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Much "To-Do" about Nothing: Hale's Skeptical Relativism, and Basic Doxastic Perspectives

Mark McLeod-Harrison

George Fox University, mmcleodharriso@georgefox.edu

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Steven Hales’s defense of his argument for philosophical relativism found in “What to Do about Incommensurable Doxastic Perspectives” challenges a number of different claims I made in my “Hales’s Argument for Philosophical Relativism.” One challenge is that I have misunderstood his argument and he thus clarifies his original intention. The second challenge is that the Alstonian-inspired alternative I gave simply misses the mark, wherein Hales chides Alston and me for having our epistemological heads in the sand. The third is an attempt to show that a number of my claims, taken together, lead to a contradiction. In keeping with Hales’s sometime literary allusions, I hope to show that Hales response is much “to-do” about nothing.

In the aforementioned response to my criticism, Hales argues the following.

1. There is more than one internally consistent yet basic doxastic practice, each of which generates philosophical propositions (and hence, knowledge claims).
2. The deliverances of these various practices, when compared across practices, conflict with one another.
3. Without any rational means by which to pick the practice that generates true beliefs, one’s options are to retreat to skepticism about philosophical propositions (and the concomitant knowledge claims) or move to relativism about philosophical propositions (where what is true is relative to doxastic perspective).

ABSTRACT: Steven Hales’s defense of his philosophical relativism in “What to Do about Incommensurable Doxastic Perspectives” challenges a number of my criticisms made in my “Hales’s Argument for Philosophical Relativism.” I respond to each of these challenges and make a number of further observations about Hales’s position.

(4) Taking the skepticism route leads one to a version of the Knower’s Paradox (which he takes to be a solution of last resort).

(5) Therefore, philosophical propositions are not absolute but relative to doxastic perspective.

While I agree with (1) and (2), I disagree with (3)—an Alstonian approach is a third alternative. Nevertheless, in my earlier criticism, I claimed Hales’s argument was that skepticism is self-refuting. In fact, I took him to be offering two reasons to pick relativism over skepticism, the first being skepticism’s self-refutation and the second the Knower’s Paradox. I had no particular response to the Knower’s Paradox and therefore said nothing of it. I only took up what I thought was his first argument, leaving the Knower’s Paradox to its own fate. In his reply, Hales denies that he was showing skepticism self-refuting but that his whole discussion of skepticism was aimed at the conclusion that skepticism leads to a version of the Knower’s Paradox.

But I think there is some good textual evidence that, at the least, his book’s claims were misleading if, in fact, his discussion was aimed only at showing that skepticism leads to the knower’s paradox. Consider this claim: “The skeptical position looks strong—too strong, as it turns out. The skeptical alternative appears self-defeating, and so skepticism is not a viable response to the problems raised so far.” If that does not claim that skepticism is self-refuting, I do not know what would. So unless he means something different by self-defeating than self-refuting, it seems the onus is on Hales to show that my reading of his text is completely off.

However, to avoid getting into a philosophical spitting match about who said what and when, let us apply the principle of charity. In short, let us allow Hales’s current expression of his earlier intention stand. Let us allow, in fact, that I previously misread his claims. Even if I did, however, much of what I said in my earlier criticism still stands. Giving Hales the benefit of the doubt, namely, that his intention was to argue not that skepticism is self-refuting but rather it leads to a version of the Knower’s Paradox, I still do not see his conclusion. In my “Hales’s Argument for Philosophical Relativism,” I raised the question, What does Hales mean by the term “can’t” in his original schematization of the challenge to skepticism, where he wrote “If skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we can’t know the truth of any philosophical proposition.” I assumed he meant something like “impossible,” which, apparently, he did, for that is how he characterizes the position in “What to Do about Incommensurable Doxastic Practices.” My earlier point was not to ignore his characterization but rather to suggest that his account of skepticism is not the only legitimate one. While his version of skepticism certainly leads to the Knower’s Paradox, one cannot just pick

and choose the version of skepticism because it leads to the conclusion one wants (namely, the Knower’s Paradox, which Hales finds to be “certainly not a good thing,” thus choosing relativism over skepticism). My point now, even granting his goal of understanding skepticism as moving toward the Knower’s Paradox, is that there is another version of skepticism available that sidesteps his whole argument and does not (at least obviously) lead to the Knower’s Paradox. When skepticism is defined in such a way that knowledge is impossible, then the Knower’s Paradox might rear up. But if skepticism simply claims that we do not know but adds that we might not know that either, the Knower’s Paradox keeps its head down. Thus, sidestepping skepticism is not as simple as Hales makes it sound. If my weaker version of skepticism remains a viable alternative, Hales’s argument for relativism simply does not go through, for it seems he would have to respond not just where knowledge is impossible but where we simply do not have it, ever, as a matter of fact.

A second issue, newly raised here, is that I think Hales probably oversimplifies the Christian doxastic practice and its relationship to “intuition-driven analytic rationalism.” It is not as if the Christian philosopher does not appeal to intuition. Instead the intuitions are just different from her non-Christian peers. Of course, she adds revelatory propositions to her intuitive framework. In fact, many of the list of disagreements (at least in the essay under consideration) are moral issues, and while the Christian moral philosopher may begin with something revealed, she could very likely go on to defend the views on more religiously neutral grounds, using the same or similar tools as those of the “intuition-driven” philosopher. Further, the breadth of views among Christian philosophers is likely much broader than Hales’s comments suggest. The consensus on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia is far from total, any more than it is among the intuition-driven analytic rationalists. It is worth noting that Hales is somewhat inconsistent in describing Christians, sometimes appealing to the (Roman) Catholic Church and other times more Protestant views. The differences there on moral issues can be quite astounding! When speaking of more metaphysical issues (the nature of Jesus’s atoning work or that God would require a homicide to motivate divine forgiveness), Hales’s appeal is likewise to conflicting moral intuitions between Christian philosophers and secular ones. So if there is a relativism across the two epistemic perspectives, it would probably take a lot more sorting out than Hales has done. In short, who appeals to philosophical intuition and when and where it is used is likely more complex than Hales describes. While intuition-driven and Christian philosophical practices may be basic, a person may, in fact, engage in both in a parallel manner in which one can engage in perceptual practice and religious practice together. If that is true, delineating when a practice is truly basic may be much more difficult
than at first appears. A good deal of moral decisions may, in fact, be shared across aspects of the basic practices.

Hales does mention one more purely metaphysical issue, namely, the soul, wherein secular and Christian folk are likely to disagree. But one can hardly capture the entirety of philosophical Christendom on this issue either. It is not entirely clear to many Christian philosophers whether there is an incorporeal soul. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body itself might give one pause here. While it is likely true that many Christian philosophers are substance dualists, certainly not all are. I am not, for one, at least on most days. I propose that although the percentages of those holding various views would be distributed differently, secular and Christian philosophers might have something close to the same number of different views on the nature of the mind or soul. After all, Plato was not a Christian and, if anything, the Christian church was influenced more by Plato than by scripture on this matter (in my opinion).

One area where secular and Christian beliefs clearly conflict is over the issue of God’s existence. Here we might find some more clear way of distinguishing the basic deliverances of Christian versus intrinsic-driven epistemic practices. One presumes, according to Hales’s view, that the proposition “God exists and is the loving creator of the universe” will be true in the Christian perspective but false in the secular rationalist perspective. This is, of course, a large issue not be handled in a few paragraphs. I will, nonetheless, provide a brief set of suggestions for consideration.

Before making my suggestions, it should be noted that Hales assumes that I am critical of his argument because I am an absolutist about truth. Hales has, in fact, no evidence for this assumption. That I think his argument for relativism fails does not entail that relativism is not true. In fact, I hold a largely relativist position, more extensive, in some ways, than Hales’s view. Having noted that important caveat, I can now point out that Hales spends some time in his book and in other places rejecting relativisms based in conceptual schemes and defends his propositional cum epistemic perspective. I take a conceptual scheme approach, inspired by Nelson Goodman and Michael Lynch. However in my approach God’s existence is not dependent, strictly speaking, on any human noetic structure. God is, to use Lynch’s terminology, a “virtual absolute” that is, something that exists (or a proposition that is true) in every conceptual scheme but independent of none. I then suggest that human conceptual schemes interact with the divine conceptual scheme in which God’s being obtains. I will not take the time to defend all


that here but interested readers might peruse my essays noted below. With this very brief notation as a back drop, I propose the following problem with Hales’s account of relativism.

In general, as a Christian theist, I find something deeply odd about Hales’s view. In particular I find curious the result that the statement “God exists” (or any of a host of other theistic claims entailing that God exists) is true only in religious doxastic perspectives. To get at this curiosity, suppose some well-known senior philosopher, immersed deeply in the intuition-driven analytic rationalism in which Hales finds his philosophical home, reaches the well-thought out conclusion that solipsism is true. That, of course, is a philosophical position the vast majority of other philosophers would reject. However, according to Hales’s view, from the solipsistic perspective, there are no other philosophers, really. My moral is not far to seek, namely, even if relativism holds, some philosophical propositions seem to withstand the noetic machinations of philosophers (whether conceptual or epistemic). It just does not seem likely that because some solipsistic philosopher comes to hold that there are no other people that there are no other people—conceptual scheme or epistemic perspective notwithstanding. While some philosophical propositions are what we might call limitedly relative (relative to only some schemes, perspectives, and so on), others are instead virtually absolute. On Hales’s account, they would be true in each and every perspective but independent of none. This does not make them absolute—that is, independent of every perspective—but virtually absolute—true in every perspective, independent of none. I propose that the proposition “humans exist” and the proposition that “God exists” are two such propositions. Here, too, is the curiosity I find in what I think would be Hales’s treatment of the central deliverance of the Christian epistemic practice, namely, God exists. Furthermore, given the Christian understanding of God, God too is a being with noetic influence on the ways the world is—a very important one, in fact. Just as the solipsistic philosopher cannot so easily do away with other humans via epistemic or conceptual perspective, neither can the secular intuition-driven relativist so easily do away with God. Some things must fall outside the influence of human noetic workings. A totalizing relativism is, as Alston points out, problematic. The only question is, what falls outside human noetic influence? I propose that, at God’s core being, God does. Nev-


8. See William Alston, A Sensible Metaphysical Realism (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), and my “God and (Nearly) Universal Pluralistic Antirealism.”
ertheless, because God is involved in conceptual schemes alongside humans and indeed is the creator of humans, God is relative to all human schemes. But for a defense and further explanation of that, the reader will have to look elsewhere.

I mentioned that Hales’s takes me to be an absolutist about truth. In fact, I simply do not think one should get to a relativist view via his epistemic argument and I do not think Hales succeeds in so doing. This makes a number of his comments and responses irrelevant to my own view of these matters, I did say in my earlier essay that I am not inclined to take a skeptical way out of the problem of incommensurable doxastic practices. I am still not. However, my tweaking of Alston’s way out notes only that it seems less rational to leap to relativism than it does to admit that one does not know that one’s assumed path to knowledge is an actual path to knowledge. As I noted, the Alston-type of response leads to some philosophical discomfort. However, this is not just some academic hangnail but rather making a difficult choice between two hard options. On the one hand, I might have gone deeply astray (whoops, Christianity is false, and I lie rotting in my grave someday!). On the other hand, Christianity is true, but only according to what my doxastic perspective provides for. Neither one of these is my first choice, but if I have to make it, rationally I would say there is nothing superior about the second. Even if the Knower’s Paradox were to result from skepticism, I might be inclined, rationally, to take that route rather than Hales’s relativism—and I hold to a quite extensive relativism myself! It is not the relativism I am opposed to so much as Hales’s version of it and the means by which he arrives there.

Furthermore, Hales describes the Alston and McLeod-Harrison view as allowing one 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.” I doubt Alston would agree, and I certainly do not. Humans do not, typically, simply choose our doxastic practices, at least not so simply. If we could, I suppose my advice to Hales would be to switch doxastic practices quickly, for on the Christian view, there is an afterlife with God. On the secular view, there is not—just moldy bodies in graves. I would pick a doxastic view that is a little more suited to longevity, myself. But in fact, it is not so easy, as Pascal admits, even after his famous wager is laid out. One can choose to take holy water, but it might be some time before one’s epistemic worldview is washed clean.

One final but important response. Hales says that there are good logical reasons for not following me down the path suggesting that Hales’s defense of philosophical relativism entails an epistemic account of truth. He writes:

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.

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. \( \neg(\neg q \lor r) \) 2 implication
5. \( \neg q \land \neg r \) 4 DeMorgan’s Law
6. \( r \) 5 \( \land \) elimination
7. \( r \) 1, 3 modus ponens
8. \( r \land \neg r \) 6, 7 \( \land \) introduction

His proof, however, is faulty, for his use of “\( p \)” in lines (1) and (3) are, I believe, equivocal. He says that I accept his reasons to accept relativism (his first “\( p \)”). But I do not. I accept as true that there is deep problem with apparently incommensurable doxastic practices. I do not accept that this is a reason to accept relativism. In line (3), he says I defend \( p \rightarrow r \) but the \( p \) here is richer than the \( p \) in line (1). My criticism is not of the claim that there are incommensurable doxastic practices. Rather my criticism, which leads to my claims about epistemic notions of truth, depends on using the fact of incommensurable doxastic practices as a reason to move to relativism. This is evidenced by the quotations from Hales’s book I used (and will not repeat here) in “Hales’s Argument for Philosophical Relativism.”

Hales cannot, I believe derive a contradiction the way he does. My position is that the way Hales goes with his defense and subsequent description of relativism, he is committed to an epistemic account of truth. I reject epistemic accounts of truth as, finally, not the best way to approach relativism. It simply gives human beings too much say in what is true. My approach is rather to suggest that our epistemic practices fall out of the way we conceptualize the world(s). Hence, in the end, I am a lot more sanguine about accepting the doxastic cards we have been dealt. Indeed, on the grounds I lay out in my own version of relativism (building on observations from Nelson Goodman

11. Ibid., 206.
and Catherin Elgin), knowledge may be overrated. And if not overrated, perhaps we do not have it at all, if we take knowledge to entail knowing that we know. It is this sort of knowing that Hales's argument needs to work. Here I am skeptical.

So in response to the topic "what to do about incommensurable perspectives" I think I can say that there is nothing to do, and hence perhaps Hales's response really is much "to-do" about nothing.