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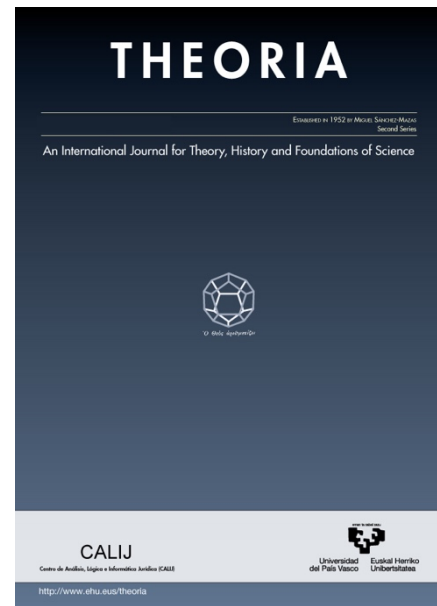
## Against Pritchard's refutation of epistemic relativism

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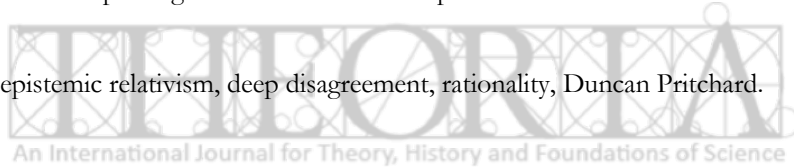
# Against Pritchard's refutation of epistemic relativism

(*Contra la refutación de Pritchard del relativismo epistémico*)

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper reconstructs Duncan Pritchard's (2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1120-1122; 2025, pp. 56-58) refutation of epistemic relativism and presents an objection to it. This refutation presupposes that epistemic relativism would be true in case there were rationally irresolvable deep disagreements. Pritchard's refutation, thus, amounts to an argument purporting to show that all deep disagreements are rationally resolvable. Our objection, in turn, aims to show that the examples of rationally resolvable deep disagreement Pritchard presents have particular features that, while making them rationally resolvable, not all deep disagreement has. In order for these examples to be representative of all deep disagreements we need to accept a particularly strong notion of rationality. Pritchard's (2011) notion of a *truth-seeker* presupposes a strong notion of rationality that could play that role. In recent papers, in contrast, Pritchard (2023, pp. 305-308; 2025, p. 53) makes use of a weaker rationality notion in characterizing deep disagreements. Both these alternatives prove to be problematic for Pritchard's refutation. On the one hand, if the notion of rationality used to characterize deep disagreements secures their rational resolvability, it will already presuppose the falsehood of epistemic relativism. On the other hand, if the refutation treads on a weaker rationality notion, it will simply fail to give reasons to think that all deep disagreements can be rationally resolved. Be that as it may, we claim that Pritchard's work allows us to identify a subset of deep disagreements that have a particular structure that makes them rationally resolvable.

**KEYWORDS:** epistemic relativism, deep disagreement, rationality, Duncan Pritchard.



**RESUMEN:** Este artículo reconstruye la refutación del relativismo epistémico formulada por Duncan Pritchard (2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1120-1122; 2025, pp. 56-58) y presenta una objeción a ella. Esta refutación presupone que el relativismo epistémico sería verdadero si hubiese desacuerdos profundos racionalmente irresolubles. Así, la refutación de Pritchard equivale a un argumento que pretende mostrar que todos los desacuerdos profundos son racionalmente resolubles. Nuestra objeción, por su parte, busca mostrar que los ejemplos de desacuerdo profundo racionalmente resoluble presentados por Pritchard tienen rasgos particulares que, si bien los hacen racionalmente resolubles, no todo desacuerdo profundo tiene. Para que estos ejemplos sean representativos de todo desacuerdo profundo es preciso manejar una noción particularmente fuerte de racionalidad. La noción de buscador de la verdad de Pritchard (2011) presupone una noción de racionalidad fuerte que podría cumplir este rol. En artículos recientes, en cambio, Pritchard (2023, pp. 305-308; 2025, p. 53) maneja una noción más débil de racionalidad al caracterizar los desacuerdos profundos. Ambas alternativas resultan problemáticas para la refutación de Pritchard. Por un lado, si la noción de racionalidad usada en la caracterización de los desacuerdos profundos asegura su resolubilidad racional, ella ya presupondrá la falsedad del relativismo epistémico. Por el otro, si la refutación maneja una noción de racionalidad más débil, ella no nos ofrecerá razones para pensar que todo desacuerdo profundo puede ser racionalmente resuelto. Sea como fuere, sostenemos que el trabajo de Pritchard permite identificar un subconjunto de desacuerdos profundos que tienen una estructura particular que los hace racionalmente resolubles.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** relativismo epistémico, desacuerdo profundo, racionalidad, Duncan Pritchard.

**SHORT SUMMARY:** This paper reconstructs Duncan Pritchard's (2011; 2021; 2025) refutation of epistemic relativism and presents an objection to it. This refutation presupposes that epistemic relativism would be true if there were rationally irresolvable deep disagreements. Our objection shows that the examples of deep disagreement Pritchard presents have features that, while making them rationally resolvable, not all deep disagreement has.

## 1. Introduction

As its title indicates, this paper presents an objection to Duncan Pritchard's (2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1120-1122; 2025, pp. 56-58) refutation of epistemic relativism. Both this objection and this refutation assume that epistemic relativism would be true in case there were rationally irresolvable deep disagreements. Thus, following Pritchard, we shall address the question of the rational resolvability of deep disagreements, understanding the categories of epistemic relativism, deep disagreement and rational resolvability in ways that make this question directly relevant for the discussion over the truth of epistemic relativism.

For Pritchard (2011, p. 269; 2021, pp. 117-118), deep disagreements are philosophically interesting because they suggest the existence of the phenomenon of epistemic incommensurability and, as a consequence, the truth of epistemic relativism. He (2011, p. 269) defines epistemic incommensurability as follows:

*Epistemic incommensurability:*

It is possible for two agents to have opposing *propositional acceptances* which are rationally justified to an equal extent where there is no rational basis by which either agent could properly persuade the other to revise their view.<sup>1</sup>

Epistemic relativism, in turn, is understood here – following Pritchard (2011, pp. 269-270; 2021, 1117-1118) – as the thesis that the rational justification of propositions and propositional attitudes is relative to the system of commitments (specially including our acceptances of propositions) of an agent, where different such systems can give rise to epistemic incommensurability.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the existence of epistemic incommensurability entails the truth of epistemic relativism.

We can get an even better grip of this understanding of epistemic relativism by distinguishing it from truth relativism. According to Pritchard (2009, pp. 406-411), the only plausible form of epistemic relativism is one that understands the relativized notion of rational justification in a purely internalist way. This is compatible with holding that the epistemic standing of our beliefs or convictions has an externalist aspect that should not be relativized to a system of commitments. For instance, we can take the truth of such a belief or conviction as a necessary condition for it to count as knowledge, which is clearly a positive epistemic standing, while understanding truth in non-relativist and non-internalist terms as correspondence to some state of affairs. An analogous thing can be said about the notion of reliability as applied to beliefs and other propositional attitudes, which has been used by externalist authors to give accounts of knowledge. The kind of epistemic relativism that Pritchard has in mind is not one that rejects these externalist notions, but simply one that relativizes a purely internalist notion of rational justification. Pritchard (2009, p. 407) called this sort of epistemic relativism *dialectical epistemic relativism*, and considered that it did not pose

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<sup>1</sup> In his paper from 2011 Pritchard talks of beliefs and not of propositional acceptances when defining epistemic incommensurability. However, based on his later work, there is reason to think that he would define this notion using a more general propositional attitude, like simply accepting or being committed to a proposition. More precisely, Pritchard (2016, pp. 90-94) thinks that certain propositions that give rise to deep disagreements cannot be believed, insofar as they cannot be justified, and often (Pritchard, 2011, p. 268, p. 280, pp. 282-284; 2016; 2021, p. 1119) uses the term “conviction” for the positive attitude we can have towards them. Be that as it may, a conviction, just as a belief, would be a way of accepting a proposition. This is the reason why we have substituted “beliefs” for “propositional acceptances” in the previous definition.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that in a recent paper Pritchard (2025, p. 56) understands the expression “epistemic relativism” differently. According to this latter understanding, epistemic relativism is just the thesis that there are different systems of commitments relative to which people can make rational evaluations, no matter whether these systems are or can be epistemically incommensurable (i.e. whether they lead or can lead to incompatible evaluations). Accordingly, the argument that we here consider as a refutation of epistemic relativism is presented there by Pritchard (2025, pp. 56-58) just as a refutation of epistemic incommensurability.

significant philosophical problems. Be that as it may, this form of relativism does constitute a substantial view about the limits of rationality and rational discussion, and in later works Pritchard (2011, pp. 269-270; 2021, 1117-1118) simply refers to it as epistemic relativism and tries to refute it by showing that we have reason to take deep disagreements as rationally resolvable.

In order to see the question of the truth of (dialectical) epistemic relativism as analogous to the question of whether deep disagreements are rationally resolvable, we also need to accept the following (at least) necessary condition for deep disagreements:

*Rational persistence:*

A disagreement is rationally persistent if and only if it is resistant to rational resolution without the parties being irrational in holding their respective views.

Notice that in the previous definition we do not assume that deep disagreements are rationally irresolvable, but we do suggest that, in case they were rationally resolvable, they resolution would be particularly difficult. As Chris Ranalli (2021, p. 985) points out, we should not take deep disagreements as rationally irresolvable by definition because the question of whether the disagreements that are usually seen as deep are rationally resolvable has no obvious answer and, as a result, we should leave it open in order to obtain a better understanding of disagreements and their rationality. And, in case there could be both rationally resolvable and rationally irresolvable deep disagreements, this question should be addressed in connection with each particular disagreement that we classify as deep.

Finally, we understand the rational resolvability of a disagreement in the following way:

*Rational resolvability:*

The disagreement between A and B over proposition  $p$  is rationally resolvable if and only if there is an attitude  $D$  which is the only rational attitude that A and B can have towards  $p$ .<sup>3</sup>

According to these understandings of epistemic relativism, deep disagreement and rational resolution, if there were rationally irresolvable (deep) disagreements, epistemic relativism would be true. Hence, in order to refute epistemic relativism, we need to show or at least give good reasons to think that all deep disagreements can be rationally resolved, since the mere existence of a subset of rationally irresolvable deep disagreements would result in the truth of epistemic relativism. This is what Pritchard (2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1120-1122; 2025, pp. 56-58) tries to do. He offers reasons to think that all deep disagreements are rationally resolvable that are, at the same time, reasons to think that epistemic relativism is false. As we have pointed out, the purpose of this paper is to question these reasons, and so to defend epistemic relativism from Pritchard's attack.

In the next and second section, we present Pritchard's (2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1120-1122; 2025, pp. 56-58) refutation of epistemic relativism. In order to do so, we introduce and analyze some key features of his view (2011, 2021, 2023, 2025) and present a case of a (rationally resolvable) deep disagreement in order to see how Pritchard's procedure for rational resolution works. This latter case is a hypothetical reconstruction of the disagreement that Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine had over the truth of geocentrism, where Bellarmine could – if he lived enough time – rationally change his view so to agree with Galileo. This reconstruction is based on Pritchard's (2011, pp. 280-282) description of this case, but also on some features that he (Pritchard, 2023, pp. 305-308, pp. 312-313; 2025, pp.

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<sup>3</sup> Ranalli (2021, pp. 4977-4978) distinguishes different senses of rational resolvability. The definition in the main text corresponds to one of such senses.

51-53) currently thinks deep disagreements have. In the third section we first argue that this case, as a description of a rationally resolvable deep disagreement, must have certain particular structural features that are not, in principle, generalizable to all deep disagreements. In order for an example like this one to be representative of all deep disagreements we need to accept a particularly strong notion of rationality, and read the above-mentioned principles in terms of it. Pritchard's (2011) notion of a *truth-seeker* presupposes a strong notion of rationality that could play that role. In recent papers, in contrast, Pritchard (2023, pp. 305-308; 2025, p. 53) makes use of a weaker notion of rationality in characterizing deep disagreements. We end this section by arguing that both these alternatives are problematic for Pritchard's refutation of epistemic relativism. On the one hand, if the notion of rationality used to characterize deep disagreements secures their rational resolvability, it will already presuppose the falsehood of epistemic relativism, and so this refutation can be accused of begging the question. On the other hand, if the refutation treads on a weaker rationality notion, it will fail to give reasons to think that all deep disagreements are susceptible of rational resolution. Be that as it may, we shall claim that Pritchard's work allows us to identify a subset of deep disagreements that have a particular structure that makes them rationally resolvable. In the fourth and final section we summarize the main points made in this paper.

## 2. Pritchard's refutation

Pritchard's (2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1120-1122; 2025, pp. 56-58) refutation of epistemic relativism is made from an epistemological view that is based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969). Initially, Pritchard (2011, 2021) arguably saw all deep disagreements as being, directly or indirectly, over a hinge proposition. Hinge propositions are the ones that, in a given context, are held with the maximal level of certainty and cannot be doubted. Consequently, they give the framework that makes our justification practices and meaningful doubts possible. According to Pritchard (2021, p. 1119), an agent can put forward a proposition as a reason to hold or doubt another proposition if and only if she is more certain of the former than the latter. Thus, insofar as hinge propositions are held with the maximal level of certainty, they cannot be justified and cannot be *directly* – without, as we shall see, an indirect procedure that presupposes a change of context – criticized. Since Pritchard (2016, pp. 90-94) understands belief as a propositional attitude that, by definition, is capable of being justified, he thinks that hinge propositions cannot be believed. Be that as it may, they would be held in another way, and the pro attitudes we would have towards them – which are often called “convictions” by Pritchard (2011, p. 268, p. 280, pp. 282-284; 2016, 2021, p. 119) – could give rise to deep disagreements.<sup>4</sup> Pritchard (2023, 2025) has recently introduced some changes in his view on deep disagreements. According to his current understanding of this category (Pritchard, 2023, pp. 302-309; 2025, pp. 51-54, pp. 58-59), not all deep

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<sup>4</sup> The examples of hinge propositions found in the literature are varied, and go from ones that are usually taken to be cornerstones of our way of thinking and presuppositions of many regular propositions (Wright 2004, pp. 188-194; 2014, pp. 214-217; Coliva and Palmira, 2021, pp. 408-409), like ‘There are physical objects’ and ‘There are other minds beside my own’, to ones that are about very specific aspects of someone's context, like ‘I have never been to the Moon’ or ‘I have two hands’ (Wittgenstein, 1969, § 133, § 245, § 247, § 252, § 667). As we shall see, Pritchard (2011, pp. 283; 2021, p. 1121; 2023, pp. 308-310; 2025, pp. 54-55.) takes the latter propositions as hinges, and recently (2023, pp. 308-313; 2025, pp. 55-56) came to think that there are basic axiological propositions that should also be considered as hinges, and that are the ones that can give rise to deep hinge disagreements. It is worth noting that, without rejecting the admittedly vague characterization of hinge propositions given in the main text, some authors have given more precise definitions that exclude some of these examples from the set of hinges. In particular, Wright (2004, pp. 188-194; 2014, pp. 214-217) and Coliva and Palmira (2021, pp. 408-409) give definitions that exclude propositions that are about specific aspect of someone's context.

disagreements are hinge disagreements, and there could even be hinge disagreements that are not deep. In a nutshell, he now sees deep disagreements as genuine disagreements that concern, directly or indirectly, an axiological question of deep existential importance to the parties involved, where these parties are broadly rational, are truly committed to their opposing judgments and have considered these judgments (i.e. they are not tacit).<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, deep hinge disagreements are disagreements over an axiological hinge proposition, but not all axiological propositions that give rise to deep disagreements are hinges. Despite this change in his view, Pritchard (2025, pp. 56-58) still gives the same reasons as he gave before (Pritchard, 2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1120-1122) to think that deep hinge disagreements are rationally resolvable, and, as we shall briefly see, what happens in the case of these disagreements could be taken as a reason to doubt that there are rationally irresolvable deep disagreements simpliciter. Thus, in what follows we shall focus only on the case of deep hinge disagreements, bearing in mind that, on Pritchard's current view, they are axiological in nature.

The previously sketched view seems to entail the rational irresolvability of deep hinge disagreements. The rational resolution of a disagreement is something that can be achieved by means of at least one of the disagreeing parties' revision of the relevant propositional attitude in light of reasons or evidence. But insofar as our commitments to hinge propositions cannot be justified, they seem incapable of being revised in such a way. However, Pritchard (2011, pp. 278-284; 2021, pp. 1119-1122; 2025, pp. 56-58) holds that deep hinge disagreements are rationally resolvable by appealing to reasons or evidence, though in an indirect way. Such a resolution would occur by the rational revision, carried out by at least one of the parties to the disagreement, of attitudes (typically belief or disbelief) towards certain propositions that are not hinges, revision that would have as a consequence the revision of the attitude had towards the hinge proposition(s) that the disagreement concerns. As a result, there would be no case for epistemic relativism.

Pritchard (2011, p. 283; 2021, p. 1121) gives examples of how I could rationally change my attitudes towards the propositions 'I have never been to the Moon' and 'I have two hands,' so that they lose their hinge status and could, eventually, be denied. Regarding the first proposition, he (2011, p. 283; 2021, p. 1121) invites us to imagine a future where space travels become very frequent, so that I could have passed by the Moon without remembering it. According to this example, I would, in the first place, have rationally revised a range of beliefs concerning the world I live in, as this world itself would have changed over time, and in the second place, this revision would have the consequence that the proposition that I have never been to the Moon would lose its hinge status and would become possible to deny it. Concerning the second proposition, Pritchard (2021, p. 1121) asks us to imagine ourselves waking up in the hospital after a car accident, or (Pritchard, 2011, p. 283) being stumbling, bewildered and confused from the wreckage of a plane crash. In such a context, immediately after taking notice of the situation one is in, one could reasonably doubt that one has two hands, and accordingly this proposition would lose its hinge status and denying it would become a possibility.

Be that as it may, how could this procedure of rational change have an impact on the resolution of deep hinge disagreements? After all, no disagreement with one previous self is involved in these examples, and not only does Pritchard (2021) not claim that there is, but he (Pritchard, 2023, pp. 309-310; 2025, pp. 54-56) even claims that there cannot be deep disagreements over propositions such as 'I have never been to the Moon' or 'I have two hands,' insofar as their truth or falsehood is something every rational person can agree on. Regarding the absence of a disagreement with one previous self in these examples, notice that Pritchard (2011, p. 283; 2021, p. 1121) treats the just mentioned propositions as time-

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<sup>5</sup> Other properties that are usually assigned to deep disagreements, like their resistance to rational resolution, are meant to follow from this characterization.

neutral or tensed propositions. Otherwise, when in these examples the context shifts, the agent will not be doubting or denying the same proposition that she accepted before. In other words, the agent would be just doubting or denying a new proposition about a particular time while retaining her acceptance of another proposition about another previous time. But do these cases involve disagreements with one previous self once we treat these propositions as being time-neutral? Well, as John MacFarlane (2007, pp. 22-23; 2014, pp. 130-133) shows, two different evaluations of one time-neutral proposition respectively made at two different times, or a pair of acceptances of two time-neutral contradictory propositions respectively made at different times, do not give rise to a disagreement, at least in an intuitive sense of disagreement that could motivate any form of relativism. Suppose that, in the morning, John accepts the time-neutral proposition that Mary is in her bed, while, at night, Ann rejects this proposition and accepts the time-neutral proposition that Mary is not in her bed. For MacFarlane, John and Ann's acceptances and eventually assertions should be assessed for accuracy (i.e. correctness in a propositional truth derived sense) considering the time of each one's respective acceptance. And since these times are different, their acceptances can both be accurate, which means that they are not in conflict.<sup>6</sup> Thus, MacFarlane shows that, according to our intuitive sense of disagreement (or at least the one involved in philosophical discussions over relativism), one person disagrees with another if and only if they have two propositional acceptances that cannot both be accurate. In case we countenanced the existence of tensed propositions, this would typically happen if (i) the parties respectively accept or assert two propositions that are inconsistent with each other and (ii) their acceptances/assertions must be assessed for accuracy relative to the same time and possible world (i.e. the same circumstance of evaluation).<sup>7</sup> For our purposes, the upshot of all this is that the previous cases are not examples of rational change involving a disagreement with one's previous self, but just examples of the indirect procedure of rational change that, in cases of a deep disagreement, would make rational resolution possible. In order to find an example of deep hinge disagreement and see how it could be rationally resolved we arguably need to countenance other types of hinge propositions in our hinge epistemology.

As we pointed out, Pritchard (2023, pp. 302-308; 2025, pp 54-56) now thinks that the hinge propositions that can give rise to deep disagreements are axiological in nature. According to him, disagreements involving a clash between a religious and a secular world-picture are among the typical cases of deep disagreement (Pritchard, 2023, pp. 301-305; 2025, pp. 51-53) and, in particular, of deep hinge disagreement (Pritchard, 2021, p. 1119; 2023, pp. 312-313; 2025, pp. 55-56). Pritchard (2023, 2025) does not give us examples of the particular hinge commitments that would be involved in the latter disagreements. Be that as it may, in a passage where he (Pritchard, 2023, p. 313) is talking about religious hinge commitments he states that "basic religious conviction might be encapsulated in a creed, for example, where it is part of the religious practices to publicly assert these claims." Insofar as the content of

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<sup>6</sup> The position MacFarlane (2007, pp. 22-23; 2014) puts forward as reasonable for time-neutral or tensed proposition is a nonindexical contextualist one, according to which the time that is relevant for assessing for accuracy an assertion or acceptance of such a proposition is the time of the context of the assertion or acceptance. He (2014, pp. 44-70) also contends that there are propositions that are neutral with respect to other things, like a standard of taste, and that assertions or acceptances of such propositions are to be assessed for accuracy considering, say, the standard of taste relevant at the context of the assessor, not the one relevant at the context of the person whose assertion or acceptance is being evaluated (of course, these contexts coincide when someone assesses her own assertions or acceptances).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that we can think of different scenarios that have the upshot that two acceptances/assertions cannot be jointly accurate. Suppose that John asserts now that Mary is in her bed, that Mary asserted 24 hours ago that Mary will not be in her bed in 24 hours, and that the asserted propositions are time-neutral. These propositions would not be inconsistent in the sense of being impossible for them to be jointly true at one single circumstance of evaluation composed by a particular world and time. Still, Johns and Mary's acceptances/assertions could not be jointly accurate.

such religious commitments can be asserted and are part of a creed, they could include, for instance, that the world was created by God or that the Bible is a holy book containing truths about the world. Both contents seem to be factual and to have epistemic significance, since they would condition what we take as legitimate evidence for propositions over certain subject matters. Be that as it may, for Pritchard both of them would also be axiological, insofar as they shape a way of experiencing the world and valuing different ways of living.<sup>8</sup> Pritchard (2023, p. 302, p. 304) also makes clear that deep disagreements can indirectly concern an axiological claim, while directly and on the surface concerning a purely factual claim. In this regard, he states the following about purely scientific debates that he considers expressions of deep disagreements:

Consider the kinds of large-scale scientific debates that look like plausible candidates to be deep disagreements, such as debates about whether our scientific understanding of agency allows for free will, whether science can accommodate qualia, or debates about the origin of the universe. While such discussions do not concern axiological claims of the relevant kind directly, they certainly concern them indirectly. If we lack free will, for example, then that threatens to make our lives absurd. Or consider a dispute about the origin of the universe and the ramifications this might have for whether one embraces or rejects a religious worldview. (Pritchard, 2023, p. 304)

In light of these considerations, we can re-describe a case of rationally resolvable deep disagreement presented by Pritchard (2011, pp. 280-282) as a disagreement that indirectly concerns an axiological hinge proposition.<sup>9</sup> This reading seems reasonable, insofar as the case involves a clash between a religious and a secular world-picture. The case is the disagreement that Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine would have had at the beginning of the seventeenth century over whether heliocentrism (according to which the sun is at the center of the universe and the earth orbits around it) or geocentrism (according to which the earth is at the center of the universe and the sun orbits around it) is true. According to Pritchard's (2011, pp. 280-282) description of this disagreement, Bellarmine would have grounded his geocentric view on a literal interpretation of the Bible taken as a holy book, whereas Galileo would have grounded his heliocentric view on empirical observations made with his telescopes. Thus, we can, for our purposes, take this disagreement as concerning, indirectly, a hinge proposition held by Bellarmine such as 'The Bible, as a holy book, provides evidence for the location of heavenly bodies,' and see – in line with Pritchard's current view – this proposition as axiological as well as epistemic.<sup>10,11</sup> Whereas Bellarmine would have accepted this proposition, Galileo would have rejected it. On the other hand, on Pritchard's description of the case Bellarmine would have been open to the possibility of being refuted and persuaded to change his mind by means of the presentation of empirical scientific evidence against his view. It would just have happened that such a robust evidence was not available at the time. Recall that Galileo's telescopes were quite rudimentary and that arguably, at that time, there was not conclusive evidence for heliocentrism. According to this,

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<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Pritchard (2023, p. 310) claims that propositions like 'There is an external world' or 'The future resembles the past,' despite stating objective facts and not making explicit reference to our sources of knowledge, work as epistemic principles.

<sup>9</sup> Pritchard (2011, pp. 278-284) actually presents two cases of allegedly rationally resolvable deep disagreement. Both of them involve a clash between a religious and a secular world-picture, and so can be re-described – in line with Pritchard's (2023, pp. 302-308; 2025, pp. 51-53) current view – as being about an axiological proposition.

<sup>10</sup> To be sure, in order to evaluate Pritchard's view on the rational resolution of deep disagreements we need not take a stance on whether our reconstruction of this disagreement is a true description of the disagreement that Galileo and Bellarmine actually had. Rather, we should treat the described case as a *possible* case of rationally resolvable deep disagreement, and see whether the conclusions we can draw about it can be extrapolated to any other deep disagreement.

<sup>11</sup> Pritchard (2011, pp. 280-282) does not explicitly say which the hinge proposition involved in the previous case is. We chose to interpret the case in a way that is in line with his current view on deep hinge disagreements.



if the empirical evidence we now have had been presented to Bellarmine, he would have changed his mind and admitted that heliocentrism was true. This would have happened by means of the same sort of indirect procedure that Pritchard (2011, p. 283; 2021, p. 1121) claims that allows someone to change her commitments to hinge propositions like ‘I have two hands’ or ‘I have never been to the Moon.’ First, by means of taking knowledge of such evidence, Bellarmine would have incorporated several beliefs concerning empirical observations. These beliefs would have, as its contents, non-hinge propositions. Second, this belief change would have forced Bellarmine to deny the proposition that the Bible, as a holy book, provides evidence for the location of heavenly bodies, which was previously held by him as a hinge.<sup>12</sup>

We shall consider this case in more detail in the next section. For now, we need to see what reasons Pritchard gives to hold that all deep disagreements can be rationally resolved by such an indirect procedure. After all, even if we grant to him that the previous disagreement is both deep and rationally resolvable, it could happen that it has particular features that not all deep disagreements have.

According to Pritchard (2011, pp. 282-283; 2021, pp. 1120-1121; 2025, pp. 57-58) there is a universally held hinge commitment that creates the strong presumption that there always are shared resources (beliefs and rational procedures) between any two subjects that allow them to rationally resolve any disagreement they could have.<sup>13</sup> This universal hinge commitment, which Pritchard (2021, pp. 1120-1123) calls *über hinge commitment*, states that we (oneself and others) are not radically and systematically in error in our propositional attitudes. Hinge propositions that are not universal would be expressions, in particular contexts, of this universally held hinge commitment. In a given context, doubting our most entrenched commitments about the world we inhabit (e.g. the conviction that I have never been to the Moon), would cast doubt over the *über hinge commitment*, and this – as we shall briefly see – would undermine communication and, as a result, make language impossible. We need a change of context, which would go hand in hand with a change in some of our beliefs in regular propositions, for a doubt in a particular hinge proposition to be possible. In Pritchard’s own words:

[...] if one can change a subject’s wider beliefs to a sufficient extent, then this will have a bearing on which claims function as manifestations of the *über hinge commitment*. This thus explains how even deep hinge disagreements can be rationally resolved via a kind of ‘side-on’ persuasion, whereby one doesn’t target the hinge commitments directly, but rather the opponent’s wider set of beliefs. Since it is these beliefs that ensure that a hinge commitment to this specific proposition is a manifestation of the overreaching *über hinge commitment*, it follows that if one can effect significant change in these beliefs, then one can also change an opponent’s hinge commitments. (Pritchard, 2025, p. 58)

Pritchard (2011, p. 282; 2021, p.1122) holds that the *über hinge commitment* must be accepted in order to make sense of the behavior of others and ourselves. Thus, without this universal commitment, communication and, as a result, language itself would be impossible. More precisely, based on Donald Davidson’s (1986, pp. 314-319) work on radical interpretation, Pritchard claims that one’s understanding of what someone says, and so one’s attribution of fine-grained beliefs to her, requires that we apply the principle of charity when interpreting her. This principle commands one, as the only means to interpret another person’s utterances, to assume that the majority of her propositional attitudes are, by one’s

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<sup>12</sup> To be sure, a disagreement – and, in particular, a deep disagreement – could be rationally resolved by means of the refutation of both opposing views or by showing that they are equally and inconclusively supported by the available evidence. For the sake of simplicity, we shall here only focus on cases where it can be shown that one of the disagreeing parties is wrong and the other is right.

<sup>13</sup> Pritchard (2011, 2016, 2021) does not describe the content of this commitment as a proposition. Accordingly, he only talks of a universal hinge commitment but not of a universal hinge proposition.

lights, true, and so the same as one's own. Only by means of this procedure one can, eventually, identify the differences that may exist between our propositional acceptances and this other person's. In other words, what one considers mistakes can only be intelligible with the help of a background of propositional acceptances that are shared with the person one is interpreting. Accordingly, we cannot make sense of the idea of there not being a significant number of propositions (including some non-universal hinge propositions) that are jointly accepted by any two people we can understand. And, in particular, we cannot make sense of the idea of there not being such common resources between two people we see as having a deep disagreement. Thus, the point Pritchard makes is that, once we accept the existence of such common resources, we must grant that any deep disagreement can, in principle, be rationally resolved by making use of them.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, in case it is correct, Pritchard's argument from the impossibility of someone being massively mistaken does not amount to a conclusive proof that all deep hinge disagreement can be rationally resolved by means of such common resources. Rather, this would be a reasonable presumption to make once we admit that we cannot make sense of someone being mistaken in such a way. And this presumption would result in someone who holds that not every deep disagreement is rationally resolvable having the burden of proof. Moreover, since on Pritchard's (2023, pp. 302-308; 2025, pp. 58-59) present view, not all deep disagreements are hinge disagreements, his current case against epistemic relativism must include the claim that the result found in the case of deep hinge disagreements is reason to think that all deep disagreements can be rationally resolved. In this vein, considering the possibility of there being deep disagreements that do not concern hinges, Pritchard (2021) briefly states the following:

[...] there is the possibility that there is a sub-class of deep disagreements which don't involve hinge commitments, and hence concerns fundamental commitments that aren't held in an essentially arational manner. But in that case, why would we think that deep disagreements involving these commitments would lead to epistemic incommensurability and thus epistemic relativism anyway? At the very least, we are owed an argument as to why this might be so, and the prospects for such an argument do not look promising, given what we have seen with regard to how this difficulty is meant to play out in the supposedly more problematic case of a Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology. (Pritchard, 2021, p. 1124)

We will not address this claim here. Our objection, which shall be presented in the next section, questions Pritchard's argument for the rational resolvability of all deep hinge disagreement. And if this objection is correct, there is no room for making the previous claim.

### *3. An objection to Pritchard's refutation*

In order to show why I think the previous argument is unconvincing, it is useful to analyze in more detail the disagreement between Galileo and Bellarmine as we, based on Pritchard (2011, pp. 280-282), have described it in order to see it as both deep and amenable to rational resolution by means of the indirect procedure introduced in the previous section.

As we suggested, this disagreement would be rationally resolvable insofar as Bellarmine was open to revise his view in case there was sufficiently convincing empirical evidence in favor of Galileo's position, and this evidence can be obtained despite the fact

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<sup>14</sup> Referring to a dispute motivated by a deep hinge disagreement, Pritchard claims: "while one might resort to persuasion rather than reason in order to resolve the dispute [...] there will be an appropriate epistemic path to resolution available since such disputes inevitably occur relatively to a shared background of commitments". (Pritchard, 2011, pp. 282-283)

that it was absent during Bellarmine's lifetime. We could describe the conditions that makes this disagreement rationally resolvable in favor of Galileo as follows:

- (i) Bellarmine accepts the proposition that the Bible, as a holy book, is a source of evidence of the location of heavenly bodies, which for him has the status of a hinge.
- (ii) Bellarmine accepts, as Galileo does, an explanation principle that results in his openness to empirical evidence in favor of heliocentrism, that has for him the status of a hinge and that he puts before other considerations when choosing between two alternative explanations of an empirical fact. Such a principle may be, for instance, a principle of greater predictive power.<sup>15</sup>
- (iii) Bellarmine recognizes and is disposed to recognize the same empirical facts as Galileo and contemporary astronomers do.
- (iv) These empirical facts, assuming an explanation principle like the one described in (ii), speaks in favor of heliocentrism and against geocentrism.

Thus, in this disagreement, Bellarmine accepts two hinge propositions that, while not contradictory, conflict with each other once new information is presented to him. This information is not picked up by his initial system of commitments, so there would be no incoherence in this system. On the other hand, in this disagreement Bellarmine is committed beforehand to privilege one of these hinge propositions, namely the relevant explanatory principle, in case such a conflict emerged. The first point means that, while lacking the relevant new information, Bellarmine is not violating this explanatory principle in accepting that the Bible is a source of evidence of the location of heavenly bodies, while the second point means that he is committed to privilege the first proposition over the second if a conflict emerged.<sup>16</sup> According to this, the possible rational resolution of a deep disagreement is indirect. In a first instance, and as a result of acquiring new information, the party that can be refuted would have to add new beliefs in non-hinge propositions and probably discard others he had. And in a second instance, this modification would give rise to a conflict between the hinge proposition(s) the disagreement concerns and one or more other hinges that are responsible for this person's openness to this new information, conflict that, insofar as this person is committed to privilege the latter hinges in case of such a conflict, would lead her to reject the hinge proposition(s) that the disagreement concerns.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bear in mind that the predictive power of an explanation (or theory) can be assessed not only with respect to future facts, but also with respect to past facts that have already been verified. One just needs to consider whether these past facts were or could be predicted by means of the explanation and other even earlier facts.

<sup>16</sup> One could wonder whether the proposition mentioned in (i) should be taken as a hinge once we consider that this explanation principle should override it in case of conflict. But, despite this circumstance, the former proposition has the traits that Pritchard (2021, p. 118-119; 2023, pp. 308-309; 2025, p. 54) thinks that characterize hinges: in Bellarmine's initial context, this proposition determines what counts as a reason for a given view about the location of heavenly bodies and cannot be doubted. Notice that, on Pritchard's view, the situation would be similar to what happens to a proposition like 'I have two hands' once a relevant change of context occurs. Presumably, I am disposed to doubt this proposition in relevant new contexts because I am not willing to reject a hinge proposition like 'I have not been systematically hallucinating the recent events of my life.' My acceptance of this latter proposition allows me to incorporate new beliefs about my surroundings that ultimately make the former proposition lose its hinge status. Notice also that 'I have not been systematically hallucinating the recent events of my life' is not equivalent to the über hinge commitment, since one can imagine a context in which it can be doubted without granting that one could be systematically mistaken about almost everything (e.g. a situation where one is aware of recently having taken a hallucinatory drug).

<sup>17</sup> As we pointed out, a disagreement – and, in particular, a deep disagreement – could be rationally resolved by means of the refutation of both opposing views or by showing that they are equally and inconclusively supported by the evidence. To device such a different case we must modify the fourth condition just presented for the rational resolution of the disagreement between Galileo and Bellarmine.

According to this, rationally resolvable deep disagreements have the following structure. The party that can be refuted, despite not being incoherent or guilty of irrationality, accepts two sets of hinge propositions that can conflict with each other if she adds new obtainable information to her belief system. One set contains the hinge propositions the disagreement concerns, while the other contains the propositions that explain her openness to this new information.<sup>18</sup> Finally, this party is committed beforehand to privilege the latter propositions in case such a conflict emerged. Conditions (i) to (iv) guarantee us that the disagreement between Galileo and Bellarmine, as we described it, has this structure. Other conditions would play this role in the case of other deep disagreements. We can grant Pritchard that disagreements that have the structure just described can be seen as being both deep and rationally resolvable. But do we have reason to think that all deep disagreements have this structure?

As we saw, for Pritchard (2011, pp. 269-270; 2021, 1117-1118; 2025, pp. 56-58) there would be a reasonable presumption that there are always common resources to rationally resolve a disagreement. The impossibility of making sense of massive error forces us to admit that there are common resources between any two speakers we find intelligible, and this admission would place the burden of proof on those who argue that not every deep disagreement is rationally resolvable. But the impossibility of massive error and the existence of common resources does not give rise to this presumption. This is so because we can make a significant distinction between those common resources that are needed to secure understanding and those common resources that are needed to rationally resolve a deep disagreement. As a matter of fact, Davidson (1986, pp. 316-318) shows that, in order for two people who do not initially share a language to be able to understand each other, they need to share many occasional beliefs (i.e. beliefs about observable events) (Davidson 1986, p. 316, p. 318) and most beliefs about basic logical questions (Davidson 1986, p. 316). It is an agreement on this sort of beliefs that guarantees understanding and makes language possible. Briefly put, this would happen by means of the radical interpreter's identification of observable events that cause certain assertions of the speaker, allowing her to assign meanings to the asserted sentences that are about such events. To be sure, the principle of charity also commands the radical interpreter to assume that the speaker agrees with her about other sort of issues (i.e. issues that are not about observable events or basic logical questions), but with respect to these issues this principle works as a guide that may lead this interpreter to identify significant differences she has with the speaker. And convictions about such issues are typically involved in the examples of deep disagreement found in the literature (e.g. disagreements about the law of abortion). Hence, nothing in Davidson's view makes us think that there will always be common resources to rationally resolve a deep disagreement.

As a matter of fact, there is a reasonable presumption in favor of the impossibility to rationally resolve many deep disagreements. Think about the hypothetical situation where Galileo and Bellarmine had the disagreement we have described, but where the second or third condition we have identified for the rational resolution of this deep disagreement was absent. It is difficult if not impossible to see how, in such a scenario, they could rationally resolve their disagreement, but it is still possible to see them – accepting Davidson's view – as two people that can understand each other. According to this, the possibility of devising hypothetical cases where it seems impossible to rationally resolve a deep disagreement, gives rise to the reasonable presumption that many deep disagreements cannot be so resolved. Thus, deep disagreements that could be rationally resolve are, in principle, only those that have the structure we identified a few paragraphs back and that our case study of deep disagreement has in virtue of satisfying conditions (i) to (iv).

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<sup>18</sup> To be sure, both these sets can contain, like in our case study of deep disagreement, only one proposition.

It is worth pointing out that Pritchard (2011) presumably makes use of a notion of rationality in light of which it is plausible that any deep hinge disagreement is rationally resolvable. He (Pritchard, 2011, pp. 267-269) claims that in order for a disagreement to be genuinely deep, the parties must be *truth-seekers* with respect to the subject matter of the disagreement. A truth-seeker is a person who has a disposition to change her view in light of proper reasons and evidence. But since our hinges determine what we see as *proper* reasons or evidence for a thesis, this mere disposition does not guarantee the rational resolution of a deep hinge disagreement. In order to guarantee that, then, truth-seekers must share enough hinges to be able, at least in the long run, to agree on how to assess reasons and evidence. According to Pritchard's (2011, p. 268) description of a truth-seeker, she is someone who responds to reasons and empirical evidence more or less in the same way as the current scientific community does. That is to say, she would have roughly the same criteria as this community has to assess an argument or a piece of evidence. And, insofar as one of the parties to a disagreement is not a truth-seeker, his behavior with respect to the subject matter the disagreement is about will not be rational and, as a consequence, the disagreement will not be deep. Recall that a disagreement's rational persistence (at least a necessary feature of a deep disagreement) was characterized as its resistance to rational resolution without the parties being irrational in holding their respective views. If the irresolvability of a disagreement were due to the mere irrationality of one of the parties, the disagreement would be of a trivial non-philosophically interesting sort.

Once our notion of rationality includes the condition of being a truth-seeker, this notion might ensure that a hinge disagreement that is truly deep satisfies conditions that, like (i) to (iv) in the case of the deep hinge disagreement we have considered, make it rationally resolvable.<sup>19</sup> Here we have used, in line with most of the literature on this subject, a notion of rationality that does not demand the fulfillment of such conditions. Consequently, we have held that there is good reason to think that many deep disagreements are rationally irresolvable. We will not defend here our less demanding notion of rationality. It suffices to say that to seriously consider the possibility of epistemic relativism, Pritchard's refutation should not use, from the start, a notion of rationality that guarantees that all deep hinge disagreements are rationally resolvable. Otherwise, the refutation will presuppose the falsity of epistemic relativism.

In recent papers, Pritchard (2023, pp. 305-308; 2025, p. 53) makes use of a weaker notion of rationality in characterizing deep disagreements. He states, as a necessary condition for a deep disagreement that the parties must be broadly rational (2023, p. 311), or that they must be minimally rational (2025, p. 53). Such a requirement is meant to exclude cases where at least one of the disagreeing parties is guilty of sheer incoherence (e.g. holds some beliefs that are inconsistent with a hinge she endorses, or claims to reject a hinge but her belief system presupposes that she accepts it), stubbornness or dogmatism. But, as we have seen, merely being open to change one's view in light of good reasons or evidence cannot secure the rational resolution of a deep hinge disagreement, since our hinges determine what we see as *proper* reasons or evidence for a thesis. Moreover, when thinking about hypothetical cases,

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<sup>19</sup> Despite the initial plausibility of the thesis that Pritchard's (2011) notion of rationality secures the rational resolvability of all deep disagreements, there is reason to doubt it. Pritchard's (2011, pp. 267-269) description of a truth-seeker refers to how a person assesses empirical evidence and arguments about matters of fact. If there were axiological hinge propositions that have no implications whatsoever for which factual beliefs someone has, there would be deep hinge disagreements that could not be resolved by gathering empirical evidence and putting forward arguments about matters of fact. In such cases, Pritchard's indirect procedure should work, instead, by adding purely axiological information (whatever that may be) that would result in a belief change that would ultimately lead at least one of the parties to rationally change one or more of these axiological hinge commitments with no factual implications. Notice that we should have reason to consider this belief change as rational in order to see the whole process as rational. These considerations show how strong a notion of rationality securing the rational resolvability of all deep hinge disagreements may need to be.

we cannot see how a deep hinge disagreement can be rationally resolved unless conditions that guarantee their rational resolvability – like (i) to (iv) in the case of the deep disagreement we considered – are satisfied. And if our notion of rationality is not strong enough to secure that conditions of this sort are satisfied for all genuinely deep hinge disagreements, the reasonable presumption to make is that many of them are rationally irresolvable. Despite this, Pritchard (2025, pp. 56-58) still claims that we have reason to think that all deep hinge disagreements are rationally resolvable by means of his indirect procedure for rational change. In this section I gave reasons to think that this claim is mistaken.

In sum, Pritchard has two alternatives, both of which are problematic for his refutation of epistemic relativism. On the one hand, he can opt to use in his characterization of deep disagreements a strong notion of rationality that secures that all deep hinge disagreements are rationally resolvable. If he does this, this notion already presupposes the falsehood of epistemic relativism, and so his refutation can be accused of begging the question. This is specially the case because he (2011; 2016; 2021; 2023; 2025) does not argue for the acceptance of such a notion of rationality. On the other hand, if he makes use of a weaker notion, his argumentation simply fails to give reasons to think that all deep disagreements are susceptible of rational resolution and so that epistemic relativism is false.

Be that as it may, we have also shown that Pritchard's work has a positive result: it allows us to identify a subset of deep disagreements that have a particular structure that makes them rationally resolvable. The four conditions put forward at the beginning of this section are an attempt to identify this structure in the case of the deep disagreement between Galileo and Bellarmine, as we reconstructed it.

#### 4. *Final remarks*

I have leveled an objection to Pritchard's refutation of epistemic relativism that consists in questioning that all deep disagreements satisfy conditions that, like (i) to (iv) in the case of the deep disagreement we have considered, make them rationally resolvable by means of an indirect procedure. A sufficiently strong notion of rationality could guarantee that conditions of this sort are satisfied by all deep hinge disagreements. Pritchard's refutation, then, faces a dilemma. On the one hand, if such a notion is accepted without argument in a refutation of epistemic relativism, the argument begs the question against this view. On the other hand, if Pritchard's refutation is red in terms of a weaker notion of rationality, like the one he uses in later papers (2023, pp. 305-308; 2025, p. 53) to characterize deep disagreements, it simply fails to give reasons to think that all deep disagreements are amenable to rational resolution and so that epistemic relativism is false.

Despite our conclusion concerning Pritchard's attempt to refute epistemic relativism, we have also claimed that his argumentation has a positive result, namely singling out an indirect procedure of rational change that, coupled with a reasonable characterization of deep disagreement, allows us to identify a set of disagreements that are both deep and rationally resolvable. A deep disagreement needs to satisfy conditions that make it have a particular structure in order to be rationally resolvable, and we have granted that it is possible for these conditions to be satisfied in particular cases -even if it were extremely difficult to find real cases satisfying them. But insofar as we do not think that, in the disagreement between Galileo and Bellarmine, the second and third conditions should be taken as partially clarifying the notion of rationality used in the definitions of epistemic relativism, rational persistence and rational resolvability, we do not consider Pritchard's refutation of epistemic relativism as successful. In other words, we do not think there is good reason to treat the examples of rationally resolvable deep disagreement as representative of all deep disagreements. Rather, these examples would be of a very particular sort, namely examples of disagreement were

conditions like the ones laid down in the previous section are met. Be that as it may, as long as we presented an example of rationally resolvable deep disagreement and considered it as a possible hypothetical case, we see Pritchard's refutation as having the positive result just mentioned.

To be sure, as we pointed out, both Pritchard's refutation of epistemic relativism and my objection to it, assume particular understandings of epistemic relativism, deep disagreement and rational resolvability. These understandings, which were made explicit by means of definitions presented at the beginning of the paper, are what makes the question of the truth of epistemic relativism directly related to the question of the rational resolvability of deep disagreements.

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