

Epistemic Relativism

Mark Eli Kalderon

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1 Introduction

At the heart of *Fear of Knowledge* is a dilemma that Boghossian (2006) likens to a Kantian antimony. Call it the *antimony of reason*:

- On the one hand, epistemic relativism is incoherent;
- On the other hand, epistemic absolutism is circular and so groundless.

The resolution of the antimony is a defense of rule circularity. Epistemic absolutism might be circular but that does not make it groundless.

I will make two sets of remarks. In the first set of remarks, I will address the alleged incoherence of epistemic relativism. If, for all that Boghossian has said, epistemic relativism is not, in fact, incoherent, then the antinomy of reason is never generated. In the second set of remarks, I will address the ambitions and rhetorical effectiveness of *Fear of Knowledge*.

2 Epistemic Relativism Defined

Epistemic relativism is a claim about *epistemic justification*. Epistemic justification is contrasted with *pragmatic justification*. The intuitive idea is that the epistemic justification for a belief is constituted by evidence for the truth of that belief—it is a consideration that counts in favor of that belief's being true. In contrast, a pragmatic justification for belief, of the kind that Pascal offers in his wager, is a consideration that counts in favor of holding that belief, regardless of its truth. Epistemic relativism is a relativism about epistemic as opposed to pragmatic justification.

Before we come to Boghossian's characterization of epistemic relativism, we must first understand three auxiliary notions.

First, an *epistemic judgment* is a belief whose content is a particular normative proposition connecting an item of information with a belief that it epistemically justifies. Boghossian offers the following example:

If it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is *prima facie* justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon.

The justification here is epistemic justification since its visually seeming that there are mountains on the moon is a consideration that counts in favor of their being mountains on the moon.

Second, an *epistemic principle* is a general normative proposition connecting items of information with the beliefs they epistemically justify. Boghossian offers the following example:

Observation: For any observational proposition *p*, if it visually seems to *S* that *p*, then *S* is *prima facie* justified in believing *p*.

Again, the justification here is epistemic justification since its visually seeming that *p* is a consideration that counts in favor of believing that *p* is the case.

Third, an *epistemic system* is a set of epistemic principles. Epistemic systems can be assessed according to various standards of coherence.

Now that we understand the notions of an epistemic judgment, an epistemic principle and an epistemic system, we are in a position to understand Boghossian's characterization of epistemic relativism. Boghossian characterizes *epistemic relativism* as the conjunction of three doctrines:

1. *Epistemic Nonabsolutism:* There are no absolute facts about epistemic justification—facts about what belief a particular item of information epistemically justifies.
2. *Epistemic Relationalism:* If a person, *S*'s, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterance 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*.
3. *Epistemic Pluralism:* 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.

What's the logical relationship between these three doctrines? Boghossian does not explicitly say. Nevertheless, it is natural to understand epistemic relationalism as the fundamental doctrine with the denial of absolutism and epistemic pluralism as consequences of epistemic relationalism. So consider the case of motion. Relationalism about motion is the claim that a body is in motion only relative to a spatiotemporal framework. Relationalism about motion entails the denial of absolutism about motion—there are no facts about motion independent of a spatiotemporal framework. Relationalism about motion also entails pluralism about motion. A body can be at rest relative to one spatiotemporal framework and at motion relative to a different spatiotemporal framework.

According to Boghossian's reconstruction, however, the denial of absolutism is the fundamental doctrine in terms of which epistemic relationalism and pluralism are to be understood. This is, admittedly, unobvious from the present formulation of the three doctrines, but Boghossian's reasons for taking the denial of absolutism as the fundamental doctrine will emerge when we discuss his arguments against epistemic relationalism and pluralism.

This is related to the apparent rhetorical oddity of Boghossian's initial qualification of epistemic relationalism:

If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true . . .

In the present context, it is natural to interpret this as saying:

If a person, S's, epistemic judgments—as *the epistemic relativist understands them*—are to have any prospect of being true . . .

But so understood, the prospects that relative epistemic judgments have of being true are few. But that seems, if not question begging, then at least unwarranted prior to any anti-relativist argument. I was careful to speak of the *apparent* rhetorical oddity of this remark. It's true significance is to signal that Boghossian has given us a *reconstruction* of relationalism in terms of the denial of epistemic absolutism. As we will see, this alternative interpretation is not without its own rhetorical difficulties.

Another apparent oddity in the present formulation of epistemic relationalism is its individualistic character. The discussion of epistemic relativism takes place in the context of inquiring whether there is an interpretation of social constructivism that constitutes a defensible form of anti-realism. It is odd, then, that epistemic judgments are relativized to epistemic systems that *an individual accepts*. Wouldn't the more relevant formulation be in terms of epistemic systems that *a community agrees upon*? This does not directly affect the anti-relativist argument that Boghossian actually gives, but it does directly affect Boghossian's motive for giving that argument.

3 Against Epistemic Relationalism

Recall epistemic relationalism is the following doctrine:

If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterance 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*.

Boghossian believes epistemic relationalism to be not only untrue, but incoherent. What is the source of this putative incoherence?

Consider now the relationship between the content of an epistemic judgment and an epistemic principle that would license it. Recall that the content of an epistemic judgment is a particular normative proposition, say, the proposition that:

If it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is *prima facie* justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon.

Consider the epistemic principle, *Observation*, that licenses that judgment:

For any observational proposition p, if it visually seems to S that p, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing p

The content of the epistemic judgment is an instance of the epistemic principle, the latter being a universal generalization.

Given this logical relationship, Boghossian observes:

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. (Boghossian, 2006, 85–6)

The problem now is plain:

The trouble is that, as we have already seen, it is crucial to the relativist's view that thinker's *accept* one or another of these systems, that they *endorse* one or another of them and then talk about what they do or 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? . . . [I]t makes no sense to insist that we abandon making absolute particular judgments about what justifies while allowing us to accept absolute general judgments about what justifies what. (Boghossian, 2006, 86)

According to epistemic relativism, then, a subject S cannot accept an epistemic judgment of the form:

If E is the case, then belief B is justified.

since such judgments are uniformly false. At best, S must accept, instead:

According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.

But information E justifies belief B according to epistemic system C because C contains an epistemic principle that has, as an instance, the particular normative proposition expressed by the epistemic judgment. But if the relevant epistemic principle has false instances, then it is itself false. But then S could no more accept the epistemic system C than S could accept the false epistemic judgment, and so epistemic relationalism is incoherent.

4 Against Epistemic Pluralism

Recall epistemic pluralism is the following doctrine:

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.

Boghossian believes that a similar incoherence affects this doctrine. What is the source of this putative incoherence?

Consider two epistemic systems, C1 and C2. According to C1:

If E is the case, then belief B is justified.

In contrast, according to C2:

It is not the case that if E is the case, then belief B is justified.

However, according to Boghossian, it is hard to understand how both of these epistemic systems could be correct. Either it is the case that E suffices for B's justification or it doesn't. If we accept the relativist's central denial, that there are no facts about absolute justification, then E is not sufficient for B's justification. But now it seems that whereas C1 contains a falsehood, C2 has replaced this falsehood with a truth. But isn't this just grounds for claiming that, at least in this regard, C2 is more correct than C1? And if it is, then epistemic pluralism is incoherent.

5 Epistemic Fictionalism

According to epistemic relationalism, as Boghossian understands it, epistemic judgments, insofar as they are true, do not express the claim that that judgment is true but rather express the claim that the epistemic judgment is entailed by the epistemic system accepted by the subject. This differs importantly from more familiar relationalist claims about, say, the relational character of motion or of the perceived location of a rainbow. Indeed, epistemic relationalism, as Boghossian understands it, is not a form of relationalism at all but is, instead, an incoherent form of epistemic fictionalism.

Motion is relative to a spatiotemporal framework. A body is at rest or in motion only relative to a spatiotemporal framework. Similarly, the perceived location of a rainbow is relative to the perspective of the perceiver. A rainbow has a perceived location only relative to the point of view inhabited by the perceiver.

When I say that a body is in motion, or that the rainbow is located just over that hill, have I spoken falsely? No. For, plausibly, relative to the conversationally salient spatiotemporal framework, the body in question is in motion. So understood, I have spoken truly. Similarly, relative to my point of view, the rainbow is located just over that hill. Again, so understood, I have spoken truly.

Focus for the moment, on the case of motion. It seems wrong to attribute systematic error to all motion talk prior to the discovery of relativity and wrong to think that our clued in talk of motion involves a change of meaning—which it would have to, if we are now speaking truly whereas before we spoke falsely. The right thing to say is that 'moves' designates a relative property even if it is no part of the meaning of 'moves' that motion is relative to a spatiotemporal framework. That motion is relative is a substantive metaphysical claim about the nature of motion not settled by reflection on the meaning of public language expressions.

So, the central thought about the relativity of motion is not that all particular propositions about motion are false. The central thought about the relativity of motion is a metaphysical claim about motion—that the motion of a body is only relative to a spatiotemporal framework. But this metaphysical claim only entails the distinct denial that all particular propositions about *absolute* motion are false.

Similarly, the central thought about the relativity of the perceived location of a rainbow is a metaphysical claim about the perceived location of the rainbow—that a rainbow is located only relative to a perceiver. But this metaphysical claim only entails the distinct denial that all particular propositions about the perspective-independent location of the rainbow are false. Moreover, the central thought about the relativity of epistemic justification is a metaphysical claim about epistemic justification—that an item of information only epistemically justifies a belief relative to an epistemic system. But this metaphysical claim only entails the distinct denial that all particular propositions about absolute epistemic justification are false.

When Boghossian claims that ‘the relativist’s central thought is that particular epistemic judgments are *uniformly false*’, he is understanding these epistemic judgments as the absolutist understands them—as expressing particular normative propositions *about absolutist justification*. But this is not how the epistemic relativist understands them—as expressing particular normative propositions *about relativist justification*. So construed, for all that has been said, such judgments may be true, just as judgments about motion and the perceived location of the rainbow may be true. No epistemic relativist worth his salt would maintain otherwise.

But if epistemic judgments can be true, as the epistemic relativist understands them, then Boghossian’s case against epistemic relativism collapses. The case against epistemic relationalism depended on the thought that:

Epistemic judgments, and so the epistemic principles that license them, are uniformly false.

But that is only plausible if epistemic judgments concern absolutist justification. If, instead, they concern relativist justification, as the epistemic relativist contends, then this thought is plausibly false—or at the very least, for all that has been said, it may very well be true. The relativist does not claim that there are no facts about epistemic justification, only that there are no *absolute* facts about epistemic justification. Similarly, the case against epistemic pluralism depended on the thought that:

Either E is sufficient for the justification of belief B, or it isn’t

But that is only plausible if epistemic judgments concern absolutist justification. If, instead, they concern relativist justification, as the epistemic relativist contends, this thought is false. At best, the epistemic relativist would endorse the following thought:

Relative to epistemic system C, either E is sufficient for the justification of belief B, or it isn’t.

E could not both justify and fail to justify belief B relative to the epistemic system C1 that S1 accepts. But E could at once justify belief B relative to the epistemic system C1 that S1 accepts and fail to justify belief B relative to the epistemic system C2 that S2 accepts.

We have been offered, not epistemic relationalism, but a surrogate for it. Epistemic relationalism, despite its title, is not a form of relationalism at all. In familiar and less controversial cases of relativism, relationalism is most naturally understood as a metaphysical claim about the relational nature of the facts in question—that they consist in certain relations obtaining. Relationalism, as Boghossian understands this doctrine, is not a *metaphysical* claim but a *metalinguistic* claim. Nor is this a harmless application of semantic assent. Relative epistemic judgments are not claimed to express propositions with a relational subject matter, but rather are claimed to express propositions about entailment relations between propositions with an absolutists subject matter. As Boghossian understands this doctrine, epistemic justification is not claimed to be relative to accepted epistemic systems; rather, epistemic judgments are merely claimed to be entailed by accepted epistemic systems (understood as sets of propositions). So understood, it is a form of epistemic fictionalism, although one of dubious coherence.

So consider Field's mathematical fictionalism. Field denies that there are abstract objects—objects that do not participate in the causal closed spatiotemporal system of events—but accepts, for example, that two plus two equals four. If numbers are abstract objects, then in what does Field's acceptance consist? At one point, Field (1989) made the following proposal: When we accept that two plus two equals four we should believe only that according to standard mathematics, two plus two equals four—that two plus two equals four is a claim entailed by standard mathematics. 'Standard mathematics' is understood as the mathematics accepted by mathematicians, deployed by engineers, and so on. But just as acceptance of a particular mathematical proposition should not be understood as belief, neither should acceptance of standard mathematics be understood as belief in its truth (as opposed to belief in its deductive utility and a commitment to deploy it in drawing inferences among propositions about *concreta*, say).

The parallel should be clear: When the relativist, as Boghossian portrays him, accepts a particular normative proposition p, he believes only that according to the epistemic system that he accepts, p. When the fictionalist accepts a particular mathematical proposition p, he believes only that according to standard mathematics, p. Not only is the parallel clear, but so is a crucial difference. For whereas the fictionalist denies that the acceptance of standard mathematics is belief, Boghossian insists that the acceptance of an epistemic system is belief. That is why I claimed that this is an incoherent form of epistemic fictionalism, for it flouts the fictionalist's central insight, if it is one—that acceptance in serious inquiry need not be belief.

6 Agreement and Epistemic Relationalism

What's gone wrong? Boghossian has offered us, *in his very definition of epistemic relativism*, not epistemic relationalism, but a fictionalist surrogate for it.

I believe that offering a surrogate for epistemic relationalism is not unmotivated. Indeed, it is motivated by a puzzle about what epistemic judgments could be relative to.

According to the relativist, epistemic judgments are relative to accepted epistemic systems. But epistemic systems, in Boghossian's framework, are sets of general normative propositions connecting items of information with the beliefs they justify. But how could the truth of a particular normative proposition be relative to the general normative proposition of which it is an instance? That thought is surely incoherent. It couldn't. Since epistemic relationalism is an incoherent option in Boghossian's framework, Boghossian fastens on the denial of absolutist epistemic justification as the central relativist claim and reconstrues both relationalism and pluralism in terms of this denial.

But perhaps the problem lies, not with making sense of epistemic relationalism, but the framework in terms of which Boghossian attempts to make sense of it.

Earlier, I complained about the individualistic character of Boghossian's formulation of epistemic relationalism. Epistemic judgments are relativized to epistemic systems that *an individual accepts*. In the context of a discussion of social constructivism, wouldn't the more relevant formulation be in terms of epistemic systems that *a community agrees upon*? As I observed, this does not directly affect the anti-relativist argument that Boghossian gives, but it does directly affect Boghossian's motive for giving that argument. For it provides the basis of an alternative to Boghossian's framework, an alternative whose passing unnoticed leads Boghossian to offer his reconstruction of epistemic relationalism as an incoherent form of epistemic fictionalism.

Consider, then, plausible forms of social relativism. Indeed, consider one of Boghossian's favorite examples—the fashionable. If something is fashionable, then what makes it so is that we agree that it is fashionable. Perhaps, not everyone's judgment counts as much as anyone else's. Perhaps Alexander McQueen's judgment counts more than mine, say. Nevertheless, what makes something fashionable is that it is agreed to be fashionable, at least by the right people. Thus it seems incoherent to suppose that there could be a community with widespread agreement about what's fashionable that is nevertheless in systematic error about this—that there could be hidden facts about what's really fashionable that had passed unnoticed by the entire community.

The truth about what's fashionable seem relative to agreement about what's fashionable. Perhaps, epistemic systems should be understood, not as sets of epistemic principles, but as sets of epistemic principles that communities of inquiry agree

upon. So understood, epistemic justification is not relative to the *epistemic principles* agreed upon but to the *agreement* upon those principles. So the reason that if it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is prima facie justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon is that, in Galileo's community of inquiry, *Observation* is an agreed upon epistemic principle. Just as the off-side rule is a standard of play whose validity depends on and derives from the agreement reached by the eleven member clubs of the Football Association on December 1, 1863, *Observation* is a standard of inquiry whose validity depends on and derives from the agreement reached by the natural philosophers who constituted Galileo's community of inquiry.

Formulating epistemic relationalism in terms of agreement is not an unfamiliar idea. It is at least entertained if not endorsed by Wittgenstein. Relativizing the truth of particular normative proposition to agreement is not incoherent in the specific way that relativizing its truth to the corresponding general normative proposition is. Moreover, epistemic relationalism, so understood, and the entailed epistemic pluralism, would not be subject to the arguments that Boghossian gives. It is not without its problems. What account can it give of the *conflict* between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine? (Though Harman, 1996, in a work cited by Boghossian, gives an expressivist account of this kind of conflict, in the moral domain, which he describes as quasi-absolutism, paralleling, as it does, Blackburn's quasi-realism. Moreover, relativist accounts of disagreement have been recently discussed by John McFarlane, forthcoming.) Perhaps it is ultimately an untenable position. I believe it is. But nothing Boghossian says establishes this, and the alleged antinomy of reason never gets off the ground.

7 Persuasiveness and the Source of Relativistic Conviction

Let me now consider, not the cogency of Boghossian's case, but its rhetorical effectiveness.

Boghossian takes the source of relativistic conviction to lie in the cogency of the arguments that support it. If the source of relativistic conviction lies in the cogency of the arguments advanced in its favor, then undermining these arguments would undermine the source of relativistic conviction.

One problem is that Boghossian only considers the arguments of the radical left of analytic metaphysics. Specifically, he only considers the arguments of Goodman, Putnam, and Rorty. (Foucault is only mentioned briefly and dismissively.) Unfortunately, the relativistically inclined among our colleagues in the humanities and all they have taught and influenced are steeped in a different intellectual tradition

with its own arguments that Boghossian fails to consider. Thus for example, there is a semantic tradition stemming from Saussure that ultimately failed to provide, as we might put it, a determinate denotational semantics. Instead of rejecting this semantic framework, some authors embraced this indeterminacy and drew relativistic conclusions from it. This intellectual trajectory can be found in diverse writers such as Lacan and Derrida and interestingly parallels Quine's own intellectual trajectory. Assessing these arguments would directly engage with that tradition and would be an interesting intellectual exercise—one that Boghossian does not deign to undertake.

There is a deeper problem, however, having to do with the very assumption that the source of relativistic conviction lies with the arguments advanced in its favor. Suppose, instead, that the arguments advanced in favor of relativism are not the source of relativistic conviction but the expression of it. Arguments can be the grounds upon which we believe their conclusions, but this is not the only role that arguments play in our cognitive practice. Even if we antecedently and justifiably believe the conclusion of an argument, sometimes at least, it remains a theoretical advance to be able to give a cogent argument for that belief (Frege claims this in the preface to the *Foundations of Arithmetic*)—in which case the argument is not the source of conviction but the product of it. Or again, the cognitive utility of an argument may lie in the conceptual connections it makes salient, a cognitive utility it would retain even if its conclusion were antecedently and justifiably believed. Arguments may be used to register and articulate a conviction antecedently held in which case the argument is less the source of conviction than the expression of it.

The arguments advanced in favor of nominalism and qualia can seem to function in this latter way—at least to their opponents. Consider then some recent analytic philosophy, if not how it was, then how it nearly might have been. Arguments are advanced for nominalism and qualia and are replaced by new arguments when they are shown to be deficient by their critics. If this pattern persists it is at least reasonable to entertain the hypothesis that the source of nominalist and phenomenist conviction is not the arguments advanced in their favor—after all conviction persists after they are exposed to be deficient. One Wittgensteinian alternative would be that the source of nominalist and phenomenist conviction lie not with the arguments advanced in their favor, but with a philosophical *picture* that animates the construction of these arguments. In both cases, the picture is not hard to discern, at least in rough outline, since each are motivated by thought experiments that seem to be the means of conceiving independent variation in two domains—the abstract and the concrete, the qualitative and the material. In such an intellectual climate, combatting nominalist or phenomenist conviction requires, if not therapy, then disenchantment with the pictures that guide the thoughts of some.

My first observation, then, is that the source of relativistic conviction is relevant

to the rhetorical effectiveness of undermining the arguments advanced in its favor. If the source of relativistic conviction does not lie with the cogency of these arguments, then undermining them would leave relativistic conviction untouched.

My second observation is that the thought that the source of relativistic conviction consists in the arguments advanced in its favor is a substantive sociological claim. It is, after all, a causal explanatory claim about beliefs widely held across the populations of diverse communities. No sociological evidence is advanced in its favor nor are any sociological alternatives considered. There is, however, a credible sociological alternative. Let me sketch that alternative, at least in broad outline. If it is even approximately correct, then the ambitions of *Fear of Knowledge* simply could not be met.

Let me dogmatically register my belief that a lot of relativist conviction is animated by the thought that the authority of reason, and its attendant rhetoric of objectivity, is a mask for the interests of power. That the authority of reason is a mask for the interests of power has a number of recent sources. Nietzsche's doctrine that the value of truth is a generalization of the Christian virtue of truthfulness and so the expression of *ressentiment* is one, Marx's doctrines about class interests and their cultural expression is another. A deeper source is, perhaps, the historical experience of European colonialism. Whatever its source, it is a widely held fear affecting a variety of people of a variety of different political persuasions. Thus the New York Times is simultaneously deemed to be right-wing, left-wing, and Zionist propaganda depending, of course, on whom you ask. When in the grips of the hermeneutics of suspicion, relativism can seem to be an effective means of resistance. This is the role that relativism plays in post-colonial thought. Consider some of the darker passages from Said's book, *Orientalism*.

Suppose, then, that relativism is a reaction to the thought that the authority of reason, and the attendant rhetoric of objectivity, is a mask for the interests of power. How might such a relativist react to *Fear of Knowledge*? Even if Boghossian's arguments succeeded perfectly on their own terms, the ambitions of *Fear of Knowledge* could not be met. A relativist motivated by the thought that the authority of reason is a mask for the interests of power will not be moved by the case put forward in *Fear of Knowledge*—*Fear of Knowledge* simply does not address that fear. Even if *Fear of Knowledge* did indeed address this relativist's arguments, since these arguments aren't the source of relativistic conviction but their expression, demonstrating their failure would fail to persuade. Indeed, in the grips of the hermeneutics of suspicion, rational counterargument could only seem like power's illicit attempt to resist its subversion by relativistic countermeasures.

Reason is not utterly impotent in this regard—however, the case would take a very different form than Boghossian's. It would involve, first, the frank admission that all belief is subject to contingent historical explanation but would patiently explain that

absolute epistemic justification is not thereby undermined. It would involve, as well, the frank admission that the rhetoric of objectivity is sometimes abused—that it is indeed sometimes a mask for the interests of power, but would insist that, where it is, relativistic countermeasures are unnecessary and that reason has sufficient resources to effectively criticize this misappropriation of its authority. This would involve portraying power’s exploitation, for its own ends, of the authority of reason as inimical to reason’s proper domain. Such exploitation would be, as Kant puts it, a kind of ‘*misology*, that is, hatred of reason’ (4:395). Any effective case against contemporary relativism must deal sympathetically with the fear that motivates it. A failure to deal sympathetically with that fear runs the risk of exacerbating it and further entrenching relativistic conviction.

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