

Lynch's Metaphysical Pluralism

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Pluralism, according to Michael P. Lynch, is the thesis that there are or can be more than one true story of the world; there can be incompatible but equally acceptable accounts of some subject matter.¹

The opposite view, absolutism, states that there can be only one true story about how the world is. In our ordinary lives both theses have intuitive pull. Most of us are ready to say that there is more than one right way to teach a class or more than one good way to raise children. Few would deny that there is no one uniquely best flavor of ice cream or best way to write a poem. When it comes to these issues we are all ready to be pluralists. On the other hand, most of us think that there is only one true scientific picture of the world. There is one true physics, and one correct understanding of the human body towards which medicine approaches, even if asymptotically. Some topics, like morality, seem to fall between the cracks, with our intuitions pulling towards both pluralism and absolutism.

When dealing with topics that turn crucially on individual preferences or behaviors, pluralist intuitions follow hard behind. When dealing with descriptive facts or truths, absolutist intuitions rise up. How can there be inconsistent truths about some one topic? If there are different but equally true perspectives on the world then truth is not objective; contrapositively, if truth is objective, then there are not different but equally true perspectives on the world. The purpose of Lynch's *Truth in Context* is to argue against this conditional. He maintains that metaphysical pluralism—true propositions and facts concerning the nature of reality are relative to conceptual schemes or worldviews—is compatible with realism about truth.

There are four kinds of pluralism that Lynch distinguishes (pp. 6–8). One is a vertical pluralism according to which there is more than one type of fact in the world and that different levels of fact-stating discourse are not reducible to a more basic discourse. For example, aesthetic or moral facts may not be reducible to physical facts, and so truths about ethics and truths about chem-

¹ All page numbers in the text refer to Michael P. Lynch, *Truth in Context: An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity*. Cambridge: MIT Press (A Bradford Book), 1998.

istry are autonomous from each other. According to horizontal pluralism, there can be incompatible facts within a single level of discourse. A horizontal pluralist about metaphysics (as Lynch is) holds that there are incompatible but equally correct metaphysical truths. Local pluralists maintain that pluralism is true about some types of facts, but not all. So one might be a pluralist about ethics, but not physics. Global pluralists think that every fact is relative.

<i>Types of pluralism</i>	Local	Global
Horizontal	1. There are incompatible but equally correct truths in some type of discourse (e.g. metaphysics, ethics, science, etc.).	3. There are incompatible but equally correct truths in any type of discourse.
Vertical	2. There are irreducible facts at different levels of discourse.	4. No type of facts is reducible to any other type of facts.

Lynch argues that (1) entails (2) and (3) entails (4). Unfortunately, these entailment claims seem to be inconsistent with one of the chief theses of the book. Lynch focuses on horizontal metaphysical pluralism, the view that there are incompatible metaphysical facts. Not only does this approach have the virtue of addressing a popular type of pluralism, but

more important... metaphysical concepts and truths are interwoven into the fabric of our conceptual schemes at a very basic level. Thus if there is a plurality of metaphysical facts, facts about ultimate reality, then prima facie at least, there could be a plurality of any sort of fact. Metaphysical pluralism plausibly implies global pluralism. (p. 8)

In other words, Lynch argues for horizontal metaphysical pluralism. To this he adds the premise that metaphysics is fundamental, and gets global horizontal pluralism. Since he has already argued that global horizontal pluralism entails global vertical pluralism, this means that relativism about metaphysical truths gives us all the pluralism we could possibly want. However, these claims appear inconsistent. Vertical pluralism denies that facts at one level of discourse can be reduced to facts at another level. At the global level this would surely mean that ethical truths, e.g., are autonomous from metaphysical facts. So how can Lynch hope to hold (a) metaphysical concepts and truths are basic to any conceptual scheme and (b) ethical facts don't depend on metaphysical concepts and truths? It doesn't look promising.

Even if his grand plans to act locally and think globally are overly optimistic, what about the local view? How can Lynch support pluralism about metaphysics? In §1.3 he defends what we might call the Intractability Argument for Pluralism, which goes something like this:

1. There are intractable metaphysical problems: puzzles of personal identity, mereology, substance, abstracta, and so forth. Advance on these problems seems to have ground to a halt, with dim prospects for real advance in the future. Global materialism and immaterialism, for example, have the same predictive power (none), have the same explanatory power with respect to nonmetaphysical issues (none), and have the same practical effects on both science and practical life (none).
2. It is because of the nature of metaphysical concepts that metaphysical debates are incapable of being absolutely resolved.
3. If metaphysical disputes cannot be resolved because of the concepts involved, then there is no objective, external fact independent of some conceptual scheme that determines the truth conditions for any particular metaphysical claim. In other words, metaphysical pluralism is true.
4. Therefore, metaphysical pluralism is true.

We might reasonably question the first two premises. Global materialism and immaterialism are meant to explain our intuitions about the nature of our experience, and predict future intuitions. It is not right to say that they have no explanatory or predictive power. But let us grant those premises for the sake of argument. Why should we take the intractability of metaphysical problems as evidence for pluralism? Lynch thinks it has something to do with those wacky metaphysical concepts. If they're really so wacky, however, perhaps the right response isn't pluralism, but *skepticism*, or maybe *nihilism*. That is, there is no reason to say "intractability means we're all right in our own way" instead of "intractability means we can't know metaphysical truths; they are ineffable" or "intractability means there just aren't any metaphysical truths; metaphysics is a series of pseudoproblems."

However Lynch might defend pluralism against objections of incoherence or emptiness, the actual *truth* of the view looks undermotivated. It could be that he's not bothered by this, as Lynch states in the introduction (p. 5) that he isn't too concerned to show that his brand of pluralism is true, but rather that it is interesting, nontrivial, internally consistent, and generally hangs together. So even in the best case, Lynch's book doesn't give us much of a reason to believe in pluralism. (Compare: solving the problem of evil doesn't

give us a reason to be a theist, it only removes a reason to be an atheist). I confess it is a bit disappointing when an author writes a whole book showing that his thesis has every virtue short of truth.

Suppose that some sort of metaphysical pluralism is true. One might argue, as many have against Putnam's internal or pragmatic realism, that reality itself is not pluralistic but that relativism enters in only at the level of our representations. Our words and concepts may be relative, but the world is not. It is curious that Lynch, who wants to preserve truth realism, is at pains to reject this argument. He distinguishes between *content relativism*, the view that there are no propositions independent of conceptual frameworks, and *fact relativism*, the view that objects exist and have properties only relative to a conceptual scheme (p. 22). Someone sympathetic to the idea that pluralism is true at the level of representations but not about the world in itself presumably defends content relativism but not fact relativism. Lynch argues that content and fact relativism are logically equivalent. In other words: when it comes to pluralism, in for a penny, in for a pound.

As borne out by Lynch's discussion of content and fact relativism, crucial to the sort of pluralism he wishes to support is the notion of a conceptual scheme. After reviewing and rejecting the Kantian model of conceptual schemes (a scheme of concepts with which any thinker informs or structures experience) and the Quinean model (a set of revisable sentences that we accept in the light of experience), Lynch defends what he calls the Wittgensteinian model (WM). According to WM, "one's conceptual scheme is... a network of general and specific concepts used in the propositions we express in language and in thought" (p. 45). Such schemes differ to the degree that they do not share basic concepts, concepts which are foundationally basic for other concepts within a given scheme yet nevertheless may shift and change over time. Like the Kantian model, WM holds that our basic concepts organize and structure our experiences; like the Quinean model, WM holds that our basic concepts are revisable. WM is the sort of conceptual scheme Lynch defends. Pluralism then becomes the thesis that there is more than one Wittgensteinian conceptual scheme.

Essential to a conceptual scheme are, of course, concepts. Chapter three is a treatment of the nature of concepts. Lynch distinguishes between two historically prominent concepts of concepts. These are the *crystalline* and *fluid* picture of concepts. The first is associated with Frege, and states that concepts have sharp edges and definite borders, and that to fully understand a concept is to understand the necessarily necessary and sufficient conditions for its application. This is a sort of logical atomism for concepts. The fluid picture of concepts is associated with Wittgenstein, and states that concepts are elastic and flexible, with vague, overlapping borders. This is connected with the work of the later Wittgenstein on games and family resemblances.

Lynch thinks that the fluid picture of concepts is more amenable for pluralism, writing that “anyone committed to the Wittgensteinian model of conceptual schemes will naturally find the fluid picture of concepts more attractive” (p. 60) and that the crystalline picture “does not fit well with the pluralist Wittgensteinian Model” (p. 59). However, he offers no argument for these claims that I can detect. Obviously, pluralism would be better off—have more broad-based appeal, be more (dare I say it?) pluralistic—if it were not wedded to any specific treatment of concepts. Since Lynch has no particular objection to the crystalline view of concepts, I am not sure why he feels the need to distance himself from that view, or put all his eggs in the “fluid concepts” basket.

Now, Lynch does offer direct arguments for the truth of the fluid concepts picture, arguments of interest in their own right. Nevertheless, this strategy has at least two problems. First, it does seem that a Lynch-style pluralist could consistently adopt the crystalline view of concepts. One could view conceptual shift, and the change of conceptual schemes as the abandonment of determinate, basic concepts. Imagine an animist who sees the world as infused with spirits and intentionality gradually becoming a scientific materialist. This seems like a definite change in worldviews, but I do not see why the change involves vague or fluid concepts, or disagreements about the application of concepts. Rather, the animist just *gives up* her old way of looking at the world, with its attendant concepts, and adopts a whole new outlook with a replacement set of concepts.

A second, deeper problem is that Lynch’s entire motivation for metaphysical pluralism was the idea that metaphysical debates are intractable. Yet here he is coming down on one side of the metaphysical debate over concepts. If the fluid picture of concepts is true and defensible then some metaphysical debates are tractable. If some debates are tractable, then metaphysical pluralism is unmotivated. Therefore, by transitivity, if the fluid picture of concepts is true and defensible, then metaphysical pluralism is unmotivated. This is a serious problem—if metaphysical pluralism is unmotivated, then who really cares what treatment of concepts works best with pluralism? An absolutist certainly wouldn’t; one might as well ask a materialist to care about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Perhaps Lynch would want to rejoin that some metaphysical debates have definite solutions, and others don’t. The proper attitude towards those in the latter category is pluralism. An absolutist would not be too persuaded by this divide-and-conquer strategy, however. How are we to decide in advance which metaphysical debates have definite solutions (as Lynch thinks is true in the case of concepts) and which are hopelessly insoluble? An absolutist would argue that, as in the case of Goldbach’s Conjecture or AIDS, the fact that no agreed-upon solution has been found is no reason to stop looking.

Many have argued that when closely examined, pluralism proves not to offer a genuine alternative to absolutism. Suppose that Smith and Johnson look into a paper bag containing three marbles. Smith accepts the principle of mereological conjunctivism: any two objects compose a third.²

Johnson rejects this principle. Consider the sentence "There are exactly three objects in the bag." Smith denies this sentence and Johnson accepts it. Following Putnam, Lynch takes this vignette to illustrate an insoluble metaphysical disagreement, one which shows the need for metaphysical pluralism.

Now, either "there are exactly three objects in the bag" has the same content in both Johnson's and Smith's conceptual schemes or it does not. If "there are exactly three objects in the bag" has the same content in both Johnson's and Smith's conceptual schemes, then Johnson will accept this proposition and Smith will reject it. Their views are inconsistent with each other and thus not equally true. If "there are exactly three objects in the bag" does not have the same content in both Johnson's and Smith's conceptual schemes, then the propositional content of the sentences they affirm and deny are relative to conceptual schemes. In this case both Johnson's assertion that there are exactly three marbles in the bag and Smith's rejection of it can both be true, for the trivial reason that they are talking past each other. Smith and Johnson are not expressing views about the same proposition. Either way, pluralism will not follow. In the first case, Johnson and Smith cannot both be right (contra pluralism) and in the second they are both right, but in a trivial and uninteresting way. Lynch calls this argument the *consistency dilemma*.

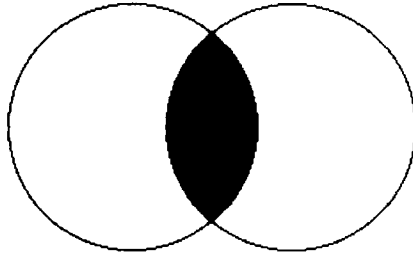
Given this dilemma, in order to have a distinct philosophical view, the pluralist must show how each of the following theses can be true (§4.2):

1. Smith and Johnson are expressing distinct propositions.
2. Smith and Johnson are expressing incompatible propositions.
3. Smith and Johnson are expressing true propositions.
4. Smith and Johnson are not employing completely different concepts of "object" or "exist" or "number"; they are not talking past one another.

Here is Lynch's solution. The metaphysician's minimal concept of an object is that an object is whatever exists. This concept, on the Wittgensteinian model, is fluid and capable of being extended out from the minimal

² Those from Harvard call this principle "mereological fusion"; those from Brown call it "mereological conjunctivism"; and those from Notre Dame call it "mereological universalism." It would be nice if some terminological agreement could be reached.

core in different appropriate yet incompatible directions. Propositional content, like the concepts they employ, is equally taffy-like, and can be pulled in different directions and so into different conceptual schemes. Lynch writes, “the pluralist strategy... is to show that the central metaphysical concepts in each case are fluid, by being either family-resemblance concepts or minimal concepts subject to divergent extensions” (p. 96). The image one arrives at is something like a Venn diagram of propositional content:



The left-hand circle indicates propositional content of “there are exactly three objects in the bag” for Smith, and the right-hand circle indicates propositional content of the same sentence for Johnson. The shaded overlap is the minimal core of shared content. So: “there are exactly three objects in the bag” means something slightly different for both Smith and Johnson. In this sense they are expressing distinct, albeit similar, propositions when they utter the phrase “there are exactly three objects in the bag.” Smith and Johnson are also expressing incompatible propositions on the grounds that they disagree about the truth value of “there are exactly three objects in the bag.” Johnson claims it is true and Smith denies it. Moreover, they are both expressing true propositions. Given the way that Smith understands the concepts of “object,” “exist” and “number” (namely, as incorporating mereological conjunctivism), his denial of “there are exactly three objects in the bag” is true. Given the way that Johnson understands the concepts of “object,” “exist” and “number” (namely, as not incorporating mereological conjunctivism), his acceptance of “there are exactly three objects in the bag” is true. Finally, our heroes are not employing completely different concepts or talking past each other, since there is the shared overlapping core.

While this is an interesting approach, it seems that a dilemma can be raised about this minimal core. Either this shared content is absolute (minimal propositional content is the same in all conceptual schemes) or it is not. If it is not absolute, then, sticking with the example above, there are conceptual schemes in which the sentence “there are exactly three objects in the bag” expresses completely different propositions with no overlapping content. If Smith and Johnson possess such conceptual schemes, then this throws us back to the consistency dilemma. Both Johnson’s assertion that there are exactly three marbles in the bag and Smith’s rejection of it can both be true,

for the trivial reason that they are talking past each other. Smith and Johnson are not expressing views about the same proposition. Such a result is not pluralism.

Suppose then that shared content is absolute. This means that there is no conceptual scheme in which the concept of an object does not entail an object being whatever exists. Put another way, if shared content is absolute, then no conceptual scheme can countenance nonexistent objects. Not only is this rather dubious, considering the history of philosophy, but it hardly seems congruent with metaphysical pluralism. The upshot is that instead of solving the consistency dilemma, Lynch has merely pushed it back to the level of minimal content. This type of problem arises whenever relativists and pluralists make definite claims. Are these claims relative or absolute? Neither alternative seems to work.

While Lynch does not directly address the preceding objection, his response to a similar difficulty that shows up later suggests that he is prepared to bite the absolutist bullet. That is, when it comes to concepts, Lynch is ready to say that to a certain extent we all must have the same ones. This comes out more clearly in his defense of realism about truth.

As noted previously, Lynch is concerned to show how pluralism can be compatible with realism about truth. The latter he characterizes in this way: "a proposition is true in the realist sense when things are as that proposition says they are" (p. 101). A paradigmatic version of truth realism for Lynch is the correspondence theory of truth. There are two anti-realist theories of truth that Lynch discusses: a Putnam-style epistemic theory, according to which truth is equivalent to justification in ideal epistemic conditions, and a deflationary or disquotational theory. He is at pains to show two things: how pluralism requires neither form of truth anti-realism and why a pluralist should avoid the epistemic and deflationary treatments of truth anyway. Pluralists shouldn't adopt the epistemic theory of truth, argues Lynch, because of serious difficulties with the view. Here he trots out some familiar objections to epistemic theories of truth.

In the case of deflationism, Lynch maintains that once one has adopted metaphysical pluralism, the deflationary view about truth is unmotivated (p. 115). Following Alston and Kirkham, Lynch argues that deflationists try to show that truth is not a genuine property by demonstrating, via disquotational schemas, that truth-talk is eliminable. To say that 'Brutus killed Caesar' is true adds nothing to the statement that Brutus killed Caesar. Therefore truth is doing no work for us and can be jettisoned without loss. Suppose that "'Brutus killed Caesar' is true" and "Brutus killed Caesar" are semantically equivalent, as deflationists argue. However, semantic equivalence is symmetrical; from the point of view of conveying information, there is no reason to prefer one way of speaking over the other. Simply pointing out the equivalence is not sufficient for the claim that one way of speaking is

metaphysically correct and the other is a mere *façon de parler*. We need additional reasons to decide which way to go. The usual reasons offered to prefer “Brutus killed Caesar” to “‘Brutus killed Caesar’ is true” involve global materialism or naturalism. Truth is supposed to be a suspect “metaphysical” notion that has no place in a strictly scientific ontology. Perhaps. Yet as Lynch points out, someone antecedently committed to metaphysical pluralism is hardly going to endorse the absolute truth of global materialism. If the chief motivation for taking the deflationist project seriously is the belief that science is the only legitimate way to acquire knowledge, and pluralism rejects this, then pluralists lack inherent motivation to accept deflationism. A pluralist might also be a deflationist, but isn’t forced to it.

Lynch wants to promote both pluralism and truth realism. Yet can a pluralist really defend any particular theory of truth? Here’s a quick argument that the answer is no.

1. According to metaphysical pluralism, there is no one uniquely correct way to describe the ultimate nature of any subject matter.
2. Therefore, for metaphysical pluralism, there is no one uniquely correct way to describe the ultimate nature of truth.
3. Therefore, for metaphysical pluralism, realism about truth is not uniquely correct.

Incidentally, similar reasoning shows that metaphysical pluralists are not inherently committed to epistemic or deflationary accounts of truth in a very brief and direct way. Lynch is worried about arguments like that above, but thinks that if one gives a suitably thin account of realist truth, it can be avoided and pluralists will have a notion of truth that remains constant in some respects across all conceptual schemes. As with his answer to the consistency dilemma, Lynch’s strategy is to distinguish between minimal and robust (or extended) concepts of truth. The minimal concept of truth he believes is captured by his principle MR: the proposition *that p* is true if, and only if, things are as the proposition *that p* says they are (p. 126). More robust concepts of truth (for example, a correspondence theory) all incorporate the minimal notion of truth expressed by MR. Lynch writes on p. 132, “since even robust concepts of truth have the minimalist concept as a necessary element, realist truth will be ‘preserved’ across contexts.”

The preceding critical argument is thus supposed to be answered along these lines: there is no one uniquely correct way to describe the ultimate nature of truth; metaphysical pluralism is right. Different robust theories of truth—the epistemic theory, or the coherence theory, say—can be equally correct in different conceptual schemes. These robust theories are incompati-

ble yet equally legitimate extensions of the minimal concept of truth expressed in MR. This minimal concept, which all parties accept, is truth realism.

One might rejoin that this only shows that we can be pluralists about robust concepts but, as we saw with the consistency dilemma, pluralism about the minimal core seems forbidden. Lynch seems unfazed by this: "according to pluralism, every proposition is relative, but not every concept" (p. 138). Unfortunately absolutism about (some) concepts leads quickly to propositional absolutism. For instance, Lynch maintains that MR expresses the minimal concept of truth present in all conceptual schemes. It is impossible for there to be two conceptual schemes such that MR is a component of one and not a component of the other. So there is a uniquely correct way to describe the core or essential nature of truth, and MR does it. MR is manifestly a metaphysical proposition, therefore metaphysical pluralism is false.

Towards the end of chapter five and in the last chapter of the book, Lynch wisely moves towards a more defensible sort of pluralism: one according to which every sentence is relative to a conceptual scheme. This is importantly different from the conception of pluralism as the idea that there is no one uniquely correct way to describe the ultimate nature of any subject matter. The difference is this: one can consistently say that MR is true in every conceptual scheme and still maintain that every sentence is relative.³

One cannot consistently say that MR is true in every conceptual scheme and still maintain that there is no one uniquely correct way to describe the ultimate nature of any subject matter, as the previous paragraph showed. I am quite sympathetic with Lynch's contention that it is consistent to hold that there are "facts that do not obtain independently of conceptual schemes but that do obtain within every scheme." I rather wish he had made clear earlier in the book that this was the form of pluralism he wished to promote, instead of the deceptively ambitious idea that there is never a uniquely correct way to describe some subject matter.

I have raised several critical points in this review essay. However, I do want to emphasize that Lynch's *Truth in Context* is a solid and useful contribution to ongoing debates over truth, pluralism, and relativism. His clear distinction between absolutism conceived of as facts independent of any conceptual schemes and absolutism conceived of as facts that hold in every conceptual scheme is an important one. I concur that pluralists and relativists are best off characterizing absolutism in the second sense. In addition, the idea of concepts as having essential cores and penumbral extensions is interesting

³ Just as one can claim that the truth value of every proposition is relative to a possible world, and still maintain that there are propositions with the same truth value in every possible world. The usefulness of this analogy in making sense of truth relativism is developed in Steven D. Hales, "A Consistent Relativism," *Mind* (106:421, 1997) pp. 33–52.

and worth further development. In the end I am in complete agreement with Lynch that there are consistent, interesting, and nontrivial forms of pluralism. The real work to be done now is to show that these forms of pluralism are not mere castles in the sky, but that some kind of pluralism is *true*. This is the key issue that remains for relativists.