

SARTORIAL EPISTEMOLOGY IN TATTERS: A REPLY TO MARTIN HOLLIS

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Martin Hollis, in the introduction to the collection of *Rationality and Relativism* he edited recently with Steven Lukes, describes himself as the most arch of arch rationalists, "by which we mean, merely, that [we] reject the forthright relativization of truth and reason."¹ You might suppose that his self-description would place him unambiguously in the army of traditionalists arrayed against what Richard Rorty fondly calls the New Fuzzies (like himself and me).² You might suppose, then, that Hollis would indulge in furious letter writing to, say, *Harper's*, telling us that "we need to stand shoulder to shoulder against the growing army of enemies of rationality. By that I mean the followers of the fashionable cult of absolute relativism, emerging from philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, and deconstructionism."³ You might suppose that he would go on in this way equivocating between "rationality" and "rationalism," identifying the people he dislikes with the enemies of civilization: fascists, Stalinists, bikers, bomb throwing nihilists — Richard Rorty and Wayne Booth and Stephen Toulmin riding into town on their Harley- (or Donald-) Davidsons, spurning warrants for belief and good reasons, reading pornographic comic books (the new literary canon), and snarling at the townsfolk huddled behind the local syllogism.

1. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1982, p. 14.
2. "Science as Solidarity," paper presented to the Iowa Symposium on the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences, March 28-31, 1984, p. 7. He calls them also "left-wing Kuhnians" and "radical pragmatists," which fits with what Hollis says here. The New Fuzzies label is adapted from Clark Glymour, a nice example of the preemptive domestications of an epithet, as in "Tory" and "capitalist."
3. Lawrence Stone, June 1984, p. 5.

You would be wrong, though, and would not have been paying attention. Hollis shows in his present remarks, as in his earlier writings, that he is a remarkably civil man in a portion of the conversation of mankind not known for its civility. He shows too that there are divisions within the apparent enemies of the new fuzziness. They divide into Saints and Latitudinarians. The Saints claim to believe that they are the chosen people of rationality, though their neuroses — such as their compulsive axiom washing — suggest that they have some doubts. The Latitudinarians have less narrow convictions, and look for foundations a priori that better suit their more ample posteriors, wrapped in finest broadcloth, fobbed and Gödeled. The saint knows one big thing, that Truth Is Out There Waiting for the Right Method. The latitudinarian knows many small things — such as that "We still need an epistemology but my gosh I don't know which."

The fuzzy doesn't *know* anything, and therefore has a sharply limited interest in conversations about epistemology. On the other hand, he knows lower case the usual stuff, and is pretty much persuaded of such things as the law of the excluded middle and the force of argument from authority. He wants to converse with people who claim to have persuasive arguments for this or that proposition in economics or art history or solid-state physics. I'm a fuzzy (radical pragmatist, left-wing Kuhnian, epistemological anarchist, working scholar in a non-philosophical field). Hollis is a latitudinarian who would rather be a saint.

His summaries of my views are notably accurate, for example—a sure sign of creeping latitudinarianism. No saint — from Plato through Descartes and Russell down to recent viewers-with-alarm such as D.C. Stove in philosophy and Mark Blaug in economics — has gotten straight the opinions of any fuzzy — new or old, from Protagoras through Nietzsche and Dewey down to the modern masters of fuzziness. One cannot listen well when shouting in someone else's ear.

Further, he agrees with many of my views, which is quite enough to make it certain that he is a latitudinarian, and enough even to start rumors of fellow traveling. We fuzzies most cordially welcome his help against the saints, who, contrary to the puzzling assertion that "no Cartesian or traditional rationalist" espouses the received view on the philosophy of science, cannot understand a conversation about understanding that does not revolve around words like falsification and objectivity.

Further, to descend to the particular, I entirely agree with his view of the importance for economics of rational expectations. The agreement provides more evidence, if more were needed, of a dangerous tendency in him to fuzzy subjectivity. I have spoken about the matter elsewhere

in terms similar to his.⁴ I would only remark for the benefit of bystanders (Hollis' talk of economics becoming "studies [of] the interplay of actions done for typical reasons" suggests strongly that he already understands the point) that the features of rational expectations we both feel are important have dominated so-called Austrian economics for a century. Since most economists do not read books this point has escaped them, and the Austrians are being quite uncharacteristically reticent about making it.

Our sole disagreement comes about two-thirds of the way through his remarks, when he puts on saintly garb and starts talking about Truth. He says there, and in the peroration, that we all have an "urgent" duty to "justify" one epistemological theory about economics (or, I suppose, philosophy) over another.

I say that it's not clear what makes it urgent. It is merely the old familiar claim by philosophers that knowledge must be philosophically grounded, which sounds to me and other fuzzies a little like the claim of doctors to a monopoly of medical practice, their way. The philosophical claim, by now about 2300 years old, has not had a good case for it made yet.

Hollis later presumes that I would of course wish to have my own arguments philosophically grounded and certified in this way. No thanks. Sure, we all admire grounding and justifying, all we fuzzies and latitudinarians and saints together, when the words mean "telling your reasons." Intellectual life has no other purpose. The mischief comes in the word "philosophically," for since the time of the blessed ~~Saint~~ Plato the philosophers have sneered at reasons of a broader sort. "Rhetoric," says Hollis, following in this the father of his tribe, "is, like public relations, a form of discourse concerned with truth only *per accidens*" (compare *Phaedrus*, 261d and *passim*).

The old calumny against rhetoric, then, persists, even from the lips of peace-loving latitudinarians. To be successful the argument of the epistemological doctor must reject broader reasoning and must define "truth" to be "whatever the stuff is that is the subject of conventional philosophical discourse." In this way it can by definition seize for philosophy alone the wise honesty of its etymology. Otherwise, in order to identify philosophy as usually practiced with actual wisdom loving, the argument has to claim that the mere choice of tools makes for loving wisdom: that axiomatics, for instance, guarantees it. But wisdom loving is a quality of people, not of methods. Rhetoric has long understood

4. In *The Applied Theory of Price* (New York: Macmillan, pp. 320, 448n, 557). I like his analogy with weather forecasting, which has indeed been a *topos* in my own conversations for several years: what, I ask, if the clouds were listening, and had an interest in taking advantage of the predictions about their fellow clouds?

this and other points about how we really know. The orator, said Cato, must be *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, the good man skilled at speaking.

A demand to know "what keeps natural science on the epistemological rails" ignores this rich tradition of rhetoric, and gives credence instead to the strange and unfulfilled promise of philosophers to tell from an easy chair what is True. What keeps us all on the rails is not epistemological at all, but moral: we prefer to be honest, we do not fake the results, we face the doubts of our opponents. It is what the Frankfurt School (dreadful Continentals, those) call "Sprachethik." Rhetoric studies it; philosophy in the style of the saints does not.

I welcome Hollis, then, to the band of sinners against saints. Before he can become a full member, however, he is going to have to get over his saintly habit of construing "the language of reason" to be the philosopher's argot called "epistemology." Together then we can reclothe the emperor in the *toga virilis* (*boni viri*), which, as you recall, had no buttons at all.