Fear of Knowledge of Relativism and Constructivism

A continuation of ‘A very bad argument,’ my debunking review of Paul Boghossian’s ‘Fear of knowledge: against constructivism and relativism’ (Oxford 2005)

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1. Can a mind grasp a mind-independent justification?

Boghossian believes that it 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, Boghossian treats this thought as if it implies that, if we restrict our attention to 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 tells us what it means. So, here too, he is talking only to himself.
Finally, crucial questions, like how we can ever recognize that an unintelligible statement is a mind-independent justification, are not addressed. 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? (76)

In this remark, Boghossian seems to be trying to defend his claim, by first restricting it to “rough approximations” and then likening it to the tacit assumptions we confidently make to the effect that certain mind-independent truths of this kind not only are knowable but known. What does confidence have to do with it? Or tacit assumptions? Or affirmations? Or interest? 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 some belief is a mind-independent justification merely by pointing to the continuum of other assumptions of this kind 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? Does the following remark, which he makes at the end of his case against relativism about truth, provide a clue?

Once we see that there is no general philosophical obstacle to acknowledging mind-independent facts, we also see that we have been given no reason for supposing that those facts aren’t just the ones we always took them to be—facts about dinosaurs, giraffes, mountains and so forth. (57)

True. But we also have been given no reason to suppose that, if there are mind-independent facts, they are just the ones Boghossian says he always took them to be.

2. Explanations of belief acquisition.

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.

Does Boghossian not understand that the negation of a belief that he finds obvious need be no less obvious to a person who believes it? For example, many of the beliefs that Boghossian
finds obvious, I find blatantly false. The comment quoted above is from his critique of David Bloor’s strong programme in the sociology of knowledge. 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. 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.

Boghossian expects us to find it obvious that the allegedly virtually universal perception is the recognition of an objective truth about how colors compare and the other is 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.

**The truth about truth.** Indeed, it seems that the truth of a belief is never needed to explain what causes people to believe it. A good fake would serve just as well. If, after seeing only one side of my sheep, you conclude that it is white, the fact that it truly is a white sheep is not needed to explain what convinces you of this. A sheep that is white only on the side you see would serve just as well. More generally, it seems that evidence that helps to convince us that a statement is true is always consistent with it being false, which suggests that its truth is not needed to explain what makes us believe it.
The truth about evidence. Although Boghossian finds Bloor’s talk about the same kind of causes unintelligible, he thinks he understands it well enough to use it to criticize the strong programme. To this end, he writes,

One way to explain both true and false beliefs through the same kind of cause is to explain each of them evidentialy. The only way to ensure that both rational and irrational beliefs are explained through the same kind of cause is to explain both of them non-evidentially. But there is not even a semi-plausible case to be made for it.

If, as the first sentence implies, Boghossian considers all beliefs about evidence, even false ones, to be evidential, then, because both rational and irrational beliefs can be explained in part by an appeal to beliefs about evidence, his second sentence is false. Also, contrary to what he implies, the question is not whether evidence can play a causal role but whether it must. For truth, I indicated above why I think that the answer is no. For evidence, we can reason as follows.

If we never need to appeal to the truth of a belief to help explain why we believe it, then we never need to appeal to the truth of a belief that something is evidence for another belief to help explain why we believe it. But those who insist on the need to appeal to evidence to help explain why we believe something seem to think
that helping to induce the belief that it is evidence is the only role it is needed to play. Therefore, if they are right, then if evidence is not needed for this role, it is not needed at all.

**The truth about rationality.** Also, unless one is committed to the objectivist notion of rationality that informs analytic philosophy, there is nothing special about a causal explanation of rational or irrational belief acquisition. An appeal to evidence is not needed to explain any case of belief acquisition. But Boghossian is committed to the objectivist notion of rationality and hence, unsurprisingly, he is extremely critical of the strong programme symmetry principle according to which explanations of belief fixation are indifferent as to whether a belief is rational or irrational. For example, he writes,

> We need to be able to make a distinction between a belief that is to be commended for being appropriately grounded in a consideration which justifies it, versus one that is to be criticized as merely grounded in prejudice. But as John Dupré has rightly pointed out, that sort of distinction would be rendered impossible by a symmetry principle about rationality.

Dupré is right. However, the symmetry principle for rationality is a methodological principle for research in the sociology of scientific knowledge, nothing more. It has nothing to say about how we should conduct ourselves outside of it. If Boghossian and Dupré feel a need to make a distinction of the kind Boghossian
mentions, they do not need permission from the strong programme or anyone else.