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Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism

By Paul Boghossian

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[1] If only Boghossian's eminently reasonable book were required reading for every freshman considering entrance into the humanities—the next generation of lay-people would be saved from the uncomprehending repetition of relativist slogans, and future scholars would be kept from mounting baroque, ineffectual attempts at their defense. *Fear of Knowledge* is engaging, easy to read, and hard to dispute. It's a satisfying work for those in the choir who will enjoy seeing written on the page precisely what we would say to constructivists were we endowed with Boghossian's rhetorical elegance. And a great many in the po-mo congregation can expect the book sent to them as suggested reading by their more analytically minded colleagues. I've already ordered a few in an attempt to stave off inane conversations I would otherwise certainly face this holiday season.

[2] Boghossian begins by addressing a relativistic claim he calls *equal validity*, 'that there are many radically different yet "equally valid" ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them' (p. 2). As Boghossian surely realizes, this first gloss on things is not entirely helpful, as on one natural reading 'equal validity' is thoroughly unobjectionable. A player's knowledge of baseball is radically different from a sports statistician's, which is in turn quite different from a physicist's; but each way of knowing has its own kind of value or validity. Nevertheless, as the example Boghossian uses to illustrate his target thesis makes clear, asserting that *conflicting* theories are equally valid borders on incoherence. The Cheyenne River Sioux may be right that humans descended from 'Buffalo people' (p. 1) or the scientific community may be right that we instead evolved from non-human primates, but if validity is supposed to involve truth, these explanations can't both be valid and they can't both constitute items of knowledge. Because one cannot know something that isn't true those who retain their conviction in the traditional Sioux story just do not know the origins of our species. Happily, though, these conclusions needn't lead us into dogmatism, as they say nothing about how we should engage those Native Americans (along with the overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens) who continue to reject evolutionary theory. We can recognize the conceptual problems with alethic relativism without shouldering a duty to convince everyone of everything we know to be true.

[3] Bohossian's second opponent denies epistemic objectivity by arguing

that 'whether a belief is knowledge necessarily depends at least in part on the contingent social and material setting in which it is produced (or maintained)' (p. 6). Again, there is a reading on which this 'social dependence' thesis is true but trivial. Suppose that unbeknownst to you I have rigged a lottery machine to produce the very number that you chose on the advice of your astrologer. Then I know the winning number and you do not even if we are equally convinced of the outcome and our cognitive differences are entirely due to our divergent 'contingent' histories. (Had we been raised differently I might have trusted an astrologer and you might have fixed the event.) Nevertheless, as Boghossian's subsequent discussion indicates, contingency of this kind does nothing to show that there are no *objective criteria* that can be invoked to distinguish items of knowledge from those of our beliefs that just happen to be true. (Though, as Boghossian rather reluctantly acknowledges, the fact that philosophers have yet to agree on these criteria – despite doggedly pursuing them since Plato – constitutes a genuine source of concern.)

[4] Boghossian's real quarry here is the *epistemic relativist* who claims that a person may know a given proposition relative to the standards prevalent in one group and fail to know that same proposition relative to the standards of a distinct group where there is no principled (epistemic) way of choosing between them. (p. 73) Epistemic relativism of this stripe is said to emerge from the metaphysical view that knowledge is a 'social construction' (pp. 6–7 & 23–24) where the constructivist rejects at least one of the three basic tenants of the 'classical' picture of knowledge Boghossian sets out to defend: (1) At least some of the facts we know are not constituted by human minds and activities. (The fact that dinosaurs once roamed the Earth is offered as an example.) (2) The relation of support that holds between a body of evidence and some hypothesis that this evidence gives us reason to endorse does not depend on us for its existence. (3) We are capable of believing some things because we appreciate the evidence in their support and not for ulterior motives.

[5] Debates over the first thesis are metaphysical in nature. The fact that a given event constitutes an economic transaction depends, constitutively, on the social context in which it is embedded; but what about the fact that a particular rose is red, the fact that electrons have negative charge, or the fact (if it is a fact) that Pluto is not a planet? Boghossian considers and rejects an attempt by Nelson Goodman to answer these questions by deriving an all-encompassing constructivism from some fairly uncontroversial cases. A constellation is defined as a body of stars that we perceive as a recognizable unit—it is therefore analytic that its impression on us is what makes a group of stars into a constellation. Can we similarly define a molecule as a group of atoms that strikes us as unified? Can we define an atom as a collection of particles that gives rise to a similar experience? Boghossian responds by insisting that at some point the constructivist will have to posit an ontological *primitive* that is not defined in terms of our ways of perceiving or conceiving things. There must be some basic set of entities that we sort into one of several different possible sets of collections, or (to vary the metaphor) some expanse of raw material we cut into one of many different possible sets of elements.

'Perhaps it is just the space-time manifold, or a distribution of energy, or whatever. Still, must there not be some such basic stuff for this picture to make sense? And if there is, doesn't that put paid to a generalized description-dependence of facts?' (p. 35). Admittedly, our need to posit something basic runs deep, and Boghossian is right to insist that Goodman's 'cookie cutter' constructivism stops short of pure idealism. But isn't Goodman's view constructivist enough? One would have thought that the classical picture of knowledge that Boghossian wants to defend is still compromised if every object, substance, and property *except for one* must be constitutively characterized in terms of our thoughts and experiences.

[6] At any rate, there ought to be some way to resist Goodman's view that doesn't concede so much to it, and, to his credit, Boghossian has three additional arguments to offer. The last of these arguments is decidedly less successful than the others so I will begin by getting it out of the way. Given that the constructions of reality in which we are interested are supposed to be metaphysically contingent, Boghossian claims that we can expose constructivism to a reductio ad absurdum as follows:

(a) Since we have constructed the fact that P, P.

(b) And since it is possible that another community should have constructed the fact that not-P, then possibly not-P.

(c) So: It is possible that both P and not-P. (p. 40)

But, of course, there is no possible world at which both P and not-P. The law of non-contradiction is inviolable. (p. 40)

[7] Clearly, this argument suffers from an illegitimate broadening of the scope of the modal. I have two hands, but it is possible that I should have only one hand (as I might be involved in a horrible accident). It does not follow from the fact that I have two hands and could have one hand that (with the modal now taking wide scope) it is possible that I both have two hands and only one hand. Similarly, cookies are, in fact, delicious. But, one might argue, a cookie's deliciousness is 'constructed' (or, better still, *constituted*) by the wonderful way it tastes to us. Because the deliciousness of something just is its tasting good to humans – and because we don't have our tastes essentially – there is a possible world in which we have different tastes and cookies are not delicious. Still, though cookies are delicious and possibly not delicious, it is impossible that cookies both be delicious and not delicious. Indeed, if Boghossian's argument were sound it would impugn the constructivist account of constellations that he allows along with the theories of dinosaurs and electrons that he rejects. The argument is too general to be true.

[8] The first of Boghossian's remaining pair of arguments concerns the problematic nature of backward causation. How can we bring it about that dinosaurs roamed the Earth or that Pluto was or was not a planet? After all, didn't Pluto exist (with all its astrophysical properties) and the dinosaurs exist (with all of their locomotive characteristics) long before humans came onto the

scene? Changing the past in the way the constructivist imagines is, Boghossian suggests, impossible. (p. 38) The second problem Boghossian raises has to do with our conceptual competence. The word 'electron' was introduced into the lexicon in the course of elaborating modern chemistry and physics. Because of this, one gains a primary grasp of the concept that 'electron' expresses by familiarizing oneself with a substantive chunk of physical theory (though, as Burge and Putnam explain, those ignorant of science can attain a secondary – parasitic – handle on the concept by deferring to experts). Since the relevant theory of electrons doesn't say that our conceptual activities bring electrons into existence – and instead accounts for their behavior in terms of fields and forces – we must conclude that the constructivist hasn't absorbed enough physical science to understand 'electron' and so fails to adequately grasp the concept it expresses. As Quine might say, the constructivist who tries to offer a truly radical account of subatomic particles merely succeeds in changing the subject.

[9] These are, I think, two excellent arguments against rabid constructivism. They do, however, somewhat overstate the case for realism by leaving out the *reference-fixing* role that constructive (or, more accurately, *pragmatic*) considerations often play in science. (Boghossian gets around to Kuhn and the Duhem-Quine thesis in chapter 8, but his discussion there is overly dismissive.) In developing the theories that fix the extension of 'electron' or 'planet' we are often made to confront classificatory issues that are not directly resolved by our evidence. It is at this stage that considerations of elegance, simplicity and (to some extent) popular sentiment can enter the fray. For instance, scientists in the IAU had to vote on whether 'planet' should pick out all of the objects that orbit the sun and are large enough to have become round due to the force of their own gravity, or whether, in addition, a celestial body must 'dominate' its own neighborhood to be included in this class. As it turned out, the more restrictive definition was selected, and, in consequence, Pluto is not (nor was it ever) a planet. Of course, neither one of the proposed definitions is forced on us by the evidence, and we could have adopted either one without hindering our substantive scientific pursuits. (No epistemic disaster would have rocked the halls of astronomy had the lovers of Pluto won the day.) We must therefore allow as much constructivism as follows from the admission that Pluto's failure to be included within the extension of 'planet' was in part determined by how the scientists in the IAU voted, where these scientists were not *rationally compelled* to vote as they did. (It may be hard to imagine a similar vote on the definition of 'electron' but there are long running debates in biology about which of several different definitions ought to be given for 'species'.) Nevertheless, as Boghossian's arguments indicate, the candidate definitions proposed for making the *content* of 'planet' more precise were all entirely focused on the non-psychological properties of celestial bodies (such as their gravitational effects); importantly, none of these definitions says anything about how different bodies are conceived of by us. Thus, so long as there were entities with the requisite physical properties orbiting stars before the existence of humans, planets existed before we did. Nothing good can come of confusing the semantics of theoretical terms with physics or astronomy.

[10] The remainder of Boghossian's book is devoted to a refutation of relativistic epistemology. There are, Boghosssian argues, a handful of basic epistemic principles. These include the following:

(Observation) For any observational proposition p, if it visually seems to S that p and circumstantial conditions D obtain, then S is prima facie justified in believing p.

(Deduction) If S is justified in believing p and p fairly obviously entails q, then S is justified in believing q.

(Induction) If S has often enough observed that an event of type A has been followed by an event of type B, then S is justified in believing that all events of type A will be followed by events of type B. (pp. 64–67)

'Observation, Deduction and Induction,' are then said to 'specify a significant portion, if not the whole, of the fundamental principles of our ordinary 'post-Galilean' epistemic system . . . ,' where, 'By a "fundamental" principle,' Boghossian intends to denote, 'a principle whose correctness cannot be derived from the correctness of other epistemic principles' (p. 67). Now one might quibble with Boghossian's claim that science is 'in large part' the rigorous (tacit) application of these claims about justification; and one might argue that paradoxes of one sort or another – such as the liar, the lottery, and the preface – show that these claims cannot be true in full generality even when they assume the extraordinarily hedged form in which they are given. But Boghossian is surely warranted in setting these worries to the side so that he can discuss questions of equal if not greater importance. Might there be equally 'valid' *alternative* sets of principles? Might there exist principles that issue competing verdicts on the justification of our core beliefs where there are no objectively compelling reasons that we (as defenders of the post-Galilean system) can invoke to ground our particular allegiance? Boghossian's central concern here – a worry he has worked over in a fascinating series of prior publications – is that any attempt to defend our adherence to these basic principles will illegitimately utilize (or assume the truth of) the very principles we are trying to defend. (p. 77)

[11] The discussion that follows begins with a sophisticated treatment of alethic relativism, though, at this point in the dialectic, Boghossian's concern is that our basic epistemic principles (rather than, e.g., claims about dinosaurs) might be true relative to one perspective and untrue relative to another. If we build the relativization to different standards into the principles themselves (adopting what one might call a 'relational' account of epistemic principles) we won't be able to endorse them in an unrelativized form. For example, instead of judging that my possession of E justifies my belief in H while acknowledging alternative epistemic perspectives from which it doesn't, I will be relegated to judging that E justifies my belief in H relative to the standards we've been assuming while also judging that E fails to justify belief in H relative to alternative standards. In consequence, I will no longer be able to endorse a proposition because I take it

to be *simply* justified by my possession of the evidence. (p. 86) But if he doesn't build his parameters into the principles themselves, the relativist will have to treat epistemic principles as 'incomplete propositions' that are not simply true or false, but true relative to certain standards and false relative to others. Against the view that results, Boghossian claims that an incomplete principle is no more fit for belief than the semantic value of 'Tom is taller than'. (p. 88) Thus, on either way of fleshing out the view, a form of epistemic nihilism rather than relativism will result.

[12] Of course, to argue against the possibility that our core epistemic principles might have a merely relative truth is not to provide a positive reason for endorsing those principles. Perhaps (on pain of skepticism) we cannot help adhering to Observation, Deduction and Induction and thinking of them as simply true. But mightn't there exist distinct beings that can't help regarding their conflicting principles as absolutely true? And mightn't we find that neither side in the dispute is capable of supplying 'objective' reasons to sway the other? Boghossian's response is equal parts Moore and Davidson. After claiming that we have a 'blind entitlement' to our principles (p. 99) he argues that we have never actually encountered a society with radically different epistemic norms. (Secular and religious thinkers are said to agree on the basic principles, as their differences are not sufficiently 'general' to supply a test case.) Moreover, facts about translation, interpretation and the meaning-constituting inferential roles of logical expressions suggest that such an encounter may be impossible. Boghossian's treatment of these incredibly subtle issues admirably distills three decades worth of scholarship into a few well-constructed pages. (Interested readers can look to the works cited in Boghossian's bibliography to fill in the back-story.) His conclusions are spot on.

[13] In the end, then, I think that both those tempted by constructivism and relativism and those repelled by these doctrines will find a lot to chew on in this deceptively slim volume. *Fear of Knowledge* shows exactly how difficult it is to argue against our most elemental metaphysical assumptions and the most basic aspects of our epistemic practices. And, in the course of laying out the terrain that the enemies of reason must cross, it provides the friends of reason with a better view of the citadel they have sworn to defend.