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## A New Maneuver Against the Epistemic Relativist

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**ABSTRACT:** Epistemic relativists often appeal to an epistemic incommensurability thesis. One notable example is the position advanced by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (1969). However, Ian Hacking’s radical denial of the possibility of objective epistemic reasons for belief poses, we suggest, an even more forceful challenge to mainstream meta-epistemology. Our central objective will be to develop a novel strategy for defusing Hacking’s line of argument. Specifically, we show that the epistemic incommensurability thesis can be resisted even if we grant the very insights that lead Hacking to claim that epistemic reasons are always relative to a style of reasoning. Surprisingly, the key to defusing the argument is to be found in recent mainstream work on the epistemic state of objectual understanding.

**Keywords:** understanding; epistemic relativism; epistemic reasons; Hacking; Wittgenstein

### §1 Epistemic Relativism and Epistemic Incommensurability

Here is a picture that characterizes the meta-epistemological commitments of most projects in mainstream epistemology: call it the Simple View.

#### *The Simple View*

- (1) There are epistemological facts. These include, most notably, (though, not only) facts that state the conditions under which agents stand in the knowledge (and justification) relations to propositions (where propositions are understood as the objects of thought and talk, assertion and denial.)
- (2) Ascriptions of the form “S knows that p”, “S is justified in believing p”, and “Reason R justifies belief p” are, when true, true in virtue of epistemological facts.
- (3) Epistemological facts are absolute and objective in character<sup>1</sup>.

By taking (1-3) for granted, mainstream epistemologists seek to *uncover* the epistemological facts. Accordingly, the (widespread) disagreements in mainstream epistemology can be understood, by and large, as disagreements about *what the epistemological facts are*, with an eye to uncovering them.

Resistance to the Simple View can take a variety of forms: for instance, epistemic *non-factualists*<sup>2</sup> (e.g. epistemic expressivists) reject (1), while social constructivists accept (1) but deny (3).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cuneo’s (2007) discussion of what he calls *minimal epistemic realism*, which is the position one presupposes by taking ordinary epistemological discourse at face value.

<sup>2</sup> See here, for example, Field (1996; 1998), Gibbard (2003) and Chrisman (2007) for versions of this kind of view. Cf. Lynch (2008) for a challenge to the coherence of this kind of position.

Another route to denying the Simple View is that taken by projects under the banner of *epistemic relativism*. Typically (though not always<sup>3</sup>) epistemic relativists at some point reason through a premise that Pritchard (2010) has called *epistemic incommensurability*:

*Epistemic incommensurability* (EC): It is possible for two agents to have opposing beliefs which are rationally justified to an equal extent where there is no rational basis by which either agent could properly persuade the other to revise their view.<sup>4</sup>

Those who defend epistemic relativism, *via* an endorsement of EC, do so on the basis of very different kinds of considerations<sup>5</sup>. Some of these considerations share a common insight: that there are, or could be, radically different belief systems<sup>6</sup>. The recognition of this insight does not, however, commit one to EC, *per se*; and, so, a strategy for *blocking* arguments for epistemic relativism can take the form of (i) granting the relativist her original insight (more or less); and then (ii) blocking the move from this insight to EC.

This is precisely the kind of strategy Coliva (2010) and Pritchard (2010) have pursued (albeit in different ways) in claiming that Wittgenstein's (1969) remarks on hinge propositions need *not* (contrary to the claims of many commentators) commit him to epistemic relativism by way of the epistemic incommensurability thesis (EC). While Coliva's and Pritchard's insights are different, their shared suggestion is (roughly) that: *even if* (i) at the foundations of our belief systems are hinge propositions that are themselves subject to neither rational support nor rational doubt, and further that, (ii) for two belief systems, A and B, the hinge propositions forming the framework of A, and B, respectively, can differ, it does not follow that (iii) the difference between these systems prevents (as EC would have it) the possibility of rational adjudication.

For Coliva, (iii) would follow from (i) and (ii) only on what she takes to be an implausible "naturalist"<sup>7</sup> reading of Wittgenstein, according to which acceptance of hinge propositions is merely an arational "form of life"<sup>8</sup> (where forms of life can vary radically). For Pritchard, (iii) would follow from (i) and (ii) only if agents could, in adopting A and B respectively, be committed to *radically* different hinge propositions. But, as Pritchard reads Wittgenstein here, the "shared background admits of only peripheral change"<sup>9</sup>. Interestingly, both Pritchard and Coliva block the Wittgensteinian avenue to epistemic relativism by resisting

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<sup>3</sup> Global relativists, for instance, are trivially epistemic relativists. See, for example, Meiland (1977).

<sup>4</sup> By reference to EC, there are epistemic facts of the form "S is justified in believing p." Proponents of EC, however, deny the absolute and objective character of such facts. Accordingly, EC is incompatible with (3) of the Simple View. For some samples of defenses of EC, see Rorty (1979; 1989; 1995) and Hales (2006). For other presentations of EC, cf. Alston (1993), Boghossian (2006) and Lynch (2010).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Rorty (1979) reasons to EC on the basis of a full-scale *anti-representationalist* epistemology while Wittgenstein (1969), on the other hand, has been read as endorsing EC (in *On Certainty*) by way of his view that *hinge propositions* can be neither rationally supported nor rationally doubted.

<sup>6</sup> Although what constitutes radical departure between belief systems is often taken as simply intuitive, there are ways to make the idea explicit. As Boghossian notes, one relevant element here will be commitments to different epistemic principles. Perhaps also, more broadly, commitment to different hinge propositions (including hinge propositions that are not *about* epistemic principles are relevant.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Strawson (1985).

<sup>8</sup> Coliva suggests that the claim that we cannot rationally support hinge propositions with evidence—a kind of *anti-foundationalism*—does not commit one (as the naturalist thinks) to the arationality of accepting them. Working with a broader conception of rationality (*ala* Wright 2004), we might view the acceptance of hinge propositions as "rationally mandatory" (2010: 5) in the following sense: that it is constitutive of rationality that we accept what makes it possible. And the acceptance of hinge propositions are precisely the conditions of possibility of a system "within which reasons for and against specific empirical propositions can be produced" (2010: 5).

<sup>9</sup> This interpretation is motivated by Wittgenstein's River Bed analogy (OC§96-99).

(for different reasons) the possibility of *radically* divergent belief systems. This much betrays a subtle concession: *if* belief systems could vary *radically*, it would be more difficult to resist the road to EC.

## §2 Hacking on Styles of Reasoning

Mainstream epistemology is in a tenuous position if diffusing epistemic relativism (and, so, defending its own core meta-epistemological assumptions) requires some *positive* argument to the effect that individuals could not be committed to *radically* different belief systems. Versions of such arguments are found in Davidson (1983) and Burge. However, should defending the Simple View against epistemic relativism ever *require* that such arguments be successful?

This issue is pressed by Ian Hacking (e.g. 1982; 1992; 2002) whose line of argument for epistemic relativism is—as we shall see—arguably more dangerous (to the Simple View) than Wittgenstein’s. Consider that Wittgenstein moves from his premise about the non-rationality of hinge propositions to the epistemic commensurability (EC) thesis only if (as Pritchard 2010: 16) puts it, “It is possible for two agents to be committed to a radically different set of hinge propositions.” Suppose, *ex hypothesi*, that individuals A and B are committed to radically different sets of hinge propositions. Whether this could ever be *sufficient* (and, not merely, necessary) for generating EC remains a live question. *What about such radically different systems might prevent rational adjudication*<sup>10</sup>?

Hacking’s answer is: if propositions *available* to proponents of one system are not equally available to proponents of another<sup>11</sup>. This suggestion is striking. If, after all, the very *objects* of assertion and denial are not available equally to both sides of a dispute, then the possibility of rational adjudication really does appear bleak: the rational force of premises depends at the very least on their having some communicable sense<sup>12</sup>.

That said, granting this observation does nothing to motivate EC *unless* we have cause to think, as Hacking thinks we do, that (some of<sup>13</sup>) the kinds of things that stand as candidates for truth-or-falsehood are themselves actually relative always to belief systems. If they are, then Hacking has motivated an insidious form of epistemic relativism: one that does not require, in principle, that the *beliefs* constituting belief systems be (possibly, or actually) divergent, *en masse*—in the sense Davidson has argued to be incoherent. Rather, epistemic incommensurability of the sort that implies epistemic relativism can be generated by reference to cases in which at least some reasons are *available* to one, but not another.

Accordingly, Hacking’s argument depends not on the possible or actual existence of different belief systems<sup>14</sup>—individuated by the particular beliefs that comprise them—but on a

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lynch (2010: 271), who characterizes the question with reference to whether what he calls *deep epistemic disagreements* are rationally irresolvable.

<sup>11</sup> See Baghramian (2004) and also Kusch (2010) for excellent analyses of Hacking’s form of epistemic relativism. As Kusch observes, Hacking distances himself from the kind of epistemic relativism he defends in his early and perhaps most influential work on styles of reasoning (e.g. 1982; 1992).

<sup>12</sup> One might draw the observation that Hacking’s view supports a kind of semantic incommensurability thesis,

where what’s relative to a style of reasoning is propositional meaning. Crucially, though, even if such a thesis is granted, this is compatible with the claim that Hacking’s argument commits him to epistemic relativism. Compare: on MacFarlane’s (2011) taxonomy, one can accept assessment sensitivity and reject local invariantism: the resulting position would be a kind of truth-relativist who is also a content-relativist.

<sup>13</sup> See below for Hacking’s distinction between propositions that do and do not depend on styles of reasoning.

<sup>14</sup> To stress, this feature of Hacking’s motivation for epistemic relativism makes it a thesis of particular philosophical interest (beyond standard arguments from diversity to an epistemic relativist’s conclusion) in

markedly different claim which is that, for Hacking: while some statements can be made in any language, others require what he calls a *style of reasoning*. The latter kinds of statements are given their *sense* by styles of reasoning themselves in that what “is a candidate for being true-or-false” depends on whether we have ways to reason about it, because “what is true-or-false in one way of talking may not make much sense in another until one has learned how to reason in a new way<sup>15</sup>” (Hacking 1982: 331). Accordingly, for example, “statistical reasons had no force for the Greeks<sup>16</sup>” much like reasons offered in some ancient systems are incomprehensible, as reasons, vis-à-vis contemporary science. Hacking, drawing from Alistair Crombie (1981), argues that there are many styles of reasoning that have come in and out of existence, and further, that:

We cannot reason as to whether alternative systems of reasoning are *better or worse than ours*, because the propositions to which we reason get their sense only from the method of reasoning employed. The propositions have no existence independent of the ways of reasoning towards them (Hacking 1982: 334; our emphasis).

Examples of such ways of reasoning include “renaissance medical, alchemical and astrological doctrines of resemblance and similitude [which] are well-nigh incomprehensible...the way propositions are proposed and defended is entirely alien to us” (1982: 330). He adds, revealingly, that: “What we have to learn is not *what they took for true*, but *what they took for true or false*.” (For example, that mercury salve might be good for syphilis because mercury is signed by the planet Mercury which signs the marketplace, where syphilis is contracted.) (*Ibid.* 330)

What Hacking denies then is what he calls the *arch-rationalist* view that there are “good and bad reasons for propositions about nature. They are not relative to anything” (1982: 324). This is an explicit denial of (3) in the Simple View<sup>17</sup>.

The extent to which this *manner* of denying (3) poses a challenge to mainstream meta-epistemology has not been properly appreciated. We shall now investigate this challenge, and particularly how it might be addressed, more closely.

### §3 Hacking’s Insight: Re-examined

One might be inclined to engage with this kind of argument uncharitably: by denying outright any phenomenon in the neighborhood of what Hacking is appealing to in concluding that some propositions are relative to (in the sense that they receive their *sense* from) styles of reasoning. Deny such a phenomenon, and Hacking’s argument never gets off the ground.

We stress that this turns out to be an unpromising way to approach Hacking’s argument, for two reasons. Firstly, this line effectively leaves it open that, *were* there such a phenomenon, it would motivate EC. *Ceteris paribus*, a better challenge would close off this avenue. Secondly, and more pressingly, this strategy is problematic because—as it will be shown—there *really is a phenomenon in the neighborhood of what Hacking draws our attention to*, an

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that it allows us to bypass entirely the issue of whether individuals could be committed to radically divergent belief systems. Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting further emphasis here.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Hacking suggests that “even after Paracelsus is translated into modern German, one still has to learn how he *reasoned* in order to understand him” (1982: 331)

<sup>16</sup> This is an observation that has been noted by Feyerabend (1975).

<sup>17</sup> While, as Kusch notes, Hacking has been writing about styles of reasoning for over 25 years, his early argument outlined here turns out to be one that challenges the Simple View in a way that can’t be dismissed in the same manner of as more typical ‘arguments from diversity’ for epistemic relativism.

observation that will make his argument all the more relevant<sup>18</sup>. And moreover: this can be granted even by one prepared to deny radically divergent belief systems (of the sort epistemic relativists have traditionally appealed to).

The core of the phenomenon can be expressed in terms of three observations, or data points, for which Hacking's suggestion that some propositions are style-of-reason relative is presented as an explanation.

Let's abstract from Hacking's theory-laden *styles of reasoning* and frame the data points he explains in terms of the theory-neutral notion of "epistemic systems". One data point can be articulated as follows: for agent A, who subscribes to epistemic system S<sub>1</sub>, and agent B who subscribes to epistemic system S<sub>2</sub>, where there is a cognitive gap that separates A and B vis-à-vis the evaluation of epistemic reasons, this gap need not be articulable *just* in terms of (as Hacking puts it) "what is taken as true" by A and B, in virtue of their commitment to S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub>, with no remainder. This is a negative point.

The second data point is that (again, with reference to A, B, S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub>) the cognitive gap that separates A and B vis-à-vis the evaluation of epistemic reasons will (at least sometimes) be articulable only by reference to a difference in A's and B's possessing dispositions to entertain propositions as epistemic reasons for belief.

A third data point is that from such a difference in dispositions can arise a difference in which propositions are *available* (e.g. possibly entertainable) *as* epistemic reasons.

These three data points capture just those features of cases—e.g. statistical reasons vis-à-vis classical Greek thinkers—that motivate the claim that some propositions are style-of-reasoning relative. One explanation for these three data points is, of course, the one Hacking has offered us: some propositions gain their sense only relative to styles of reasoning. It is an explanation that takes one quickly to the epistemic incommensurability thesis (EC). But it does so only if it is the best explanation of what it seeks to explain.

#### §4 Objectual understanding and explanatory coherence

At this point, it will be helpful to consider a distinction that is made in the mainstream literature on the epistemic state of *understanding*—specifically, between what Pritchard has called *atomistic understanding*, also known as *understanding-why* (e.g. understanding-*why* something is so<sup>19</sup>) and what Kvanvig (2003; 2009) has referred to as *objectual* understanding (e.g. understanding  $\phi$ , where  $\phi$  is some subject matter) on the other.

Understanding-*why* is often regarded as a kind of knowledge<sup>20</sup>—specifically, knowledge of *causes*. Individuals who know the same causal propositions, accordingly, will be taken to possess the same atomistic understanding.

Objectual understanding however, is more cognitively demanding; understanding a subject matter is generally argued to require more than (as Hacking puts it) taking the right propositions as true<sup>21</sup>. Consider, for example, a student who memorizes a list of propositions

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting this point be emphasized.

<sup>19</sup> For additional work on understanding-why, see Grimm (e.g. 2010), Greco (*forthcoming*), Brogaard (2005) and Hills (2009).

<sup>20</sup> This is especially typical in the philosophy of science. See here, for example, Lipton (2004), Woodward (2003), and Kitcher (2002). For a non-propositionalist (ability-based) defense of the knowledge-of-causes account, see Grimm (*forthcoming*).

<sup>21</sup> One line of argument to this effect is as follows: if understanding were just a matter of knowing certain propositions, then, we should expect that understanding can be undermined by certain kinds of epistemic luck just as knowledge is. But, as Kvanvig (2003) and Pritchard (2009) suggest, it is not. Specifically, Kvanvig argues that

about some subject matter, say, <algebraic geometry> or (following here Kvanvig 2003) <The Comanche dominance of the North American plains in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century>. For each of these subject matters, there will be a number of propositions that must be believed to be true in order for one to understand that subject matter. Plausibly, these propositions will be *central* to the subject matter in question (whereas, some propositions that constitute part of the subject matter are better understood as peripheral, and objectual understanding allows for some false peripheral beliefs<sup>22</sup>.)

A common view<sup>23</sup> (e.g. Kvanvig 2003), then, is that it is a *necessary condition* on one's possessing objectual understanding of subject matter S that one truly believe the propositions central to S. However, importantly for our purposes, this is *not* generally taken to be a *sufficient* condition for understanding a subject matter.

The standard line here, as suggested by Kvanvig (2003), Grimm (2010; *forthcoming*) and Riggs (2003), is that, for some agent to understand a subject matter S, an agent must not *merely*—to impose Hacking's phrase here—"take the right propositions as true", but further, must *grasp* the way in which these propositions are interrelated (or, as Riggs puts it, "hang together" (2003: 20-21). Likewise, Kvanvig (2003:192) observes that "one can *know* many unrelated pieces of information, but *understanding* is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question." Call this additional necessary condition the *grasping condition on objectual understanding*.

We need not take a stand on the matter of what this grasping involves, *qua* a kind of cognitive ability; this point is controversial<sup>24</sup>. However, a common answer to the question of what must *be grasped*, in cases of objectual understanding, is presented in terms of (following here Kvanvig 2003 and Grimm 2010; *forthcoming*) *coherence-making relations* that stand between the truly believed propositions comprising the relevant subject matter. The coherence-making relations that must be grasped include *explanatory relations* (e.g. how some propositions explain others in the system<sup>25</sup>).

That said, a familiar insight in recent work on epistemic value is that one achieves, as Grimm has put it, a kind of "cognitive gain" when moving from knowledge of propositions to understanding. Plausibly, this cognitive gain is to be explained in part by reference to a kind of *dispositional* epistemic good one has when one understands. Specifically, when one understands  $\phi$ , one has the ability (or disposition) to grasp the explanatory relations that stand between the truly believed propositions. Grimm (*forthcoming*) has referred to this ability as a kind of *know-how*—though for the present purposes, we needn't take a stand on the nature of such an ability or disposition. Crucially, for our purposes here, the ability to grasp explanatory relations is no less an ability to recognize and appreciate certain possibilities not envisioned by one lacking understanding. That understanding (as opposed to mere propositional knowledge) generates the ability to entertain (and, accordingly, appreciate the force of) new possibilities is also a

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objectual understanding is compatible with both Gettier-style and environmental epistemic luck (Cf. Pritchard 2005); Pritchard argues understanding to be (like knowledge) incompatible with Gettier-style epistemic luck though compatible with environmental epistemic luck).

<sup>22</sup> See here Kvanvig (2003, Ch. 8) and Carter & Gordon (*forthcoming*). For example, one's false belief that encouragement of the Social Realism art movement in Russia began in 1933 rather than 1934 does not preclude one's understanding modern Russian history.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Zagzebski (2001) and Elgin (2009) for some notable dissent on this point.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Grimm (e.g. 2010; *forthcoming*), Hills (2009) and Strevens (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Kvanvig (2009) also considers logical and probabilistic relations, along with explanatory relations, as among the kinds of coherence-making relations that are grasped. Cf. Khalifa (2013) for a recent criticism of Kvanvig here.

point that has been stressed in recent work by Hills<sup>26</sup> (2009, §2) and Grimm<sup>27</sup> (2010; *forthcoming*). Accordingly, as Elgin (2009: 5) observes, “the student who understands geometry can *do more with it*<sup>28</sup> than the student who just knows all the axioms, the main theorems and their derivations.”

#### §4 A New Diagnosis

Consider that one who *understands* (for instance) algebraic geometry will see possibilities for solutions to standing problems that will be unavailable to one lacks such understanding. The deeper the understanding, the greater the cognitive gap between oneself and another who merely holds certain things as true, without grasping the explanatory connections.

Let’s revisit now the sort of cases that lead Hacking to move from a difference in styles of reasoning to his brand of epistemic relativism. Consider once again the case of renaissance medicine.

For example, that mercury salve might be good for syphilis because mercury is signed by the planet Mercury which signs the marketplace, where syphilis is contracted. (*Ibid.* 330)

For simplicity<sup>29</sup>, let’s suppose the issue under consideration is whether one is epistemically justified in believing the proposition that *Mercury salve is an effective treatment for syphilis*. Agent A (a subscriber to the system in which this belief comes out justified) says it is; B, a contemporary scientist, says it is not.

Consider now that this case exhibits each of the three data points from which, as we saw in §3, Hacking reasons to epistemic incommensurability. Firstly, the cognitive gap between A and B is not *merely* a function of what each “takes as true.” Our scientist, suppose, is not a scholar in renaissance medicine and fails to appreciate how the properties of mercury would ever be viewed as efficacious for treating syphilis 500 years ago. This, in part, explains the disagreement.

Secondly, the space of disagreement between A and B owes further to a kind of dispositional difference: A and B are not disposed to entertain the same propositions *as reasons for belief*. For example, consider the reason (call it R) that *mercury is signed by the planet Mercury which signs the marketplace, where syphilis is contracted*; (R) is something A, but not B, is disposed to take as a reason for believing the target proposition. R would have force, *as a reason*, for A, but not for B (as R would enter into very different explanatory relations for A, than for B).

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<sup>26</sup> Hills (2009), for instance, suggests—in the context of discussing moral understanding—that the ability one possesses in virtue of satisfying the grasping requirement is an “ability to draw the right conclusion or give the right explanation in *new cases*” (*Ibid.* 6; our italics)

<sup>27</sup> As Grimm (2010) suggests, one who understands “is sensitive not just to how things are, but to how things stand modally, and in particular to how things might have been, if certain conditions had been different. He adds, elsewhere, that (at least, if the subject matter is appropriately simple) then, by manipulating it (e.g. entertaining counterfactual possibilities) allows the agent to ‘see’ the way in which “the manipulation influences (or fails to influence) other parts of the system” (2010: 11). ”

<sup>28</sup> As Hills (2009) notes, part of what one can do with understanding is *generate* beliefs in new propositions. In rejecting the claim that possessing the kind of abilities constitutive of understanding *just is* the possession of items of knowledge, Hills notes: “Gaining this extra knowledge may help you acquire the requisite abilities, but you might have the extra pieces of knowledge without having the kind of good judgment that enables you to generate new true...beliefs yourself. Surely no extra piece or pieces of knowledge guarantee that you have these abilities” (2009: 6).

<sup>29</sup> We are simplifying in part to avoid the unnecessary tediousness that comes with Hacking’s use of the epistemic modal “might.”



Thirdly, as is suggested by Hills and Grimm, the difference in dispositions to grasp the particular explanatory relations that are part of renaissance, and contemporary, medical science (respectively) will lead A and B to entertain different *possibilities*. Just as the classical Greek grasp of mathematics did not, for instance, engender the taking of statistical reasons as possible candidates for entering into explanatory relations, likewise, the contemporary grasp of 500-year-old medical belief systems does not engender the taking of (R)—the Mercury belief—as a possibility<sup>30</sup> for entering into explanatory relations.

The conclusion we aim to draw at this point should be obvious; we are now in a position to insist that *differences in objectual understanding* suffice to neatly explain data points (1-3). However, a mere recognition that differences in understanding *persist* is no more interesting as an insight for motivating epistemic relativism than is the insight that not everyone knows all the same things.

Accordingly, we can grant all of the key data points that Hacking takes as motivating the denial of objective epistemic reasons, but we need not accept his conclusion; indeed, we have offered a diagnosis of the data that is compatible with a denial of epistemic relativism. After all, *any* meta-epistemological commitments (objectivist or otherwise) should allow for individuals to differ in what they understand no less than such commitments should allow individuals to differ in what they know.

Unlike critics who deny the existence of the kind of phenomenon that Hacking defends epistemic relativism precisely in order to explain, we are not leaving it open that, *were* there such a phenomenon, it would motivate EC. We think that there is such a phenomenon, but that the phenomenon is just that people differ in so far as they possess objectual understanding.

Our diagnosis, then, is entirely amenable to the mainstream meta-epistemological assumptions stated by the Simple View. This includes claim (3): that epistemic facts are objective and absolute.

## §5 Objections and Replies

There are various lines the relativist might try to take in response to the move we have made. One such reply would be to grant that the diagnosis we have offered does not motivate epistemic relativism (by way of EC), but to point out that we have failed to provide any reason to *prefer* the diagnosis we offer (for the data points, 1-3) to Hacking's own diagnosis<sup>31</sup>.

We grant this point. While we think that our explanation of the data points is *independently* better motivated than the relativist's explanation, this is in part for general reasons that pertain to relative truth, *per se*<sup>32</sup>. But the onus is not on us to defend such general arguments here. Rather, we've placed the onus back on the relativist: the argument for epistemic relativism we've considered here does not go through *unless* Hacking's explanation of the data can be defended as a better explanation than the one we've offered. In the absence of

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<sup>30</sup> The kind of possibility suggested here is epistemic possibility—what is possible given what one knows (or believes).

<sup>31</sup> It is worth pointing out here that the objectual understanding-based diagnosis we are proposing here is not meant to *rival* an externalist diagnosis. The grasping condition on objectual understanding can be conceived of as an internalist or as an externalist condition. The issue would turn on whether (and, perhaps to what extent) it must be reflectively accessible to one that the relations grasped by the subject are appropriately coherence-making *vis-à-vis* the subject matter in question.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Boghossian (2006) and Cappelen & Hawthorne (2010) for a variety of (very differently motivated) general considerations that count against the notion of relative truth. *Cf.* MacFarlane (e.g. 2007) and Hales (1997) for a sample of some defenses.

such an argument, the argument for epistemic relativism is not successful. And to block the conclusion was precisely the goal, nothing more.

Another objection to our move runs as follows: if understanding is *factive* in the sense that, if S understands  $\phi$  then the beliefs central to the  $\phi$  must be true, then A doesn't count as understanding medieval medicine. But this is problematic, since it was her alleged understanding in virtue of which we argued that she was able to appreciate (R) as a reason for the belief that *Mercury salve is an effective treatment for syphilis*, while B could not.

In response, we must make a distinction. Let "P" be the phlogiston theory of combustion. Johann Bercher (the 17<sup>th</sup>-century developer of the theory) understood P. However, so do many contemporary historians of science. That said, what Bercher *and* some contemporary historians of science grasp (by grasping the explanatory relations of P) is not the phenomenon of combustion, but *how* the phlogiston theory represents combustion (*viz.*—how the theory *works*—a kind of representation that is now scientifically obsolete). Contemporary scientists, on the other hand, *understand* combustion. Bercher did not. Likewise, in the example case from the previous section, A did not understand syphilis treatment because A's beliefs on the matter were widely false. B understands syphilis treatment but not *how* renaissance medicine represents effective practices of treating syphilis. This difference in understanding accounts for the phenomena highlighted by the three data points.

But, finally, one might press that (for instance) Bercher *thought* he understood combustion, even though he actually did not (and merely understood how the phlogiston theory works). Yet, from Bercher's perspective, the phenomenon of combustion was *intelligible* to him: after all, his grasp of the connections of different elements of the theory helped him to explain phenomena, and these explanations were (reasonably) empirically adequate. However, why not think that contemporary scientists are in the same predicament as Bercher? Specifically, how can contemporary scientists be sure that, in what they take to be *veridical* explanatory relations (in understanding combustion), their beliefs are not merely (like Bercher's) empirically adequate, though false? This line of objection then concludes that the diagnosis we have offered leads ultimately to the epistemic incommensurability thesis. If this is right, our explanation of the phenomena that Hacking appeals to is ultimately just a different diagnosis that ends up in the same place.

We have two responses here. Firstly, a reductio: if the fact that mere (non-veridical) intelligibility can be mistaken for (veridical) understanding were to motivate the epistemic incommensurability thesis, then it would do so by reference to some more general claim. This claim would be something like the following: if epistemic state A is veridical, and B is not, and when one is in B, one takes oneself to be in A, *then* there is no fact of the matter whether A is in a better epistemic position than B. But this is absurd. Contemporary scientists are in a better epistemic position than Bercher was—he just didn't realize it—just as those who believe truly are in a better position than those whose beliefs are in error (though they don't realize it). If Bercher were alive today, he would surely agree.

A second response to the third line of objection is to read the objection as simply raising a kind of template skeptical argument<sup>33</sup> for understanding, an argument analogous to the kind of arguments engaged with by those who aim to vindicate propositional knowledge. Specifically, the argument would run as follows: one understands  $\phi$  only if one can rule out some  $\psi$  where  $\psi$  is incompatible with  $\phi$  yet compatible with one's experiential evidence.  $\psi$

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<sup>33</sup> See here Ch. 1-4 of Pritchard (2005).

can't be ruled out. Therefore, one does not understand  $\phi$ . This argument, however, (or, at least, a generalized form of it) is one whose conclusion is just a conclusion about the *scope* of human understanding. Facts about how much understanding there is in the world are orthogonal to facts about whether the kinds of epistemic facts articulated by the Simple View are *relative*. In sum, then, this argument results, at best, in a skeptical denial of (1) of the Simple View. It is a challenge of mainstream meta-epistemology, but not a relativist one.

## §6 Conclusion

Hacking claims to have posed a relativist challenge from the “within the heartland of rationality” (1982: 322). The kind of epistemic relativism he has endorsed is incompatible with the meta-epistemological presumptions of mainstream epistemology. We've attempted to counter his challenge by appealing to standard thinking at the fore of recent debates in contemporary epistemology. Rather than to have dismissed Hacking's initial insights motivating his relativism, we have granted them and offered a competing diagnosis—one that is perfectly compatible with the kind of objectivity about epistemic facts Hacking denies. It is tempting to consider how the move we have developed here against Hacking's relativism might also provide a way to block other arguments for epistemic relativism. However, that is a task for another occasion.

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