Epistemic Realism and Epistemic Incommensurability

Abstract: It is commonly assumed that at least some epistemic facts are objective. Leading candidates are those epistemic facts that supervene on natural facts about the reliability of belief-forming methods. In this paper, I raise and discuss a challenge to this assumption—not because I am unsympathetic but because I think that its nature and ground bear further examination. It turns out that realism about matters epistemic is more complex to articulate and defend than generally assumed.

I. Realism and Relevance

Skepticism about the objectivity of moral facts is ubiquitous—at least among philosophers. Less common, and certainly much less discussed, is skepticism about epistemic facts. By epistemic facts, I mean putative facts of the form:

- x is justified
- x is warranted
- x is supported by the evidence
- x is known.

Most philosophers, I’d wager, assume that such facts are objective – or at least some of them are. One reason for this is that a broad range of philosophers would agree that at least some facts of the above form
supervene on certain natural facts. Which natural facts, is, of course, a matter of debate. Leading candidates include facts about which methods of belief-formation are reliable—where a reliable method is defined as a method that is more likely than not to produce true beliefs over the long run.¹ This is because it is generally seen as a good thing, from the epistemic point of view, to form beliefs by way of reliable doxastic methods, processes, and practices.² If some epistemic facts supervene on natural facts of this sort, then it is very plausible that some epistemic facts are, indeed, objective. At the very least, the case for the objectivity of such facts is bolstered by their dependence on facts about the reliability of methods.

I want to raise and discuss a challenge to this assumption—not because I am unsympathetic but because I think that its nature and ground bear further examination. It turns out that realism about matters epistemic will be more complex to articulate and defend than we might have thought.

In particular, I'll focus on two widely held meta-epistemological presuppositions. The first is

Method realism: there are objective facts about which methods and/processes are reliable.

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¹ The more controversial issues are whether reliability sufficient for knowledge and justification across the board.

² Throughout, I will use the term "method" generically to cover practices and processes.
I will not fuss here with what it means to call a fact “objective” – but will stipulate that the following is a necessary condition for being an objective fact in the sense with which I am concerned:

It is an objective fact that $F$ only if disagreements over $F$’s being the case are subject to fault.

A disagreement is subject to fault just when one party or the other, in believing what they do about the matter at hand, commits a cognitive error. So stated, method realism is a fairly weak view. Most philosophers, and perhaps most non-philosophers, would think that it is an objective fact in this weak sense about whether, e.g. sense-perception is more likely than not to result in true beliefs.

The second presupposition is:

Epistemic relevance: The objective facts about which belief-forming methods are reliable are, or can be, relevant to shaping our epistemic views. We can, at least in principle, appeal to them when, e.g. changing our minds on which methods are reliable.

In short, facts about methods and their reliability (or lack thereof) are not, at least in principle, opaque to us. It is possible to discover which methods of belief are reliable, which are unreliable and which are more reliable than others. Indeed, most of us think that we often do appeal to such facts in forming our beliefs about which methods are reliable. Or

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3 (deleted for blind review)
course, we can be wrong, as epistemic realism implies. If radical skeptics are right, we might be massively wrong. The methods we may believe are reliable may not be. But there is no conceptual or metaphysical barrier, as opposed to possible epistemic barriers, to our accessing such facts.

Realism about a target area is often marked by a fusion of what Crispin Wright has called “modest” and “presumptive” thoughts (1992, 1). Where we are realists about a kind of fact, we think we can be mistaken about such facts – we aren’t always right in what we believe about them. That’s the modest bit. Yet we also think such facts are accessible to us. That’s the presumptive bit. Method realism and epistemic relevance respectively capture at least elements of both bits. Consequently, I’ll call the conjunction of method realism and epistemic relevance weak epistemic realism. 4

Our discussion will be organized as follows. In section one, I present some distinctions about methods and the different types of ascriptions of reliability we can make with regard to them. In section two, I raise what I’ll call the problem of epistemic incommensurability by way of a two-stage argument, distinguishing it from associated problems. In sections three and four, we’ll discuss how this problem bears on our two claims above. In the final section, I will close by highlighting some open questions.

II. Methods and principles

4 Explicit defenses of epistemic realism are relatively rare. And exception is Cuneo (2007).
Our concern is with the reliability of doxastic or belief-forming methods. But it helps to have a word for our ascriptions of reliability to such methods. I’ll call these ascriptions epistemic principles. An epistemic principle is a principle to the effect that some method for forming beliefs is trustworthy (or trustworthy to some degree, or within certain constraints) with regard to some subject matter or domain of inquiry.

So defined, epistemic principles can be distinguished along multiple lines. One important distinction is between those that are derivative and those that are not. An example of a derivative principle would be:

Google: Googling is a reliable method for diagnosing medical conditions.

A dispute over this principle could presumably (hopefully!) be resolved by appeal to more basic epistemic principles. Contrast:

Sense Perception (SP): Sense perception is a reliable method for forming beliefs about the external world.

SP is arguably a fundamental epistemic principle (FEP). An epistemic principle is fundamental in a system of principles if it can’t be shown to be true (actively justified) without employing the method that it endorses as reliable. Arguments in favor of such principles are therefore subject to “epistemic circularity”. An argument is epistemically circular when, as
Alston puts it, “a commitment to the conclusion [is] a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be justified in holding the premises” (1993, 15). This is the sort of circularity I am guilty of if I believe you are trustworthy just on your say-so. As Alston and others have argued (Alston, 1993; Bergmann, 2006), this seems to be true of sense perception. It seems difficult, to say the least, to prove that any of the senses are reliable without at some point employing one of the senses. Giving a proof (or showing that one is justified, as opposed to having a proof, or being justified) presumably requires language, and one can’t use language without some use of the senses. Similarly with:

DP: Deductive inference from true premises is reliable.

It is hard to see how I could show that deductive inference is reliable without at some point employing a deductive inference. Similarly with induction: if the widely accepted Humean arguments about induction are correct, I cannot show that induction is true without at some point employing inductive inference.

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6 As Alston notes (1993, 19), it does no good to protest that one can justify vision’s reliability by appeal to, e.g. hearing and touch. For how do we justify their reliability in turn without at some point relying on vision?

7 Can’t I just use a simple-track record argument for the reliability of deduction? Perhaps. But note that – even putting aside the question of the modal strength of deduction’s reliability—there is the following problem. Track-record arguments presuppose an obvious deductive inference from the following principle: If T is a track-record argument, and T shows that M is reliable, then M is reliable. Without the relevant inference in play as a presupposition, track-record arguments are irrelevant to the reliability of deductive inference. With it in play, they are epistemically circular.
Fundamentality can be relative or absolute. A principle is fundamental relative to a system of beliefs if, were anyone to accept that system (that is, have the beliefs that constitute it) they would be unable to show that the principle is true without relying on the method it recommends. A principle is absolutely fundamental if it is relatively fundamental to every system of beliefs. None of what follows requires that you believe that SP or DP any other mentioned candidates are absolutely fundamental epistemic principles – although I confess as taking it to be highly likely that SP and DP are exactly that. I will assume only that these are relatively fundamental principles—that is, that relative to some systems of principles, SP and DP are fundamental.

While SP and DP may both be fundamental relative to most belief systems, they differ in various other respects. DP concerns an (the) inferential doxastic method; SP is non-inferential: it concerns a source or method of belief that does not itself take beliefs as inputs. DP, unlike SP is less restricted in its applicability. Deductive inference from true premises, if it is reliable, is reliable for forming beliefs of any sort; sense perception is not a reliable means for forming beliefs about mathematics. It is, broadly speaking, applicable to ascertaining the contingent facts about the external world. Still more restricted are principles that assert the reliability of methods with regard to forming beliefs about a single domain of facts: facts about the distant past, or facts about economics and so on.

Finally, principles can also be distinguished in terms of whether, like SP, they are simple assignments of reliability, or whether they assign
a comparative weight to a method's reliability. An example of the latter would be:

PM: Inductive inference from empirically gathered, third-person data is the most reliable method for forming beliefs about human psychological states.

Call this a *comparative epistemic principle*. Holding such a principle is consistent with thinking that there are other methods or sources of information (in this case, perhaps, introspection) that, while reliable, are less reliable than the method recommended by the principle. Note that comparative principles, just like simple principles can be derivative or fundamental. A possible example of the latter would be:

IM: Introspection is the most reliable method for forming beliefs about the properties of our occurent conscious mental states.

This principle is plausibly fundamental. It is difficult to see how one could be justified in accepting it without employing, at some point, introspection. For how else would one judge that introspection is more reliable than, e.g. third person empirical data with regard to the properties of one’s conscious mental states without introspecting one’s occurent beliefs about the properties of such states?

Of course there is more to say about epistemic principles; but these simple distinctions will due for our purposes. Let us move on to a discussion of what it is to defend an epistemic principle.
III. Defending epistemic principles

Epistemic principles, like any other principle or belief, can be challenged. In the weak sense I’m interested in, you *challenge* my principle \( P \) just when you ask me to *give some reason for* \( P \). I’ll say that I *defend* \( P \) from your challenge when I give you some reason for \( P \); and I epistemically defend \( P \) when I give you some epistemic reason for \( P \). Challenges and defenses are, so defined, not events that happen in a social vacuum; they are made to and from a particular person or persons’ epistemic point of view. Thus, whether one is obligated, intellectually, epistemically or otherwise to answer any particular challenge in the weak sense so defined, is apt to be a context-sensitive matter.\(^8\) I am interested in a different question: whether it is even possible to epistemically defend, that is, given epistemic reasons for, certain epistemic principles against challenge.

What is required for me to give a reason to you in the face of a challenge? There are doubtless different epistemic relations one might have in mind when talking about “giving reasons”. The one I’m concerned with can be defined as follows: I’ll say that \( A \) gives a reason \( R \) to \( B \) for some \( P \), only if were \( B \) aware of her principles, and reason consistently with them, \( B \) would recognize that \( R \) is a reason for \( P \). That is, in order for \( A \) to give a reason to \( B \), \( B \) should be *able* to recognize—even if she in fact does not – that it is a reason from his standpoint.

\(^8\) See Williams 1995, 2001 for discussion.
This definition of “giving a reason” is stipulative, but it is not wholly so. It is the notion in play whenever there is a need for coming to some mutually recognized agreement on some matter or course of action. Suppose we are wondering which of two plans for building a bridge is the safest, and we consult an engineer to find this out. In so doing, we not only expect the engineer to be able to discriminate whether the one plan is safer than the other, but to be able to articulate, or otherwise make clear, the rational basis of her discrimination. In short, we expect her to give us a reason for favoring one plan over the other that we can understand from our own standpoint. Barring that, we will either not build the bridge at all, or we will judge the plans equally safe, and choose between the plans in some other way.

Of course, we can be ignorant or mistaken about our principles, epistemic or otherwise. We may be unaware that we are committed to some principles by other principles we explicitly believe. Indeed, it would be surprising if this weren’t so. Thus if you challenge a derivative epistemic principle of mine, I might successfully give you a reason to believe that principle even if you fail to appreciate that I’ve done so, simply because you are unaware that said principle is entailed by some more fundamental principle that you do accept. Indeed, that this happens is to be expected. Moreover, our constraint on reason “giving” is consistent with some familiar distinctions. One might be justified in believing P without having a reason for the belief. The belief may simply be produced by a reliable method. Likewise one’s belief might be justified by a reason without you recognizing that it is a reason. Moreover, one can have reasons one doesn’t give or receive. But that is not what is at issue in
the case of the engineer, or in the case of an overt epistemic disagreement. In both cases, there is a standing demand to *defend* one’s beliefs or commitments. And to epistemically defend a belief essentially requires giving an epistemic reason for the belief, and one gives a reason only if, at least in principle, it can be recognized as such by oneself and others. It is precisely here that our problem begins to arise.

**Challenge Argument**

1. *A* can epistemically defend a fundamental epistemic principle FP to *B* when challenged only if *A* can give a reason for FP to *B*. (definition).
2. Fundamental epistemic principles can be shown to be true only via epistemically circular arguments (definition).
3. Epistemically circular arguments can’t be used to give epistemic reasons under challenge.

Therefore: Fundamental epistemic principles cannot be epistemically defended when challenged.

The argument is straightforward. The first premise falls out of our stipulated definitions of reason-giving and challenge. I challenge *P*, recall, just when I don’t believe *P* and ask you to give some reason for *P*; I defend it when I give you a reason. The second premise is a consequence of our

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9 Contrast Thomas Nagel: “To reason is to think systematically in ways anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognize as correct”. (1997, 5).
definition of a fundamental epistemic principle. The third premise is less trivial, but it is hardly implausible: an epistemically circular argument cannot be used to effectively give an epistemic reason for a belief in the face of a standing demand to actively justify the belief. It will fail to be recognized as a reason by anyone who doesn’t already share the principle. As the bridge-plan case illustrates, in a case where live demands for justification are on the table, we demand reasons we can recognize as such. Epistemically circular arguments are hopeless for doing this. If I don’t trust your basic methods, your reassuring me that they are reliable because employing them informs you that they are really won’t impress me. Nor should it.

Is this an argument for skepticism? I see no good reason to think that it is. It is certainly no argument for Cartesian skepticism. Cartesian skepticism could be false and I still might not be able to epistemically defend my fundamental epistemic principles in the face of a challenge. The converse also holds: the truth of Cartesian skepticism doesn’t imply that I can’t defend my epistemic principles; all epistemic principles could be commensurable and an evil demon could still be deceiving us.

The issue is slightly subtler when the type of skepticism on the table is skepticism about fundamental epistemic principles. According to one version of this view, no fundamental epistemic principles are justified. One might think that if the challenge argument is sound, then skepticism of this sort would follow. And it might, if we accepted:

(A) S is epistemically justified in believing P only if S can give an epistemic reason for P in the face of a challenge to P.
But this condition on justification is likely to be very controversial. Many, for example, will think that my four year old can be justified in believing something without having the ability to defend her belief in the face of sophisticated disagreement. More plausible is the claim that while justification in general doesn’t require the giving of reasons, the justification of fundamental epistemic principles does. That is:

(B) Where $P$ is a fundamental epistemic principle, $S$ is epistemically justified in believing $P$ only if $S$ can give a reason for $P$ in the face of an overt challenge to $P$.

This is significantly less controversial.\(^{10}\) But it still fails to be persuasive on most extent theories of justification. If old-fashioned reliabilism is right, for example, then if a basic method is reliable, it could be known to be reliable just by using that method. From the externalist’s viewpoint, all that matters is whether the source is reliable, not whether we know or even believe that it is. As long as the source is in fact reliable, it can produce knowledge or justified belief. Thus, if the method can produce beliefs about its own reliability, then it can be used to justifiably believe or even know whether it is reliable.\(^{11}\) Obviously the externalist response

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\(^{10}\) Even if this is true, however, skepticism in the dogmatic sense about epistemic principles doesn’t automatically follow. Rather, one might think something more like Pyrrhonism is the outcome.

\(^{11}\) W. P. Alston, 1989; 1993; Sosa, 1997; Bergmann 2004.
to epistemic circularity is controversial. But for purposes of this paper at least, I’ll assume that epistemic circularity is no threat to knowledge or even justified belief—at least no direct threat.

Many internalists can also reject (B). Take a very minimal internalist conception – one which allows us to know that to which we are entitled in the sense intended by Crispin Wright – to one’s fundamental epistemic principles (Wright, 2004). To be entitled in Wright’s sense is, roughly, to have epistemic warrant for a proposition without having any epistemic reasons to believe it. One is entitled to a proposition in this sense when (a) that proposition is presupposed by one’s cognitive projects; (b) one has no reason to think it is not true; and (c) any attempt to justify it would rest on propositions whose epistemic standing is no better off. Perhaps we are entitled in this sense to our fundamental principles. And perhaps, as Wright suggests, entitlement is epistemic and not pragmatic in character – it provides what we are calling justification for a belief. If so, then we are free to reject the above condition on justification.

So the challenge argument shouldn’t be taken to support skepticism. The real problem it points to is all together different, but equally troubling. It raises the possibility that two epistemic principles, each fundamental relative to their respective systems, can be incommensurable in a clear sense. Since incommensurability is entirely

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epistemic and not semantic in its origin, I’ll call this epistemic incommensurability.\textsuperscript{13}

IV. Incommensurability from Epistemic Disagreement

One way – as it will turn out, not the only way – to get a handle on the phenomenon of epistemic incommensurability is by thinking about the conditions under which disagreements over epistemic principles might persist – that is, might defy resolution.

It is a platitude that a debate can be resolved only if there is some equally recognizable common ground between the participants. So if we are to resolve disagreements over epistemic principles it seems we must have some common ground. And if we are to resolve the debate by appeal to epistemic reasons, it seems we must have common epistemic ground. But it seems possible to lack such ground where disputes concern fundamental epistemic principles.

Most disagreements over epistemic principles are relatively shallow; they can be resolved, at least hypothetically, given enough time and so on, by appeal to shared principles. What we might call “deep” epistemic disagreements, on the other hand, concern fundamental epistemic principles or would so concern them were the basis of the dispute made explicit. The mere fundamentality of the principles involved, however, may not always be sufficient for deep disagreement. Where the parties to the dispute do affirm distinct principles, the

\textsuperscript{13} Compare Kuhn, 1962, whose paradigmatic incommensurability argument, while obviously having epistemic consequences, is arguably semantic in origin.
principles must conflict in the sense that they recommend methods capable of producing incompatible beliefs.\textsuperscript{14} The relevant belief-systems relative to which the principle or principles is fundamental must be internally consistent. And of course the parties to the disagreement must also – as we are assuming they do—share an epistemic goal(s). Otherwise they would be talking past one another.

But where these simple conditions do hold, the following argument seems plausible:

1. Deep epistemic disagreements can be epistemically resolved only if the fundamental epistemic principle(s) can be epistemically defended under challenge (definition).
2. They can’t be epistemically defended under challenge (Challenge Argument).
3. So, deep epistemic disagreements can’t be epistemically resolved.

The argument, if sound, appears to suggest that were two people to endorse incompatible fundamental epistemic principles, those principles would be incommensurable in an obvious sense: there can be no epistemic reason given by adherents of either principle for accepting their respective principle. Moreover, if the argument is sound, then any principle I accept which is fundamental for me, is potentially incommensurable with other principles in this way. Such

\textsuperscript{14} Might there be cases where appeals to a second fundamental epistemic principle might somehow resolve a dispute over a first? Possibly; although presumably deeper disagreements will preclude this.
incommensurability is properly called epistemic because it falls out of strictly epistemic, and not semantic, considerations. Accordingly, I’ll call this the Epistemic Incommensurability Argument, or EIA. \(^{15}\) I’ll refer to its conclusion as the problem of epistemic incommensurability or sometimes just “epistemic incommensurability”.

It is worth noting, that deep epistemic disagreement of the sort that gives rise to epistemic incommensurability is not best described as a kind of “peer disagreement” in the sense most relevant to recent discussions.\(^{16}\) First, the focus here is on explicitly epistemic disagreements, not on the epistemological consequences of non-epistemic disagreements. Second, peer disagreements are of epistemic interest when disagreeing parties (a) acknowledge each other as epistemic peers – they see each other as having the same evidence, but (b) they draw different conclusions from said evidence. When these conditions obtain, one can ask whether one should revise one’s own positions in the face of recognized disagreement. This is a very important question – but it is not the one raised by epistemic incommensurability. For parties to a real or potential deep epistemic disagreement will not see themselves as epistemic peers—nor should they. What I recognize as evidence for P depends on my epistemic principles – on the methods I take to be reliable. If I don’t think a method of yours is reliable about some matter, then I am not going to take any of its deliverances as

\(^{15}\) See Hales 2006 and Pritchard 2009 for parallel discussions; both are particularly interested in epistemic relativism.

\(^{16}\) The literature on peer disagreement, is large; for a sampling, see Kelly 2005; Feldman 2007, and Christensen 2007.
evidence. Rather, I will see my own preferred method (should I have one) as producing evidence. So I won’t see us as being in the same evidential state. So I won’t see you as an epistemic peer. If the situation should be reversed, you will return the favor. You may see me as an intellectual peer (capable, say, of drawing correct inferences etc.). But you won’t see me as an epistemic peer. And of course, that is not surprising. You can no more see someone with different fundamental epistemic principles as your epistemic peer than you can see someone who thinks torture is fun as your moral peer.

The challenge argument needn’t be understood as a (good) argument for skepticism; likewise for the EIA argument. As we saw above, we may well know (via an epistemically circular argument perhaps) which basic methods are reliable. But this fact has absolutely no traction when one is trying to justify employment of a method in the face of open and explicit doubts about the method’s reliability or the extent of its reliability. When posing a challenge, it doesn’t help to be told, “If you adopt my method, you’ll be able to know that you did”. That answer offers stone instead of bread. Likewise, in a case of explicit challenge, one cannot give a reason in the sense defined by appealing to the fact that you are entitled by your cognitive projects to trusting that method. This would work, presumably, if one’s challenger did accept the same project, and the reliability of the method in question was in fact presupposed by any pursuit of that project. But your challenger may not accept your cognitive project. And if he doesn’t, saying, “I’m entitled to p” cannot be used to give a reason for p in a case of deep epistemic
disagreement, *even if* the person who is entitled is warranted in holding *p*.

Note that the above considerations are entirely consistent with the possibility that there are some fundamental epistemic principles accepted (implicitly or otherwise) by everyone. As noted before, DP, SP and a parallel principle of induction seem to be excellent candidates. But the fact that everyone believes or would believe such principles still fails to be very relevant here. First, the fact that some epistemic principles are absolutely fundamental doesn’t mean that all are. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how they could be. Principles like IM are arguably fundamental for the systems of which they are a part. But it is not at all clear that they are, or must be, parts of every epistemic system. Moreover, as indicated earlier, some fundamental principles may well be comparative in nature, and thus less likely to be accepted (implicitly or otherwise by everyone). In general, it seems highly unlikely that every basic method of belief-formation will be employed by every believer, even if some methods are employed by all. It seems highly likely – as an empirical hypothesis—that there will be some differences between human beings in this respect. It just doesn’t seem likely that our methods of belief will be completely homogenous even at the basic level.

Second, even for those FEPs that are universally accepted, this fact fails to show that such principles are true. The fact that everyone accepts that *p* does not entail *p*. This is so even if we must, as Hume had it, abide by certain epistemic principles by virtue of our “natural instincts”. Hence the fact that some FEPs are absolutely fundamental does not show that we can defend such principles with epistemic reasons against someone
who challenges them. And given that universal acceptance does not entail truth, someone may well challenge a method’s reliability yet still acknowledge that he will have to use that method of belief in daily life, as the case of Hume and the method of induction amply illustrates.

So epistemic incommensurability has interest all on its own, independent of skepticism. In particular, it raises at least two issues, each of which bears on the objectivity of epistemic facts.

V. Incommensurability and Realism

I began by distinguishing two common meta-epistemological assumptions: The first of these was:

Method realism: there are objective facts about which methods are reliable.

Does epistemic incommensurability threaten method realism? Here’s one reason to think that it might.

1. Deep epistemic disagreements cannot be epistemically resolved.
2. The best explanation for why deep epistemic disagreements cannot be epistemically resolved is that such disagreements are faultless.
3. If such disagreements are faultless, then, probably, there are no objective facts about which fundamental epistemic principles are true.

The argument trades on the connection between objectivity and faultless disagreement we stipulated earlier. As such, it parallels a familiar argument for moral anti-realism.\(^{17}\) That argument moves from the premise that deep moral disagreements are rationally irresolvable to the conclusion that there are no objectively true moral principles. Such arguments are widely used to undermine moral realism.\(^{18}\)

Moreover, like those arguments, the above is potentially explosive, since, one might think:

4. If there are no objectively true fundamental epistemic principles, there are no objectively true derivative epistemic principles.
5. All epistemic principles are either fundamental or derivative.
6. Therefore, there are (probably) no objective facts about which epistemic principles are true.

And if there are no objective facts about which epistemic principles are true, then there are no objective facts about which methods of belief-

\(^{17}\) For discussion of the moral version, see Shafer-Landau, 2005.

\(^{18}\) Note the "probably" in the conclusion. The argument is deductive, but its conclusion inherits its content from the abduction in the second premise.
formation are reliable. Method realism would be false, and thus weak epistemic realism would be undermined.

Like any other argument involving an appeal to the best explanation, this one succeeds only if there is no other, equally good, explanation of the phenomena in question. I think there is. We’ll briefly consider a few other alternatives.

Some might claims that the best explanation for why deep epistemic disagreements are epistemically irresolvable is not that there are no objectively true epistemic principles, but that we can’t know which epistemic principles are true. But as I’ve noted, various kinds of rival epistemologies—both externalist and externalist—suggest that we can know which epistemic principles are true. So it is very much up in the air whether skepticism is this sense is the best explanation of the rational irresolvability of epistemic disagreements.¹⁹

Another possibility is that premise two is false because the epistemic irresolvability of deep epistemic disagreements is due to defective concepts. That is, we might think that our basic epistemic concepts are simply too vague or imprecise, or otherwise mangled, and that is why disagreements which essentially employ such concepts can not be e-resolved. Like our first suggestion, this would be cold comfort. For if our basic epistemic concepts are radically defective, it may be that many of our epistemic principles that employ such concepts will lack a

¹⁹ This consideration also underlines an important fact already noted but worth nothing again: namely that the argument is consistent with externalism being true. For an externalist will claim that if our epistemic principles are true, then we can know they are true (by way of those same epistemic principles). But this conditional can be true even if the antecedent is false. So externalism is not ruled out by the argument.
determinate truth-value. We end up reaching the same conclusion by other means.

There are also the familiar possibilities of nonfactualism and relativism about epistemic principles. But far from being rival explanations, nonfactualism and relativism presuppose the general negative claim (that there are no objectively true epistemic principles) allegedly supported by the above argument.

Consequently, it remains our first task to see whether there is a simpler explanation of the epistemic irresolvability of epistemic disagreements. There is. This explanation for the epistemic irresolvability of deep overt epistemic disagreements is that it is a direct consequence of the nature of epistemic rationality itself together with the relevant facts about the kind of disagreement in question. More precisely: once one understands what it means to give an epistemic reason, the epistemic irresolvability of deep epistemic disagreements is just what one should expect. It is a consequence of the human cognitive condition; what Pritchard has memorably called our “epistemic angst”.

Where there is deep epistemic disagreement over some fundamental principle, the disagreement has hit bedrock, the spade has turned – choose your favorite metaphor. When such a state is reached, the process of giving epistemic reasons – of engaging in the activity of justifying in the epistemic sense – seems to lose its point. But the best explanation for this is not some deep metaphysical fact about the

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21 See Pritchard, 2005, 245-249.
objectivity of our epistemic principles. The best explanation is that epistemically circular arguments for the reliability of some method won’t be recognized as a reason to accept that method by those challenging its reliability in the first place. In short, the very nature of the debates themselves, together with facts about what is to give a reason, already explain the epistemic irresolvability of deep epistemic disagreements. No further explanation is needed.

So the epistemic irresolvability of deep epistemic disagreements doesn’t—at least by itself—mean that there are no objectively true epistemic principles. The alternative explanation just offered is completely consistent with one side or the other being in cognitive error about whether their respective methods are reliable. But of course it is also consistent with this not being the case. As a result, it seems that epistemic incommensurability still raises a challenge to weak epistemic realists. That challenge, as we’ll see, is that if one wishes to continues to insist that deep disagreements over methods are still subject to fault, then something needs go be said about the accessibility of the relevant facts.

VI.  Epistemic relevance and Epistemic change

So far then, weak epistemic realism seems unthreatened by epistemic incommensurability arguments. The second background assumption that I noted above was
Epistemic relevance: The objective facts about which belief-forming methods are reliable are, or can be, relevant to shaping our epistemic views. We can, at least in principle, appeal to them when, e.g. changing our minds on which methods are reliable.

We’ve already seen the beginnings of a threat to epistemic relevance. Suppose weak epistemic realism is true. There are objective facts about which methods are reliable. Suppose further that we can know externalistically which of these facts are reliable. The point of the challenge argument was that even if these facts obtain, we still can’t give epistemic reasons for the reliability of our basic methods under challenge. And if we can’t do that, then as EIA alleges, we can’t epistemically resolve deep epistemic disagreements. Together, these points suggest that even if we can access the relevant epistemic facts – in the sense that allows us to externally know such facts—it doesn’t follow that we can always recognize that we are rational in so doing.

It is worth stressing that the challenge remains whether or not there are actual deep epistemic disagreements. Moreover, we don’t even need to appeal to disagreements between different parties at all in order to raise it. This is because epistemic incommensurability suggests that we cannot conceive of changes in our own epistemic views as being rational.

Here is the argument. The relevant changes, of course, concern fundamental epistemic principles. Consider:

TRANSITION: At t2, S believes a fundamental principle FP she did not believe at t1.
TRANSITION describes positive epistemic change: an adoption of a principle that wasn’t part of the believer’s epistemic previous epistemic repertoire. Now consider the following chain of reasoning

1. If S is to recognize TRANSITION as rational, then S must be able to give a reason for FP at t2 that she would have recognized as a reason at t1.

The underlying rationale here is that change in view can be modeled as disagreement between different temporal stages. Hence if I am going to see my own positive change in view as rational, then it must be possible me to explain my later self, so to speak, to my earlier self. That is, I should be able to give a reason—in the sense defined earlier—to my earlier self for accepting the new principle. If I cannot, then it is mysterious how I could presently understand that adoption as one that was based on rational grounds. I may hold the principle for reasons, but I cannot understand my own adoption of the principle as being based on reasons.

From this point, the reasoning takes a now familiar form.

2. Any reason given for a FP will be epistemically circular.
3. Epistemically circular reasons for FP won’t be recognized as reasons for FP by S at t1.
4. So, S cannot recognize TRANSITION as rational.
The conclusion is mitigated slightly – but only slightly—by the fact that it leaves open the possibility that negative change in epistemic view – transitions from holding a principle to not holding it—might well be recognizable as rational. But this is small consolation. For surely it is possible to improve one’s epistemic situation by adopting new and more reliable methods for generating beliefs—including new fundamental methods. And it is obvious that such improvement is, or at least can be, a rational process – one based on reasons. And yet that is precisely what the above line of argument rules out. Epistemic incommensurability begins at home.

The argument seems to constitute a legitimate threat against epistemic relevance. There may be objective facts about which of our basic belief forming methods are reliable (and corresponding objectively true epistemic principles) but we can’t recognize ourselves as appealing to such facts when coming to accept such methods. They are not, in the defined sense, relevant. Put another way, our acceptance of our fundamental epistemic principles seems, from the standpoint of epistemic reason, entirely arbitrary.

VII. Open Questions

As I emphasized at the outset, I’m concerned in this paper with how epistemic incommensurability might affect two widely held meta-epistemological assumptions. As we’ve seen, the more serious challenge is to epistemic relevance. It is an additional project to say how we should
answer this challenge. But I want to close with some observations about how I think we shouldn’t do so.

One initially tempting response to the problem can be seen in this passage from Paul Boghossian, where he is discussing disagreement over what I’ve called fundamental epistemic principles:

[The claim] that we cannot hope to justify our principles through the use of those very principles is not true in general, it is true only in the special, albeit important case where we have *legitimately* come to doubt the correctness of our own principles. (Boghossian, 2006, 100).

Boghossian’s thought is that epistemic circularity bars us from giving reasons for our epistemic principles only if we have legitimately come to doubt those principles – if the cause of our doubts is illegitimate, then there is nothing wrong with using a method to justify the reliability of the method.

Is it not at all clear that this can be the end of the story. First, what counts as “legitimate”? There’s the rub. A legitimate challenge is presumably a rational challenge. But deep epistemic disagreements are disagreements over fundamental epistemic principles. Our fundamental epistemic principles are part of what determines what we at least suppose ourselves to be rational in believing. And there we have the problem. I can’t decide on what counts as a legitimate reason to doubt my fundamental epistemic principles unless I’ve already settled on my fundamental epistemic principles. So I can’t determine which doubts are
legitimate independently of determining which principles are true. Nonetheless, and as I've already emphasized, what makes deep disagreement over epistemic principles so curious is that it is not what is sometimes called ‘reasonable disagreement’. Adherents of distinct principles won't see each other as drawing a different conclusion from the same evidence. Rather, they will see each other as not grasping the relevant evidence, or even ignoring it. So from the first-person perspective, where I am one of the people involved in the disagreement, I will regard myself as perfectly justified in rejecting their complaints about my principles. And of course if my principles are true, then I will be justified (externally). But this fact, as I’ve emphasized, isn’t relevant to the problems raised by epistemic incommensurability.

Second, and the reason it is irrelevant, is that the problem of epistemic incommensurability arises, as we’ve just seen, independently of any actual or possible epistemic disagreement. The problem, as I’ve said, begins at home: it concerns wither our acceptance of our own epistemic principles is, from the standpoint of epistemic reason, anything other than arbitrary. And this is a question that can be raised entirely independently of any issue of doubt. The issue isn’t about doubt. I can recognize, for example, that I couldn’t have given any reason to my prior self for accepting some new fundamental epistemic principle without doubting my present principle. The question isn’t whether I have any reason to doubt my present principle, but whether I have any reason for thinking that it is true that is non-circular, and therefore not arbitrary.

Another way of responding to the problems I’ve outlined is by way of a theoretical shrug of the shoulders. Perhaps, one might think, we
shouldn’t really worry about whether we can give reasons – in the sense defined—for our fundamental epistemic principles, whether to other people or to our (earlier) selves. Perhaps we should just accept that, at some point, epistemic reason-giving just grounds out in something arbitrary. This too is a tempting thought, and one that has taken many guises throughout the history of philosophy. Here is version of it in Wittgenstein:

> Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic. ...I said I would ‘combat’ the other man—but wouldn’t I give him *reasons*? Certainly, but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think of what happens when missionaries convert natives) (1969; §611-612).

Indeed, that is precisely what I think we should think about. Missionaries, historically, have had great success converting natives through a combination of force and manipulation. But is that really how we wish to understand our relationship to our own fundamental epistemic commitments?

Of course there is more to say about both sorts of responses. My present point is that, whatever their other merits, and whatever force they may have against, e.g. epistemic skepticism, neither seems particularly attractive, at least at first blush, as responses to the problems of epistemic incommensurability. Nonetheless, both raise a similar and clearly relevant underlying question. *Should we even care about giving*
reasons for our fundamental epistemic principles? Answering this question is beyond the scope of the present essay; but I will register an opinion: I think we should.\textsuperscript{22} At root, the reason we should care about giving reasons for our fundamental epistemic principles is that not doing so (or being willing to do so) is against our principles. Here, for example, is something I am attracted to believing:

Reasonableness: S is reasonable in accepting some P to the degree to which S is able, at least in principle, to give reasons for P when challenged.

As noted briefly above, whether one is required to answer a challenge may well be a contextual matter. Consequently, it will be a delicate matter to state a full and refined statement of the principle. But even so roughly put, the intuition here is easy enough to appreciate. Moreover, note that you can accept something like this principle without thinking that reasonableness is either necessary or sufficient for knowledge or even justification. You might just think that it is a good thing, from the epistemic point of view, to be reasonable, but hold that reasonableness is an independent virtue from knowledge or being justified. Whatever one’s stance on these epistemological matters, being reasonable seems to be something we should value. One of the reasons we should value it is that the practice of giving epistemic reasons plays an important and obvious role in our social lives. We often have to decide, jointly, what to do—and we often have to make these decisions in the company of people who we

\textsuperscript{22} (Deleted for blind review)
ourselves find unreasonable. We must work together to solve some problems whether we like it or not. But working together is most effective when most involved are convinced that we are pursuing the best route to a solution of the problem at hand. To reach consensus of this sort, or even to approach it or even aim at it, requires that we be willing give each other public reasons – sometimes practical or ethical reasons, but often epistemic reasons – reasons for thinking that our view of the facts is the right one to have. And of course, this is something we value even when the facts in question are epistemic – or concern the reliability of methods. Perhaps we are on the school board, and must decide on the standards textbooks must meet if we are to use them in our schools. We agree that the textbooks should include the facts, but we may disagree over what the facts are. One reason we might disagree over the facts is that we might disagree over which belief-forming methods are reliable. And if that disagreement comes to light, it seems reasonable to be willing to give reasons—and public, mutually appreciable, reasons—for why we should accept some methods over others.

VIII. Conclusion

We began by noting how plausible it is to think that at least some epistemic facts supervene on natural facts about the reliability of belief-forming methods. Consequently, since facts about reliable methods seem objective, it seems an easy conclusion to draw that at least some epistemic facts seem objective as well. We've seen that this conclusion, intuitive as it may be, is open to challenge.
What I’ve called the problem of epistemic incommensurability is the problem of how we can give public reasons for our most fundamental epistemic principles: either to ourselves or to others. As we’ve seen, this problem doesn’t so much threaten the objectivity of those principles but our own understanding of our commitment to those principles. The threat it raises - the threat that our commitment to our own epistemic principles is epistemically arbitrary - is distinct from the skeptical problem. Moreover, it is a problem with pressing practical implications - implications for whether what I’ve called reasonableness is really possible. As I suggested just above, our reasons for being reasonable might be at the end of the day non-epistemic. And that points the way, I suspect, towards how we must eventually answer the problem of epistemic incommensurability: by reconceiving the relationship between practical and epistemic reason.23

Bibliography
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