

In Defense of Epistemic Relativism

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Paul Boghossian's *Fear of Knowledge* contains many brilliant arguments against various forms of epistemological constructivism and relativism. In this paper, I will have nothing to say about the vast majority of those arguments, since I find them entirely conclusive. I will focus my attention on the one argument in Boghossian's book that I do not find conclusive. In section 2 of this paper, I will spell out that argument, and say why it is not conclusive. This is not a purely academic exercise of criticizing an argument for a conclusion that is anyway clearly true: in section 3, I will briefly sketch the positive case for one version of epistemic relativism.

I should note at once that I do not know whether the failure of the single anti-relativist argument that I will discuss in this paper, or the possible truth of a specific version of epistemic relativism, prevents Boghossian's book from achieving its ultimate dialectical goals. For all I can tell, the book succeeds completely in achieving its ultimate goals, even if the specific anti-relativist argument that I criticize in section 2 is unsuccessful, and even if the specific version of epistemic relativism that I describe in section 3 is true. But then why do I focus so narrowly on a single argument, the failure of which may be quite irrelevant to the overall success of Boghossian's project? I devote section 1 of this paper to offering my excuse for doing this.

(I) What is the overall project of Boghossian's book?

The ultimate aim of Boghossian's book is, it seems, to defend certain allegedly commonsensical ideas against a recent tendency (supposedly widespread in the humanities and social sciences) to reject those ideas. But what are those commonsensical ideas, and what is this tendency to reject them? Let's briefly consider what Boghossian has to tell us about these things.

Boghossian's book opens by describing a conflict between two views of the origin of a particular Native American people: one view confirmed by archaeological investigation, the other view propounded in some Native American creation myths. One British archeologist, Roger Anyon, responded to such conflicts by saying:

"Science is just one of many ways of knowing the world. [The Zunis' world view is] just as valid as the archeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about" (Boghossian 2006, 2)

Boghossian takes such statements on the part of archeologists to exemplify a general tendency that, he says, has recently been popular in the humanities and the social sciences. The tendency involves accepting the doctrine of

"Equal Validity:

"There are many radically different, yet 'equally valid' ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them." (Boghossian 2006, 2)

Now, it is not clear to me why the passage quoted above from Roger Anyon should be understood as an endorsement of Equal Validity. Anyon does not say that the many ways

of which he speaks – the many ways of knowing the world – are equally valid. Rather, he says that the Zunis’ world view and the archeological viewpoint of *what prehistory is about* are equally valid. (Is it that they have different conceptions of the activity of pre-historical narration, and one of them thinks of the activity as a form of fictive narration, in which fictive past-tense truths are authored, much as Homer authored fictive past-tense truths about Agamemnon?) But let’s put aside this issue, and assume that, whether or not Anyon endorses Equal Validity, many scholars in the humanities and social sciences do endorse it.

Is such endorsement of Equal Validity incompatible with common sense? It must be if Boghossian is right to claim that the doctrine of Equal Validity is “radical and counterintuitive” (Boghossian 2006, 3). But is Boghossian right to claim this? Perhaps I do not understand the doctrine that he is calling “Equal Validity”, but if we confine our attention to the doctrine most naturally suggested by the words quoted above in Boghossian’s official statement of the doctrine, then we find that Equal Validity, so understood, is quite obviously true. For example, I know that I am a human being, that I live in North Carolina, that I speak English, that I teach philosophy at a university, and that my next mortgage payment is due very soon. Do I gain all of this knowledge by means of science? It seems clear that I do not: at least not on any ordinary understanding of the term “science”. But I do gain it in some way. Therefore, I gain all of this knowledge in some way(s) other than by means of science. And so, if we grant that science is one way of “knowing the world” (i.e., knowing some facts), it seems to follow that there are at least two ways of knowing the world – science and some other way(s) by means of which I know that I am a human being, that I live in North Carolina, etc. Are these two (or more) ways of knowing the world “equally valid”? If we allow that two ways of knowing are “equally valid” just in case one is capable of acquiring (or perhaps reasonably likely to acquire) genuine knowledge in either way, then the answer to the preceding question is “yes”: they are equally valid. It follows that Equal Validity – understood as the doctrine most naturally suggested by the words quoted above in the official statement of that doctrine – is true. There seems to be nothing radical or counterintuitive about this conclusion. I can only conclude that the doctrine that Boghossian is calling “Equal Validity” is not the doctrine that is most naturally suggested by the words quoted above.

So what is the doctrine of Equal Validity? Perhaps we can find out by looking at what Boghossian calls “representative examples of scholars endorsing the basic thought behind equal validity” (Boghossian 2006, 2), Boghossian quotes passages from a number of recent sources:

“As we come to recognize the conventional and artifactual status of our forms of knowing, we put ourselves in a position to realize that it is ourselves and not reality that is responsible for what we know.” (Boghossian 2006, 3 – quoted from Shapin and Shaffer 1985)

This passage talks about the “status of our forms of knowing”, and it talks about what is “responsible for what we know”, but it says nothing about the equal validity of various ways of knowing, and it says nothing about science. And so it’s not clear to me how the

preceding passage constitutes an endorsement of Equal Validity, or the basic thought behind it. What about the following:

“First-world science is one science among many...” (Boghossian 2006, 3 – quoted from Feyerabend 1993)

This passage does not say or imply that science is a way of knowing, or that there are other ways of knowing besides science, or that any of these ways of knowing are equally valid. And so again it’s not clear to me how the preceding passage constitutes an endorsement of Equal Validity, or the basic thought behind it. What about:

“For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. Because he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality he does not see rationally and irrationally held beliefs as making up two distinct and qualitatively different classes of thing.” (Boghossian 2006, 3 – quoted from Barnes and Bloor 1982)

This passage purports to tell us about what the relativist thinks. And presumably the doctrine of Equal Validity does not purport to be about the relativist at all. I find it unclear, then, how any of the quoted passages is supposed to constitute an endorsement of the “radical and counterintuitive” doctrine that Boghossian is calling “Equal Validity”.

Perhaps we can figure out what this radical and counterintuitive doctrine is by considering the commonsensical ideas that Boghossian takes to be incompatible with it. Here’s what Boghossian says:

“we think that on a factual question like the one about American prehistory, there is a way that things are that is independent of us and our beliefs about it – an objective fact of the matter, as we may put it, as to where the first Americans originated. ...

“We may not know what this fact of the matter is, but, having formed an interest in the question, we seek to know it. And we have a variety of techniques and methods – observation, logic, inference to the best explanation and so forth, but not tea-leaf reading or crystal ball gazing – that we take to be the only legitimate ways of forming rational beliefs on the subject. These methods – the methods characteristic of what we call ‘science’ but which also characterize ordinary modes of knowledge-seeking – have led us to the view that the first Americans came from Asia across the Bering-Strait. This view may be false, of course, but it is the most reasonable one, given the evidence – or so we are ordinarily tempted to think.

“Because we believe all this, we defer to the deliverances of science...”
(Boghossian 2006, 3 – 4)

Now, I am puzzled about two things in the passage just quoted. First, why does Boghossian say “Because we believe all this, we defer to the deliverances of science...”? The paragraph immediately preceding that sentence tells us that “we have a variety of techniques and methods ... that we take to be the only legitimate ways of forming rational beliefs...”. But if these methods are, as Boghossian says, characteristic not only of science but also of “ordinary modes of knowledge-seeking”, then why would we defer

to the deliverances of science? Why not instead defer to the deliverances of ordinary modes of knowledge-seeking? Suppose that a well-known scientist tells me that she has excellent evidence that I am not a human being, or that I do not live in North Carolina, or that I do not speak English. In such a situation, whether or not the scientist is correct, it would still be entirely reasonable for me to believe firmly that she is wrong. I would not be reasonable to defer to the deliverances of science in this case – or even to spend my precious time trying to understand those deliverances. I have better things to do than to figure out precisely where the scientist went wrong in arriving at her crazy conclusions (which, despite being crazy, might still be true).

Second, it is not clear to me how any of the claims that Boghossian makes here on behalf of common sense is incompatible with the claims made in any of the passages quoted earlier from the putative proponents of Equal Validity. There being an objective fact of the matter about American prehistory, there being a variety of techniques and methods that we take to be the only legitimate ways of forming beliefs about that fact, and our deferring to the deliverances of science – all of this is compatible with its being ourselves who are responsible for what we know, and it is compatible with there being more than one science, and it is compatible with any claim at all about the relativist.

Maybe none of this matters much, since Boghossian's book is primarily concerned not with arguing against Equal Validity, but rather with criticizing the intellectual source of the appeal of Equal Validity: a source that Boghossian takes to be expressed in the following passage, which he quotes from Kathleen Lennon:

“Feminist epistemologists, in common with many other strands of contemporary epistemology, no longer regard knowledge as a neutral transparent reflection of an independently existing reality, with truth and falsity established by transcendent procedures of rational assessment. Rather, most accept that all knowledge is situated knowledge, reflecting the position of the knowledge producer at a certain historical moment in a given material and cultural context.” (Lennon 1997, 37, quoted in Boghossian 2006, 6)

The real target of Boghossian's book is the thesis endorsed in the passage above, and (Boghossian says) in many other passages throughout contemporary writing in the humanities and social sciences. Boghossian's book is aimed at criticizing that thesis, namely that “all knowledge is situated knowledge, reflecting the position of the knowledge producer at a certain historical moment in a given material and cultural context.” But what does Lennon mean by this statement?

Consider, for instance, my knowledge that my next mortgage payment is due very soon. Is this knowledge “situated knowledge, reflecting the position of the knowledge producer at a certain historical moment in a given material and cultural context”? I am not sure. In order to figure out the answer to this question, I would first need to know who the “knowledge producer” is in the present case: is it me? Is it the mortgage lender who sends me the notice informing me that my payment is due? Is it the postman who delivers the notice to my house? Is it the whole banking system? Or perhaps the whole economy? If the knowledge producer is me, then my knowledge that my mortgage payment is due very soon does seem to “reflect the position of the knowledge producer at a certain historical moment in a given material and cultural context”: for instance, I am

able to have this knowledge only because I have been trained to read, and I am competent to make binding contractual agreements, and so on. My knowledge that my next mortgage payment is due very soon reflects my position in something like the way in which my linguistic abilities reflect my upbringing: I have them because of my upbringing. Perhaps all of my knowledge reflects my position in something like this way – I can have this knowledge only because I have acquired certain abilities that I could have acquired only by virtue of being a member of a linguistic community. Is this what Lennon means to be saying? Again, I am not sure.

In short, I find it hard to locate the overall target of Boghossian's book anywhere *outside analytic epistemology*. Nonetheless, it is clear that the book does criticize several versions of constructivism and relativism *within analytic epistemology*. As Boghossian says:

“My aim is to clarify what is at issue between constructivism and its critics, and to map the terrain in which these issues are embedded. My ambition is not to be exhaustive, examining every view that the literature has thrown up or every argument that has been advocated. Instead, I will isolate the three theses that, as it seems to me, a constructivism about knowledge could most interestingly amount to. And I will then attempt to assess their plausibility.

“The first thesis will be a constructivism about truth; the second a constructivism about justification; and the third, finally, will concern the role of social factors in explaining why we believe what we believe.” (Boghossian 2006, 8 – 9)

Now the preceding statement of purpose is clear enough. But I do not know how the various versions of constructivism that Boghossian criticizes are related to recent tendencies outside analytic epistemology. I will therefore say nothing more in this paper about the relation between Boghossian's book and its seemingly intended targets in the greater republic of letters. For all I know, the version of epistemic relativism that I defend in this paper may be of no use or interest whatsoever to Boghossian's intended targets, and so Boghossian might regard my objections as trifles.

In the remainder of this paper, I will focus exclusively on the second of the three theses that Boghossian mentions above: constructivism about justification. I will say nothing about constructivism about truth, or about the role of social factors in explaining why we believe what we believe. I will also say nothing about Boghossian's argument for the thesis that constructivism about justification must assume a relativistic form if it is to avoid the problem of disagreement – I simply grant that point for the sake of argument. And finally, I will say nothing about the argument for epistemic relativism that Boghossian articulates in chapter 5, and then criticizes in chapter 7, of his book. In the section that follows, I will devote all of my attention to a particular anti-relativist argument that Boghossian offers in chapter 6 of his book. Criticizing this anti-relativist argument is not an idle academic exercise, for, as I indicate in the final section of this paper, a particular relativist thesis in epistemology may well be true – in any case, a reasonable case can be made for it.

(II) Boghossian's Arguments Against Epistemic Relativism

Boghossian formulates epistemic relativism as the conjunction of three theses:

A. There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (Epistemic non-absolutism)

B. If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form 'E justifies belief B' as expressing the claim *E justifies belief B* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.* (Epistemic relationism)

C. There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic pluralism)

Boghossian's argument against the conjunction of these three theses has the form of a trilemma: either the epistemic systems mentioned in B and C are sets of truth-evaluable propositions, or they are sets of incomplete propositions, or they are sets of imperatives. And, on any of these three hypotheses, epistemic relativism is not true. Now, for the sake of argument, I will grant Boghossian's premise that these three options are exhaustive. I will also grant that, if epistemic systems are sets of incomplete propositions or sets of imperative, then epistemic relativism is not true. So I will focus exclusively on his argument against a single horn of the trilemma: namely, that, if epistemic systems are sets of truth-evaluable propositions, then epistemic relativism is not true. In this section, I will critically assess that argument.

Boghossian's argument occurs in the following passage:

"an epistemic system... consists of a set of general normative propositions – epistemic principles – which specify under which conditions a particular type of belief is justified. ... In other words... the epistemic principles which constitute particular epistemic systems are just more general versions of particular epistemic judgments. They, too, are propositions stating the conditions under which a belief would be absolutely justified, the only difference being that they do so in a very general way and without adverting to particular beliefs held by particular agents at particular times and under particular evidential conditions.

"Now, however, if the relativist's central thought is that particular epistemic judgments are uniformly false, and so must be replaced by judgments about what is entailed by the epistemic systems that we happen to accept, then it follows from this central thought that the general epistemic principles which constitute the epistemic systems that we accept must be false, too, for they are general propositions of much the same type. ...

"suppose that we take that point on board, and so agree that the various general epistemic principles out of which epistemic systems are composed are themselves false. Why should that cause any problems for the relativist? ...

"The trouble is that... it is crucial to the relativist's view that thinkers accept one or another of these systems, that they endorse one or another of them and then talk about what they do and do not permit. ...

“But how could we go on accepting one or another of these epistemic systems, once we have bought in on the relativist’s central thought that there are no absolute facts about justification and so have come to conclude that they are made up out of uniformly false propositions? ...

“It is also hard to explain why anyone should care about what follows from a set of propositions that are acknowledged to be uniformly false. What sort of normative authority over us could an epistemic system exert, once we have become convinced that it is made up of propositions that are uniformly false?” (Boghossian 2006, 85 – 7)

So the basic idea seems to be this: according to the relativist, particular epistemic judgments are false, and so it follows that general epistemic judgments are false as well. But epistemic systems are simply sets of general epistemic judgments, and so they will be sets of falsehoods. And the fact that something follows from (what we take to be) a set of falsehoods is normatively irrelevant for us. Thus, Boghossian concludes, the epistemic relativist is not in a position to explain how an epistemic system can have any normative force for the people who subscribe to that very system.

Now, why does Boghossian characterize “the relativist’s central thought” as being the following: “that particular epistemic judgments are uniformly false, and so must be replaced by judgments about what is entailed by the epistemic systems that we happen to accept”? To answer this question, let’s first consider what Boghossian means by the phrase “particular epistemic judgments”. Here’s what he says:

“particular epistemic judgments might speak of particular people, beliefs, and evidential conditions, as in

3. If it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon” (Boghossian 2006, 85)

So (3) is an example of a particular epistemic judgment. But recall that, according to conjunct B of Epistemic Relativism – the conjunct that Boghossian calls Epistemic relationism – the relativist thinks if someone’s “epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form ‘E justifies belief B’ as expressing the claim *E justifies belief B* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.*” If this is correct, then it follows that, if (3) is to have any prospect of being true, we must construe (3) as expressing the claim *According to the epistemic system C, that I accept, if it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon.* More generally, we should construe those utterances of the form ‘E justifies belief B’ as expressing judgments of the form: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.* But, according to the relativist, judgments of this latter form need not be false: many of them may be true. And so the relativist can perfectly well allow that many of our particular epistemic judgments are true, as are our general epistemic judgments. The relativist can therefore perfectly well allow that our epistemic systems are sets of propositions, many of which (perhaps even all of which) are true.

The relativist's picture, then, is shaping up as follows: let S2 be someone who is forming beliefs on the basis of evidence, and let S1 be someone engaged in the project of epistemic assessment of S2. (I leave it open whether S1 = S2.) When S1 assesses S2 epistemically, S1 makes judgments of the form *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S1, accept, if S2 is in informational state E, then S2 is justified in belief B*. But what is the epistemic system C to which such judgments refer? It is a set of general propositions of the form *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S1, accept, if an agent is in informational state E, then that agent is justified in belief B*. Each element of C, therefore, refers to that very set C of which it is an element. And furthermore, each particular epistemic judgment that is implied by elements of C itself refers to that very same set C. Is there a problem with this picture?

There may be a couple of easily remediable problems. First, it might be objected that an epistemic assessor can appeal to an epistemic system even without being aware that she is appealing to any such system – and so without judging anything about what is the case according to an epistemic system *that she herself accepts*. If the relativist is impressed by this objection, she can reply to it by revising her conception of the elements of an epistemic system so that it says the following: an epistemic system is a set of general propositions of the form *According to THIS epistemic system if an agent is in informational state E, then that agent is justified in belief B*, where the demonstrative expression “this” demonstratively refers to the very same epistemic system which, as it happens, contains that proposition as an element. If the elements of an epistemic system are propositions of this form, then an assessor can affirm those general propositions without being aware that she herself is appealing to any epistemic system.

Second, it might be objected that epistemic assessment is fundamentally, not a matter of assessing whether particular bits of information justify particular beliefs, or not; rather it is a matter of assessing the extent to which an epistemic agent's total informational state makes rational her total distribution of confidence over propositions. Again, if the relativist is impressed by this objection, she can reply to it by revising her conception of the elements of an epistemic system yet again, so that it now says the following: an epistemic system is a set of general propositions of the form *According to THIS epistemic system if an agent is in total informational state E, then that agent is rational to degree n in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W1, and rational to degree n' in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W2, and rational to degree n'' in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W3, and so on...* This problem, like that last one, is easy to fix – assuming it is a problem at all.

In any case, neither of the two objections above has anything to do with Boghossian's objection to the kind of relativism being considered here. Boghossian does not explicitly consider the kind of relativism being described here, but I think we can reasonably speculate about how he would object to the present version of relativism. He might object that our relativist is not in a position to explain how an epistemic system, as described above, can have any normative force for the people who subscribe to that very system. Boghossian explicitly raises that complaint in the context of assuming that the relativist is committed to claiming that particular epistemic judgments are false; as we have seen, however, the relativist is not committed to claiming this. But might Boghossian's complaint still be justified with respect to the relativist view that I have just sketched – a view according to which S1's epistemic system C is a set of propositions of

the form *According to THIS epistemic system if an agent is in total informational state E, then that agent is rational to degree n in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W1, and rational to degree n' in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W2, and rational to degree n'' in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W3, and so on...* ? Is the relativist that I have described in a position to explain how an epistemic system like that can have any normative force for the people who subscribe to that very system?

In order to answer this question, let's consider a doctrine I call "grammatical relativism". In stating grammatical relativism, I will use the phrase "grammatical system" to refer to a set of general propositions of the form *According to THIS grammatical system, phonetic strings of type T are grammatical*. To say that a phonetic string is "grammatical" is to say that an utterance of that string is a grammatical utterance. A grammatical system is a set of propositions that together state a complete grammar for a spoken dialect. Using this terminology, I can now state the doctrine of grammatical relativism:

A'. There are no absolute facts about which phonetic strings (i.e., sequences of phones) are grammatical. (Grammatical non-absolutism)

B'. If a person, S's, grammatical judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form 'string S is grammatical' as expressing the claim *phonetic string S is grammatical* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to THIS grammatical system, phonetic string S is grammatical*. (Grammatical relationism)

C'. There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative grammatical systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these dialects is more correct than any of the others. (Grammatical pluralism)

Now, in order to avoid possible misunderstanding, it may be worth noting that grammatical relativism is compatible with there being some propositions that are elements of all grammatical systems, i.e., grammatical universals. (Such universals may be determined by the human vocal or auditory apparatus, or by the brain's processing powers.) Grammatical systems may be distinct, and may allow different phonetic strings as grammatical, even if there is some non-empty intersection among those systems.

I should also note that grammatical relativism is compatible with there being people (e.g., young children, extremely provincial people) who are not aware of the existence of alternative dialects, or alternative grammatical systems, and who mistakenly regard the norms of grammar as applying absolutely (or else who simply have no thoughts whatsoever about this issue). In fact, it is possible for grammatical relativism to be true even if no one thinks that it is true – because, say, no one has ever been exposed to a dialect other than the one that she herself speaks. Even if grammatical relativism is true, its truth may come as a surprise to some people, just as the existence of grammatical universals may come as a surprise to some people.

Finally, I should stress that grammatical relativism is a doctrine about the grammaticality of *phonetic* strings – not *phonological* strings. Phonological strings are strings of phonemes, and phonemes are equivalence classes of phones, where the

equivalence relation is relative to a dialect: relative to one dialect, two phones may be members of the same phoneme, but relative to another dialect, those same two phones are not members of the same phoneme. There is a clear sense, then, in which a *phoneme* belongs to a particular dialect, or group of dialects, and so a phonological string is either grammatical *simpliciter* (if it is grammatical in the dialect to which it belongs) or it is ungrammatical *simpliciter*. A phone, in contrast, does not belong to any dialect. Which phonological string (if any) is realized by a particular phonetic string is relative to a dialect, but particular phonetic strings do not belong to any dialect. The very same phonetic string may realize one phonological string in English, and a different phonological string in French, and the former may be grammatical in English, while the latter is ungrammatical in French. Thus, one and the same phonetic string can be grammatical in one language and ungrammatical in another.

Now, it seems to me obvious that grammatical relativism, understood as above, is true. For any phonetic string S, that string cannot be grammatical (or not) *simpliciter*, but only relative to one or another grammar: relative to some grammars it is grammatical, but not relative to others. Now, let's ask: given the truth of grammatical relativism, is there a problem explaining how a grammatical system can have any normative force for native speakers of a dialect the grammar for which includes that very system? Of course, there is the difficult empirical task of explaining how it is that a human infant can acquire her native dialect, but the difficulty of carrying out this task does not tell against grammatical relativism. Might there be *another* problem explaining what could constitute its being the case that a grammatical system has any normative force for native speakers of a dialect the grammar for which includes that very system?

It might be thought that considerations of the kind raised by Kripke 1982 pose such a problem. Very roughly, Kripke argues that it is impossible to explain what makes it the case that the use of a sign is governed by a certain semantic norm. So far as I can see, nothing in Kripke's argument hinges on the norm's being *semantic*, or on the used object being a *sign*: a generalization of Kripke's argument would, I think, work equally well to support the conclusion that it is impossible to explain what makes it the case that the use of a physical object is governed by a certain norm. Might such a generalization of Kripke's argument pose an insuperable explanatory problem for grammatical relativism? This is not the place to evaluate Kripke's argument, or the generalization of it that I've sketched. But such an evaluation is not necessary for present purposes, since the generalization of Kripke's argument does not pose any *more* of an explanatory problem for grammatical relativism than it does for grammatical absolutism. If it is impossible to explain what makes it the case that the use of a physical object is governed by a norm, then this is impossible whether the norms at issue are relative or absolute. And so, whether or not Kripke's argument succeeds, it does not tell against grammatical *relativism*.

Is there any other explanatory problem that might beset grammatical relativism? Even if there is such a problem (and I cannot think of one), it is obviously not fatal to grammatical relativism, since grammatical relativism is obviously true.

Now let's return to our main topic, viz., epistemic relativism. We were wondering whether the epistemic relativist could explain how an epistemic system has normative authority for its adherents. Perhaps it is better to articulate the imagined challenge for the relativist as follows. If epistemic relativism is true, then different

epistemic systems will have normative authority for different people. Consider a particular community COM and their epistemic system ECOM. By the relativist's hypothesis, ECOM has normative authority for the members of COM, but not for people who are not members of COM. But these other people who are not members of COM might nonetheless come to recognize, on the basis of some evidence, that the propositions that are elements of ECOM are all true. For recall that each such element says what is true according to ECOM, and a person can recognize the truth of such propositions whether or not she is herself a member of COM. In fact, membership in COM determines whether ECOM has normative authority for one, but it does not determine whether one can recognize the propositions that are elements in COM as true. So it is one thing for ECOM to have normative authority for someone; it is another thing (not sufficient for the former) for someone to recognize the propositions that are elements of ECOM as true. But then, if recognizing the propositions that are elements of ECOM as true is not sufficient for ECOM to have normative authority for someone, then what is sufficient? How could ECOM have normative authority for someone, except by dint of some such recognition on her part? The epistemic relativist must have an answer to this question, but what answer can she offer? This is a central challenge to the epistemic relativist.

In answering this question, it seems to me that the epistemic relativist can avail herself of materials that would be employed by the grammatical relativist in meeting an analogous challenge. The grammatical system of my own dialect of English has normative authority for me – for instance, it helps to determine what phonetic strings I ought to utter or accept in the course of conversation – but it does not have normative authority for, say, a native speaker of Swahili who speaks no English. The grammatical system of Swahili has normative authority for the native speaker of Swahili, but not for me, as I do not speak Swahili. Now, why does the grammatical system of each dialect have normative authority only for those people who speak the dialect? A grammatical system is part of the grammar for a dialect, and it has the same sort of normative authority that a grammar has – whatever exactly that normative authority is. As I mentioned above in connection with Kripke, this is not the place to give an account of what sort of normative authority a grammar has for those who speak the dialect of which it is the grammar. What matters for present purposes is that we can agree that a grammar does have normative authority just for those people who speak the dialect of which it is the grammar, and just by virtue of their speaking that dialect, i.e., of their possessing and exercising a certain skill.

Can an epistemic relativist make an analogous point about epistemic systems? Can she say that an epistemic system has normative authority just for those who possess and exercise the skill of using that system, and just by virtue of the fact that they possess and exercise that skill?

It might be objected that there is a crucial disanalogy between the grammatical case and the epistemic case: speakers of different dialects are governed by different grammatical systems for the simple reason that they are engaged in different activities, with different constitutive rules. But, it will be objected, users of putatively different epistemic systems are not engaged in different activities. They are engaged in the same activity, viz., inquiry, or trying to find out about how the world is. Unless we accept some version of fact-constructivism (a view that Boghossian effectively criticizes), we

must admit that users of putatively different epistemic systems are all directing their inquisitive efforts on one and the same object – the world – and so, it seems, they are all engaged in the same activity, and are responsible to the same set of constitutive rules of that activity. Doesn't this pose a problem for the suggested analogy between grammatical relativism and epistemic relativism?

No. While it is true that speakers of different dialects are engaged in different activities, it is also true that, at a higher level of abstraction, they are engaged in the same activity, viz., communication. But then just as it is true that users of putatively different epistemic systems are engaged in the same activity, viz., inquiry, it may also be true that, at a lower level of abstraction, they are engaged in different activities, i.e., inquiry governed by epistemic system E1 or inquiry governed by epistemic system E2, where E1 and E2 are distinct, even though their intersection is non-empty. And for E1 and E2 to be distinct, it is not necessary that there be more than one world, or that different inquirers direct their attention to different objects. Different inquirers can all direct their attention to the very same object, so long as they do so in different ways. Just as different versions of football all have the same goal (winning more points than the opposing team), and they all involve some (but not all) of the same rules, so too it may be that different versions of inquiry all have the same goal (i.e., finding out about how the world is), and they all involve some (but not all) of the same norms. Different versions of inquiry may nonetheless involve distinct epistemic systems. So the suggested analogy between grammatical relativism and epistemic relativism survives the envisaged objection.

According to the analogy being suggested here, the epistemic relativist thinks that different forms of inquiry are normatively governed by different (though perhaps overlapping) epistemic systems, where an epistemic system is a set of general propositions of the form *According to THIS epistemic system if an agent is in total informational state E, then that agent is rational to degree n in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W1, and rational to degree n' in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W2, and rational to degree n'' in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W3, and so on...* Why not regard all of these epistemic systems as proper subsets of one comprehensive epistemic system that has normative authority over all epistemic agents? The relativist may wish to resist this move because the resulting comprehensive epistemic system is likely to contain propositions that cannot all be true: it would contain a proposition of the form *According to THIS (comprehensive) epistemic system if an agent is in total informational state E, then that agent is rational to degree n in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W1...*, and it would also contain a proposition of the form *According to THIS (comprehensive) epistemic system if an agent is in total informational state E, then that agent is rational to degree m in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W1...*, where m and n are distinct. And presumably, epistemic systems cannot contain propositions that cannot all be true – or if they do contain such propositions, this presumably diminishes their normative authority.

I conclude that the epistemic relativist described here is no less able to explain how epistemic systems have normative authority over those agents whose systems they are than is the grammatical relativist able to explain how grammatical systems have normative authority over those agents whose systems they are. But, since grammatical relativism is true, there can be no insurmountable problem confronting the grammatical

relativist. Therefore, there is also no insurmountable problem confronting the epistemic relativist. Boghossian has not refuted epistemic relativism.

To sum up: I have described a version of epistemic relativism, and then considered what argument Boghossian might offer against it. The strongest argument that I've been able to find on Boghossian's behalf is an argument that refutes epistemic relativism only if it also refutes grammatical relativism. But grammatical relativism is true, so it cannot be refuted. Consequently, the best argument that I've been able to find on Boghossian's behalf is an argument that does not refute epistemic relativism. And so, I conclude that either there is a better argument to be offered on Boghossian's behalf – an argument that I have not yet seen, and that I hereby ask to see – or else that epistemic relativism may, for all Boghossian has shown, be true.

Of course, none of this is to say that epistemic relativism *is* true. It is compatible with everything that I've said so far that epistemic relativism is indisputably and obviously false. I turn now to the question of whether some version of epistemic relativism – or in any case something like epistemic relativism – is true.

(III) An Argument For Epistemic Relativism

We have been thinking of an epistemic system as a set of propositions of the form *According to THIS epistemic system if an agent is in total informational state E, then that agent is rational to degree n in distributing her confidence over propositions in way W1*. But we have so far said nothing about what it is for an agent to be in a “total informational state”. Now, I would like to say something about what it is for an agent to be in such a state. For an agent to be in a particular total informational state is for an agent to be in a state which is such that her being in that state completely determines just how rational it is for her to distribute her confidence over propositions in a particular way. But the only state which is such that an agent's being in that state completely determines just how rational it is for her to distribute her confidence over propositions in a certain way is the state of having a particular body of *total evidence*. So, what it is for an agent to be in a certain informational state is for that agent to have a particular body of total evidence.

Now I will sketch an argument for a particular relativist thesis about evidence. I will first state the thesis, and then give an example to illustrate it. The thesis is this: what evidence a particular person possesses at a particular time is relative to a set of presupposed facts (or what I will henceforth call, departing slightly from standard usage, a “presupposition set”). It follows from this thesis that how rational it is for a particular person at a particular time to distribute her confidence over propositions in a particular way, is itself relative to a presupposition set.

Now, to illustrate what I have in mind: Suppose that, in the course of investigating a murder, Holmes interviews people who were in the house at the time of the crime. Once he's conducted the interviews, Holmes knows all of the following statements are true:

- (A) Holmes now seems to remember its having sounded to him as if the butler said that the maid was in the dining room when the murder took place.
- (B) It sounded to Holmes as if the butler said that the maid was in the dining room when the murder took place.

- (C) The butler said that the maid was in the dining room when the murder took place.
(D) The maid was in the dining room when the murder took place.

Which of (A)-(D), if any, is part of the evidence that Holmes now possesses? Some philosophers (e.g., Feldman 1988) think that one's evidence at a moment is restricted to one's conscious mental states at that very moment, and so the correct answer to this question is simply (A). Other philosophers (e.g., Williamson 2000) think that one's evidence at a moment includes all and only what one knows at that very moment, and so the correct answer to this question is all of (A) – (D). But according to the present relativist thesis, the correct answer to the question “which of these truths is part of the evidence that Holmes now possesses?” is relative to a presupposition set. Relative to a presupposition set that includes such facts as *(A) would not be true unless (B) were also true*, Holmes's evidence includes not just (A) but also (B). Relative to a presupposition set that includes such facts as *(A) would not be true unless (C) were also true*, Holmes's evidence includes not just (A) but also (C). Relative to a presupposition set that includes such facts as *(A) would not be true unless (D) were also true*, Holmes's evidence includes (D). And so on. Independently of any such specification of a presupposition set (a specification perhaps given explicitly in speech or conscious thought, but more commonly determined by the silent or non-conscious operation of contextual factors), the question is indeterminate, and there is no uniquely correct answer. So, relative to some presupposition sets, Holmes's evidence immediately after conducting the interviews might include all of (A) - (D). But relative to other presupposition sets, Holmes's evidence immediately after conducting the interviews might include only (A). That is the basic idea of the relativist thesis that I will be defending here.

Notice that this relativist view is not a version of epistemic relativism as Boghossian defines it, since it is not committed to the truth of:

A. There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (Epistemic non-absolutism)

B. If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form 'E justifies belief B' as expressing the claim *E justifies belief B* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B*. (Epistemic relationism)

C. There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic pluralism)

Nonetheless, the view that I have just espoused is clearly a version of epistemic relativism in a broader sense, for, in conjunction with some very plausible background hypotheses concerning the relation between what evidence someone has and what belief someone is justified in holding, my view is committed to the truth of:

A'. There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular person at a particular moment is justified in holding.

B'. If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form 'X is justified in holding belief B' as expressing the claim *X is justified in holding belief B* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, X is justified in holding belief B.*

C'. There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others.

Although Boghossian argues against the conjunction A&B&C, and I am espousing the conjunction A'&B'&C', there still seems to me to be a conflict between us, for, so far as I can see, Boghossian's arguments can have no greater force against A&B&C than they can against A'&B'&C'.

Now that I've explained the relativist thesis that I accept, I will sketch an argument for it. Consider the following cases:

Case 1. Kate is ambling down the street when she looks up at a street sign that says "State Street". Now, it is a matter of complete indifference whether Kate is on State Street – nothing whatsoever depends upon it. The ambient lighting is perfectly normal, and Kate's eyesight is perfectly normal, and she sees the street sign clearly. She has no special reason to believe that the street sign is inaccurate, though she also has no special reason to think it is any more likely to be accurate than any other street sign. There is nothing else unusual about the circumstances.

How confident should Kate be that the street that she is on is State Street? Plausibly she should be extremely confident in this proposition, and she should not have any significant doubt about it. (This is not to say anything just yet about the odds at which she would bet on her being on State Street. It is controversial what connection there is between degree of confidence and betting odds, and I avoid that controversial issue here.)

Case 2. You need Kate to get to Main Street by Noon: you are on Main Street, and your life depends upon her finding you by Noon. At 11:45 AM, she comes to an intersection and looks up at a street sign that says "Main Street". The ambient lighting is perfectly normal, and Kate's eyesight is perfectly normal, and she sees the street sign clearly. She has no special reason to believe that the street sign is inaccurate, though she also has no special reason to think it is any more likely to be accurate than any other street sign. Since there are still 15 minutes until noon, Kate still has time to gather further evidence that she is on Main Street (she could, for instance, ask a passerby), but she doesn't do so, since, on the basis of the street sign, she is already extremely confident that she is on Main Street.

How confident should Kate be that the street that she is on is Main Street? Plausibly, she should have some moderate degree of confidence in this proposition, but she should also

have some significant doubt about it. She should *not* be extremely confident that she is on Main Street.

Case 3. You need Kate to get to Main Street by Noon: your life depends upon it. At 11:45 AM, Kate comes to an intersection and looks up at the perpendicular street signs at that intersection. One street sign says “State Street” and the perpendicular street sign says “Main Street”. Now, it is a matter of complete indifference whether Kate is on State Street – nothing whatsoever depends upon it. She looks straight at the pair of street signs that say “State” and “Main”. The ambient lighting is perfectly normal, and Kate’s eyesight is perfectly normal, and she sees both street signs equally clearly. She has no special reason to believe that either street sign is inaccurate, though she also has no special reason to think either one of them any more likely to be accurate than any other street sign. There is nothing else unusual about the circumstances.

How confident should Kate be that the street that she is on is Main Street? How confident should she be that the street that she is on is State Street? Plausibly her confidence that it is Main should match her confidence in Case 2, since (we may stipulate) her evidence in this case matches her evidence in Case 2. But also, plausibly, her confidence that it is State should match her confidence in Case 1, since (we may again stipulate) her evidence in this case matches her evidence in Case 1. Nonetheless, her confidence that she is on Main should match her confidence that she is on State, since she has the same evidence for each proposition.

Now, how is this possible? After reading Case 2, we said that Kate should not be extremely confident that she is on Main Street. After reading Case 1, we said that Kate should be extremely confident that she is on State Street. But how is this possible, if she should have the same degree of confidence in each?

Our problem can be put as follows. Consider these claims:

- (a) In case 1, Kate should be extremely confident that she is on State Street.
- (b) In case 2, Kate should not be extremely confident that she is on Main Street.
- (c) In case 3, Kate should have the same degree of confidence in the proposition that she is on State Street that she should have in case 1.
- (d) In case 3, Kate should have the same degree of confidence in the proposition that she is on Main Street that she should have in case 2.
- (e) In case 3, Kate should have the same degree of confidence in the proposition that she is on State Street as she should have in the proposition that she is on Main Street.

Now, (a) – (e) are individually plausible but mutually inconsistent. How can we most reasonably avoid this inconsistency?

I do not have the space here to assess each of the many logically possible answers to this question, so I will simply proceed to state the answer that I find best. On my view, sentence (a) above expresses a proposition of the form *in case 1, Kate should be extremely confident that she is on State Street relative to presupposition set P*, where the value of P is fixed by the presuppositions in the context in which the sentence is uttered, entertained, or otherwise used. Again, sentence (b) above expresses a proposition of the

form in case 2, *Kate should not be extremely confident that she is on Main Street relative to presupposition set P'*, where again the value of P' is fixed by the presuppositions in the context in which the sentence is uttered, entertained, or otherwise used. When we think about case 1, we are normally in a context in which the presupposition set includes such facts as the following: the sign would not say State Street unless Kate were on State Street. But relative to any presupposition set P that included that fact, it is true that, in case 1, Kate should be extremely confident that she is on State Street relative to P. However, when we think about "high stakes" cases like case 2, we are normally in a context in which the presupposition set does not include such facts as that the sign would not say Main Street unless Kate were on Main Street: when the risks of error are very salient to us, we tend not to presuppose as much. Relative to any presupposition set P' that does not include the fact that the sign would not say Main Street unless Kate were on Main Street, it is true that, in case 2, Kate should not be extremely confident that she is on Main Street relative to P'. But there is no presupposition set Q such that it is true that, in case 1, Kate should be extremely confident that she is on State Street relative to Q and in case 2, Kate should not be extremely confident that she is on Main Street relative to Q. Thus, although (a) can normally be used to express a truth, and (b) can normally be used to express a truth, that's because each sentence is normally used against the background of different presupposition sets. There is no single presupposition set relative to which both (a) and (b) are true.

To proceed with my argument, I assume the following general principle:

(Total Evidence) Rationality requires that the degree to which a person S is confident of a hypothesis h is proportional to the degree to which S's total evidence E supports h.

If Total Evidence is true, and if the degree to which rationality requires that a person S is confident of a hypothesis h is relative to a presupposition set, then it follows that the degree to which S's total evidence E supports h is also relative to a presupposition set. But the support relations obtaining between any particular body of total evidence and h are not relative to any further parameter, so it follows that S's total evidence E is relative to a presupposition set. I conclude that what evidence a person possesses at a given time is relative to a presupposition set.

It may be protested that the intuitions elicited by my cases are intuitions that tell against Total Evidence: those intuitions suggest that rationality requires the degree to which a person S is confident of a hypothesis h to depend to some extent on S's utility function, and this utility function can vary independently of S's total evidence. In response to this objection, I ask the reader to notice that the cases say nothing about Kate's costs – they speak only of *your* costs. And surely rationality does not require Kate's degrees of belief to depend upon *your* costs!

The argument sketched above would, of course, need to be filled in much more fully in order to be convincing: in particular, I would have to argue against alternative solutions to the puzzle generated by our three cases. But I hope that I have at least displayed a *kind* of case that might reasonably be made on behalf of a version of epistemic relativism. Epistemic relativism may be false, but, so far as I can see, it is neither absurd nor hopelessly bereft of a possible line of defense.¹

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