

# METAEPISTEMOLOGY AND DIVINE REVELATION

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**Abstract:** In *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*, William Abraham offers a rich, subtle defense of an epistemology of divine revelation. In this paper, I focus on a cluster of metaepistemological claims made by Abraham. Specifically, I argue that Abraham's remarks about epistemic fit and the epistemic standards we bring to bear in making evaluations of divine revelation claims commit him to a species of epistemic relativism. I suspect, however, that Abraham does not think of himself as an epistemic relativist. If this is the case, then I believe Abraham needs to rethink his metaepistemological commitments that imply epistemic relativism.

In *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*,<sup>1</sup> William Abraham offers a rich, subtle defense of an epistemology of divine revelation. While I believe there is much about Abraham's work that is commendable, my remarks in this paper will be primarily critical. But the fact that Abraham's work is worthy of critical comment should be evidence enough of the importance of Abraham's book.

My focus here will be on a cluster of metaepistemological claims made by Abraham. Specifically, I will argue that Abraham's remarks about epistemic fit and the epistemic standards we bring to bear in making evaluations of divine revelation claims commit him to a species of epistemic relativism. This may not be a problem. I am not interested in offering an argument against epistemic relativism.<sup>2</sup> I suspect, however, that Abraham does not think of himself as an epistemic relativist.<sup>3</sup> If this is the case, then I believe Abraham needs to rethink his metaepistemological commitments that imply epistemic relativism.<sup>4</sup>

In the remainder of this note, I will proceed as follows. I will first sketch Abraham's project, focusing on the claims he makes about epistemic fit and his rejection of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to making epistemic evaluations. Next, I will move on to show that Abraham's claims about epistemic fit and the norms deployed in making epistemic evaluations imply a commitment to some species of epistemic relativism.

### 1. Abraham's Project

As mentioned above, Abraham's project, broadly construed, is to articulate and offer a defense of an epistemology of divine revelation. His central thesis appears to be that 'divine revelation exists and that our possession of such revelation constitutes knowledge.'<sup>5</sup> A proper part of defending his thesis involves presenting reasons that favor a cluster of theological claims that constitute what he christens 'canonical theism'. By 'canonical theism' Abraham means 'the vision of theism adopted publicly, intentionally, and explicitly by the church as it was initially driven to articulate, celebrate, and live out its fundamental convictions on the other side of conversion and the gospel.'<sup>6</sup>

In defense of his claims about revelation and canonical theism, Abraham rejects what he refers to as the 'standard strategy' in religious epistemology. Such a strategy involves developing 'a general account of rationality or justification and then apply[ing] it to theism to see how far belief in God is rational or justified.'<sup>7</sup> In lieu of the strategy that proffers a 'once-size-fits-all' approach to epistemology, Abraham proposes that we 'identify a particular brand of theism and then asks what would be the appropriate way to adjudicate its intellectual status.'<sup>8</sup>

So Abraham recommends discovering guidelines for how best to examine the epistemic status of canonical theism in accordance with what Abraham calls the

‘principle of appropriate epistemic fit’: ‘Our vision of rationality, justification, knowledge, warrant, and the like should be appropriate to the subject matter in hand.’<sup>9</sup>

The standard strategy fails because it does not do justice to the richness of Christian belief and the epistemic commitments found therein, according to Abraham. We should make epistemic evaluations by conforming our epistemic standards that issue from the subject matter at hand, in this case, the epistemology of divine revelation.

It is worth noting that the epistemic strategy Abraham endorses is a version of what Roderick Chisholm christened ‘particularism’. Particularism is contrasted with methodism.<sup>10</sup> The particularist starts with particular instances of knowledge and then asks what the criteria of knowledge are, while the methodist starts with criteria of knowledge and then ask what we know. I will return to this distinction in the conclusion.

In the next section I will consider some implications of Abraham’s meta-epistemological assumptions. I will argue that his commitment to safeguarding the epistemic status of Christian claims to divine revelation has consequences I suspect Abraham wishes to disown.

## 2. Epistemic Fit and Divine Revelation: Some Concerns

As just mentioned, my primary concerns with Abraham’s work are metaepistemological. Again, I am most concerned that his epistemology of divine revelation implies a species of epistemic relativism. By ‘epistemic relativism’ I mean the following thesis.

ER ‘Epistemic relativism’=df. For any epistemic claim, C, there is no universally applicable, objective standpoint from which to assess its epistemic status.<sup>11</sup>

ER is a normative thesis about the norms we deploy in epistemically evaluating doxastic attitudes (such as belief, unbelief, and the suspension of belief) and epistemic agents. I

take it that ER is, while a rather ‘thin’ definition, an adequate definition of ‘epistemic relativism’. Epistemic relativism implies the rejection of epistemic universalism.<sup>12</sup>

‘Epistemic universalism’ can be defined as follows.

EU ‘Epistemic universalism’=df. For any epistemic claim, C, there is some universally applicable, objective standpoint from which to assess its epistemic status.

EU does not entail the rejection of some context sensitivity to our epistemic evaluations. But it does entail that there are universal epistemic norms that apply to all epistemic agents and their doxastic attitudes. If EU implies a universally applicable standpoint from which to epistemically evaluate epistemic agents and their beliefs, then ER minimally implies the rejection of such a universal standpoint. But ER does not imply that we cannot make any epistemic evaluations. It only entails the denial of any universally applicable standpoint from which to make epistemic evaluations. In light of the foregoing, I will take it to be a reasonable assumption in this paper that ER provides an acceptable, albeit quite general schematic definition of ‘epistemic relativism’.<sup>13</sup>

Abraham’s commitment to something like ER is explicit in some places; but in most it is an implication of other commitments. In a number of places Abraham makes claims that suggest a strategy of insulating religious commitment from the same kind of epistemic scrutiny to which we subject everyday beliefs.

The principle of appropriate epistemic fit mentioned should raise some red flags in the minds of those who wish to resist epistemic relativism. For instance, opponents of epistemic relativism may be concerned when Abraham asserts that, ‘We should let the subject matter in hand shape what kinds of considerations should be brought to bear on

the rationality of the issue under review.’<sup>14</sup> Of course, what is meant by ‘considerations’ will no doubt determine the extent to which epistemic universalists ought to be worried by Abraham’s claims. If this just means that direct observation of a phenomenon is not what is required for a belief about the veridicality of a divine revelation claim to be justified, but it is in the case of a belief about how medium-sized physical objects behave, then it should not be too problematic. But if it means that the broad standards about support by evidence shift when considering religious claims versus scientific claims, then the epistemic universalist’s eyebrow raising is warranted.

Abraham makes various ambiguous claims that should make epistemic universalists a little anxious; but they do not obviously justify the charge of epistemic relativism. But there are other statements made in his book that betray a tacit commitment to epistemic relativism. I will quickly mention three places in *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* where Abraham’s incipient epistemic relativism is evident.

First, Abraham asserts that, ‘Theologians should help themselves to the same liberties as the historian and the natural scientist. They should be content to take for granted a whole network of epistemic platitudes that can be assumed or defended relatively easily.’<sup>15</sup> No principled means of determining the platitudes to which the theologian ought to help herself is offered. Abraham offers a list. The list allegedly codifies ‘what is implicit in healthy forms of believing and in good intellectual practices.’<sup>16</sup> But it does not fall out from some more basic epistemic principles. In fact, I would suggest that if the list did fall out from some more basic epistemic principles, the list would be the same for everyone in every field of inquiry. *Granted, the methods*

*deployed in confirming or disconfirming the truth of a proposition may be specific to an area of inquiry; but the epistemic norms from which the platitudes are derived and are used in making epistemic evaluations will be the same.* Specifically, the epistemic universalist will insist that the methods be truth-conducive.<sup>17</sup> So, for instance, the methodological epistemic norms that govern our evaluations of an epistemic agent and whether or not she is deploying the methods she ought to deploy will be determined by the extent to which following those norms allows us to get to the truth and avoid error. Even if an agent's context may determine the suitability of how certain norms are *applied*, the methodological norms remain the same.

The second set of eyebrow raising remarks Abraham makes are found in the network of epistemic platitudes he offers. Abraham makes the following contentious claim.

Our epistemic obligations are person-relative. They depend on how much information we have, on how strong we think the pertinent arguments are, on our general background knowledge, on how much time we have to think things over, on how far we have defeaters for the propositions under consideration, on how much intellectual capacity we possess, on which other obligations we must meet, and the like.<sup>18</sup>

This claim is worrisome for the following reasons. It either implies that there are not objective epistemic norms that apply to all believers in all situations or it implies that we will evaluate the beliefs of persons differently depending upon their circumstances. The former implication is problematic. The latter implication is perhaps less troublesome. I will consider each alternative in order.

Consider the following non-methodological epistemic obligation offered by Richard Feldman:

O1. For any proposition  $p$ , time  $t$ , and person  $S$ ,  $S$  epistemically ought to have at  $t$  the attitude toward  $p$  that is supported by  $S$ 's evidence at  $t$ .<sup>19</sup>

This strikes me as an epistemic obligation that all persons have in virtue of their roles as epistemic agents. I will not defend it here. I will simply assume that believing what the bulk of your evidence supports is certainly truth-conducive. Presumably, the evidence is evidence for the truth of the proposition believed. If the aim of epistemic agency is true beliefs and knowledge, then O1 or something close to it expresses an epistemic obligation we have as epistemic agents.<sup>20</sup>

If Abraham is suggesting that there are no universal epistemic norms that apply to all persons in all situations, then O1 does not apply to some persons. This means that it is epistemically permissible for some person to have a doxastic attitude towards  $p$  that is not supported by her evidence. Of course, the opponent of ER may grant that it may be prudentially or morally permissible for the agent not to believe what the bulk of her evidence supports or to believe one of two competing propositions in the case of an epistemic stalemate. In fact, there may be no way to rationally adjudicate between types of directive norms that may be competing with each other (e.g., epistemic versus prudential) when trying to determine what attitude to take toward a proposition.<sup>21</sup> But such a concession is quite different from saying that O1 does not apply universally. If O1 is a truth-conducive epistemic norm, then it applies to all epistemic agents. Of course, it is epistemically permissible for two persons with different evidence in different locations to take different doxastic attitudes towards the same proposition if their respective bodies

of evidence diverge. But O1 still applies to both of them. If it does not, we need to know why rejecting the universality of O1 (or something close to it) is acceptable.

If Abraham means that we evaluate the beliefs of persons differently depending upon their circumstances, then this is not as problematic for the epistemic universalist. Epistemic norms are universal, but we may evaluate two persons differently because of their contexts. So, for instance, a flat-earther in a primitive society four thousand years ago does not have knowledge, but he does not obviously have an epistemically unjustified belief; but an educated flat-earther in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century does not have an epistemically justified belief. I am not sure if Abraham actually means something as epistemically innocuous as the claim that epistemic norms are context sensitive or if he means the stronger claim that there are no universal epistemic norms that apply to all persons at all times.

Later in his book, Abraham argues that defenders of divine revelation must determine what claims they take to be secured and ‘the relevant epistemic considerations they deem appropriate, the precise arguments they think strengthen their case, and the way they propose to handle defeaters and objections.’<sup>22</sup> He adds that the various religious traditions with their different revelation claims should speak for themselves and critics should be ‘free to develop whatever objections they deem relevant.’<sup>23</sup> By itself, this may not be very controversial. But it is what Abraham thinks this policy implies that is quite controversial. He writes:

This policy clearly means abandoning the standard picture of objectivity that restricts discussion to publicly agreed forms of evidence, to academic neutrality, to independently measurable or quantitative data, and the like. These

have their place where pertinent in critical inquiry; they are critical aids to reflection, but they cannot begin to capture the aesthetic dimensions of our cognitive endeavors, nor can they do justice to the richness and complexity of the issues at stake in each particular case. The idea that there is some sort of grand morality or ethics of inquiry at this point is deeply misleading and inaccurate.<sup>24</sup>

Abraham thus rejects ‘a vision of epistemic unity across disciplines.’<sup>25</sup>

I assume that by ‘morality or ethics of inquiry’ Abraham is referring to methodological directive epistemic norms and not the end-state directive norms such as O1 that provide criteria for what doxastic attitude one ought to have. Abraham appears to be suggesting that the defenders of divine revelation get to determine the rules of engagement. He seems to be suggesting that what he refers to as the ‘standards of intellectual excellence’ be determined by those who make the claims to knowledge of divine revelation. I take it that such agents will be sensitive to the relevant ‘aesthetic dimensions of our cognitive endeavors’ and will appreciate ‘the richness and complexity of the issues at stake.’<sup>26</sup> My worry, however, is that such a claim does little more than insulate claims about divine revelation from epistemic scrutiny. If it does not preclude outsiders—in this case, non-Christians and Christians who reject canonical theism—from being able to effectively engage with informed believers, then it renders divine revelation claims impervious to disconfirmation. This is the case because he seems to be suggesting that the devout get to determine the rules of engagement due to their epistemically privileged position. I suspect that many epistemic universalists will find this prospect alarming.

Before concluding this section, I wish to note a possible consequence of Abraham's remarks.<sup>27</sup> Recall the dispute between Cardinal Bellarmine and Galileo regarding the controversy over Copernicanism versus Ptolemaism. Bellarmine took Galileo's scientific claims as lying within the domain of religion.<sup>28</sup> If Abraham is right, Galileo *qua* scientist could have helped himself to one set of epistemic norms in the dispute with Bellarmine; and Bellarmine *qua* theologian could have helped himself to another set of epistemic norms. Of course, it is not obvious that the dispute was wholly theological or scientific. But if we accept realism about truth and epistemic universalism, there is a correct answer about who was closer to the truth and had epistemically better beliefs in this dispute. Things are more complicated if we reject epistemic universalism. We are left first trying to determine whether or not the dispute was scientific or theological; and then we must determine what criteria are relevant for adjudicating between the two sides. Obviously, there is vagueness here regarding the boundary between religion and science—similar vagueness is evinced by recent cases over teaching so-called creation science versus evolutionary biology in places like Kansas and Dover, Pennsylvania. But the epistemic universalist will insist that in all of these cases we must consider the extent to which one theory or another is supported by universally accessible evidence. And since the claims are about whether or not the universe is one way or another, the evidence should be empirical. The nature of the claims, whether they are finally taken as primarily scientific or religious is totally irrelevant. In so far as one makes some claim about some feature of the world (including divine revelation claims), it is incumbent upon the one defending the claim to provide evidence for its truth in its defense.

### 3. Conclusion

I suspect that persons who are attracted to particularism over methodism in epistemology may worry that I am committed to methodism. This impression, however, is mistaken. Nothing I have said commits me to methodism. In commending particularism, Chisholm suggests that we start like good common sense realists with clear cases of knowledge and then articulate criteria for knowledge. This does not imply articulating different criteria for knowledge in different domains of inquiry.

I believe it is reasonable to assume that the one thing all clear cases of knowledge have in common is that they do not suffer from the evidential ambiguity of questionable cases or the complete lack of evidential support we have in cases where we lack knowledge. As Chisholm notes,

As ‘particularists’ in our approach to the problem of the criterion, we will fit our rules to the cases.... Knowing what we do about ourselves and the world, we have at our disposal certain instances that our rules or principles should countenance, and certain other instances that our rules or principles should rule out or forbid.<sup>29</sup>

I conclude with these remarks about particularism and evidence because, *contra* Abraham, I believe that in the case of religious propositions, we are faced with an evidentially ambiguous situation. We are not faced with the sorts of cases of knowledge Chisholm is talking about. In the case of bare-bones theism versus atheism this ambiguity is evident. Things are no better when we turn to Christian theism and the claims to divine revelation made therein. I do not believe this implies that Christian commitment is

untenable. It is just that the epistemic situation for the theist, including the Christian, is not one where we can justifiably start with knowledge claims and then move on.

My pessimism about our epistemic situation as Christians does not lead me to embrace epistemological views that will secure knowledge for me. Rather, I am convinced that there are other ways of showing that Christian commitment is broadly rational. But that is a matter for another time.<sup>30</sup> For now it should be evident that, while I admire and appreciate Abraham's efforts, we represent two different epistemological viewpoints. However, if Christ's prayer for unity in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 17:20-23) means anything to Christians, charitable dialogue is not just an option. It is an obligation. This is a point (among others) on which I expect Professor Abraham and I are in complete agreement.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I am not an epistemic relativist. For reasons similar to those offered by Paul Boghossian in *Fear of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), I find epistemic relativism to be an untenable position.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Abraham has made it quite clear in correspondence and in a symposium on his book in which I participated that he is not an epistemic relativist. But I found a no-universal standard epistemic principle which he offered as unhelpful in making the case that his metaepistemological assumptions do not commit him to some species of epistemic relativism.

<sup>4</sup> I am not concerned with offering a direct refutation of epistemic relativism in this paper. My task is more modest. But I trust that the problems with epistemic relativism will be apparent to persons who find other types of normative relativism unpalatable.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham, *Crossing*, p. 5.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> See Roderick Chisholm, 'The Problem of the Criterion', reprinted in his *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 61-75.

<sup>11</sup> This is roughly the definition of 'epistemic relativism' offered by Steven Luper, 'Epistemic Relativism', *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004), pp. 271-95, at p. 271. For a more robust definition that I believe limits the range of views we can properly identify as versions of epistemic relativism, see Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, pp. 72-3.

<sup>12</sup> I prefer the term 'epistemic universalism' over 'epistemic objectivism' and 'epistemic absolutism'. As I see it, epistemic relativism does not imply epistemic subjectivism, the latter being the thesis to which epistemic objectivism stands in contrast. Epistemic relativism does imply a rejection of epistemic absolutism, but epistemic universalism does not imply epistemic absolutism. 'Epistemic absolutism', while preferred by some (e.g., Boghossian and Luper) suggests a rather restrictive vision of how epistemic norms are applied. So I prefer the term 'epistemic universalism' since it merely implies that epistemic norms are universal, applying to all persons in all circumstances.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to William Abraham for pressing me to provide some reasons for why ER is an acceptable definition of 'epistemic relativism'.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham, *Crossing*, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Luper, 'Epistemic Relativism', p. 284 argues that an epistemic standard is authoritative to the extent that it is truth-conducive. I am following him here, but it should be noted that I do not agree with all of Luper's remarks about the authority of epistemic standards. Also, I do not wish my remarks to suggest that epistemic value monism is correct. I am agnostic about whether or not truth is the sole intrinsic epistemic value. Others seem important (e.g., understanding, rationality, conscientiousness, etc.), but I am inclined to think that their value is dependent upon their being truth-conducive.

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<sup>18</sup> Abraham, *Crossing*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Feldman, 'The Ethics of Belief' in Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 166-95, at p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> I am here remaining neutral with respect to whether or not directive epistemic norms are hypothetical imperatives or categorical imperatives. This is an interesting problem in its own right. But there are ways of reading O1 as expressing either a hypothetical imperative or a categorical imperative that are consistent with EU.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Feldman argues that 'There is no meaningful question about whether epistemic oughts 'trump' or are trumped by other oughts,' ('The Ethics of Belief', p. 194). I am sympathetic to Feldman's thesis. But I do think there may be a meaningful sense in which an agent's beliefs and other attitudes can be more or less broadly rational (see John Heil, 'Believing reasonably', *Nous* 26 (1992), pp. 47-61 for an attractive account of broad rationality). For instance, in cases of an epistemic stalemate between two propositions—say, 'It is the case that canonical theism is true' and its denial—due to evidential ambiguity, it may be more rational overall to take one or the other as true for prudential or other reasons. But if one were to take the same attitude towards a third proposition for prudential reasons—e.g., 'Wicca is correct'—it would be less rational than the attitude taken towards the canonical theism proposition or its negation. This is because only two propositions were live options for you to take the attitude of belief or some other type of acceptance towards. The Jamesian pedigree of these remarks should not be surprising to those familiar with William James's religious epistemology or the recent literature on Jamesian religious epistemology. For more on these matters, see William James's 'The Will to Believe', reprinted in George I. Mavrodes (ed.) *The Rationality of Belief in God* (Englewood Cliffs NJ : Prentice-Hall, 1970), 161–183; John Bishop, 'Faith as Doxastic Venture', *Religious Studies* 38 (2002), pp. 471-87; John Bishop, 'On the Possibility of Doxastic Venture: A Reply to Buckareff', *Religious Studies*, 41 (2005), pp. 447-51; John Bishop, *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007); John Bishop, 'How a Modest Fideism May Constrain Theistic Commitments: Exploring an Alternative to Classical Theism', *Philosophia* 35 (2007), pp. 387-402; Andrei A. Buckareff, 'Can Faith be a Doxastic Venture?', *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), pp. 435-45.

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<sup>22</sup> Abraham, *Crossing*, p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> The relevance of the following example for the debate over epistemic relativism was first brought to my attention by reading Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*.

<sup>28</sup> This may have been due in part to the Copernican system having been defended by a heretic, Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake in 1600 as well as the publication in 1616 of a tome by Paolo Antonio Foscarini defending the compatibility of Copernicanism with Scripture. See Mariano Artigas and William Shea, *Galileo in Rome: The Rise and Fall of a Troublesome Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 7-8, 67. Even if Bruno and Foscarini had failed to bring the debate over the accuracy of the Copernican system vis-à-vis the Ptolemaic system into the domain of theology, the Copernican system was seen as fundamentally at odds with divine revelation.

<sup>29</sup> Chisholm, 'The Problem of the Criterion', p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> I have taken up some of these matters in Buckareff, 'Can faith be a doxastic venture?'

<sup>31</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read in a symposium on William Abraham's *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* in the group meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers at the 2007 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Baltimore, Maryland. I am grateful to William Abraham, John Zeis, and the members of the audience for helpful discussion of the topics covered in this paper.