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Introduction: Epistemic Relativism

VERSIONS OF EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

This issue of *Episteme* is devoted to the topic of epistemic relativism. It includes a symposium on Paul Boghossian's treatment of epistemic relativism in chapters 5 through 7 of his new book, *Fear of Knowledge* (2006). The symposium centers on Boghossian's argument against epistemic relativism in chapter 6 of that book. In their contributions to the symposium, Gideon Rosen and Ram Neta offer criticisms of Boghossian's argument, and Neta argues for a version of epistemic relativism. In addition to the symposium, Jonathan Weinberg, Michael Williams, and Roger White supply stand-alone articles on related topics. The purpose of this introduction is to situate epistemic relativism in the constellation of relativist views, to distinguish several forms of epistemic relativism, and to remark briefly on how the versions of relativism discussed in the articles in this issue fit these forms of relativism.

Among the many forms of relativism, the most familiar is relativism about truth, sometimes called *alethic*, *semantic*, or *Protagorean* relativism – the view that there are no absolute truths; there are only truths relative to ascribers of truth. Alethic relativism is often traced to Protagoras, who said that "man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."[1] The view is traditionally motivated by the observation that things seem one way to one person and a contrary way to another person, together with the claim that, although for at least one of these contrary ways, it must be true that things are that way, nothing makes it true that things are one way rather than the other; hence, for each of these ways, it is true that things are that way, albeit relative to the subject to whom it seems so. Protagorean relativism was attacked in Plato's *Theaetetus* (according to the standard interpretation of that dialogue) on the ground that a fully general version of relativism about truth is self-refuting.[2] Such a general version of relativism about truth has also been attacked on the ground that it precludes any particular truth-values of propositions, even relative truth-values.[3] These criticisms are avoided if relativism about truth is restricted to a small enough proper subset of the universal class of propositions. The alethic relativist might hope to capture what was wanted from a fully general relativism in such a restricted relativism. For this purpose, an alethic relativism restricted to truths about justified belief seems most promising. The motivation for alethic relativism – that things seem contrary ways to different people, and nothing makes it true that things are one way rather than the other – is more persuasive for things to do with justification than for things in general. What is best

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motivated, then, is not that there are no absolute truths at all but that there are no absolute truths about justification. We may call this restricted alethic relativism *alethic epistemic relativism*.

Remarks similar to those we have just made about alethic relativism may be made about relativism about facts, or *metaphysical* relativism.[4] This may be formulated as the view that there are no facts, or (what may be the same thing) no absolute facts; so there are no (absolute) facts to make propositions absolutely true; there are at most truths relative to truth-ascribers.[5] The reasons given above for restricting alethic relativism to propositions about justification are equally reasons for restricting metaphysical relativism to (absolute) facts about justification – a view we may call *metaphysical epistemic relativism*. To a first approximation, this is the view that there are no (absolute) facts about justification, hence no absolute truths about justification; there are at most truths relative to ascribers of justification. Boghossian (2006) considers a variant of this view, which he calls "epistemic relativism." I will follow his usage here. The view is the target of our symposium and of Weinberg's article. (The articles by Williams and White treat a related view, to which I will turn subsequently.)

Boghossian defines epistemic relativism this way:

A. There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (Epistemic non-absolutism)
B. If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form "E justifies belief B" as expressing the claim *E justifies belief B* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B*. (Epistemic relationism)
C. There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic pluralism) (Boghossian 2006, 73)

Epistemic non-absolutism (A) is the doctrine that there are no absolute facts about justificatory relations between *particular* information and *particular* beliefs. Epistemic relationism (B) allows the epistemic relativist to maintain that there are nevertheless truths – indeed, absolute truths – about such justificatory relations, by putting a non-obvious interpretation on ascriptions of particular justificatory relations. Such ascriptions are said to have a content that allows them to be absolutely true despite not being made true by any absolute facts that such particular justificatory relations obtain. Epistemic pluralism (C) extends the denial that there are absolute facts about particular justificatory relations (A) to a denial that there are absolute facts about the correctness of epistemic systems or norms (where among the facts about correctness denied is that an epistemic system is made absolutely true by an absolute epistemic fact). This doctrine is needed to prevent epistemic relationism from conflicting with epistemic non-absolutism. It precludes epistemic relationism from entailing that some ascriptions of particular justificatory relations are made absolutely true by absolute facts because the epistemic systems to which they refer according to epistemic relationism are correct (in the sense of being made absolutely true by an absolute fact).

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Epistemic relationism explains how ascriptions of particular justificatory relations could be absolutely true, despite epistemic non-absolutism. It does so by claiming that ascriptions of particular justificatory relations are made absolutely true by *nonepistemic* absolute facts. For ascriptions of particular justificatory relations are, in a non-obvious way, relational. Epistemic relationism does *not* say that ascriptions of particular justificatory relations ascribe a relation between a belief and the *believer's* epistemic system. The view is not to be confused with a coherence theory of justification, on which a belief is justified in virtue of a relation of coherence with the believer's other beliefs. Nor is it to be confused with a perspectivalist theory of justification, on which a belief is justified in virtue of the relation of conforming to the epistemic norms accepted by the believer. On these theories, ascriptions of particular justificatory relations are made absolutely true or false by absolute facts that justificatory relations obtain (more precisely, by absolute facts that a belief coheres with the believer's other beliefs or conforms to the believer's norms). This is inconsistent with epistemic non-absolutism. Rather, on epistemic relationism ascriptions of particular justificatory relations are made absolutely true by absolute facts that are not facts that such relations obtain but rather facts that the ascriptions conform to the norms the ascriber accepts. More exactly, on epistemic relationism, an ascription of particular justificatory relations is indexical. It does not say that a belief is justified but that according to the epistemic system the ascriber accepts, a belief is justified. Given a context of ascription, "E justifies belief B" is made absolutely true, not by the absolute epistemic fact that E justifies belief B, but by the absolute nonepistemic fact that according to the ascriber's epistemic system, E justifies belief B. Compare: given a context of ascription, "Today is Tuesday" is made absolutely true, not by the absolute fact that today is Tuesday (for today might not be Tuesday, and "Today" might not refer to today), but by the absolute fact that the day on which the sentence was uttered was Tuesday. Thus, epistemic relationism allows that ascriptions of particular justificatory relations in context have absolute truth values determined by absolute facts in the way that indexical ascriptions in context have absolute truth values determined by absolute facts. In this way, epistemic relationism explains how there can be absolute truths affirming particular justificatory relations even though there are no absolute facts that such relations obtain.

OBJECTIONS TO EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

I will skip discussion here of arguments for epistemic relativism and instead offer some preparation for our symposium by reporting briefly two of Boghossian's objections to epistemic relativism in Chapter 6 of *Fear of Knowledge*, the focus of the contributions by Rosen and Neta.

The first of the objections purports to show that epistemic *relationism* is incoherent. According to this objection, the epistemic relationist says that we should not make particular epistemic judgments understood as ascriptions of particular justificatory relations we intend to be made true by absolute facts that such relations obtain; instead we should make judgments about what is entailed by the epistemic systems we happen

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to accept. But we cannot consistently make the latter judgments while refraining from the former judgments on the ground that there are no absolute epistemic facts: "Given that propositions which make up epistemic systems are just very general propositions about what absolutely justifies what, it makes no sense to insist that we abandon making absolute *particular* judgments about what justifies what while allowing us to *accept* absolute *general* judgments about what justifies what" (2006, 87). The absolute general judgments are as absolutely false as the absolute particular judgments, since there are no absolute general epistemic facts any more than there are absolute particular epistemic facts. So we cannot consistently embrace the absolute general judgments while rejecting the absolute particular judgments as false. Thus, epistemic relationism is incoherent.

Boghossian considers a reply to this objection: the epistemic relationist treats the particular epistemic propositions not as false but as *incomplete*: the relationist renders the sentence "Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations" as "In relation to epistemic system C, Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations," where C is a system of incomplete general judgments (2006, 88). But Boghossian responds that this reply does not save epistemic relationism from incoherence. We can no more believe an incomplete particular or general epistemic proposition than we can believe a proposition we believe to be false. And there is no entailment relation between incomplete propositions. In his contribution to our symposium, Gideon Rosen objects to Boghossian's response on the ground that there is a way to make sense of an entailment between incomplete propositions. And Ram Neta, in his contribution to the symposium, argues that there must be a way to make sense of the epistemic relationist proposal to render the particular epistemic proposition as meaning "According to THIS epistemic system, Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations." For we make sense of the proposition that sentence S is grammatical, and we mean by this "According to THIS grammatical system, S is grammatical."

Boghossian's second point against epistemic relativism involves considering whether the epistemic relativist can treat an epistemic system as a set of imperatives rather than a set of incomplete propositions and in this way avoid the preceding objection to epistemic relationism (2006, 91–93). Boghossian argues that we cannot treat an epistemic system as a set of imperatives. For imperatives cannot capture propositions about justification. This is because justification is a form of permission, and imperatives cannot capture propositions about permission. Moreover, we have no notion of what it would be for a set of imperatives to be epistemic rather than moral or pragmatic. Finally, an imperatival interpretation of an epistemic system is incompatible with relativization to a system. For on epistemic relativism, an imperatival system must command us to believe a proposition given that we are to believe the proposition. But this captures only an imperative given a psychological condition; it does not capture the normativity of epistemic judgments. Rosen defends an imperatival interpretation of an epistemic system from these points, and Boghossian replies to his defense.

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MODERATE EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

In his article in this issue, "Moderate Epistemic Relativism and Our Epistemic Goals," Jonathan Weinberg defends a view that he calls *Moderate Epistemic Relativism* (MER). Weinberg defines the view by two conditions. One is a "*demographic* condition": epistemic evaluation is relative to groups of people, identified by culture, gender, educational background, religion, profession, socioeconomic status, language, and the like. The other is an *unresolvability* condition, according to which some disagreements over epistemic evaluations "cannot be resolved rationally, but only defused or perhaps battled out politically." Despite the fact that unresolvability is merely rational unresolvability and not alethic unresolvability or epistemic non-absolutism, Weinberg makes it clear that he intends MER to include not only the demographic and unresolvability conditions, but epistemic non-absolutism (A) as well. MER is then a version of epistemic non-absolutism that adds only these two conditions. It falls short of a *radical* epistemic relativism in rejecting the claim that no set of epistemic norms has more epistemic value than others. (The relation of this radical epistemic relativist claim to Boghossian's epistemic pluralism (C) is obscure, since it is not clear that the epistemic pluralist claim that no set of norms is more correct than any other includes not only the alethic relativist claim that sets of norms do not differ in absolute truth value, but also the epistemological claim that no set of norms has more epistemic value than others.) The interest of MER, then, is that it is a version of epistemic non-absolutism that denies the radical epistemic relativist claim of parity in epistemic value among sets of norms.[6]

Given his ambition to combine epistemic non-absolutism with the denial of parity in epistemic value among sets of norms, Weinberg undertakes to show that his unresolvability condition does not entail the parity claim. He argues that sets of norms across groups may be unresolvable even though some are better than others in virtue of better serving our epistemic goals. A set of norms employed by a group may serve epistemic goals well or poorly. Moreover, however well or poorly a set of norms may serve epistemic goals, it may contribute positively to the eventual choice of a good set of norms, by figuring in a historical development of norms in which competing sets of norms are contrasted for their effectiveness in serving epistemic goals and the better sets of norms are chosen. In this way, the unresolvability condition is shown consistent with differences in the epistemic value of sets of norms. MER therefore allows us to accept non-absolutism while denying parity in the epistemic value of sets of norms.[7]

EPISTEMIC SUBJECTIVISM

I turn now from the target of the symposium and of Weinberg's article, epistemic relativism, to that of Michael Williams's and Roger White's articles. They focus, not on epistemic relativism, but on a closely related view that White calls *epistemic subjectivism*. The latter view does not entail epistemic non-absolutism or epistemic relationism. Rather, it allows that there are absolute epistemic truths made so by

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absolute epistemic facts. First, it does not deny that one set of norms among contrary sets of norms is made absolutely true by absolute epistemic facts, while the others are made absolutely false by absolute epistemic facts. Second, it maintains that a particular belief is justified when it conforms to the subject's own system of epistemic norms. Epistemic subjectivism allows, if it does not entail, that it is absolutely true that a belief is justified when the belief conforms to the subject's norms. Despite not denying that some sets of norms are absolutely true and sets of norms contrary to these are absolutely false, epistemic subjectivism holds that no competing set of norms is rationally superior to another. It holds this at least in the sense that a subject's belief is justified if it merely conforms to the norms the subject accepts, whether or not those norms are absolutely true. There is a sense in which on epistemic subjectivism disputes as to whether a particular belief is justified, and as to whether a set of norms is correct for a given subject, are not rationally resolvable: they are trivially resolved. A dispute as to whether a particular belief is justified is resolved by asking whether the belief conforms to the norms of the believer. A dispute as to whether a set of norms is correct for a subject, in the sense of a dispute as to whether a belief of the subject that conforms to the norms is justified, is resolved by asking whether the subject accepts those norms. Both Williams and White in effect object to epistemic subjectivism on the ground that it only trivially resolves such disputes. The objection assumes that the resolution of disputes about the justification of particular beliefs and the correctness of norms should not be trivial in this way.

In his contribution to this issue, Williams defines epistemic subjectivism (which he calls "epistemic relativism") to include these components:

> *System-dependence*. A belief's epistemic status (as justified or not) is not an intrinsic property but depends on the believer's epistemic system. This is a logical (or semantic or perhaps metaphysical) claim. It is a claim about what we mean, or ought to mean, when we say that a belief is justified.
> *System-variability*. Epistemic systems vary from culture to culture or within single cultures from one historical epoch to another. This is an empirical claim.
> *System-equality*. No epistemic system is superior to another. This is a normative claim. (Williams, this issue, 93)

System-dependence is the view that a belief is justified in virtue of its relation to the *believer's* epistemic system – specifically, the relation of conformity to the norms of the system. System-dependence obviously neither entails nor is entailed by epistemic non-absolutism or epistemic relationism. System-equality more closely resembles the claim of parity of the epistemic value of sets of norms in Weinberg's account of radical epistemic relativism than it resembles epistemic pluralism in Boghossian's account of epistemic relativism. One kind of system-equality follows from the perspectivalist version of system-dependence: if, as a perspectivist theory has it, a belief is justified merely in virtue of conforming to the believer's norms whatever they may be, then in this sense all systems have equal epistemic status.

Epistemic relativism and epistemic subjectivism differ on whether absolute truths about particular justificatory relations are made true by absolute facts that such

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relations obtain, but does this difference matter? It matters for at least two reasons. First, Boghossian's arguments against epistemic relativism clearly have no traction against epistemic subjectivism. For these arguments attack epistemic relationism; but epistemic subjectivism does not entail epistemic relationism. Second, the objection that epistemic subjectivism trivializes the resolution of disputes about justification does not apply to epistemic relativism. The objection is that epistemic subjectivism makes the resolution of disputes as to whether beliefs are justified or norms are correct trivial because it entails that a belief is justified if it merely conforms to the subject's norms, or because it entails that norms are correct (in the sense that a belief is justified when it conforms to the norms) if the subject merely accepts them. Epistemic relativism does not succumb to this objection, since it doesn't have these entailments.[8]

The burden of Williams's article is to distinguish his own contextualism about justification (Williams 1996) from epistemic subjectivism. He argues that contextualism offers a fundamentally different response to a standard epistemic circularity argument for epistemic subjectivism. In his article, White considers a case for epistemic subjectivism based on instrumentalism, internalism, and epistemic conservatism. By instrumentalism, a norm is epistemically correct only if it has an appropriate connection to true belief. But by internalism, what matters for the correctness of a norm is not that it in fact reliably leads us to true beliefs, but that it leads to true beliefs according to the justified judgment of the subject. By conservatism, I am prima facie justified in the beliefs I have unless they conflict with one another, and I may rely on them justifiedly to judge how best to reason to true beliefs. Since I am justified in my beliefs as to how best to reason to true beliefs, I am also justified in the beliefs that result from such reasoning and the beliefs that conform to the norms that are correct according to my justified judgment. These positions thus converge on epistemic subjectivism. Despite this case for epistemic subjectivism, White resists epistemic subjectivism on the ground that it makes what we are justified in believing arbitrary: we turn out to be justified in our beliefs simply because we happen to hold them. White's objection to arbitrariness spells out what is troubling about the way epistemic subjectivism trivializes the resolution of disputes about justification.

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NOTES

1 This is alleged to be the first sentence of Protagoras's book *Truth*. The interpretation of Protagoras as an alethic relativist is disputed (Burnyeat 1976; Broadie 2003, 80–84).

2 Plato (1973, 161c-171d). This standard interpretation has been disputed (Burnyeat 1976).

3 For an introductory presentation of alethic relativism, doubts about the charge of self-refutation, and a case that alethic relativism fails to fix any particular truth-values of propositions, see Schmitt (1995, ch. 2). Boghossian (2006, ch. 4) makes essentially the same points about self-refutation and the fixing of truth-values (albeit for relativism about facts rather than truth). See Hales (1997) for another defense of relativism from the charge of self-refutation. For prosecution of the charge of self-refutation (albeit against epistemological relativism), see Siegel (2004).

4 The difference between metaphysical and alethic absolutism is significant if a true proposition that *p* is not made true by the fact that *p*. This happens on a deflationist account of truth and on a metaphysics that denies the existence of facts. But I do not think that the difference between metaphysical and alethic relativism is important for the discussions in this issue.

5 Boghossian speaks of "absolute facts," but he does not make clear whether he means by this nothing more than facts, so that there are no non-absolute facts. I see no reason why he needs absolute facts that are other than mere facts, but to accommodate the possibility of a distinction of this sort, I leave it up in the air here whether there are any non-absolute facts. I take epistemic non-absolutism and epistemic relationism together to entail that there are no absolute epistemic truths made true by absolute epistemic facts.

6 I note that Weinberg's view is not vulnerable to Boghossian's objection to epistemic relationism (B), since it does not affirm epistemic relationism. By the same token, it provides no explanation of just what epistemic non-absolutism amounts to.

7 Can Weinberg support MER by appeal to the argument for epistemic relativism from epistemic circularity entertained by Boghossian (2006, ch. 5)? That argument assumes (in the epistemic circularity case for premise (2)) that no system has more justification than any alternative. But is that assumption consistent with MER's allowance that some systems have more epistemic value than others? That depends on the relation between justification and epistemic value. In any event, Weinberg supports MER by appeal to examples of unresolvable norms of explanation, rather than by the epistemic circularity argument.

8 It is worth noting that epistemic subjectivism is not supported by exactly the epistemic circularity argument for epistemic relativism entertained by Boghossian (2006, ch. 5). For the third step in that argument claims that there are no epistemic facts. But epistemic subjectivism leaves open that there are epistemic facts. Moreover, a typical epistemic subjectivism will maintain that the second premise of the argument is false: it is possible to arrive at justified beliefs about what the absolute epistemic facts are, by arriving at justified beliefs about whether given beliefs conform to the believer's norms. So Boghossian's epistemic circularity argument for epistemic relativism does not support epistemic subjectivism. Despite this, there is a parallel argument for epistemic subjectivism from epistemic circularity. The argument proceeds: believers can be justified in their epistemic

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beliefs; they can be so justified by an epistemically circular justification; yet they can be justified by an epistemically circular justification only if epistemic subjectivism is true. Williams considers and ultimately rejects a parallel argument of this sort. The argument Williams considers differs from the one Boghossian considers in two respects. Williams's argument does not assume that a system cannot be justified in an epistemically circular way, only that any system is as justified or as unjustified as any other by epistemically circular justification. And Williams's argument assumes that we are justified in accepting our standards by (and not merely only by) epistemically circular justification if at all, while Boghossian's argument assumes only that we are justified in accepting our standards only by epistemically circular justification if at all.

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