

Review of Steven D. Hales' Book: *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*

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Abstract: *This review is a critical evaluation of the main points of Steven D. Hales' significant book: Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy. To that end, I will first summarize his major line of argument pointing out to the richness and significance of the book. After that, I will argue that Hales' account of intuition is subject to the challenge shown by some recent works written on the topic, and that it postulates a concept of knowledge that opposes Gettier's one, without arguing why it is so. And, I will show that except rational intuition, none of the methods adopted by Hales are adequate to acquire beliefs about philosophical propositions. Next, I will argue that his method of wide reflective equilibrium is committed to foundationalism and conservatism, and that all what his criticism of skepticism show is that skepticism is true. Also, I will try to show that his form of perspectival relativism is committed to the problem of infinitum; it is incompatible with his foundationalism. It is powerless regarding some forms of skepticism, sharing the same source with some others. It is not progressive, and not perspectival enough regarding Goldman's view, naturalists' view, and its alternatives. And, if it is perspectival enough, then it refutes itself.*

Key Words: *Rational Intuition, Reflective Equilibrium, Christian Revelation, Ritual Use of Hallucinogens, Skepticism, Foundationalism, Nihilism, Perspectival Relativism.*

In *Relativism and the Foundations of philosophy*, Stephen Hales offers a detailed account of a modest form of relativism according to which the truth of philosophical propositions is perspective dependent. His basic claim is that there is variation in epistemic methods of gaining beliefs about philosophical propositions. This methodic diversity leads to conflicting results. None of these methods is superior over others and accordingly their truths have the same epistemic status. So, we have to choose among three alternatives: nihilism, skepticism, and relativism. He opts for the last option. Thus, a philosophical proposition does not have one truth value; rather it has truth values that are relative to perspectives. He gives the full particulars of this argument through four chapters as follow.

In ch. 1, he rejects Socrates' and philosophers' of language view of philosophy as conceptual analysis, and he considers rational intuition as a method through which philosophy addresses its issues. Following George Bealer, he distinguishes between physical intuition, which constructs "beliefs about contingent truths", and rational intuitions, which "generates beliefs about putative necessary truths" [1]. While the former is examinable through appeals to empirical data, the latter is testable "through appeals to possible cases and nonempirical counterexamples" [1]. That is, the "reliability of intuition is a task that intuition itself must perform" [1]. This leads us to what he calls as "the problem of intuition," the problem of circularity. To get a way out of this circularity, Hales suggests a modest form of foundationalism according to which "there are justified propositions whose justification depends on nothing other than themselves" [1]. Like Descartes, he thinks that rational intuition is of proposition, necessary truth and foundational. But he is not in agreement with him about the indubitability of rational intuition. For him, the method of rational intuition produces basic, noninferential and a priori beliefs. But these beliefs are not known in virtue of their certainty. Rather, they are defeasible, because they are testable against a wide reflective equilibrium with different theories from different fields [1]. But as a method of attaining basic beliefs about philosophical propositions, rational intuition is not the only one in town.

Accordingly, in ch. 2, he argues that in addition to rational intuition, there are two rival methods that "are Christian revelation and the ritual use of hallucinogens" [1]. Like intuition, those two methods generate epistemically foundational, noninferential, and basic beliefs that are also testable against reflective equilibrium. In Hales' words, "those who use these methods proceed to take the basic beliefs and develop them into more comprehensive belief systems through the use of reason" [1]. The problem is that all three methods yield inconsistent results, for example: "one method may yield a belief that p while another produces a belief that not-p" [1]. In a situation as such, which is more preferable? Hales argue that rational intuition is not superior over Christian revelation and the ritual use of hallucinogens. He considers four arguments that defend the superiority of rational intuition. The first argument holds

that beliefs-sets generated by intuition are “more comprehensive, unified, consistent, and explanatorily cohesive than those generated by other methods” [1]. In reply, Hales states that intuition's beliefs-sets are “coherent” but “inconsistent with each other” [1]. The second argument contends that “it is standard justificatory practice to use intuitions evidentially. Unless and until a reason for departing from this standard practice is produced, we are entitled—indeed, obligated—to continue using intuitions as evidence” [1]. In reply, Hales says that the same argument can be said in favor of the other two methods. The third argument asserts that “our epistemic faculties ... [are] equally trustworthy, and that reliance on reason or intuition is just as reasonable as trust in our senses” [1]. To this, Hales replies that “the argument is clearly guilty of hasty generalization” [1]. The fourth argument affirms that “rational intuition is the basic model and the others are optional features” [1]. In reply, Hales holds that the value given to reason in this argument might be true in the case of inferential beliefs, but it might not be so in the case of noninferential ones. Reason equally operates upon the beliefs produced by all three methods. As a result, he concludes that all these argument fail. And so, the alleged superiority of rational intuition over other two methods is false. Having undertaken such an examination, he argues that we have to accept one of the following alternatives: epistemic skepticism, metaphysical nihilism, and metaphysical relativism. He rejects skepticism, the impossibility of philosophical knowledge, because it “is not merely self-destructive; it leads to the knower paradox” [1]. He rejects nihilism, the nonexistence of philosophical proposition, because it suggests that we must “reject philosophical propositions as either unphilosophical or not really propositions [1]. The only alternative we have left is relativism according to which “what propositions are true is therefore dependent on, and relative to, method” [1].

In ch. 3, he defends relativism, considering the most known anti-relativism argument, the self-refuting argument. Hales agrees that “global relativism” that takes the form “everything is relative” is self-refuting. Considering relativism as a modality, he argues that relativism can be either absolutely or relatively true. If it is relatively true, then absolutism is true in some perspective and accordingly relativism is false. If it is absolutely true, then it must have a stable truth value (i.e. it must be true in all perspectives) and accordingly relativism is false. In his words, “relativism can be neither absolutely nor relatively true. The claim that *everything is relative* must be false” [1]. To meet this charge, Hales again treats relativism as a modality and suggests a modest form of relativism according to which “there is nothing self-contradictory or paradoxical about the claim that everything true is relatively true, just as there is no puzzle engendered by the claim that whatever is true is possibly true” [1]. Here, neither “x is absolutely true” nor “x has a stable truth value” will be a problem for a relativist since there is no nonperspectival truth. So, the self-refuting argument is avoided. The word ‘perspective’ is understood as ‘way of knowing,’ and the word ‘relativism’ should be understood as it is of truth, not of content. So, both ‘perspective’ and ‘relativism’ have the character of being commensurable, because they are purely formal relations, not conceptual ones. By reductio, the logical inconsistent results known by different methods can all perspectively be true. Once we abandon the metaperspective notion of truth, we can see relativism about philosophical (i.e. nonempirical) propositions as true [1].

In ch. 4, Hales rejects the main competitor to his relativism namely, naturalism according to which philosophical propositions are reducible to the claims of science. He distinguishes between two versions of naturalism. One is “global naturalism” which holds that no knowledge can be obtained from philosophical propositions, because there are no philosophical propositions, because all propositions are empirical and accordingly the scientific (natural and social) method is the adequate one to deal with them to gain knowledge. His response to global naturalism is that aesthetics, normativity, metaphysics, epistemology, axiology etc. play an ineliminable role in any naturalistic methodology to construct a scientific picture of the world [1]. Another is “local naturalism” which holds that “nonnaturalistic methods of acquiring philosophical beliefs are untrustworthy” [1]. In his response to local naturalism, he says that he just want to disturb the composure of its proponents to push them to improve arguments. He first considers Goldman’s “continualism,” which, says Hales, holds that “rational intuition is scientifically deconstructed and eliminated as a source of evidence; what seemed like a priori philosophical propositions are empirical and a posteriori after all ... Thus rationalism is both continuous with science and superior to revelation and hallucinogen” [1]. Hales argues that except British empiricists, philosophers regularly used to rely on pure reason, without trying to stay away from disagreement with science. He adds that “both Christianity and hallucinogenic traditions have been influenced by science” [1]. Another form of local naturalism is the view of Weinberg et al., who used the empirical method of social science to show that rational intuition is useless, because it varies according to factors like culture, language, socioeconomic background, etc. To this, Hales replies that rational intuition is a subject to reason in a wide reflective equilibrium. Naturalists should explain why among many alternatives like mathematics, pure logic, etc., only rational intuition should be testable empirically to get rid of being theologian. They also need to show that someone’s (e.g. philosophers) intuition is not better than someone (e.g. non-philosophers) else’s. Moreover, if truth has no intrinsic value, Weinberg et al. should justify their dependence on the norms of social science via the scientific method. Otherwise they just presuppose the truth of normativity (noncognitivism). If a justification as such is available, then knowledge can be produce via some other methods. Rational intuition may be one of these methods although it is not unique or superior to them [1]. He considers some other forms of relativism. Against Sapir-Whorf’s

conceptual relativism, he says that his epistemic relativism has nothing to do with this linguistic one [1]. Against Michele Moody-Adams' critique of cultural relativism, he says that descriptive cultural relativism is possible at least at the level of subcultures. Otherwise there are beliefs of individuals; there are no cultures [1].

As should be clear, this is an ambitious, valuable, and interesting book. A significant virtue of the book is that it does not seek simply to articulate and motivate a well-argued form of relativism i.e. the perspectival relativism, but it also attempts to illuminate many things about other topics that are commonplace in contemporary philosophy, including intuition, foundationalism, reflective equilibrium, philosophical propositions, etc. Moreover, it is entirely worth reading for anyone interested in skepticism, rationalism, philosophical methodology, theory of truth and so on. Despite the fact that Hales' approach has the dual advantage of being philosophically rich and dialectically forceful, I will point to some places where I think that the view might usefully be revised and filled in.

Let me start with the central thesis in ch. 1 namely, rational intuition as a method philosophies rely on while addressing their issues. Recently it was shown that a claim as such is objectionable. For example, Herman Cappelen refutes what he calls as the 'Centrality Thesis' according to which analytic philosophy rely on intuition as evidence. He divides his refutation into two arguments: the argument from intuition-talk i.e. the philosophers' sense of intuition-terminology and the argument from philosophical practice i.e. the philosophers' use of intuition in their thought experiments. He finds that none of these arguments provides good reason to believe Centrality Thesis, which is therefore false [2]. In the same vein, Max Deutsch argues exactly against what Hales calls as a modest form of foundationalism. Using the method of counterexample, Deutsch contends that the claim that "many philosophical arguments treat the fact that certain contents are intuitive as evidence for those very contents" is just a myth [3]. What Cappelen and Deutsch want to say is that philosophy relies on nothing but argument. There may be many ways in which Hales can respond to them. So far he did not, at least not to the best of my knowledge of his work. Despite that, what matters here is that he no longer can comfortably claim that intuition is the method philosophies rely on while theorizing, without taking objections as such into consideration.

At the next station on the track toward his form of relativism, Hales suggests that beside rational intuition, there are two more methods to acquire beliefs about philosophical propositions: the Christian revelation and the ritual use of hallucinogens. For a moment, one feels that one observes Edmund Gettier's question "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" being inversed [4]. At first glance, it looks as if Hales' concern is what the adequate philosophical methods to get justified true belief about philosophical propositions are. But is knowledge justified true belief? If yes, he first has to argue that knowledge is so. After that, he can go on to argue that that knowledge is perspectively relative. Apart from that, except the propositions that are related to the issue of God and some ethical matters, I suspect that these two methods have anything to do with philosophical propositions. Unless he proves that philosophical propositions, like any other propositions, have their own distinct nature, this claim is too credulous. Hales himself later on in the book criticizes naturalists for their unfair dealing with unempirical philosophical propositions through their scientific method. Just as philosophical propositions are not empirical, they are not religious as well. And, just as mathematical and pure logic propositions have something that makes them unique and accordingly we use mathematical and logical methods to acquire beliefs about them, philosophical propositions must be considered to be possessed something as such and we must use adequate philosophical methods to acquire beliefs about them.

Let us move to the next point. According to Hales, the three methods produce conflicting truths. And, none of these truths is superior to others, because they all are subject to the method of wide reflective equilibrium (RE). Since from the book itself one cannot know what reflective equilibrium is, I think it is useful to define it before I start making some points regarding Hales' usage of it. According to Sankey, "the method of reflective equilibrium is a method of justification whereby judgments about particular cases are brought into conformity with general principles ... a distinction may be made between "narrow reflective equilibrium" in which judgments and principles relate to a restricted domain, and "wide reflective equilibrium" in which a broader range of considerations is taken to be relevant" [5]. Hales opts for the latter, the wide reflective equilibrium (WRE). But does RE necessarily lead to truth? In fact, many philosophers criticized RE claiming that it is very weak. For example, Kelly and McGrath say that nothing offers a guarantee that RE leads to truth. Moreover, some object that RE is that it is committed to foundationalism [6]. That is, it depends with full trust on our initial beliefs, which may not be able to be relied on as truthful sources. As we have seen, Hales clearly admits that all three methods produce foundational beliefs, self-justifying ones. But, as he must be well aware, it is a mistake not to distinguish between many forms of foundationalism telling us which method has what foundationalism. For example, Michael DePaul distinguishes between epistemic foundationalism, psychological foundationalism, a combination of the both, etc. [7]. To my mind, the Christian revelation is committed to a purely psychological foundationalism. While rational intuition is committed to a purely epistemic foundationalism. If so, this variation in foundationalism must affect the process of WRE. But I

think it is hard to say the ritual use of hallucinogens is committed to any form of foundationalism, simply because it works artificially. It is like Weinberg and his colleagues' Truetemp whose brain was "re-wired so that he is always absolutely right whenever he estimates the temperature where he is" [8]. In both case the protagonist does not know the beliefs he/she produced, because he/she was made to produce them. So, there is no point out of asking whether or not they are foundational. After all, what is the wrong with being committed to foundationalism? The wrong is if this objection is true, all what RE can do is to confirm our initial beliefs. And, if this is all what RE can do, RE leads to what Richard Brandt calls as conservatism. Brandt also points out that if initial beliefs play a crucial role in RE, we may reach to equilibriums, simply because people do not share the same initial beliefs [9]. In view of that, it seems as if Hales just passed over these objections, granting full truthfulness to RE.

But why this matters? It does matter, because he supposed that there are three methods to obtain beliefs about philosophical propositions. These methods are subject to RE that leads us to truth. So, we have three different truths. Since these truths may be conflicting and since none of the three methods is superior to the other two, we have three options: nihilism, skepticism, and relativism. Hales rejected the first two and defended the last one. But if RE does not lead to truth, the basis upon which he depends to defend relativism is no more there even. In a related context, I think Hales did not spend enough time to reject skepticism. He set out the argument as follow:

- If skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we can't know the truth of any philosophical proposition. (Definition of skepticism)
- Skepticism is a philosophical proposition. (Premise)
- Therefore, p: if skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, we can't know it. (From 1, 2) [1].

Let us take Hales conclusion and ask what exactly follow from it. It entails unknowability, which in turn leads to nothing but a strong version of skepticism. That is, knowledge is impossible, including the knowledge of skepticism as a philosophical proposition. Hales' way of arguing against skepticism reminds me of the critics of Nāgārjuna's thesis of emptiness. The thesis holds that everything is empty, or that nothing has an intrinsic substance. The critics said that this thesis is self-refuting, because if Nāgārjuna's thesis is true, then it itself is empty. Nāgārjuna simply replies yes, everything is empty including my thesis itself. It is the best way to prove the thesis of emptiness as true. The same story is true for Hales' argument against skepticism. To argue that skepticism is false because it amounts to unknowability is to argue that skepticism is true. Furthermore, suppose for the sake of argument that we admit that Hales is right in his refutation of skepticism, it is hard to say that this refutation covers all forms of skepticism. It does not, for example, cover the dream skepticism according to which unless there is a precise criterion by means of which one can decide whether one is awake or not, one beliefs that amount to knowledge are not reliable. Accordingly, the dream skeptic can always accuse any criticism of skepticism, including Hales' one, of being dream beliefs and accordingly false.

To turn to the point about relativism, I think what Hales presents is a form of relativism about epistemic justification rather than truth. That is, all three epistemic methods have the same standing. No epistemic method is better justified than any other method. So, epistemic justification is relative to the epistemic method. But what justifies a method? In Hales' case, it is clear that any of the three methods cannot be justified by any of them. Instead, all of them are justified by one that is not from the set itself namely, RE. Yet, one may ask what justifies RE? Hales may answer this question in two ways. One is that RE is justified by one of the three methods. But this leads to circularity. Another is that RE is justified by one that is not from the three methods. Let it be M. But the question will come again: what justifies M. Again, avoiding circularity, one will say it is justified by N method, for example. This simply leads to Pyrrhonian skepticism. It seems that Hales' form of relativism and some form of skepticism share the same source! Additionally, as we have seen, Hales considers that all three methods produce foundational beliefs about philosophical propositions. I have already argued that RE may not eliminate this foundationalism. Despite that, being perspectival, relativism cannot be friend with foundationalism, because foundationalism entails that beliefs are self-justifying, but relativism entails that beliefs are justified in virtue of being taken from some perspective. What is more, if relativism is true, then there should be no problem for one to be skeptic about some propositions, nihilist about others, and relativist about some others. We should have no reason to claim the superiority of relativism over nihilism and skepticism.

Concerning his criticism of naturalists, I want to make a comment on his reading of Goldman. I do not agree with him that Goldman wants to eliminate intuitions as a priori source of evidence by making them a posteriori. Goldman argues that intuitions "are a clear example of a priori cognition" or "non-experiential and ratiocinative cognition." He illustrates that intuitions have first and second order evidential status. The first order may be a priori depending on "what cognitive science tells us about the cognitive processes underlying classification intuitions;" but the second order is empirical [10]. When we ask whether intuitions qualify as evidence, this question is an example of

the first order, and when we ask whether there is an evidence for the evidential status of intuitions, this question is an example of the second order. In other words, Goldman was trying to establish a form of foundational intuition by using cognitive science. As we have seen, foundationalism is Hales' view of intuition. But maybe Hales does not even accept a foundational outlook of intuition if it was established based on science. Although he himself confesses that the other two methods were influenced by science. In addition, Hales himself did the same elsewhere. He creates a form of foundationalism using perceptual science [11]. This is an obvious appeal to science even if it is just through using an alleged analogy between perception and intuition. As well, one may criticize him here wondering how progressive is his view since he rejects cognitive science, but accepts the ritual use of hallucinogens as a method to obtain beliefs about philosophical propositions. From the point of science, we can enter to his criticism of other naturalists such as Weinberg et al. who address the issue of intuition by using the method of social science. I have already said that he asserts that each of the three methods is subject to a wide reflective equilibrium with different theories from different fields. But it seems that his WRE is not wide to the extent that it contains naturalists' view within its process, maybe because he thinks that doing so may weaken his foundationalism. Or he could add naturalists' method to the other three and make it subject to WRE and accordingly consider the beliefs produced by it as perspectivaly true. Unfortunately, he did none of these two choices. It is worth to mention that both Hales and naturalists end up defending relativism, but again Hales' problem with them is about their method, their 'way of knowing'. What is more, when he criticizes them to defend his own form of relativism, he quotes and mentions many philosophers such as Rorty, Nietzsche, Kuhn, etc. But I do not think that it was a successful attempt. For example, mostly Rorty was recognized as relativist. And he used to take help from Nietzsche's, Kuhn's, and others' views to support this line of argument, which is completely anti-foundationalist, at least to the best of my knowledge of his works. Foundationalism, for him, is the philosophers' continual mistake from Plato to his time, but it no longer can be tolerated.

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