

Book Symposium

A Relativist's Rejoinder

I am honoured and grateful that such fine philosophers as Professors Otávio Bueno, Henry Jackman, and Jonathan Weinberg have given my book a close and careful reading. Furthermore, I am pleased that my critics are evidently in agreement with, or are at least sympathetic to, most of the central theses of the book. None has raised concerns with (1) the analysis I give of the structure of analytic rationalism as taking intuition-generated beliefs as non-inferentially basic and then constructing theories in an effort to achieve wide reflective equilibrium, (2) the complaint that we are unable to show that intuition is more truth-conducive than religious revelation or the ritualistic use of hallucinogens, (3) the argument that we are then faced with a trilemma problem for philosophical knowledge, namely that we should be either sceptics, nihilists, or relativists about the knowledge of philosophical propositions, or (4) the modal model I give of relativism and the demonstration that relativism is internally consistent. Instead Bueno, Jackman, and Weinberg focus on my treatment of scepticism and naturalism. Let me try to assuage some of their concerns.

Reply to Otávio Bueno

It is gratifying that Bueno is so supportive of my overall project, and in particular the formal account of relativism that I give in chapter 3. I am also delighted that he found the system I develop useful for extension into a relativist treatment of mathematics. I am in agreement with him about how this might be done, and don't have a lot to add. Bueno notes that mathematical truths are traditionally understood to be necessarily true, and 'presumably would be considered then absolutely true'. But, as he is well aware, it would be a mistake to move from necessarily true to absolutely true. On p. 143 in the technical presentation of relativist logic, the alethic modalities are relative to perspectives, thus permitting the claim that necessity is perspectival. This obviously dovetails with Bueno's relativist treatment of mathematics. Mathematical claims can both be necessarily true and also merely relatively true. It is necessarily true that set theory can be finitely axiomatized with first-order logic – but only relative to the perspective of von Neumann-Bernays-Gödel set theory.

Bueno's presentation of the notion of a perspective is slightly different from my own, but I think that there is no substantial difference between the two. I emphasize the role of fundamental doxastic methods in bounding perspectives, and Bueno focuses on the comprehension principles that tell us how to understand any particular mathematical statement. Yet this may be a distinction without a difference. So certainly with respect to the first part of Bueno's comments, we are essentially in agreement.

Bueno is less sanguine about my argument against scepticism. He approvingly cites the argument against scepticism I offer on p. 92 of the book, and agrees that it is a successful argument against common understandings of scepticism. However, Bueno considers my argument powerless against *Pyrrhonian* scepticism. According to Sextus Empiricus, the Pyrrhonian sceptic makes no claims whatsoever. In Bueno's words, 'she is only pointing out that, *according to the dogmatist's standards*, the *dogmatic* philosopher lacks knowledge'. Now, this sounds as if the Pyrrhonian sceptic *is* making a claim nevertheless, a conditional one:

- If one accepts the dogmatist's standards, then the dogmatic philosopher lacks knowledge.

But Bueno denies even this. He claims that it is the dogmatist who must accept the conditional claim and that the Pyrrhonic sceptic is simply helpfully pointing this out. (Although it still seems to me that 'pointing it out' has epistemic force and is so a contention of some sort.) In this way the Pyrrhonic sceptic is aloof, above the fray, committed to nothing, never wrong, never right. Thus interpreted Bueno takes scepticism to be friendly to relativism. The Pyrrhonic stance is superperspectival. His remarks on this are tantalizing, and I wonder what grounds the Pyrrhonist would or could have for selecting among competing perspectives. If relativism is right and philosophical propositions – or whatever mathematical ones Bueno recommends – are true only in some perspectives but not in others, and you are a sort of Pyrrhonic god, how do you pick which perspective to go with? Or do you?

Even if Bueno is right about Pyrrhonism, my argument against the non-Pyrrhonic sceptic of the Descartes/Hume strain still stands. *That* sort of scepticism is a real threat to my defence of relativism. If we are confronted with a plethora of basic-belief-acquiring methods that yield incompatible theories that can severally be held in reflective equilibrium, and we want to be absolutists, then exactly one of those methods will get us to the (absolute) truth. But since we have no reason to prefer any fundamental method over any other, it is just luck if we pick the one that leads us to the truth. It is here that the sceptic pipes up. Bueno agrees that I successfully rebut the dangerous sceptic, he just argues that I don't effectively rebut the relativist-friendly Pyrrhonian sceptic. OK, I can live with that!

Reply to Henry Jackman

One of the central themes in the book, and certainly in chapter 2, is that philosophical knowledge faces a trilemma: that rationalists are unable to privilege our own methodology of the use of rational intuition over competitor methods that use different data to found their theories upon. Therefore if traditional analytic rationalism really does get us to the truth, then we are just fortunate that we picked the right method—we could have just as easily chosen revelation or peyote. In this case it looks as if scepticism wins out: we don't actually know the truth of any philosophical proposition, since it is no more than luck that we picked the right route to the truth. Alternatively, we could choose to be nihilists-cum-naturalists. There are no properly *philosophical* propositions. Either such putative propositions are ultimately non-cognitive or they are in fact empirical and knowable solely through the methods of the natural sciences. The final option is one that I defend, relativism.

Whereas I vote for the relativist way out, Jackman seems to waffle between the sceptics and the naturalists. The appeal of naturalism I can see, although I don't think that the hard-core naturalist project is going to pan out, as I discuss in my reply to Weinberg. But is relativism really so bad that *scepticism* looks like a better idea?

Jackman raises two objections to my story: the first is about philosophical propositions, and the second about the role of intuitions. According to me, there is a class of propositions that are treated by philosophers – we try to figure out which of these propositions are true, which ones might reasonably be believed, which ones are false, and so on. The problem with scepticism is that, apart from its intrinsic lack of appeal, a capitulation of our entire profession, it leads to a form of the knower paradox. As Jackman accurately summarizes, if scepticism about philosophical propositions were true, then not only would we be unable to know that it was true, but we wouldn't even be able to know that we couldn't know it was true. All despite the fact that we can apparently prove from the assumption of scepticism that we don't know the truth of scepticism.

Jackman agrees that this is a perfectly fine argument for epistemic propositions, and he agrees that it is a fine argument if all philosophical propositions are in the same boat as epistemic ones. But he denies that they are all in the same boat. He holds that 'philosophical proposition' fails to demarcate a kind or class of proposition at all. Indeed, he claims that "‘Philosophical proposition’ lumps together a fairly heterogeneous group of topics, some for which scepticism may seem to be the most plausible response to intractable disagreement (theology, nature of mind), others for which nihilism might be more tempting (ethics), and perhaps some for which relativism should be preferred (propositions about epistemic justification).'

I think that this is a bad plan for two reasons. The first is that there is a strong *prima facie* case to be made for thinking that there really is a class of

philosophical propositions, even if its borders are vague, and even if we have made mistakes in the past about which propositions are properly philosophical and which ones are empirical. For one, I hold (and there is a long and distinguished legacy before me) that the propositions debated by philosophers are putative necessities. Of course, there are non-philosophical propositions that are also necessities (e.g. mathematics), so more is needed than that. In addition, though, analytic rationalists all employ approximately the same methodology for deciding what to believe in ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, philosophy of mind, and the other subfields. That is, the examination of cases, the appeal to intuitions about these cases, and the subsequent rationalization of these intuitions into theories that can be held in reflective equilibrium. If Jackman is right, why are we all using the same tools to address these unconnected, disparate topics?

There is an even worse problem for his view as well. Jackman thinks that all the topics that philosophers address really are such a heterogeneous group that we should be sceptics about some, nihilists about others, and relativists about still others. If nothing marks the class of philosophical propositions, then philosophy as a discipline is literally empty, or perhaps too full: 'philosophy' becomes a portmanteau term full of unrelated topics. But does anyone really think that the metaphysics of personal identity is irrelevant to ethics? Or that the philosophy of mind is irrelevant to the philosophy of language? To understanding concepts? Or to the free-will debate? Does anyone think that understanding human cognition is irrelevant to the ontology of secondary qualities? Is rational choice theory unrelated to natural theology? (Hello? Pascal? Call your office). The problems of philosophy are deeply interconnected with each other. It would be astonishing in the extreme if all these topics were as heterogeneous as Jackman suggests, that they didn't together form something properly called 'philosophical'.

And look at what this hydrogen bomb of a position is hauled out to kill: my argument *against* scepticism. Think about that for a moment. Is relativism really that terrifying?

Jackman's second main complaint against me concerns my analysis of the methodology of analytic rationalism, and my treatment of rational intuition. Keep in mind that I am not advocating either rationalism or intuition – I'm defending relativism. In chapter 1 what I try to do is present the best case and the most cogent interpretation that I can for our familiar philosophical practice. According to Jackman,

For Hales, the so-called 'method of intuitions' involves

- (a) Starting with your 'rational intuitions' about knowledge, beauty, etc.
- (b) Bringing these intuitions into wide reflective equilibrium.

He then suggests

However, there is an alternative model of philosophical practice that looks something like:

- (a*) Start with what you are currently inclined to believe about knowledge, beauty, etc.
- (b*) Bring those beliefs into wide reflective equilibrium.

But I have absolutely no idea how this supposed alternative model is supposed to work. According to me, when we attempt to develop theories in reflective equilibrium, not only do we take into account our original intuitions on the topic, but we must also incorporate the intuitively plausible counterexamples offered by our honourable opposition. Sometimes we stick to our guns and accept the undesirable consequences of our views as highlighted by the proffered counterexample; sometimes we revise our theories to get around the counterexample. On Jackman's alternative approach, where all we do is bring our current beliefs about philosophical topics into reflective equilibrium, what role is there for counterexamples or counterintuitive consequences of one's view? If all I care about is finding some way to systematize my current beliefs, how will anyone argue with me? I have never considered (and hence do not believe) whatever cases or examples they come up with, so under the Jackman model I needn't incorporate them in my theory. How would we revise our beliefs? In light of what? Not demonstrations of counterintuitive consequences of our views, presumably. It is hard to see the appeal of Jackman's proposed alternative. It seems to me that either his proposal has little to do with actual philosophical practice (which is what I was trying to capture in the book) or it is simply what we already do under the more familiar rubric of intuition.

However, even if my story about how analytic rationalism really works is wrong, or not completely right, it doesn't matter all that much. Remember: I'm not defending it! I tried to give rationalism the best showing that I could, but I'm defending *relativism*. If you want to defend rationalism, you need to show why it is better than alternative methods like revelation or the ritualistic use of hallucinogens. Jackman doesn't try to do that, and admits that the arguments he gives are ultimately not that unfriendly to my main project of defending the coherence of relativism. About that, I agree.

Reply to Jonathan Weinberg

In *RFP* I argue that philosophical intuitions about cases function as data points. Rationalist philosophers use these data to develop theories. As I say in a passage from the book that Weinberg approvingly cites,

The beliefs that rational intuition produces are noninferential, basic ones that are nevertheless fallible and revisable. The resulting

network of beliefs is then adjusted and modified to attain wide reflective equilibrium, with some intuitions ultimately rejected and others retained as we systematize our philosophical views and make them congruent with our scientific knowledge. In this manner philosophers reach a rational consensus about the nature of the mind, the scope and limits of knowledge, [etc.].

(pp. 42–3)

This is the method of analytic rationalism. As I said, Weinberg seems to endorse everything I've so far said. So what's his beef? In the paper he co-wrote with Nichols and Stich, he seems to *dismiss* intuitions as having any epistemic value at all. That is, his project is a *debunking* one. Philosophers claim to have the same intuitions as the 'folk', and use these intuitions in their philosophizing. The problem here, according to WNS, is that the folk have systematically variable intuitions about various kinds of philosophical cases. Therefore appealing to the intuitive wisdom of the proletariat is a non-starter – the proletariat have wildly inconsistent intuitions. Therefore appeals to intuition have no epistemic credence whatsoever.

But *that* can't be right – Weinberg said that in the great harvest of intuition, we need to separate the epistemic wheat from the chaff. So Weinberg doesn't actually want to debunk intuition. He wants to keep some intuitions and dismiss the rest. Well, I agree with that, and claimed in the book that rationalists are best served not by citing the supposed wisdom of the folk, but by consulting the trained intuitions of the experts. We get much more agreement about basic intuitions among analytically trained philosophers than we find in presenting Gettier cases to random passers-by. I offered an analogy to the physical intuitions of Richard Feynman. Feynman ought to trust his intuitions far more than those of his Intro to Physics students.

But Weinberg rejects this too. For reasons I couldn't quite decipher, he thinks that my analogy to Feynman is an 'appeal to science' and that this proves that '[philosophers'] intuitions aren't independent in the relevant sense'. That's a mistake. I'm offering an argument from analogy here, not appealing to science, much less making a scientific argument. In any case, Weinberg claims that my analogy between Feynman's scientific intuitions and the modal intuitions of expert philosophers is inadequate. He claims

The reason we would trust Feynman's intuitions is that *we have good reasons to trust them*, of several different sorts. We have independent evidence that they were trained on an epistemically meritorious set of propositions; we can tell a plausible scientific story about why they track the truths that they purport to disclose to us; and we can trust that even when they are wrong, they will not lead us hopelessly astray,

because we have good empirical means of corroborating or correcting them as needed. None of these things are true of philosophers' intuitions on the whole.

This is either wrong or question-begging. Do we have independent evidence that philosophical intuitions were trained on an epistemically meritorious set of propositions? Well, if you think that top graduate schools impart philosophical knowledge and train their students in how to get more of the same, then yes. Can we tell a plausible scientific story about why they track the truths that they purport to disclose to us? If we insist on a 'scientific story', then this requirement simply begs the question in favour of the naturalist. If we drop the scientific requirement and just ask whether we can tell a plausible story about why philosophical intuitions track the truths that they purport to disclose to us, then yes, I think that we *can* tell such a story. I tried to do so in my book. Of course, I don't think that rationalism provides us with the absolute truth, but that's a different matter. Weinberg's third claim about why Feynman's empirical intuitions are supposedly better than rationalist intuitions is that we can trust that even when they are wrong, they will not lead us hopelessly astray, because we have good empirical means of corroborating or correcting them as needed. Again, an insistence on 'empirical' here assumes the very thing that the naturalist needs to prove, that science and the scientific method is the sole legitimate method of gaining knowledge. Setting that aside, do we have a means of corroborating or correcting philosophical intuitions? Yes, we do – this is the procedure of reflective equilibrium. Philosophers routinely reject their own intuitions when they find that those intuitions cannot be adequately integrated with otherwise excellent theory or with other intuitions.

Thus, apart from Weinberg's emphasis on *scientific* stories and *empirical* means of corroboration, the rational intuitions of trained philosophers about philosophical propositions stack up fine against Feynman's empirical intuitions about physics. So poll the masses all you want. Who cares what they think about Gettier cases?

In any case, Weinberg is apparently stepping away from the thesis that social-scientific investigation is really going to debunk philosophical intuition. He is obviously far more sympathetic to intuition than he is to either revelation or the ritualistic use of hallucinogens. Not too surprising, really. We were all trained to respect appeals to intuition, and it is disturbing to see them lumped with what (we rationalist intellectuals) see as disreputable epistemic methods. Weinberg claims that 'science holds out the promise of explaining *away* the appearance of evidentiality that revelation and hallucinogens seem to present', and he proceeds to cite research into cognition and evolutionary psychology. He also states that we should expect scientific psychology to give us a similar story about intuition. Unfortunately, Weinberg's claims notwithstanding, such research shows

precisely nothing about the veridicality of beliefs delivered by revelation, hallucinogens, or intuition. There are cognitive and evolutionary bases of *sense perception*, but that hardly debunks sense perception as a source of knowledge. At least, naturalists like Weinberg had better hope that it doesn't. In fact, writers like Alston and Plantinga give just this argument against naturalists eager to give scientific explanations of revelation (it's all temporal lobe seizures!). Scientific explanations of the neurological means by which we have an experience, or an evolutionary account of why we have such experiences at all, do not demonstrate that those experiences have no evidentiary value.

There can be little doubt as to Weinberg's true allegiance. The scientific method is the emperor of epistemic methods before which all others must scrape and bow. Yet this claim of empire is completely undefended. He describes the web of belief as having an 'epistemically grounded core' – deliverances of rational intuition that cohere with this core may be retained; *noblesse oblige*. But should they dare to conflict, then consign them to the flames; as Weinberg says, rationalism is no more than phrenology or astrology. The positivist patrimony is strong in this light.

Yet there is a deep problem for naturalism that I discuss in the book and that Weinberg fails to address in his critique: that of justifying the use of the scientific method as uniquely superior to any of intuition, revelation, or the use of hallucinogens. The reason that I do not think that the naturalists are going to win out here is that the scientific method itself is shot through with normativity. If one argues that the great virtue of the scientific method is its excellence at delivering the truth, then the value of the method is instrumental, and truth has intrinsic value. But whence the judgment that truth has intrinsic value? It sounds good (Nietzschean critiques notwithstanding), but how is the scientific method itself going to deliver the intrinsic value of truth? That the scientific method is a good method is a normative judgment, not an empirical one. Furthermore, the scientific method embodies a good many epistemic norms – the value of parsimony in the development of theory, for one. Weinberg and Nichols and Stich all help themselves to these norms without question or justification. Weinberg thinks that the only decent intuitions are the ones (if any) that get saved by empirical considerations. However, perhaps something like the reverse is true: the only decent scientific procedures are those informed by irreducibly philosophical considerations, such as the normative value of parsimony and truth.

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