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REVIEW ESSAY

A Very Bad Argument

Gabriel Stolzenberg

Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 135 pp., £15.99/€25.30/\$24.95. ISBN 0-19928-718-X.

This slim book by the philosopher, Paul Boghossian, is a many-pronged attack on relativism and constructivism, especially social constructivism, as seen from an objectivist perspective that he attempts to justify by appeals to logic and common sense. He wishes to defend the privileged status of science against those who hold that all belief systems are 'equally valid'. There is a wealth of interesting material. I recommend especially the criticism of Wittgenstein on the logic of the Azande and of Richard Rorty on the dispute between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine. They remind us not to be too quick to conclude that two belief systems are incommensurable. Other philosophers whose seemingly constructivist or relativist views are criticized include Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam on the description-dependence of facts, Thomas Kuhn on incommensurability in science, and Pierre Duhem on the underdetermination of theory by evidence.

Doubts about the Success of the Project

Although Boghossian seems confident that he has refuted relativism and constructivism, I don't see that he has refuted either. Indeed, most of his attacks are directed against the wrong targets. This is a predictable consequence of his tacit assumption that he can learn how things appear from another perspective merely by observing, from his own perspective, how they appear to appear from the other one. For example, although relativism is no less concerned with meaning than with truth, Boghossian's relativism is almost exclusively concerned with truth. There also are serious problems with the exposition. Several important arguments employ expressions borrowed from ordinary language whose technical meanings, apparently invented by Boghossian, are not revealed.¹ Yet he treats them as if they were crystal clear. In mathematics, we call this 'proof by intimidation'. Also, although Boghossian attaches great importance to whether an argument

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would have been valid even if there had never been people, he pays little attention to whether his own arguments meet this standard.

All this is worrisome, as is much else. However, in this review, I can offer no better rationale for my doubts about the success of the project than the following critiques of fragments of some of the arguments – critiques that are directed no less at the quality of the reasoning than at the intelligibility, accuracy, and relevance of the claims.

Are Relativists Deniers or Agnostics?

According to Boghossian, social constructivists are, or at least should be, relativists. And relativists are deniers: for example, they deny that justification can be objective or that belief can be rational. Some even deny that there are objective truths. Why would anyone wish to deny these things? Boghossian attributes it to a fear of having to acknowledge certain unpleasant truths. Maybe. But is it true that relativists are deniers? Except for one brief remark that he then ignores,² Boghossian does not allow for the possibility that some, maybe all, relativists are not deniers but agnostics, who neither deny nor believe in the existence of objective truths and justifications. However, he does offer what he takes to be proofs of their existence and, in each case, if the reasoning were correct, which I argue below it is not, mastering it would convert agnostics to believers. But, because it is not correct and denial is at best an unsupported claim, the idea that relativists are not deniers but agnostics would appear to have its virtues.

But What Exactly is an Objective Truth?

Boghossian does not say but he does tell us that anything objective is mind-independent, where, for him, a mind-independent truth is one that would be true even if there had never been people. This too has its problems. Does Boghossian really wish to define ‘mind-independent’ truth in terms of our ordinary use of the word ‘truth’? Apparently he does. He also seems to think that if a dinosaur injured its tail, this is a mind-independent truth, but if I break my leg, it is not. Notwithstanding such problems, for want of any better option I will read Boghossian’s arguments for the existence of objective truths as if they were about mind-independent ones. I also define a mind-dependent truth to be one that is not mind-independent – that is to say, a truth that would not have been true if there had never been people.

Are there Mind-independent Truths?

By ‘relativism about truth’, Boghossian means the claim that all truths are mind-dependent. The argument he offers to refute it is a variation on a two-part traditional one, the second part of which should have been put to sleep a long time ago. The first part is the trivial observation that relativism about truth is not mind-independently true, from which it follows that, to refute it, it suffices to show that it also is not mind-dependently true. This is the business

of the second part of the argument. However, it is not clear that it is needed. True, relativism about truth has not been refuted. But shouldn't an objectivist be satisfied with knowing that it is not a mind-independent truth? Opinions vary. Boghossian is not satisfied with knowing this but his colleague, Thomas Nagel, whose formulation of the traditional argument he quotes with approval,³ seems to be of two minds. He first attempts to complete a refutation by claiming without proof that if relativism about truth were mind-dependently true, it would not rule out the claim that it is mind-independently false. How Nagel can see this as a refutation, I have no idea. But it doesn't matter. Because a mind-dependent truth is true and a mind-independent falsehood is false, Nagel's claim is not merely unproven but false. This attempt at a refutation completes the second part of his argument.

At least, it should. Yet having just completed what he thinks is a proof that relativism about truth is not a mind-dependent truth, instead of declaring victory and going home, Nagel says, in effect, 'There may be relativists who present relativism about truth as a mind-dependent truth. But it does not call for a reply, since it is a report of what the relativist finds it agreeable to say.' But isn't Nagel's belief that he has proved that relativism about truth is not a mind-dependent truth a much better reason for him not to reply?

An Infinite Regress of Abbreviations?

Exit Nagel and enter Boghossian, who parts company with him on how and whether to continue the argument. He ignores Nagel's attempt to complete a refutation and is agnostic about the value of mind-dependent truth. But his own attempt at a refutation is even stranger and no more successful. According to Boghossian, for a relativist, every statement is merely an abbreviation of the statement that a certain theory implies it. But, then, the latter statement is merely an abbreviation of the statement that a certain theory, not necessarily the first one, implies it. And so on, generating an infinite regress of abbreviations but no statements.

This is nonsense. For a relativist, a statement is no more an abbreviation of a statement that a certain theory implies it than the false statement, $1 = 0$, is an abbreviation of the true statement that the theory that $1 = 0$ implies it.⁴ Boghossian seems to have failed to distinguish between asserting a statement that follows from another one and asserting that it follows from the other one. Although I have no idea why, he also thinks that an infinite regress for relativism of the kind that he mistakenly believes he has discovered can be used to prove the existence of mind-independent truths. But, because he has not shown that there is such a regress, the existence of mind-independent truths remains unproved and I remain agnostic.

Are There Mind-independent Justifications?

Relativism about justification says that the answer is no. Boghossian apparently believes that he can refute this by refuting a relativism about knowledge of which it is a corollary.⁵ In his words, he believes that, because there are

'decisive objections' to relativism about knowledge, '[i]t would seem, then, that we have no option but to think that there are absolute, practice-independent facts about what beliefs it would be most reasonable to have under fixed evidential conditions' (p. 110).

But why does he believe that we have no option? One possible explanation is that, once he thought he had refuted relativism about knowledge, he took for granted that he had thereby refuted every corollary of it – in particular, relativism about justification. But not every corollary of a false statement is false. So, I remain agnostic.

Can Analytic Philosophy Justify the Privileged Status of Science?

When I recall the heroic but futile efforts of early analytic philosophers to objectivize mathematics, I am inclined to see Boghossian's project as an attempt to do something even more ambitious. I see an analytic philosopher, constrained by the dogmas of his discipline, especially about rational belief change, seeking to trivialize the mind–world relationship by discovering, or if necessary creating, an objective basis for validating the belief that science is a better way to arrive at reasonable beliefs about matters of fact than any radically different way. In his introduction, he expresses his concern in the following way.

We defer to the deliverances of science. [We take it] to be the only good way to arrive at reasonable beliefs about what is true, at least in the realm of the purely factual. For this sort of deference to science to be right, [it] had better not be the case that there are many other, radically different yet equally valid ways of knowing the world. [For] if science wasn't privileged, we might well have to accord as much credibility to archeology as to Zuni creationism, as much credibility to evolution as to Christian creationism. (p. 4)

We defer to the deliverances of the scientific community, not science.⁶ Furthermore, there is no need to assume that science, as Boghossian understands it, is the only good way to arrive at reasonable beliefs about the 'purely factual' world. It may be the only good way that we know but that is a different matter. Finally, if the scientific community was to find Zuni creationism as credible as archeology and Christian creationism as credible as evolution, it would behoove Boghossian to defer to its judgment that these belief systems are, in effect, scientific. For him to treat such a possibility, however remote, as something that 'had better not be the case' makes me wonder whether his professed deference to the 'deliverances of science' is trumped by his commitment to certain dogmas of analytic philosophy about the nature of rationality.

Explanations of Belief Acquisition: How Not to Criticize the Strong Programme

It is doubtful that all belief can be treated symmetrically with respect to truth. Some propositions are so obvious that it would be difficult to

explain belief in them in terms of the very same causes that explain belief in their negations. (p. 116)

This comment appears in Boghossian's critique of David Bloor's strong programme in the sociology of knowledge.⁷ He doubts that one can always be neutral with respect to the truth or falsity of a belief when explaining why it is believed. He attempts to validate this doubt by contrasting the perception that red looks more like orange than like blue, which he says is virtually universal, with a hypothetical minority perception that red is closer to blue.⁸ Boghossian expects us to find it obvious that the allegedly virtually universal perception is the recognition of an objective truth and the other a manifestation of some kind of color blindness. But if, by selective breeding, the current minority view were to become virtually universal and the majority view marginal, would Boghossian then say that the view he now claims to be the perception of an objective truth is actually a kind of color blindness and what he now declares to be a kind of color-blindness is the perception of an objective truth?

Although Boghossian does not explain how introducing his objectivist non-symmetric explanation helps to illustrate his doubts about the possibility of a symmetric one, he seems to believe that, once we have seen it, we will agree that, in this case, 'a stance of neutrality about the truth or falsity of the belief would yield, in all likelihood, an incorrect explanation of its genesis.' But if we disregard his talk about the perception of an objective truth versus color blindness, we can see immediately that the difference between the two perceptions reflects only variations in the physiology of our color vision. It is in terms of these variations in the physiology that we would expect to construct a symmetric explanation of how each perception was acquired. Truth and falsity have nothing to do with it.

Can We Grasp Mind-independent Justifications?

Boghossian is confident that we can. His optimism seems to originate in the thought that the only reason we may be unable to understand a mind-independent justification is that it is too long or too complicated, not, say, that we lack access to concepts needed to grasp it. Inexplicably, he treats this thought as if it implies that, if we are willing to settle for intelligible mind-independent justifications that are 'rough approximations' to possibly unintelligible ones, 'it seems hardly to need any defense'. But his use of the expression 'a rough approximation', which carries the burden of his reasoning, is a shameless case of proof by intimidation. Although it is his own invention, he never reveals what it means, much less how he is able to produce such 'approximations' of the kind he requires for his argument. Nor, for that matter, does he explain how, if a statement is unintelligible, he can tell that it is a mind-independent justification. He continues:

Whenever we confidently judge that some belief is justified on the basis of a given piece of information, we are tacitly assuming that such facts not

only are knowable but that they are known ... Indeed, what would be the interest of an absolutism about [epistemic truths] which combined that absolutism with the affirmation that those absolute truths are necessarily inaccessible to us? (p. 76)

What does confidence have to do with it? Or tacit assumptions? Surely, Boghossian does not mean to suggest that the greater our confidence that we know something, the more likely it is that we do; nor that we can successfully defend the assumption that a justification is mind-independent merely by pointing to the continuum of similar assumptions that we unthinkingly make and live by. But, if he does not mean to suggest these things, what more charitable reading is there of what he says?

Is Mathematics Objective?

Even though nearly all mathematicians have intuitions of theorems as truths about an objective realm and proofs as objective justifications of them, they have pretty much given up trying to make good sense of this. Although Boghossian says nothing about mathematics, if, as it seems, he believes his intuitions help him to recognize objective justifications, what better candidates are there on which to test these intuitions than mathematical proofs? Yet, having failed to make sense of their own intuitions about them, the mathematical community has fallen back upon the idea of pure mathematics as a collection of meaningless formal systems,⁹ a seemingly defeatist idea that has turned out to be immensely fruitful. I regret that Boghossian did not begin his book by testing his ideas on pure mathematics.

Others May See It Differently

Although these critiques address only a small part of the story, in my view, they suffice to cast doubt on the success of Boghossian's attacks on relativism and constructivism. Others may see it differently but, to this reviewer, it seems that Professor Boghossian has greatly underestimated the difficulty of his task.¹⁰

Notes

1. For example, notice the italicized words (italics added) in the following: 'In the absence of any *legitimate* reason to doubt [our principles], we would be perfectly *entitled* to rely on them in justifying our system over theirs' (p. 100). Because Boghossian fails to reveal his criteria for legitimacy and entitlement, he might as well be talking to himself.
2. Boghossian says that a relativism that does not challenge objectivism may be 'true relative to a theory that it pays for us all to accept, relativists and non-relativists alike' (p. 54).
3. Nagel (1997: 15). Boghossian is confident that, although he uses a relative/objective dichotomy for *truths* and Nagel employs a subjective/objective one for *statements*, they mean the same thing by 'objective truth'.
4. However, Boghossian's hero, Alan Sokal, does create an infinite regress of abbreviations. In an attempt to be epistemologically scrupulous, he declares that whenever he makes a factual statement, *S*, he really means, "There is a vast body of

extremely convincing and diverse evidence in support of S^* (Sokal, 1998: n. 22). But if S is factual, so is what he says he means by it, which creates an infinite regress but no statement. Thus, if Sokal is as good as his word, he can no longer make factual statements.

5. The alleged refutation is long and often lacking in precision but here I am concerned only with a simple point of logic.
6. Science doesn't make deliverances; it doesn't *do* anything. Conflating science with the scientific community is a case of what I mean by trivializing the mind-world relationship.
7. David Bloor's (1991 [1976]): 3–23) statement of the strong programme provides an incisive critique of Boghossian's (2005) criticism of it.
8. However, we have no reason to think that the minority perception is any less obvious to the minority than the majority one is to the majority.
9. Note that, because the truth of a statement depends on what it means, if there are no meanings, there are no truths.
10. A perceptive colleague makes the excellent point that much of my criticism of this book also applies to my review of it. Some of my statements lack adequate justification. Others have none at all. Furthermore, some of the most interesting and important questions are not even mentioned. For a first step towards correcting these and other imperfections, see my comments both about the book and my review of it at <http://math.bu.edu/people/nk/rr/>.

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