinge on

Annalisa Coliva<sup>1</sup> · Louis Doulas<sup>1</sup> 

Received: 19 June 2021 / Accepted: 8 May 2022 / Published online: 2 June 2022  
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

## Abstract

Philosophers disagree. A lot. Pervasive disagreement is part of the territory; consensus is hard to find. Some think this should lead us to embrace philosophical skepticism: skepticism about the extent to which we can know, or justifiably believe, the philosophical views we defend and advance. Most philosophers in the literature fall into one camp or the other: philosophical skepticism or philosophical anti-skepticism. Drawing on the insights of hinge epistemology, this paper proposes another way forward, an intermediate position that appeals both to skeptical and anti-skeptical intuitions concerning the possibility and scope of philosophical knowledge. The main advantage of our account is that it's able to recover some philosophical knowledge while also being compatible with philosophical skepticism.

**Keywords** Philosophical disagreement · Philosophical skepticism · Philosophical methodology · Hinge epistemology

---

✉ Louis Doulas  
ldoulas@uci.edu  
Annalisa Coliva  
a.coliva@uci.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Philosophy, University of California, Irvine, 85 Humanities Instructional Building, Irvine, CA 92697-4555, USA

Philosophers disagree. A lot. Pervasive disagreement is part of the territory; consensus is hard to find. Some think that this should lead us to suspend our philosophical beliefs. That is, if pervasive, systematic peer disagreement rationally requires us to withhold our beliefs, and if philosophical disagreement is an instance of such disagreement, then philosophers aren't rational in believing the views they defend and advance.<sup>1</sup> Thus, pervasive, systematic peer disagreement in philosophy warrants *philosophical skepticism*: skepticism about the extent to which we can justifiably believe the philosophical views we advance.<sup>2</sup> If, moreover, as many tend to assume, justified belief<sup>3</sup> is necessary for knowledge, then, says the philosophical skeptic, it's unreasonable to think there is any genuine philosophical knowledge at all.

Now, the philosophical skeptic assumes, plausibly, that disagreement seems to presuppose belief as well as cognate notions like truth, justification, and rationality.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the philosophical skeptic exploits these features to show that philosophers aren't rationally justified in believing the views they advance. But if disagreement is conceived in terms of rational (i.e., justified) belief, then disagreement seems to disappear with philosophical skepticism. If, for example, philosophical skepticism prevents the realist from rationally believing that "there are physical objects" is true and prevents the idealist from rationally believing that it's false, then what *seemed* to be a real, rational disagreement between the realist and idealist is not really one. The same goes for all philosophical disagreements. So philosophical skepticism seems to make philosophical disagreement impossible. Yet, philosophical disagreement is what motivated philosophical skepticism in the first place! So the argument in favor of philosophical skepticism based on philosophical disagreement seems to be self-defeating. Call this the *self-defeat problem*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The first and second premise are obviously controversial. Here, we simply take their plausibility for granted. For discussion of the conciliationist principle underlying the first premise, see Christensen and Lackey (2013). For discussion of the applicability principle underlying the second premise, see Christensen (2014) and Kornblith (2010).

<sup>2</sup> For discussion and defense of disagreement-based philosophical skepticism, see Beebe (2018, Sect. 3), Brennan (2010), Christensen (2014), Fumerton (2010), Goldberg (2009, 2013), Kornblith (2010, 2013), and Licon (2012). Barnett (2019) also seems sympathetic to philosophical skepticism but doesn't focus on defending it. The road to philosophical skepticism isn't paved exclusively by peer disagreement. Chalmers (2015), Beebe (2018, Sect. 2), and Lycan (2019), for example, defend a kind of philosophical skepticism motivated by methodological concerns. See Stoljar (2017) for an optimistic rebuttal to both disagreement- and methodological-based philosophical skepticism. We discuss such a kind of philosophical skepticism in Coliva and Doulas (2022).

<sup>3</sup> We remain neutral here on how to think of justification given that it's largely irrelevant with respect to the arguments put forward in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> By *belief* we mean an attitude of acceptance of holding true a proposition and having epistemic reasons in favor of it. See Sect. 2 for a contrast between belief and acceptance.

<sup>5</sup> A weaker version of the self-defeat problem would go as follows. Let it be that at first philosophers disagree—that is, hold incompatible *beliefs*. When disagreement comes to light and impresses one as intractable, they retreat to a different attitude with respect to their philosophical views. Yet, if disagreement necessarily involves belief, then, at that stage, they seem no longer able to disagree with one another, even if they hold incompatible philosophical positions. This weaker reading of the disagreement argument for philosophical skepticism would make disagreement disappear, contrary to what would intuitively seem to be the case. As we will see in Sect. 2, this is a version of the "lost disagreement" problem. Thus, to counter either the self-defeat problem or the lost disagreement one, we need an account of disagreement that does not necessarily require parties to the dispute to hold incompatible *beliefs*.

In light of this, one might be compelled to give up on philosophical skepticism altogether. If philosophical skepticism is self-defeating then so much the worse for it. While this line of thought is tempting, we think it's too quick. For there is something instructive in philosophical skepticism and in the argument from disagreement appropriately reconceived. Namely, there are cases of deep philosophical disagreement, that is, cases of philosophical disagreement that aren't solvable for principled reasons. And when that's the case, it's clear that neither party is entitled to claim that they know or epistemically rationally believe their respective views. In this sense, philosophical skepticism is correct and can be motivated by considerations having to do with the nature of (at least some) philosophical disagreements. Thus, we argue, it's important to be able to make sense of the idea that there can be this sort of philosophical disagreement which doesn't depend on rational belief in a target philosophical view. As we argue in this paper, one way for the philosophical skeptic to escape the self-defeat problem is to re-conceive philosophical disagreement in terms other than rational belief. But we also think philosophical anti-skepticism is correct to some degree too: we *can* know (or at least justifiably believe) many of the philosophical views we advance even in the face of widespread disagreement. That is, we find *wholesale* philosophical skepticism untenable.

While both claims above require further qualification, the view we propose in this paper is an intermediate position, one that appeals both to skeptical and anti-skeptical intuitions concerning the possibility and scope of philosophical knowledge. Since our account is thoroughly hinge epistemologist, the thrust of it drawing on insights from the literature on hinge disagreement, we begin there.

## 1 Hinge epistemology and philosophical skepticism

Here's a proposition that philosophers seem to disagree about:

(P) There are physical objects.

More explicitly, (P) seems *believed* to be *true* by philosophers of the realist persuasion and *believed* to be *false* by philosophers of the idealist persuasion. Yet, *prima facie*, hinge epistemology precludes the possibility of such a disagreement. Why?

Central to the hinge epistemology program<sup>6</sup> is the idea that justification and knowledge take place amongst a backdrop of epistemically groundless assumptions: *hinges*. According to the hinge epistemologist, in order for empirical claims like "Here is a hand" or "There is a table in this room" to be justified, one must take certain assumptions for granted (assumptions like "There are physical objects" and "My sense organs

<sup>6</sup> Broadly construed. Those who have embraced hinge epistemology explicitly under that label, or under a slightly different one, include: Strawson (1985), Wright (1985, 2004, 2014), Moyal-Sharrock (2005), Kusch (2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2017), Schönbaumsfeld (2016), Pritchard (2015, 2019), and Coliva (2010, 2015). Though Michael Williams rejects the label, we tentatively include Williams (1991) here as well. Note too that while we sometimes use the terms "hinge epistemology" and "hinge epistemologist" in a generic sense, the hinge approach we assume here is that of Coliva (2015).

work mostly reliably”)<sup>7</sup> alongside having the relevant course of experience, absent defeaters. However, since such assumptions are epistemically groundless, they are neither believed nor disbelieved, justified nor unjustified, known nor unknown. Neither are they thought to be true or false.<sup>8</sup>

Now, if belief is central to rational disagreement and hinges like (P) aren't the sort of things that can be believed or disbelieved, then rational disagreement over hinges and its possible resolution looks impossible. To be clear, the issue here isn't that the hinge epistemologist is unable to make sense of disagreement, generally-speaking. They can. The issue is that the hinge epistemologist can't seem to make sense of *certain types* of disagreement: disagreements where hinges are the alleged objects of disagreement, i.e., hinge disagreements. This is *prima facie* puzzling since disagreement and its rational resolution over things like (P) certainly seem possible. Accordingly, call this *the puzzle of hinge disagreement*.

Notice that, like the philosophical skeptic, the hinge epistemologist is committed to the idea that many of our deep philosophical views (that there are physical objects, that our sense organs work mostly reliably, etc.) are neither known nor justified. Of course, for the hinge epistemologist, this is because such views are taken to have the status of hinges (which are by their nature neither known nor justified), whereas for the philosophical skeptic it's because rationality demands withholding belief in them (given pervasive, systematic disagreement *about* them).<sup>9</sup> Despite these differences, however, the consequences each view has for disagreement are the same: certain rational disagreements are seemingly impossible.<sup>10</sup> To avoid this unpalatable consequence, both the hinge epistemologist and philosophical skeptic must therefore find a different way to characterize disagreement.

We propose to model philosophical disagreement over propositions such as (P) along the lines of hinge disagreement. Doing so, we claim, not only sheds light on the nature of philosophy and its methods but also on how the debate between philosophical skeptics and philosophical anti-skeptics should be understood. The rough idea is this: just as hinges make it possible to produce reasons for or against ordinary empirical beliefs like “Here is a hand,” we argue that *philosophical hinges* make it possible to acquire reasons for or against specific philosophical beliefs. (We say more about philosophical hinges in the next section.) Thus, our account is friendly to both philosophical skepticism and philosophical anti-skepticism. For while philosophical hinges are neither known nor justified (philosophical skepticism), they are what make our less basic philosophical beliefs and knowledge possible (philosophical anti-skepticism).

The plan for the rest of the paper is as follows. First, we show one way that the puzzle of hinge disagreement might be approached (Sect. 2). Then, we go on to consider some other, non-belief accounts of philosophical disagreement and argue that our

<sup>7</sup> Although note that not all hinge epistemologists take these to be paradigmatic hinges or even hinges at all. Nor would all hinge epistemologists characterize hinge propositions as “assumptions” (if hinges are even propositions in the first place). See, for example, Pritchard (2015, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Wittgenstein (1969, OC §§196–206, 110, 130, 166, 121, 559).

<sup>9</sup> Although see footnote 1.

<sup>10</sup> Again though, for the hinge epistemologist, disagreement seems impossible only for a narrow class of disagreements (i.e., hinge disagreements). Likewise for the philosophical skeptic, i.e., those disagreements that are *philosophical* in kind.

approach makes for a particularly attractive alternative: our account is able to recover some philosophical knowledge while also claiming compatibility with philosophical skepticism and side-step the self-defeat problem (Sect. 3). After spelling this proposal out in more detail, we then explore its implications for philosophical methodology as a whole (Sects. 4 and 5).

## 2 The puzzles of hinge disagreement

The puzzle of hinge disagreement is, in fact, two-pronged. For there are two distinct but related problems at play.

First, there is what we might call *the lost hinge disagreement problem*: disagreement seems to presuppose belief and truth and, yet, hinges aren't in the market for either. So, contrary to appearances, disagreement over hinges like (P) isn't possible. And second, there is what we might call *the problem of rational inertia*: the rational resolution of a disagreement presupposes certain shared epistemic standards, standards that aren't and can't be captured by hinge disputes. For example, we might think that the philosophical disagreement between the realist and idealist above could be rationally resolved when the realist presents the idealist with a convincing counter-argument whereby they might give up their belief in idealism and come to believe realism. When it comes to certain hinges, however, this can't happen. Hinges like (P) aren't responsive to reasons or evidence.<sup>11</sup> One can't rationally persuade another to believe (P) over  $\sim$ (P) because hinges like (P) are neither believed nor disbelieved. Thus, hinge disputes seem rationally inert.

Consider first the lost hinge disagreement problem which, again, goes something like this: disagreement presupposes belief and truth, but hinges aren't in the market for either of these things. Thus, contrary to appearances, disagreement over hinges like (P) isn't possible. Hence, disagreement is in some sense "lost."

We maintain that hinges are truth-apt.<sup>12</sup> But this requires some qualification. For hinges can't be true or false in any robust, correspondence-theoretical or evidentialist way. They cannot be true in an epistemically constrained way because they need to be presupposed in order for sensory evidence to accrue to justification for ordinary empirical propositions. Hence, we cannot non-circularly prove the truth of "There are physical objects" by, say, appealing to the evidence we have in favor of "Here is a hand" and noticing that it entails the existence of physical objects. For reasons that we can't expand on here (see Coliva (2015, 2018) for defense and explanation), the move that we favor is to go *truth minimalist*.<sup>13</sup> The truth-aptness of hinges, we claim, can be captured by the minimalist's schema:

<sup>11</sup> Although see Piedrahita (2021) and Neta (2019) for an alternative account in which hinges (some of them anyway) play an evidentialist role.

<sup>12</sup> This view certainly isn't shared by all hinge epistemologists. And while a natural reading of Wittgenstein's OC seems to support the idea that hinges aren't truth-apt (given that Wittgenstein maintained that hinges play a rule-like role and thereby lack descriptive content), in fact, certain passages can be used to support a reading in which he does think hinges are truth-apt in a certain minimal sense. See Williams (2004) and Coliva (2010, 2015, 2020) for such a reading.

<sup>13</sup> See Horwich (1998). See also Lynch (2009) and Wright (1992, 2013).

“There are physical objects” is true iff there are physical objects.

Cashing truth out this way means that hinges have semantic content and can be meaningfully negated and embedded in conditional statements but that they don't carry with them the metaphysical baggage of correspondence theories.

So hinges can be true or false in a strictly minimalist sense and therefore qualify as propositions. Consequently, hinges can be the objects of propositional attitudes. Propositional attitudes like belief? No. For belief aims at correct and justifiable representations of the world and hinges aren't the kinds of things that represent or that can be epistemically justified. Rather, they provide the conditions of possibility *for* those specific empirical beliefs and their justifications. That is, it is only once it is assumed that there is a world “out there” comprised of mind-independent physical objects that we can go on to represent *specific* states of affairs—states of affairs involving specific instances of physical objects—and take these representations to be answerable to a mind-independent reality and liable to justification.<sup>14</sup> Still, though none of the usual norms that govern belief satisfy hinges, there is still some *belief-like* attitude one can and does take toward them. Call such an attitude *acceptance*. Acceptance is an attitude of holding a given proposition true (in a minimalist sense) even if no epistemic (non-question-begging) justification for it can be gotten.<sup>15</sup> The hinge epistemologist can, then, characterize hinge disagreement as follows:

HINGE DISAGREEMENT: Two parties *hinge-disagree* with one another if and only if they accept incompatible philosophical assumptions (or hinges).

So much, then, for the lost hinge disagreement problem. What about the problem of rational inertia? If hinge disagreements (i.e., disagreement over hinges like (P)) can't be resolved through the use of argument or evidence (empirical or otherwise), is there any way they can be rationally resolved? While one of us in previous work has argued for a positive answer to this question,<sup>16</sup> here we would like to tentatively explore a negative answer with the following caveat: that a hinge disagreement isn't rationally resolvable by means of a priori or empirical evidence doesn't mean that such a disagreement is totally *arbitrary*; neither does it necessarily mean that the hinges one assumes aren't rational or that non-hinge philosophical disagreements aren't rationally resolvable. Here's why.

Recall that one important aspect of hinge disagreement is that it cannot be resolved in the sense of providing non-question begging a priori or empirical reasons in favor

<sup>14</sup> Hinge epistemology therefore differs from Quinean holism at least in the following important respects. First, there is a discontinuity between hinges and ordinary empirical propositions regarding their level of generality and normative import. Second, while there may be more than one hinge at play in the structure of empirical justifications (e.g., “There is an external world,” “Our sense organs are mostly reliable,” “We are not victims of massive and lucid dreams”), that does not mean that the justification of a specific empirical claim will depend on one's overall belief framework.

<sup>15</sup> Arguably, in this sense we accept many things: that God exists (or doesn't); that there is a self (or there isn't); that there will be life after death (or there won't be); and, for some philosophers of science like van Fraassen, our fundamental scientific theories. If the latter claim were correct, it would speak in favor of at least the structural similarity between science and philosophy. We hope to be able to take up the latter issue in another paper.

<sup>16</sup> See Coliva and Palmira (2020, 2021).

of one hinge over the other.<sup>17</sup> To the extent that there are *philosophical* hinges, then, we should expect a similar outcome. A philosophical hinge will be a general and broad philosophical claim for which the a priori or empirical evidence that one may bring to support it will be considered question-begging by those who deny it.<sup>18</sup> The disagreement between the realist and the idealist over (P) is instructive. While the realist will hold that there are physical objects and will offer perceptual evidence as corroborating that view, an idealist will not be moved and will take that very evidence to show that “physical objects” are constructions out of sensory evidence and therefore mind-dependent.<sup>19</sup>

Faced with this kind of entanglement, one may say that the choice between the two views has no rational ground and is therefore entirely arbitrary. Yet, we think a choice can still be motivated based on a variety of virtues a given philosophical hinge can have. Consider (P) “There are physical objects.” One may hold it because such a philosophical hinge must be assumed for certain non-basic (perceptual) beliefs, like “Here is a hand,” to be rationally justified. Given its nature as a philosophical hinge, however, (P) is not evidentially justified, yet it is still nevertheless rational to assume it on an “extended” conception of rationality (*à la* Coliva (2015)) which includes not just evidentially justified propositions but those evidentially *unjustifiable* assumptions which make empirical justification possible in the first place, e.g., (P) amongst others. Such hinge assumptions—construed as constitutive assumptions of extended rationality—would in turn account for the *coherence* between our epistemic practice of deeming rational justified empirical beliefs and those hinges that make it possible for us to acquire justifications for those beliefs. For those hinges too would count as rational, by the lights of the extended notion of rationality.

Other virtues may be the fact that a given philosophical hinge coheres better with a standing worldview. For instance, holding that there are mind-independent physical objects seems to better cohere with our standing naturalistic worldview, which is predicated on the possibility of investigating nature empirically, where nature, in turn, is a figment neither of the human mind nor of a divine mind. A different worldview—a non-naturalistic worldview for example—would therefore yield different hinges.<sup>20</sup>

Crucially, while these virtues may provide motivations for embracing a given philosophical hinge, they should not be understood as *epistemic* virtues. That is, virtues

<sup>17</sup> Here it is crucial to keep in mind that for Coliva, contrary to Wittgenstein, only very general propositions like “There are physical objects” or “There is an external world” are hinges. As argued in Coliva (2010, 2020), propositions such as “Nobody has ever been on the Moon,” which are considered hinges by Wittgenstein in OC, are actually not so. Coliva and Palmira (2021, pp. 407–409) propose a test for “hinginess” based on whether a disagreement over a target proposition can be resolved on the basis of empirical or a priori evidence. If it can’t be resolved on either basis, then the proposition in question is a hinge (as opposed to a deeply entrenched belief).

<sup>18</sup> Not just this. Importantly, philosophical hinges serve as conditions of possibility of our epistemic practices themselves. That is, they make possible our less basic philosophical beliefs (or what we will later on call “intra-theoretical” philosophical beliefs) such as, for example, that epistemic externalism or internalism is true, or that direct realism or indirect realism is true, and so on. See also footnote 17. Thanks to an anonymous referee for inviting us to further clarify this.

<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in footnote 15, similar stalemates could be reached over philosophical claims such as the existence of God or the self.

<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the non-existence of God, or of a self, understood as a mental substance capable of existence independently of the existence of the body, accord better with a naturalistic worldview.

that ultimately track truth (in the robustly realist sense) and that can provide epistemic justification for one philosophical hinge over another. So while it may be a virtue to assume that there are mind-independent physical objects (because such a hinge best coheres with our naturalistic outlook) such a hinge doesn't *add* to the plausibility of naturalism. It's in this way that our hinge account aligns with philosophical skepticism in that we cannot know (or justifiably believe) philosophical hinges.

Thus, while the virtues that are brought to bear onto this issue are not strictly speaking epistemic or truth-tracking, they make the choice between two philosophical positions non-arbitrary. It's in this limited sense, therefore, that we think the problem of rational inertia should be addressed.

### 3 Disagreement without belief

Interestingly, many philosophers in the literature on philosophical disagreement have come to very similar conclusions. Not about hinges, but about the idea that philosophical disagreement can be characterized in terms other than belief. Consider, for example, Goldberg (2013) who identifies as a philosophical skeptic. He thinks that the attitude of belief is rationally unreasonable in the face of systematic peer disagreement. Still, we can make sense of the doxastic attitudes of philosophers in different terms. For Goldberg, we don't believe the philosophical views we advance but *regard them as defensible*. To regard-as-defensible is captured by the attitude of speculation. In *speculating that p* one regards *p* as more likely than, say,  $\sim p$ , but one regards one's total evidence as stopping short of warranting outright belief in *p*. The balance of reasons might tip in favor of *p* but this balance isn't strong enough to warrant outright belief, let alone knowledge that *p*. So we can disagree about which philosophical views we ought to *regard as defensible*.

Or consider Barnett (2019) who suggests that we can ignore the higher-order evidence we get from peer disagreement (and agreement) when favoring and advancing our philosophical views. This is captured by an attitude he calls *disagreement-insulated inclination*. This isn't to say that we should ignore such higher-order evidence when it comes to our *all-things-considered* beliefs. Says Barnett, we *should* attend to such evidence—rationality demands it—and when we do, we'll likely be led to philosophical skepticism. Rather, it's that all-things-considered belief isn't required for *doing* philosophy: we can sincerely and genuinely advance and defend our philosophical views without believing them full-stop. So we can disagree about which philosophical views deserve our *disagreement-insulated inclinations*.

Beebe (2018), like Goldberg and Barnett, is also led to defend some form of philosophical skepticism: the attitude of belief is rationally unreasonable in the face of systematic peer disagreement. In response, she proposes to do away with "belief-substitutes" like Goldberg's attitudinal speculation or Barnett's disagreement-insulated inclination and opts for the attitude of acceptance. Acceptance, according to Beebe, is the appropriate doxastic attitude one should take toward our philosophical views. For Beebe, following van Fraassen (1980), acceptance involves a kind of practical commitment to a certain sort of philosophical research program. (It's in this way that Beebe's proposal most resembles the hinge epistemologist's.)

But if philosophy doesn't aim at knowledge, let alone justified true belief, what *does* it aim at? Beebe recommends *equilibrism*,<sup>21</sup> a view inspired by a few of David Lewis's remarks on philosophical method:

Our 'intuitions' are simply opinions; our philosophical theories are the same. Some are commonsensical, some are sophisticated; some are particular, some general; some are more firmly held, some less. *But they are all opinions, and a reasonable goal for a philosopher is to bring them into equilibrium. Our common task is to find out what equilibria there are that can withstand examination, but it remains for each of us to come to rest at one or another of them.* (Lewis, 1983, p. x, emphasis added)

As Beebe herself says:

...[I]n the case of philosophy the aim of the discovery of equilibria demands that we take on board a set of core assumptions and methodological prescriptions in order to develop and scrutinize an equilibrium position of our own that can withstand examination. (Beebe, 2018, p. 22)

According to Beebe, then, our collective aim as philosophers is to be in accord with this "equilibria" where the doxastic attitude we take toward our philosophical endeavors—i.e., the attitude we take towards our philosophical views—is that of acceptance. So we can disagree about which philosophical views we *accept* in the course of bringing our views into equilibrium.

Each of the views here suggest that disagreement can and should be understood in terms other than belief. If that's the case—if, that is, attitudinal speculation, inclination, or acceptance is how disagreement should be understood—then they successfully show how disagreement is possible without full-fledged belief. Philosophical skepticism, then, like hinge epistemology, doesn't entail the impossibility of philosophical disagreement and therefore avoids the self-defeat problem (or its weaker version mentioned in footnote 5).

The upshot is that disagreement seems to come in at least two different forms: *belief-based* disagreement and *non-belief-based* disagreement. The self-defeat problem trades on an ambiguity between these two kinds of disagreement. Recall our initial argument for philosophical skepticism: systematic peer disagreement rationally requires us to withhold our beliefs; philosophical disagreement is an instance of such disagreement; therefore, philosophers aren't rational in believing the views they defend and advance. Such skepticism, we said, entails that philosophers cannot rationally believe the views they advance: the realist isn't rationally justified in believing that there are physical objects and the idealist isn't rationally justified in believing that there aren't, and so on. If there is, or was, a disagreement here, however, it was a *belief-based* disagreement. Philosophical skepticism at least assumes as much. But, as the approaches above make clear, philosophical disagreement may be had without disputants *believing* the propositions they advance. In other words, while philosophical skepticism forecloses on the possibility of *belief-based* disagreement, it doesn't foreclose on the possibility of *non-belief-based* disagreement. Thus, disagreement in

<sup>21</sup> Not to be confused with the reflective equilibristic views of Goodman (1955) and Rawls (1971).

philosophy is possible and compatible with the skeptical view that we don't rationally believe or know many of the philosophical views we defend and advance.

This idea is at the heart of hinge epistemology. For the hinge epistemologist claims that we don't rationally believe many of the philosophical claims we advance precisely because such claims (or a certain class of them anyway) amount to philosophical hinges which aren't in the market for knowledge or rational belief in the first place (only acceptance). The hinge epistemologist thus also sidesteps the self-defeat problem since she can offer an account of philosophical disagreement which is still compatible with philosophical skepticism. Thus, the hinge epistemologist can characterize philosophical disagreement along roughly the following lines:

PHILOSOPHICAL DISAGREEMENT (FIRST PASS): Two parties *philosophically disagree* with one another if and only if they accept incompatible philosophical assumptions (or hinges).<sup>22</sup>

Consider again the debate between the realist and the idealist. The realist and idealist disagree because, in hinge-theoretic terms, the realist assumes (P) as a philosophical hinge while the idealist assumes a different, incompatible hinge. And as we argued above, philosophical disagreements like this one—seen as a species of hinge disagreement—can be made sense of. Likewise, philosophical skepticism can be made sense of: propositions like (P) are philosophical hinges, which are not in the market for knowledge or justified belief.

However, contrary to the views examined in this section, the hinge account has a clear advantage over them. For, as we'll argue in the remainder of the paper, it can make sense of genuine *philosophical knowledge* too. Hence, the hinge account here has the resources to avoid the wholesale kind of skepticism the views above end up embracing. This is a significant result. For there's a sense in which philosophical skepticism lends itself to a certain form of philosophical defeatism; one that is hard to reconcile with the highly intuitive view that many philosophical debates, while certainly difficult to adjudicate, are rationally conducted, i.e. are responsive to reasons and, at least in some cases, may find real, rational resolution. This is, we take it, the main advantage of modeling philosophical disagreement along the lines of hinge disagreement.

#### 4 A contextualist solution to philosophical skepticism

Just as hinges make it possible to produce reasons for or against ordinary empirical beliefs, *philosophical* hinges make it possible to acquire reasons for or against specific philosophical claims. Call these *intra-theoretical* philosophical beliefs (or in a more Carnapian spirit, "internal" philosophical beliefs).<sup>23</sup> These are the philosophical beliefs that are made possible thanks to one's given philosophical hinges. One's philosophical hinges, that is, make it possible for these intra-theoretical philosophical

<sup>22</sup> This is only a first pass. A modified definition will be introduced in Sect. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Notoriously, Carnap (1950) distinguished between "internal" and "external" questions. While he gave a metalinguistic reading of the latter, he proposed a factual reading of the former. Our hinge account of philosophical disagreement and its consequences is advanced in a similar spirit, save for the metalinguistic reading of external questions, or, in our terminology, of philosophical hinge disagreement.

beliefs to be justified or to constitute knowledge. It's in virtue of these features that one can see how disagreements involving intra-theoretical philosophical beliefs are rationally resolvable. For they're rationally resolvable in just the same way we think (in our more philosophically anti-skeptical moods) that run of the mill philosophical disagreements are resolvable!

While plenty of disagreement in philosophy occurs between philosophers who maintain radically incompatible assumptions (such as the disagreement between the realist and idealist above) many philosophical disagreements arise between those who share largely the same philosophical assumptions. Those disagreements are, plausibly, capable of rational resolution. For instance, once it's granted that there are mind-independent physical objects, it then becomes possible to ask questions about how what perceiving them consists in, and different proposals can be put forward to account for that. Those proposals, in turn, may be subject to various forms of control: are they all coherent? Are they capable of solving a number of problems recognized as central to the domain under investigation? (Like, for instance, whether they can account for the fact that non-conceptual creatures, such as infants and animals, can perceive objects in their environment or whether perceptions can serve as reasons for the corresponding empirical beliefs, etc.) And, assuming at least some proposals pass muster, are they compatible with our best scientific theories about perception? If it turns out that all of them are compatible with our best scientific theories, then perhaps they are in fact empirically equivalent and we cannot conclusively embrace one over the other, at least for the time being. But there's good reason to think that not *all* philosophical disputes are like this. In such cases, then, we might think that only the proposals that pass this final test will be retained.

Of course, our intra-theoretical philosophical beliefs and their corresponding disagreements needn't specifically be about perception. Indeed, they include most of the beliefs that philosophers historically have debated and continue to debate. Consider, for example, two philosophers who both accept the same hinges, including the hinge that there are mind-independent physical objects. While such philosophers can certainly disagree about what perceptual account of those objects is better justified, they might also disagree about how those objects *persist* across time: do they endure, perdure, or exdure? Or consider two philosophers who accept that mind-independent physical objects *endure*. They might disagree about how those enduring objects are composed and whether they are derivative or fundamental or whether they are emergent.

Here we won't argue for any particular view about perception or persistence across time, although at least one of us has done so in other writings (roughly favoring a representationalist, nonconceptualist account of perception). Rather, the point that we want to stress here is just that these intra-theoretical, as opposed to "framework" or "hinge" philosophical debates involve epistemically grounded beliefs and are rationally resolvable, at least in principle.

If what we have said so far is on the right track, then, philosophical anti-skeptics are right too, to some extent. That is, witnessing even widespread and relatively persistent disagreement in philosophy should not necessarily lead us to philosophical skepticism. Moreover, our account's compatibility with philosophical anti-skepticism isn't in tension with its compatibility with philosophical skepticism. The key idea here is

to recognize that there are different kinds of philosophical disagreements. This is the contextualist aspect of our proposal:

**HINGE PHILOSOPHICAL DISAGREEMENT:** Two parties to a philosophical disagreement *hinge-disagree* with one another if and only if they accept incompatible philosophical hinges.

**INTRA-THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHICAL DISAGREEMENT:** Two parties to a philosophical disagreement *intra-theoretically disagree* with one another if and only if they believe incompatible intra-theoretical propositions (but largely share the same philosophical hinges).

The first kind of disagreement is the kind we witnessed between the realist and idealist over (P). While we argued that resolution of *that* kind of disagreement—i.e., a *hinge* disagreement—was possible to some extent, (an epistemically) *rational* resolution wasn't. Hence, it's in this respect that our account is friendly to philosophical skepticism. The second kind of disagreement, however, is friendly to philosophical *anti*-skepticism and in a fairly straightforward way: the philosophical anti-skeptic maintains that genuine philosophical knowledge (or justified belief) is possible. The hinge epistemologist can maintain the very same thesis insofar as the belief (or knowledge) involved is *intra-theoretical*.

Therefore, philosophical anti-skeptics can be taken to be right with respect to intra-theoretical philosophical disagreements, which, as we have seen, involve rational belief and are compatible with the possibility of knowing, or at least justifiably believing a given (set of) philosophical proposition(s). While philosophical skeptics, in contrast, can be taken to be right about hinge philosophical disagreements, which, as we have seen, are possible, because they are best viewed as concerning the acceptance of, rather than the rational belief in, incompatible philosophical hinges (or assumptions), and yet are not epistemically resolvable.

Thus, philosophical disagreement, can be understood in a hinge-epistemological vein as follows:

**PHILOSOPHICAL DISAGREEMENT:** Two parties philosophically disagree with one another if and only if they accept incompatible philosophical assumptions (or hinges) or else they believe incompatible intra-theoretical philosophical propositions.

## 5 Conclusion

For many debates in philosophy, it's easy to see the strengths and weaknesses of both sides. The debate between the philosophical skeptic and philosophical anti-skeptic is no exception. It's true: consensus in philosophy really *is* hard to find. Indeed, the pervasiveness of such disagreement can be overwhelming. Realizing that in philosophy almost everything is, or can be, disputed can leave one feeling pessimistic. In the face of so much disagreement, how *could* we be rationally justified in believing the views we advance? After all, our interlocutors are often times much more capable than we

are. Can we really be so sure that our method for getting at the truth is better than theirs?—Or *theirs* better than the rest of philosophy?

And yet isn't it possible that philosophers are on to something? Why assume that we all have, more or less, *equally competent* access to the same evidence? Don't some philosophers just have things backwards? Indeed, it doesn't seem out of the question to think that philosophy is capable of leading us to knowledge even when there is little hope of reaching consensus.<sup>24</sup>

Most philosophers in the literature surrounding philosophical disagreement fall into one camp or the other: philosophical skepticism or philosophical anti-skepticism. The hinge-theoretic account we have proposed in this paper offers another way forward, one that can accommodate the intuitions of both positions and one that is able to show how, contrary to appearances, we can sometimes have things both ways. But, then again, that's debatable.

**Acknowledgements** Thanks to Adam Carter, Chris Kelp, Oscar Piedrahita, Mona Simion and audiences at the COGITO Epistemology Workshop (Glasgow, March 17th, 2021), and three anonymous referees at *Synthese* for helpful comments and discussion. While this paper has been conceived and written together, Coliva is the main responsible for Sects. 2, 4 and Doulas for Sects. 1, 3. The Introduction and the Conclusion (Sect. 5) were jointly coauthored.

## References

- Barnett, Z. (2019). Philosophy without belief. *Mind*, 128, 109–138.
- Beebe, H. (2018). Philosophical scepticism and the aims of philosophy. *The Aristotelian Society*, CXVIII, 1–24.
- Brennan, J. (2010). Scepticism about philosophy. *Ratio*, 23, 1–16.
- Carnap, R. (1950). Empiricism, semantics and ontology. *Revue Internationale De Philosophie*, 4, 20–40. Reprinted in the Supplement to Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic, enlarged edition (University of Chicago Press, 1956).
- Chalmers, D. (2015). Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy? *Philosophy*, 90, 3–31.
- Christensen, D. (2014). Disagreement and Public Controversy. In J. Lackey (Ed.), *Essays in collective epistemology* (pp. 143–163). Oxford University Press.
- Christensen, D., & Lackey, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Disagreement: New essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Coliva, A. (2010). *Moore and Wittgenstein. Scepticism, certainty and common sense*. Palgrave.
- Coliva, A. (2015). *Extended rationality. A hinge epistemology*. Palgrave.
- Coliva, A. (2018). What anti-realism about hinges could possibly be. In R. McKenna & C. Kyriacou (Eds.), *Epistemic realism and anti-realism: Approaches to metaepistemology* (pp. 267–288). Palgrave.
- Coliva, A. (2020). In quest of a Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology. In N. Da Costa & S. Wuppuluri (Eds.), *Looking at things from the point of view of Wittgenstein's philosophy* (pp. 107–121). Springer.
- Coliva, A., & Doulas, L. (2022). Philosophical progress, skepticism, and disagreement. In J. A. Carter, M. Baghramian, & R. Rowland (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of philosophy of disagreement*. London: Routledge.
- Coliva, A., & Palmira, M. (2020). Hinge disagreement. In M. Kusch (Ed.), *Social epistemology and epistemic relativism* (pp. 11–29). Routledge.
- Coliva, A., & Palmira, M. (2021). Disagreement unhinged, constitutivism style. *Metaphilosophy*, 52, 402–415.
- Fumerton, R. (2010). You Can't Trust a Philosopher. In Feldman & Warfield (Eds.), *Disagreement* (pp. 91–111). Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, S. (2009). Reliabilism in philosophy. *Philosophical Studies*, 124, 105–117.

<sup>24</sup> For a survey of some of these issues here concerning philosophical progress and disagreement see Coliva and Doulas (2022).

- Goldberg, S. (2013). Defending philosophy in the face of systematic disagreement. In D. E. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and skepticism* (pp. 277–294). Routledge.
- Goodman, N. (1955). *Fact, fiction, and forecast*. Harvard University Press.
- Horwich, P. (1998). *Truth*. Clarendon Press.
- Kornblith, H. (2010). Belief in the face of controversy. In Feldman & Warfield (Eds.), *Disagreement* (pp. 29–52). Oxford University Press.
- Kornblith, H. (2013). Is philosophical knowledge possible? In E. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and skepticism* (pp. 260–276). Routledge.
- Kusch, M. (2013). Annalisa Coliva on Wittgenstein and epistemic relativism. *Philosophia*, 41, 37–49.
- Kusch, M. (2016a). Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and relativism. In S. Rinofner-Kreidl & H. A. Wilschke (Eds.), *Analytic and continental philosophy: Methods and perspectives*. De Gruyter.
- Kusch, M. (2016b). Wittgenstein on mathematics and certainty. In A. Coliva & D. Moyal-Sharrock (Eds.), *Hinge epistemology* (pp. 48–71). Brill.
- Kusch, M. (2017). When Paul met Ludwig: Wittgensteinian comments on Boghossian's anti relativism. In K. Neges, J. Mitterer, S. Kletzl, & C. Kanzian (Eds.), *Realism, relativism, constructivism: Proceedings of the 28th international wittgenstein symposium in Kirchberg* (pp. 203–214). De Gruyter.
- Lewis, D. (1983). *Philosophical papers* (Vol. I). Oxford University Press.
- Licon, J. A. (2012). Sceptical thoughts on philosophical expertise. *Logos and Episteme*, 3, 449–458.
- Lycan, W. G. (2019). *On evidence in philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Lynch, M. (2009). *Truth as One and Many*. Oxford University Press.
- Moyal-Sharrock, D. (2005). *Understanding Wittgenstein's on certainty*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Neta, R. (2019). An evidentialist account of hinges. *Synthese*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-02061-0>
- Piedrahita, O. A. (2021). Can hinge epistemology close the door on epistemic relativism? *Synthese*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02995-4>
- Pritchard, D. (2015). *Epistemic Angst: Radical skepticism and the groundlessness of our believing*. Princeton University Press.
- Pritchard, D. (2019). Scepticism and epistemic angst, redux. *Synthese*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02504-2>
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Harvard University Press.
- Schönbaumsfeld, G. (2016). *The illusion of doubt*. Oxford University Press.
- Stoljar, D. (2017). *Philosophical progress. In defence of a reasonable optimism*. Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P. (1985). *Scepticism and naturalism. Some varieties*. Columbia University Press.
- van Fraassen, B. (1980). *The scientific image*. Oxford University Press.
- Williams, M. (1991). *Unnatural doubts*. Blackwell.
- Williams, M. (2004). Wittgenstein, truth and certainty. In M. Kölbel & B. Weiss (Eds.), *Wittgenstein's lasting significance* (pp. 249–284). Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On certainty*. Blackwell.
- Wright, C. (1985). Facts and certainty. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 71, 429–472.
- Wright, C. (1992). *Truth and objectivity*. Harvard University Press.
- Wright, C. (2004). Warrant for nothing (and foundations for free)? *The Supplementary Volume of the Aristotelian Society*, 78, 167–212.
- Wright, C. (2013). A plurality of pluralisms. In N. J. L. Pedersen & C. Wright (Eds.), *Truth and pluralism: Current debates* (pp. 123–153). Oxford University Press.
- Wright, C. (2014). On epistemic entitlement (II): Welfare state epistemology. In D. Dodd & E. Zardini (Eds.), *Scepticism and perceptual justification* (pp. 213–247). Oxford University Press.