

DOES „ONE CANNOT KNOW” ENTAIL „EVERYONE IS RIGHT”? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EPISTEMIC SCEPTICISM AND RELATIVISM

MAJID AMINI & CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

Virginia State University

Abstract. The objective of the paper is to seek clarification on the relationship between epistemic relativism and scepticism. It is not infrequent to come across contemporary discussions of epistemic relativism that rely upon aspects of scepticism and, vice versa, discussions of scepticism drawing upon aspects of relativism. Our goal is to highlight the difference(s) between them by illustrating (1) that some arguments thought to be against relativism are actually against scepticism, (2) that there are different ways of understanding the relationship between relativism and scepticism, and (3) that a commitment to either relativism or scepticism does not entail commitment to the other. The paper focuses upon the works of Peter Unger and Paul Boghossian to show how this terrain can be variously conceived and to illustrate that Boghossian's conception of the landscape is incorrect.

It is not uncommon to see contemporary philosophers who are engaged in epistemological discussions of our cognitive states, such as beliefs, treating scepticism and relativism as epistemic siblings. In *Varieties of Relativism*, for example, Rom Harré and Michael Krausz divide relativism into 'two broad flavours – the sceptical and the permissive' where the former states that there cannot be any true belief and the latter asserts that there are many mutually incompatible true beliefs. (Harré and Krausz 1996, p. 3) Or, to give another example, in *Farewell to Reason*, Paul Feyerabend describes epistemic relativism as the doctrine that, 'For every statement, theory, point of view believed (to be true) with good reasons *there exist* arguments showing a conflicting alternative to be at least as good, or even better', which, according to him, was the mainstay of the 'ancient sceptics to achieve mental and social peace'. (Feyerabend 1987, p. 76) In fact,

Feyerabend goes so far as to assert that a rejection of his version of epistemic relativism 'would require detailed empirical/conceptual/historical analyses none of which are found in the customary objections to scepticism and relativism.' (Feyerabend 1987, p. 77) Thus, on such readings, there is a close kinship between scepticism and relativism, and, yet, the question that forms the core of this paper is whether scepticism and relativism do actually belong to the same epistemic pedigree. Part of the interest in this question lies in the issue of whether a rejection or acceptance of one of these epistemological positions would correspondingly commit one to the rejection or acceptance of the other.

From an historical perspective, doubts about man's ability to attain knowledge have an ancestry that is conventionally traced back at least to Xenophanes in the sixth century BC. (Sedley 1989) Similarly, objections to sensory knowledge were formulated by Parmenides in the first part of the fifth century BC and soon afterwards by his followers Zeno of Elea and Melissus, and, with reservations, by the atomist Democritus. Yet, Pyrrho of Elis, living in the fourth and third centuries BC, is traditionally designated as the father of ancient scepticism as attested, for example, by Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: 'Pyrrho appears to us to have applied himself to Scepticism more thoroughly and more conspicuously than his predecessors.' (Bury 1933, pp. 5-7) Like Socrates, Pyrrho himself did not write anything, but became the symbolic figurehead for a new way of doing philosophy. (Annas and Barnes 1994, pp. ix-xv) He is reputed to have simply maintained that nothing can be known – without the subtlety of letting this thesis qualify itself – and, consistently, to have rejected all speculation about the world as it *really* is as a time-wasting source of anxiety. The latter claim especially has a direct impact on one's understanding of the relationship between scepticism and relativism that is going to be discussed shortly.

The point of this genealogical detour on scepticism is to highlight, contrary to Feyerabend's historical reconstruction of the ancient sceptics, a couple of crucial differences between scepticism and relativism. According to Sextus, the essence of Pyrrhonian or ancient scepticism is constituted by the 'ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement and afterwards to tranquillity.' (Annas and Barnes 1994, p. 4) In other words, the primary goal of scepticism is to *suspend judgement* and thereby to *refrain* from assigning truth or falsity to our cognitive states altogether. Sextus' description delineates a path that the sceptic systemati-

cally treads in each case from an opposition or conflict of opinions to epistemic suspension and finally to psychological freedom from disturbance.

On this model of scepticism, the Pyrrhonian odyssey starts when the sceptic is investigating some question or field of enquiry and finds that opinions conflict as to where the truth lies. The hope of the search, at least in the early stages of the sceptic's quest for enlightenment, is that tranquillity will be achieved if only one can discover the rights and wrongs of the matter and give assent to truth and thus avoid falsity.¹ The difficulty for the sceptic is that, in any matter, things appear differently to different people according to one or another of a variety of circumstances. But, conflicting appearances cannot be equally true and thereby equally real. Therefore, the sceptic needs a criterion of truth to ascertain what to accept and what to reject. It is at this juncture that the Pyrrhonian sceptic argues that there is no intellectually satisfactory criterion we can trust and use, and, hence, the sceptic is left with the conflicting appearances and the conflicting opinions based upon them, unable to find any objective and impartial reason to privilege one belief or opinion over another. Consequently, if the sceptic can neither accept them all, because they are in conflict with one another, nor make a choice between them for lack of an objectively reliable standard or criterion, he *cannot* accept any.

Now, compare this sceptical suspension of judgement to, for example, Harré and Krausz's characterisation of relativism: 'all points of view are equally privileged, all descriptions are true and all assessments of value are equally valid.' (Harré and Krausz 1996, p. 3) Here, there are two important contrasts between ancient scepticism and relativism that need to be noted. First, as indicated in this definition of relativism, the relativist has no hesitation in ascribing truth to mutually incompatible statements or beliefs; for relativists, truth is a matter of epistemic egalitarianism. In contradistinction, at the end of his *scepsis* or enquiry, the Pyrrhonian enquirer feels obliged to withhold judgement about truth. For the sceptic, when it comes to truth, the only option is to suspend judgement completely. Secondly, as Myles Burnyeat poignantly points out, the ancient sceptic's argument is in a very fundamental manner dependent upon the concept of truth, and no stage of the sceptical sequence from opposition to suspension and then ultimately to tranquillity would make sense without a substantial understanding of that notion. (Burnyeat 1989) Basically, when the sceptic doubts that anything is true, the absence of truth is set up against *real existence*. In other words, for the sceptic, statements that merely record how things

¹ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book I, Chapter VI.

appear are not in question; strictly speaking, they are not called true or false. Truth only applies to statements asserting that things are thus and so in reality. In the controversy between ancient sceptics and their opponents over whether any truth exists at all, as Burnyeat remarks, 'the issue is whether any proposition or class of propositions can be accepted as true of a real objective world as distinct from mere appearance.' (Burnyeat 1989, p. 25) It is indeed a fact of central importance that truth, in the sceptic's vocabulary, is closely tied to real existence as contrasted with appearance; whereas, for the relativist, truth is equally applicable to 'mere appearance'.

Thus, on the basis of these decisive disparities, it may not be amiss to say that it is rather simplistic, if not outright incorrect, to presume that there is a close connection between scepticism and relativism where one of them can be easily inferred from the other. Interestingly enough, it is not just in relation to ancient scepticism that we come across these divergences but also in the context of contemporary scepticism. Indeed, one can see the same type of concerns, claims and contrasts as in Pyrrhonian scepticism, albeit expressed and formulated differently, in present-day epistemological works such as Peter Unger's.

UNGER ON SCEPTICISM AND RELATIVISM

In a series of papers culminating with the publication of *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, Unger came into prominence as one of the most radical sceptical epistemologists of his generation. He lays out the core of his sceptical project as 'the thesis that no one ever *knows* anything about anything', and, like his Pyrrhonian predecessors' aim to achieve tranquillity, he endeavours to show that a consequence of this type of pervasive ignorance is that we can have no realistic emotional ties to anything: 'if nobody ever really knows anything, then nobody will ever be angry, or happy, or surprised about anything.' (Unger 1975, pp. 1 and 186) What is, however, more germane and significant for the topic of this paper is Unger's subsequent shift from scepticism to relativism in his *Philosophical Relativity* and how he attempts to chart the important differences between the two positions.

To set the scene for his defence of philosophical relativism, Unger states that there is 'an extremely pervasive' belief among philosophers according to which 'the traditional problems of philosophy have definite objective answers: It is not a matter of arbitrary convention what answer one is to give to these problems.' (Unger 1984, p. 3) Take, for example, the specific

problem of knowledge. Unger interestingly notes that both the majority, *viz.* the anti-sceptics, and the few sceptics, 'alike believe in an objectively right answer' (Unger 1984, p. 4), with the only difference being that, unlike the anti-sceptic, the sceptic believes that the right and objective answer is not epistemically accessible. Whereas, on the other side, we find relativists who believe that 'there really is no objective answer, neither positive nor negative'. (Unger 1984, p. 4) In other words, relativism not only stands opposed to the commonsensical view that there is a 'positive' answer to the question of knowledge but also to the 'negative' answer of scepticism. That is, relativism and scepticism do *not* belong to the same epistemic lineage. This characterisation of scepticism actually tallies well with the earlier discussion of Pyrrhonian scepticism maintaining that truth is legitimately applicable to real existence except that we do not possess reliable epistemic means to attain it. In contrast, on Unger's reading, the essence of relativism is captured by its abdication of truth *in toto* and the total abandonment of an objective reality.

The discord between scepticism and relativism, however, is not exhausted in terms of the respective parties' variance over the notion of truth. There is in fact a second crucial dissimilarity *vis-à-vis* the semantics of natural languages that decisively divides the two camps. To develop his case for philosophical relativity, Unger remarks that a key aspect of a philosophical problem may always depend on the meaning of, or on the semantic conditions of, certain linguistic expressions in terms of which the problem is formulated. Although there may be aspects of a given philosophical problem that are not undecidable, the existence of only one undecidable semantic aspect would be enough to lead to philosophical relativity in the particular case of that problem. In such a situation, Unger writes, if 'there is no objectively right answer as to how a certain expression should be interpreted' and 'no unique determinate meaning to be assigned', then one is committed to *semantic relativism* and thereby to the position that there is no objectively right answer to any philosophical problem including the problem of knowledge. (Unger 1984, p. 5)

To motivate his semantic relativism, Unger suggests that in discussions of language there are only a few components that one needs to lay out in the open: on the one hand, there are certain people making marks or sounds and, on the other, there are certain effects achieved on people as regards their conscious thoughts, their experiences, and, most importantly, their behaviour. Otherwise everything 'linguistic, in between, is an explanatory posit.' (Unger 1984, p. 6) By drawing on the presumed pervasive presence of vagueness in language that Unger calls the 'quagmire of vagueness, so

characteristic of our language' (Unger 1984, p. 43), he notes that where such linguistic explanatory *posits* are stipulated, observable and concrete phenomena are already left behind in the sense that for a given group of speakers there is really no single semantics that is the unique, objectively real semantics of that group. Rather, one may formulate various explanations of the people's production of effects on each other, where each formulation assigns a different semantics for the population under study.

Notwithstanding the propriety or otherwise of this linguistic analysis, what is pertinent to the discussion at hand is Unger's own observation that although relativism feeds on and relies upon semantic relativism, scepticism cannot comport comfortably with such a semantic thesis. For scepticism to be able to get off the ground, it has to reject the idea that 'there simply is no fact of the matter as to the (full) semantics of the relevant expressions' (Unger 1984, p. 10) and has to subscribe to the opposite position that Unger labels *semantic invariantism*. To see this commitment on the part of the sceptic, consider the overall structure of the sceptical strategy where the sceptic sets out some propositions, each of which fairly obviously conflicts with what one claims to know to be true. Now, if there happens to be any linguistic ambiguity and vagueness whatsoever in the propositions that the sceptic attempts to pit against some corresponding commonsensical ones, then the anti-sceptic will have ample opportunity to dismiss the sceptical challenge. Thus, if the sceptical strategy is to succeed, only an anti-relativistic semantics can give the sceptic, in Unger's words, 'the demanding conditions he wants for the key terms of his negative arguments.' (Unger 1984, p. 9) It is, therefore, not surprising to see Unger confirming that in the sceptical phase of his philosophical ruminations he had 'been an invariantist' (Unger 1984, p. 9), and his subsequent shift towards relativism had to be predicated upon semantic relativism.

To round off the discussion thus far, one may conclude that although there is a certain broad similarity between scepticism and relativism in that both hold that the truth-value of many things we say or express will be other than we ordinarily assume, there are significant dissimilarities between them. First, although sceptics are keen on undermining commonsensical claims to knowledge, they are averse to jettisoning the notion of truth and its application to real existence; whereas, for relativists, the notion of truth is a matter of arbitrary convention. Second, for the sceptical challenge to get a foothold against commonsense, meaning and semantic conditions have to be fully determinate, whereas, in contrast, relativism views meaning and semantic conditions merely as a matter of conventional stipulation. Yet, in some contemporary epistemological debates over relativism,

we come across discussions such as Paul Boghossian's where scepticism and relativism are run together as if they were, doctrinally, of a cognate nature.

BOGHOSSIAN'S DESCRIPTIONS OF RELATIVISM

In *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Boghossian's primary purpose is to provide an argument against epistemic relativism. The argument, in outline, attacks relativism by connecting it to constructivism and by showing the untenability of constructivism, hence rendering relativism *ipso facto* unsustainable. Two major problems exist within Boghossian's discussion. First, constructivism does not entail relativism. Second, and this is the real focus of this section, the argument conflates relativism and epistemological scepticism and does not thereby clearly articulate the relationship between these two different epistemic stances. The terrain, as conceived by Boghossian, will be sketched in this section to illustrate the conflation which occurs in his work, and particular passages will be analysed to illustrate precisely Boghossian's errors.

Boghossian connects relativism to constructivism by first defining 'postmodernist relativism' in terms of what he calls the doctrine of *Equal Validity*, i.e. 'There are many radically different, yet "equally valid" ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them' (Boghossian 2006, p. 2), and then tracing the origin of the doctrine to the rise of *social constructivism* in recent times. (Boghossian 2006, p. 6) He views contemporary relativism as having developed from constructivist commitments. As Boghossian states:

Ordinarily, to say that something is *constructed* is to say that it was not there simply to be *found* or discovered, but rather that it was *built*, brought into being by some person's intentional activity at a given point in time. And to say that it was *socially* constructed is to add that it was built by a society, by a group of people organized in a particular way, with particular values, interests and needs. (Boghossian 2006, p. 16)

It is a commonplace to see that a commitment to constructivism leads to a commitment to relativism. If a value, for example, is constructed within a particular context, then it is easy to conceive that particular value as pertinent, or true, only within that context. Importantly, the two positions are about very different issues. Constructivism is concerned with the source of origin, while relativism is concerned with the status of the judgement

in relation to other judgements concerning the same content. For example, an ethical constructivist denies moral realism and claims that moral values are constructed and not found. A moral relativist, on the other hand, claims that no matter the origin of moral values or judgements, individual moral judgements stand in a particular kind of relationship to other moral judgements; namely, moral judgements which contradict each other are equally valid.

However, it is not the case that a commitment to constructivism entails a commitment to relativism. Although the concern here is primarily epistemological, ethical theory provides an example of a commitment to constructivism paired with a rejection of relativism. In *What We Owe to Each Other*, T. M. Scanlon provides just such an account. (Scanlon 2000) Scanlon draws upon the contractualist tradition within morality to formulate a justification of moral obligation as objective and non-relativistic in nature. The idea is that we construct what obligations we have to others through the process of reasonable justification. The fact that the obligations are constructed does not make them relativistic. The process of establishing a fact as true does not necessarily affect the status of that fact as objectively true. The point here is not to trace out his theory or arguments, but instead to clearly articulate that a commitment to constructivism does not entail a commitment to relativism. Scanlon's argument, whether or not it is a satisfactory account of the source of normativity, simply provides one example of this distinction. Ultimately, constructivism does not entail relativism, a major problem for Boghossian's argument as he connects epistemic relativism to constructivism.

More centrally to the present project, the terrain surrounding relativism and scepticism, and the connections between these positions, need to be carefully articulated. A careful inspection illustrates that some arguments that are used against one are actually arguments against the other and, thus, do not actually strike the intended target. The terrain surrounding relativism and scepticism, for Boghossian, is not clearly articulated and must be drawn from the descriptions of and arguments against relativism. Boghossian's strategy is twofold. First, he connects constructivism to relativism, as previously argued, in a problematic manner. Second, he connects relativism and scepticism in a subtle way. His descriptions of relativism appear to entail a commitment to scepticism and his arguments against relativism are arguments against scepticism. Boghossian, thus, connects the two in such a way that an argument against scepticism is also an argument against relativism. The illegitimacy of Boghossian's conception and strategy is the focus of the following analysis.

The textual evidence for Boghossian's failure falls into two basic categories. The first category includes passages which are meant to be descriptions of relativism. These passages, however, are either actually descriptions of scepticism and not relativism or are at least consistent with scepticism. The second category includes passages that are meant to be arguments against relativism. However, these are also, either actually arguments against scepticism only, or at least arguments against scepticism as well as relativism. The analyses of these various passages comprise a cumulative case in support of the argument that Boghossian's proper target is scepticism and not relativism.

Although not all of the passages in the first category (descriptions of relativism) can be dealt with here, four primary examples illustrate Boghossian's failure to remain focused solely upon relativism, and show that his descriptions are at least partly descriptions of scepticism.

Passage 1.1 states:

However we end up construing rationality, notice that reasons for belief are *fallible*: one can have good reasons to believe something false. The evidence available to pre-Aristotelian Greeks made it rational for them to believe that earth was flat, even though as we may now be said to know, it is round.

As this example also shows, reasons are *defeasible*: one can have good reasons to believe something at one time and then, as a result of further information, cease to have good reasons to believe that same proposition at some later time. The pre-Aristotelian Greeks justifiably believed earth to be flat; we justifiably believe it to be round. (Boghossian 2006, p. 15)

The notions of fallibility and defeasibility as discussed here are clearly connected to scepticism. If one can have good reasons for believing something false, then the ability of those reasons to meet the standards for knowledge and not mere belief, whatever those standards turn out to be, is undercut. Ultimately, the notion of the fallibility of reasons for belief does not establish a relativistic picture of knowledge, but instead establishes a sceptical position denying the possibility of knowledge itself. The relativist would be committed to the claim that the pre-Aristotelian Greeks *possessed knowledge* that the earth was flat and that we *possess knowledge* that the earth is round. However, the fallibility of reasons does not establish such relativism, but rather establishes the sceptical claim that neither we nor the pre-Aristotelian Greeks possess knowledge, because the reasons providing the basis for belief are fallible and defeasible. It is not that one who accepts the fallibility and/or defeasibility of reasons is committed to scepticism, but rather that the view of reasons as fallible and defeasible is

consistent with a sceptical view of knowledge. Thus, the basic concepts employed by Boghossian, in his attempt to explain the contemporary commitment to relativism, are consistent with a commitment to scepticism.

Passage 1.2 states:

It is important to observe, however, that the fact-objectivist is not committed to *any* particular catalogue of mind-independent facts. All he is committed to is that there are *some* facts that obtain independently of us humans; he needn't claim, in addition, to *know* which facts those are. The fact-constructivist is not offering a different account of which facts obtain; nor is he claiming, as a radical skeptic might, that no one is in a position to *know* which facts obtain. The fact-constructivist need not disagree that the world contains facts about mountains, dinosaurs and electrons. (Boghossian 2006, pp. 25-26)

Boghossian here explains the fact-constructivist position in a way which suggests that it is inconsistent with scepticism. However, it is not. Boghossian is right in his characterisation of the fact-objectivist. Yet, the idea that the fact-objectivist need not claim to know which facts are objective does seem strange in the context of this discussion, given that the questions whether or not one can know these facts, and whether that knowledge is objective or relative in nature, are the central concern of Boghossian's book. Even if we agree that fact-constructivism entails a form of relativism, which it does not, we must nevertheless note that the sceptic also need not disagree that the world contains facts about mountains, dinosaurs and electrons. A sceptic can easily admit that there are such facts, but simply claim that we do not have access to those facts; that individuals lack the epistemic ability to grasp those facts in a way that grounds knowledge of such facts. Again, Boghossian is not eliminating the sceptic from the discussion, even when he explicitly claims to be. The first two passages in the first category of passages are thus consistent with descriptions of scepticism. The problems are worse for the second set of passages which are actually descriptions of scepticism and not relativism.

Passage 1.3 states that global relativism maintains that there can only be facts of the form 'According to a theory that we accept, there have been dinosaurs' and no facts of the form 'There have been dinosaurs' (Boghossian 2006, p. 54). At first glance, this statement does appear to be relativistic in nature due to the qualifier 'According to a theory we accept'. A fact is true relative to a particular theoretical point of view. However, look at what the qualifier actually achieves. The qualifier does not establish that we have knowledge once we accept a particular theoretical viewpoint, but instead the qualifier establishes doubt concerning any particular claim to

knowledge by stating that any fact is only a fact within a particular theoretical framework. The qualifier ultimately establishes the kind of doubt that the sceptic is committed to attempting to establish. Ultimately, the description here of the relativistic position is actually a description of the sceptical position, and of the sceptical method of establishing doubt in the possibility of knowledge by placing such qualifiers as ‘according to a theory we accept’ onto every claim concerning simple facts that we make. The sceptic’s goal is to create and foster doubt, and that is precisely what Boghossian is describing here. Thus, this passage is actually a description of scepticism and not relativism.

Passage 1.4, the final passage from the first category, states:

Between them, Observation, Deduction and Induction specify a significant portion, even if not the whole, of the *fundamental* principles of our ordinary, “post-Galilean” epistemic system. (The way of fixing beliefs that we call “science” is in large part a rigorous application of these ordinary, familiar principles.) By a “fundamental” principle, I mean a principle whose correctness cannot be derived from the correctness of other epistemic principles. (Boghossian 2006, p. 67)

This passage is probably the most important passage in illustrating how the positions of relativism and scepticism become conflated in Boghossian’s work. The passage entails that there is no justification possible for a fundamental principle. This is precisely the claim which a sceptic would endorse. Observation, Deduction, and Induction are the primary principles which we use in gaining knowledge. They are rightly called “fundamental principles” by Boghossian. Notice that the final sentence of the passage does not make any claim about the relativity of the truth of these fundamental principles, or the relativity of our knowledge of them. The issue being addressed here is the truth of these principles not relative to any theoretical point of view. Boghossian is here addressing not the relativist, but the sceptic who wants to instil doubt in the epistemic value of these fundamental principles. Boghossian’s focus, even at the level of description, constantly moves away from relativism and towards scepticism.

BOGHOSSIAN’S ARGUMENTS AGAINST RELATIVISM

The second category of passages are arguments Boghossian claims are against relativism but are actually either against both relativism and scepticism, or only replies to scepticism. Again, not all of the relevant passages

can be investigated, but we will look again at four examples. *Passage 2.1* states:

Every epistemic system will have a possible alternative that contradicts it. Take any such contradictory pair. If one of them is deemed to say something false, the other will have to be deemed to have said something true. Under those circumstances, it's hard to see how it could be right to say that there are no facts by virtue of which one epistemic system could be more correct than any other. (Boghossian 2006, p. 91)

This is an argument from polarity which is an argument against scepticism, not an argument against relativism. The argument is perfectly consistent with relativism since a fact could be true from one theoretical point of view and false from another. One need only look at various descriptions of the origin of the universe for a multitude of examples. Instead, the argument is attacking the sceptical claim that no fact can be determined to be true or false, to be known, from any point of view. Finally, consider the last sentence of the statement carefully. At first glance, the sentence appears to be a rejection of relativism, as it frames the discussion in terms of competing epistemic systems. However, even if there are facts by virtue of which one epistemic system is more correct, the issue is not the existence of those facts, but our having knowledge about those facts. The final sentence will do no good against either the relativist or the sceptic since the issue at hand is not the existence of facts, but the knowledge of those facts. Ultimately, the argument, in so far as it is even relevant to the issues at hand, is concerned with scepticism and not relativism.

Passage 2.2, in reference to a genuine dispute between competing epistemic systems, states:

All parties to this dispute should agree that each thinker is *blindly entitled* to his own epistemic system – each thinker is entitled to use the epistemic system he finds himself with, without first having to supply an antecedent justification for the claim that it is the correct system. Perhaps it is overdetermined that the relativist will agree with this. But it is worth emphasizing that even the objectivist must do so, on pain of a debilitating scepticism about epistemic justification: if no one is entitled to use an epistemic system without first justifying it, then no one could be entitled to use an epistemic system, for any attempt by the thinker to justify it will depend on his being entitled to use some epistemic system or other. (Boghossian 2006, p. 99)

The notion of blind entitlement is a response to the sceptic, not the relativist. Boghossian even admits that the relativist will agree to this notion, as one must ‘on pain of a debilitating scepticism.’ Boghossian here is

concerned not to respond to or even avoid relativism, but to avoid scepticism. Boghossian's point is about the ultimate justification of any particular epistemic system. The acceptance of blind entitlement is easily compatible with relativism, as Boghossian acknowledges, since individuals with incompatible epistemic systems will each be blindly entitled to their epistemic system. What the notion of blind entitlement does is to provide a foothold for epistemic justification that will allow one to begin building epistemic justification for particular claims to knowledge. Importantly, this does not say anything about the status of those particular claims, *e.g.*, whether they are objective or relative in nature. Thus, the argument here does not touch the claims of the relativist at all, but squarely addresses the sceptic only.

Passage 2.3 states:

Where does the pro-relativist argument go wrong? It goes wrong, it seems to me, in relying on an overly general application of Fumerton's claim about norm-circular arguments. Fumerton's claim², that we cannot hope to justify our principles through the use of those very principles, is not true in general; it is true only in the special, albeit important, case where we have *legitimately* come to doubt the correctness of our own principles. In the absence of legitimate reason to doubt them, though, we would be perfectly entitled to rely on them in justifying our system over theirs, just as we would be entitled to rely on them in reasoning about any other subject matter. However, once we have come legitimately to doubt them, it does seem hard to see what value there would be in using them to show that they pronounce themselves perfectly in order. (Boghossian 2006, p. 100)

Boghossian is here utilizing an anti-sceptical strategy, not a strategy that will work against the relativist. Notice that in the middle of the passage Boghossian addresses cases where individuals come to doubt the correctness of certain principles. The notion of doubt is a sceptical notion, not a relativistic one. One can be a relativist and have absolutely no doubts about the truth of the principles that one holds. The relativist is simply committed to a different notion of truth, *i.e.* truth relative to a system as opposed to truth outside of any system, and does not necessarily doubt the truth of any particular proposition. A cultural moral relativist, for example, may believe that morals are relative to the particular culture in which an individual lives. However, this individual can easily have no doubts about the truth of a moral principle within a particular context. If the cultural moral relativist is pressed to make a judgement concerning the truth of

² This is in reference to Fumerton 1995.

a moral principle outside of a cultural context, it is not the case that he now suddenly has doubts about the truth of the principle, instead the cultural moral relativist will think the question simply cannot be answered because the necessary tools for answering the question, *i.e.* the necessary cultural content and context, are lacking. Thus, Boghossian's strategy here is, again, not addressing the relativist at all, but instead the sceptical notion of doubt.

Passage 2.4 states, in reference to an encounter which would cause us to doubt the correctness of our own epistemic principles:

For this encounter to have the desired effect, this alternative epistemic system would clearly have to be a *real-life* epistemic system, with a proven track record, not just some theoretical possibility. Its *actual* achievements would have to be *impressive* enough to make us legitimately doubt the correctness of our own system. (Boghossian 2006, p. 101)

The passage makes the same mistake as the previous passage. Doubting the correctness of our own moral system does not move us towards relativism. It will either move one towards a rejection of one's currently held epistemic system and towards adopting some other system, or towards a sceptical position of doubting the possibility of any epistemic system being adequately justified. For a move to epistemic relativism to be motivated, the alternative epistemic system would have to not make us doubt the correctness of our own system, but would have to get us to doubt the *uniqueness* of our own system. The two competing epistemic systems must appear equally impressive, to use Boghossian's language.³ Doubting the correctness of an epistemic system is not a relativist position, but a sceptical one. Thus, Boghossian's reply is, again, focused on scepticism and not relativism.

The implications of this analysis of some parts of Boghossian's work concern both the adequacy of his own arguments as well as the larger picture concerning the discourses surrounding epistemic relativism and scepticism. First, Boghossian's argument is not as successful as it may first appear. Boghossian is not actually arguing against relativism when he claims to be, and he is not always describing relativism. His arguments and analyses are often actually about scepticism. Thus, the overall argu-

³ Fumerton's concerns are clearly relevant in the judgement between the two competing systems. However, that issue can be put aside presently as Boghossian is working as if the judgements concerning the achievements and impressiveness of various epistemic systems were possible, and whether or not they are actually possible is not of consequence to the present issue.

ment against relativism is not as fully developed as it may have appeared initially. Second, the way Boghossian envisions the terrain surrounding epistemic relativism is that there is a connection between relativism and scepticism such that if one can defeat scepticism one will defeat relativism. Although it has been argued here that this is not correct, this is a provocative view of the terrain surrounding these issues.

Next, this discussion has implications beyond Boghossian's work. Contrary to how Boghossian connects epistemic relativism and scepticism, one can be a relativist without being a skeptic. One need only consider the difference between being an ethical relativist and a moral skeptic for this to be clear. The ethical relativist does not doubt her beliefs in the way the moral skeptic does. The moral skeptic does not believe that any moral belief can be known. Ultimately, the moral skeptic must maintain a quietist position concerning moral questions. The relativist, on the other hand, is not forced to a quietist position as the moral relativist can be committed to knowing the truth concerning a moral question, relative to the relevant criteria of course. The difference is important as, for example, the cultural ethical relativist is able to assent to a proposition of the form 'I know that X is immoral in culture Y.' The moral skeptic cannot assent to any such proposition. Fundamentally, Boghossian is connecting relativism and scepticism in a way that implies that an argument against scepticism is also an argument against relativism. However, this connection is not legitimate. A commitment to relativism does not entail a commitment to scepticism. The separation of the two positions is very important for understanding the terrain and the relationships between various commitments. Although it might appear that there is a connection between the two positions, as it apparently does to Boghossian, upon closer investigation, as attested by the earlier discussions of Pyrrhonian and Ungerian scepticism, it becomes clear that a commitment to one does not entail a commitment to the other. The lesson here is that the terrain surrounding these commitments, and any connections between them, needs more careful attention and development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Annas, J., Barnes, J. (eds.), 1994, *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boghossian, P., 2006, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Burnyeat, M. F., 1989, "Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?", in M. Schofield *et al.* (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 20-53.
- Bury, R.G. (ed.), 1933, *Sextus Empiricus I*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Feyerabend, P., 1987, *Farewell to Reason*, London: Verso.
- Fumerton, R., 1995, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Harré, R., Krausz, M., 1996, *Varieties of Relativism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Scanlon, T.M., 2000, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Sedley, D., 1989, "The Protagonists", in M. Schofield *et al.* (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 1-19.
- Unger, P., 1975, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Unger, P., 1984, *Philosophical Relativity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.