

What to Do about Incommensurable Doxastic Perspectives

Reply to Mark McLeod-Harrison

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What should we do when we have incompatible strategies of approaching a problem or of drawing conclusions out of data, and no metatheoretical way of adjudicating among these strategies? In the case of intuition-driven philosophizing, I argued in *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy* that the methodology is to take one's intuitions about cases as data and then, using a process of reflective equilibrium, develop a theory that best retrodicts the intuitive data and predicts future intuitions about cases. So, for example, if one has the intuition that Henry does not know that the barn he accurately perceives is a barn because he is in Fake Barn Country, then this datum must be accommodated by an adequate analysis of knowledge. Either that, or the analysis must be so independently compelling that we are prepared to dismiss our intuition about Henry as an outlier that we can legitimately ignore. Any proposed analysis of knowledge must also accurately predict what sorts of intuitions we will have in future examples about whether the subject really knows or merely believes. If the theory fails to do so, then we judge that there are sufficient counterexamples to the proffered analysis of knowledge that the analysis is defective and we head back to the drawing board.

This familiar procedure is all well and good so long as everyone agrees that it is intuitions that should be taken as the data upon which reason then

ABSTRACT: The present paper is a response to the criticisms that Mark McLeod-Harrison makes of my book *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*. If secular, intuition-driven rationalist philosophy yields a belief that p , and Christian, revelation-driven epistemic methods yield a belief that not- p , what should we do? Following Alston, McLeod-Harrison argues that Christian philosophers need do nothing, and remains confident that their way is the best. I argue that this is a serious epistemic mistake, and that relativism about philosophical propositions is a superior approach. McLeod-Harrison also raises two objections to my account of relativism, the first against my rejection of the skeptical alternative, and the second attempting to show that I am committed to an epistemic theory of truth. I rebut both arguments.

operates to produce a theory. But suppose that Christians pick *revelation*¹ as *their source of basic philosophical beliefs instead of intuition*, but otherwise keep reflective equilibrium as the way to generate theories about philosophical issues. Well, so long as intuition and revelation ultimately produce the same results (like sight agreeing with hearing), then there is no real problem; both are sources of philosophical knowledge.

Unfortunately, they do not produce the same results. For example, Catholic revelation-derived teachings clash with most secular intuition-driven philosophers over matters of sexual and medical ethics, especially the morality of premarital sex, masturbation, birth control, voluntary sterilization, homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia. The Catholic Church finds all these things to be unequivocally immoral. Most secular philosophers do not. Most Christian denominations accept the notion of original sin. For secular philosophers, the idea that a person can be fairly punished for the misdeeds of another, especially a hypothetical ancestor of a few thousand years ago, is anathema to every treatment of justice of which I am aware. Christians accept the idea that Jesus was the sin-free son of God, executed on the cross as a blood sacrifice to atone for the sins of humanity. Secular rationalists find it flatly ridiculous that justice can be done through the punishment of the innocent, or that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent deity would somehow require homicide to motivate his forgiveness. Christians generally hold that persons are partly or wholly composed of an immaterial, immortal soul. Among secular philosophers, not even the holdout dualists find the idea of a soul to be sensible or helpful in understanding mentality. And so on.

Here, then, is our problem: which approach should we take—the perspective of intuition-driven analytic rationalism, the perspective of revelation-driven Christianity, or something else altogether? To answer “all of the above” results in inconsistent beliefs. Perhaps one method could be shown to be uniquely superior to the alternative perspectives, in which case it alone ought to be pursued and the others discarded. That is not very likely in the case of intuition-driven rationalism and Christian revelation, however, as both are sophisticated, well-developed approaches concerned with internal consistency and held in reflective equilibrium. Moreover, both approaches treat their fundamental data (intuitions and revelations, respectively) as basic and noninferential. Thus it is not very likely that the perspective of Christian revelation will be shown to be epistemically superior to that of analytic rationalism, or vice versa.

Mark McLeod-Harrison agrees that (1) there are different doxastic perspectives as outlined above, (2) they yield conflicting results, and (3) we cannot show one method to be superior to another.² So far so good. An obvious

1. Also known as the “Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit” (Plantinga) and “Christian Mystical Practice” (Alston).

2. All of which I argue for in chap. 2 of *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) and McLeod-Harrison endorses on page 417 of “Hales’s

response at this point is to embrace skepticism—points (1)–(3) above result in an antinomy and perhaps the best thing to conclude is that we have no philosophical knowledge at all. There are many incompatible paths to beliefs about philosophical topics, all those paths look about equally promising, yet they arrive at different locations. Therefore we have no clue about which path is the right one, the one that will take us to the truth. Left in a state of *aporia*, we have no knowledge of these topics at all.

The skeptic's challenge is not, as McLeod-Harrison suggests,³ that we are simply ignorant of which is the right perspective to adopt. The challenge is that we cannot know which is the right perspective and so philosophical knowledge is impossible. Now, I have argued that the skeptical response is not the right way to go because philosophical skepticism leads to a certain sort of paradox, namely, the Knower Paradox. Here is an outline of the problem.

Philosophical skepticism =df. knowledge of propositions concerning philosophical topics is impossible.

- (1) The definiens of "philosophical skepticism" expresses a proposition concerning a philosophical topic, namely, that knowledge of propositions concerning philosophical topics is impossible.
- (2) It follows directly that if philosophical skepticism is true, then it is impossible to know that philosophical skepticism is true.
- (3) Since the conditional that is the content of (2) is also a philosophical proposition, it follows that it is impossible to know "if philosophical skepticism is true, then it is impossible to know that philosophical skepticism is true."

The conclusion in (3) is deeply puzzling, since it states that something easy to grasp and that we have proven with simple deductive logic, is unknowable even by God. McLeod-Harrison mistakenly takes the preceding argument to be a sort of self-refutation argument,⁴ and then offers up a way to escape self-refutation formally analogous to the way I proposed relativists can elude the famous self-refutation problem faced by global relativism. However, McLeod-Harrison is off chasing a red herring, since I am not arguing that skepticism is in any way self-refuting. The problem for skepticism about philosophical propositions that I am attempting to highlight is that it leads to a version of the Knower Paradox. Perhaps it is not a showstopper for a theory that it results in a paradox of this sort; I am not sure whether the Knower Paradox is as bad as paradoxes with propositions that have unstable truth-values, like the Russell Paradox. But it is certainly not a good thing either. My conclusion is not that philosophical skepticism is thereby

Argument for Philosophical Relativism," *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008): 411–23.

3. McLeod-Harrison, "Hales's Argument for Philosophical Relativism," 418.

4. *Ibid.*, 418–19.

refuted,⁵ but rather that any solution to a problem that incorporates a paradox is a solution of last resort. Since skepticism about philosophical propositions yields a paradox, we should keep looking for a better approach to solving the antinomy of incompatible doxastic perspectives about philosophical knowledge. Fortunately, McLeod-Harrison agrees with me that we should eschew skepticism if at all possible and find another way.

The solution that I propose and defend in my book is that we should accept relativism about philosophical propositions. That is, we should hold that philosophical propositions are true in some doxastic perspectives and false in others. For example, it may be that “there are immortal noncorporeal souls” is true in the perspective of traditional revelation-driven Christianity, and false in the perspective of intuition-driven analytic rationalism. McLeod-Harrison rejects relativism, instead embracing an Alstonian doxastic conservatism.

Alston draws an extended analogy between revelation and sense perception. Both are basic belief acquiring methods that produce defeasible beliefs that function as data in the development of more comprehensive theoretical systems. Alston imagines incommensurable perceptual doxastic practices that produce results incompatible with each other, but are internally consistent and equally fruitful in the accommodation of past and future data. Alston writes that “in the absence of an external reason for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me to take is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world.”⁶ In short, upon recognizing that there are alternative approaches to understanding the world, alternatives that appear every bit as legitimate as your own way but produce opposite results, what you as an epistemologist devoted to the truth must do is: *absolutely nothing*.

Anyone who believes in absolute truths—that whatever is true is true in all perspectives—should regard this ostrich approach with slack-jawed incredulity. What Alston and McLeod-Harrison regard as rational is to select randomly from an array of apparently equal belief-forming methods and then remain convinced that this random selection will produce knowledge of the absolute truth. One can only assume that if they were to go to Las Vegas, Alston and McLeod-Harrison would go up to the roulette wheel, note that there are thirty-eight equivalent slots that the ball might drop into, arbitrarily pick #17, proceed to persuade themselves that #17 will be a winner,

5. As McLeod-Harrison thinks (cf. “Hales’s claim is that skepticism is self-refuting” [McLeod-Harrison, “Hales’s Argument for Philosophical Relativism,” 420]).

6. William Alston, “Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God,” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 203, 204, quoted in McLeod-Harrison, “Hales’s Argument for Philosophical Relativism,” 421–2.

and bet their paychecks.⁷ McLeod-Harrison concedes that this view gives him “some philosophical discomfort,” like an academic hangnail, I suppose, worth chewing on but nothing life-altering. Yet he is still willing to bet his paycheck on a random number.

Alston claims that his own doxastic practice serves him well in guiding his activity in the world, by which he means that the beliefs thereby formed are internally consistent and coherent and capable of being held in reflective equilibrium. Unless he is ready to endorse a coherence theory of truth, he cannot mean that he has any evidence his doxastic practice is getting him to the truth at all, since there are alternative incommensurable practices that yield equally coherent sets. At this point the skeptical alternative looks mighty appealing: we do not know which slot the roulette ball will drop into and we do not know which doxastic perspective to adopt in order to arrive at the truth about philosophical propositions. We do not know the winning number, and we do not know the truth. Unlike roulette, where eventually the ball will drop and we will know the winning number, there are no means to adjudicate among competing doxastic perspectives on philosophical topics and thus we *cannot* know which philosophical propositions are absolutely true.

McLeod-Harrison thinks it is “more reasonable to stick with the means of knowing one has than to leap to Hales’s philosophical relativism.”⁸ Yet, as I have just argued above, if one is an absolutist about truth, then there is no reason whatsoever to maintain that one’s doxastic practice is a means of knowing instead of a route to error. Ironically, it is reasonable to stick with one’s own doxastic perspective precisely when one *endorses* relativism. When philosophical truths are merely relatively true, then the perspective of Christian revelation is a means of knowing and so is the doxastic practice of analytic rationalism. When two epistemic roads diverge in a yellow wood, and sorry you could not travel both and be one traveler, you can rest assured that they will both lead you to the truth when you accept relativism. Otherwise, like Frost’s hiker, you can randomly pick between or among equally appealing paths and then tell others ages and ages hence how virtuous you were for taking the road you did, even though the options were indistinguishable. If you are an absolutist, the epistemic road to Damascus may be taking you to the truth or to complete and utter ignorance, but either way you should not be complacent and self-satisfied about your choice.

One final salvo that McLeod-Harrison launches concerns whether my sort of relativism will entail an epistemic theory of truth. He writes,

Hales spills several bottles of ink showing that relativism is compatible with certain epistemic accounts of truth, noting that such compat-

7. In case I am being too subtle or obscure here, let roulette slot = doxastic practice, the winning number = the truth, and paycheck = belief.

8. McLeod-Harrison, “Hales’s Argument for Philosophical Relativism,” 422.

ibility is not entailment. He also argues for relativism's compatibility with various nonepistemic accounts of truth. While I think Hales is right on both matters, I think his time is not well spent on those issues. The real question is, does Hales's defense of philosophical relativism entail an epistemic account of truth? The answer, I believe, is yes.⁹

There are good logical reasons not to follow McLeod-Harrison down this path. Notice that he accepts the reasons that I provide as premises for my defense of relativism; it is just that he is not sufficiently convinced that relativism is preferable to skepticism. In the paragraph quoted above, McLeod-Harrison agrees with me that relativism is compatible with both an epistemic theory of truth and with nonepistemic theories; that is, it is not the case that relativism entails an epistemic theory. No problem so far. But McLeod-Harrison then adds his own contention that the reasons to accept relativism entail an epistemic account of truth. Unfortunately, adding this assumption results in an inconsistency. Here is the proof.

Let p = the reasons I give to accept relativism, q = relativism, and r = the epistemic theory of truth.

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| (1) p | primary assumption, defended by Hales, accepted by McLeod-Harrison |
| (2) $\neg(q \rightarrow r)$ | primary assumption, defended by Hales, accepted by McLeod-Harrison |
| (3) $p \rightarrow r$ | primary assumption, defended by McLeod-Harrison |
| (4) $\neg(\neg q \vee r)$ | 2 implication |
| (5) $\neg\neg q \wedge \neg r$ | 4 DeMorgan's Law |
| (6) $\neg r$ | 5 \wedge elimination |
| (7) r | 1, 3 <i>modus ponens</i> |
| (8) $r \wedge \neg r$ | 6, 7 \wedge introduction |

In other words, if one takes my defense of philosophical relativism and adds the assumption (as McLeod-Harrison does), that this defense entails an epistemic account of truth, then a contradiction can be derived. McLeod-Harrison and I are in agreement about premises (1) and (2). Clearly, it is premise (3) that must be jettisoned. Thus we have a splendid reason to deny that the reasons to accept relativism entail an epistemic theory of truth.

The problem of incommensurable doxastic perspectives is deep and troubling, and none of the possible solutions is wholly appealing. I have argued that neither skepticism nor Alstonian complacency is an acceptable response to the problem. If we want to retain the view that there are philosophical propositions and they have truth values, we would do well to conclude that they have those truth values merely relative to doxastic perspective.

9. Ibid.