

Review for „Boghossian, Bellarmine and Galileo: historical evidence for epistemic relativism“

1. Please characterise the submitted paper by checking the relevant box:

☐ Accepted with no revisions

☒ Accepted with minor revisions

☐ Accepted with major revisions

☐ Rejected with possible resubmission

☐ rejected

☐ The paper should not have been sent to referees, but rejected outright.

## 2. Comments

The paper is clearly written and well argued. It makes an interesting point about the role historical case studies play for Boghossian's anti-relativism and attacks his treatment of them. Though, to my mind, the paper is too strongly focused on Boghossian's specific argument, it is nevertheless of importance because Boghossian's book had much impact on the relativism debate. The following comments should further help to improve the paper. I suggest **acceptance with minor revisions**.

a) The authors bemoan that anti-relativists tend to focus on conceptual issues in the debate and that therefore a mismatch arises between these considerations and the „empirical impetus underlying many relativist positions“ (p. 2). They claim that „in order to take the full measure of what we regard as the most plausible versions of epistemic relativism, one must always keep in view both the conceptual issues and the considerations arising from a study of specific cases. There is a complex interplay between them, which we aim to bring out in this paper.“ (p. 3). They focus on Boghossian to make their point, but claim that „Our main conclusions could be easily extended to other recent anti-relativist approaches such as (Carter, 2016; Seidel, 2014).“ (Footnote 5).

Whereas the authors might be right with respect to Boghossian, I think they are wrong that their argument can „easily“ be extended to other accounts. Let's take Seidel's argument: Seidel, like Boghossian, discusses the Bellarmine-Galileo-dispute with respect to whether it provides an example of the thesis that there are fundamentally different epistemic systems. At the very beginning of his discussion he claims: „[...] sometimes it is claimed that the thesis is just an *empirical* claim. Though, of course, the thesis that there are fundamentally different epistemic systems is an empirical one – we obviously need empirical research in order to sustain the thesis –, it is misleading to suggest that it is *just* empirical.“ (Seidel 2014, 163). He argues that, of course, the thesis is an empirical one, but that there are also conceptual issues necessary to be clear about – namely, what exactly it means to say that an epistemic system is not just different but *fundamentally* different. In fact, if I understand Seidel right, he would wholeheartedly embrace the idea that there is „a complex interplay between

the conceptual issues and considerations arising from a study of specific cases“. The fact that, as the authors on p. 4, Footnote 6 note, Seidel also criticises Boghossian for his treatment of the Bellarmine-Galileo-dispute from a historical-empirical point of view (Seidel 2014, 174f. and Footnote 75) should the authors also make aware that they cannot lump his argument „easily“ together with the apriori anti-relativists they aim at. And since Seidel more than once in his book emphasizes his naturalistic stance, it should be no surprise that he cannot „easily“ be thought of as some kind of „a priori anti-relativist“. Surely, he cannot be treated as Boghossian, of which the authors claim the following: “As Boghossian sees the dialectic, historical evidence could not be relevant to assessing relativism. Thus, Boghossian feels safe to revert to the sort of approach which we believe cannot do full justice to the relativist’s position: that of focusing solely on the conceptual issues, while bracketing a posteriori historical considerations as irrelevant.” (p. 4f.). Seidel, in a debate with Kusch, himself made clear that his naturalistic stance of course implies that there might be historical examples that falsify his anti-relativism (see: <https://philosophie-indebate.de/2527/pro-und-contra-ist-der-epistemische-relativismus-ueberzeugend/>) and the fact that he refers to Quine – the champion of denying that there can be a clear separation of conceptual and empirical issues – at this point confirms my suspicion that Seidel should be fine with the claim of the authors that „the empirical details and the conceptual issues surrounding relativism cannot be cleanly separated“. (p. 5)

So, Boghossian might be an easy target for the author’s purpose but they should consider to differentiate more between his argument and the arguments of others. Just as many relativists (e.g. David Bloor) quite justified bemoan that absolutists tend to lump their position together with caricatures of the position, also those making a case for relativism should not lump together people from the other camp under one label of „a priori anti-relativist“ who is „focusing solely on the conceptual issues“ (p. 4). Seidel, as I understand it, will not accept such a narrow focus.

So either the authors should make clear, in which way their argument can be applied also to other authors – it doesn’t seem ‚easy‘ – or they should explicitly just restrict their argument to Boghossian.

b) The authors at many points suggest that Boghossian’s treatment of the historical episode is inadequate and too simplistic. They are surely correct in this judgment. But in all fairness to Boghossian (and absolutists), the authors should perhaps note that he takes up the example from Rorty, who probably can be counted among the relativist’s camp. As Boghossian himself is aware, Rorty is the relativist he is mostly concerned with in his book. I think it is important to make clear that the example stems from Rorty for the following reason: At some points of the paper, the authors’ argument leaves the impression that absolutists deny historical evidence whereas relativists take care about historical evidence. Under a) I tried to show that it is not true that absolutists deny the importance of historical evidence. But it is also not true that relativists by and large take care of the details of historical studies. To my mind, Rorty’s treatment of the Galileo-Bellarmino dispute is an example.

I suggest that the authors make clear that although, of course, Boghossian should be criticised for his sloppy use of historical details of the dispute, part of the reason for this sloppiness is the lack of detailed treatment of historical material by his original opponent – namely Rorty. It would be great, if Boghossian goes into more historical detail, but in case his original opponent is (nearly) as sloppy as he is, it is surely not as mandatory as sometimes suggested by the authors. In any case: The authors should be clear not to leave the impression that lack and sloppiness of historical detail of specific episodes is something that authors from the relativistic camp are somehow immune to. I know of many relativists mentioning historical episodes in the same sketchy manner (and worse) as Boghossian. Doing history of science adequately is not somehow intrinsically connected to relativistic philosophy – there are many relativists (and absolutists) having no clue about history of science.

c) The authors claim that „the underdetermination problem is most crucial for our analysis of the epistemic symmetry characterizing the Galileo/Bellarmino debate“ (Footnote 14).

Reading this, I was surprised that the authors do not go into much more detail *how* and *in which way* underdetermination plays a role. The reason is that discussion of ‚the‘ underdetermination problem is a key issue in the relativism-debate. And many authors – like, to name a few, Boghossian himself, Kitcher, Laudan, Seidel – have critically discussed underdetermination as support for relativism roughly in the following way: „Talk of ‚the‘ underdetermination thesis blurs many important distinctions to be made. Many relativists just claim that historical evidence supports ‚the‘ underdetermination thesis – but are not aware that they switch between different forms of the thesis back and forth.“

I am surprised that the authors do not say more here – especially since Boghossian himself discusses underdetermination in relation to relativism (and the major part of Seidel 2014, whom they quote, is about that issue). They should at least shortly make clear why they are not impressed by those arguments if „the underdetermination problem is most crucial for“ their analysis.

d) p. 24: „if anything happens in nature it is ipso facto true.“ A bit of nitpicking; the philosopher in me says ‚category mistake‘. Since facts cannot be true, but only descriptions of them, perhaps the authors should stick here to the metaphor of the ‚book of nature‘ in this formulation: „if anything is written in the Book of Nature, i.e. if it happens in nature, it is ipso facto true“.

e) The point in 4.1 is well argued by the authors. Nevertheless, I am not really sure about the conclusion. The authors write: „The relativistic conclusion to draw is that we have here a genuine case of Equal Validity, in the form of two equally valid procedures of adjudication which give rise to fundamentally different epistemic systems and which cannot be justified in a non-circular way.“ (p. 25). Let’s accept that the authors are right in this conclusion. They speak of a ‚relativistic conclusion‘ here, but do the authors also take the conclusion to imply relativism? I wonder because – as far as I see – relativism is a thesis about the *absence* of absolute norms (be they fundamental or adjudicating). That means that the absolutist just needs to show one case in which there are absolute norms. Of course, that might be impossible and it might also be the case that absolutists hitherto never delivered such a case. But nevertheless, it means that the authors by showing that the case of Bellarmine-Galilei is a case of Equal Validity – as we might grant – do not show that there might not be other cases. It seems to me that the absolutist can easily grant that there are cases of Equal Validity – who has ever thought otherwise? – but that he can go on to claim that not *all* cases are like this. And, so the absolutist’s argument goes, that is what the relativist needs to show.

In the end, the just mentioned point i) crucially depends on how exactly relativism is defined (the authors seem to have a different definition of relativism than the one just applied – this becomes clear at the end of the paper), and ii) tends to end in fruitless debates about who has the burden of proof. But perhaps the authors can make some notes about whether they think their conclusion is relativism (and how they define it).

f) p. 25: „Boghossian, if he wishes to hold on to his absolutism, would have to maintain that it is nevertheless somehow always objectively settled which procedure of adjudication is the correct one.“ This relates to my comment e). Does the absolutist really need to show that it is somehow *always* objectively settled? What happens if he can show that it is *sometimes* objectively settled? Wouldn’t that suffice to deny relativism? To me it seems the stakes for absolutism are high here: to my mind, the absolutist can well accept that *sometimes* it can be objectively settled which procedure of adjudication is correct and *sometimes* it cannot. (On p. 33, it seems, we get the hint of an answer by the authors, but I am not really sure, because I do not know whether the point about absolute epistemic principles there also applies to the adjudicating principles).

g) p. 26: „What is crucial in historical cases such as the Galileo/Bellarmino dispute is that an existing epistemic system is confronted with a fundamentally new situation. Galileo and Bellarmine, as we have emphasized, already have an epistemic system, including adjudicating principles, on which they more or less agree.“ I stumbled across this formulation. How can this formulation be reconciled with the claim that Bellarmine and Galileo have fundamentally different epistemic systems? The just quoted passage seems to explicitly claim the contrary: They seem to have more or less *the same* epistemic system but the situation, they are confronted with, is fundamentally different from the former situation. (On p. 29 the authors claim: „Once this is seen, it becomes hard to deny that different procedures of adjudication can, in cases such as these, give rise to fundamentally different systems. Even though Galileo and Bellarmine share their fundamental principles, and even their adjudication principles in general outline, there is a deep mismatch between them concerning what is to be counted as evidence for what, and thereby also concerning how to even approach the task of justifying certain claims.“ This helps a bit, but only a bit. Why do Galileo and Bellarmine now have ‚different procedures of adjudication‘, but shared principles of adjudication? And what exactly is the ‚deep mismatch‘ here? Is it a fundamental difference or not?)

[X ] My comments may anonymously be given to the author