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Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism Is Not Relativism[1]

ABSTRACT

This article distinguishes Wittgensteinian contextualism from epistemic relativism. The latter involves the view that a belief's status as justified depends on the believer's epistemic system, as well as the view that no system is superior to another. It emerges from the thought that we must rely, circularly, on our epistemic system to determine whether any belief is justified. Contextualism, by contrast, emerges from the thought that we need not answer a skeptical challenge to a belief unless there is good reason to doubt the belief; so we need not rely on our epistemic system to determine whether a belief is justified. Accordingly contextualism is not committed to the view that a belief's status depends on the believer's epistemic system, nor to the view that no system is superior to another. The contextualist is not committed to epistemic relativism.

1. I have long defended a conception of justification that, following David Annis, I call "contextualist".[2] Central to this conception – which in my version owes a good deal to Wittgenstein – is the idea that standards of justification are subject to significant circumstantial variation, hence in some sense neither "absolute" nor "invariant." Now everyone agrees that justification is in some respects relative to circumstances: for example, whether I am justified in accepting a hypothesis can depend on the evidence at my disposal. But according to some critics, my version of contextualism goes farther than that: by implying that epistemic standards are "less than fully objective," it amounts to a kind of epistemic relativism.[3] But while I agree that, in a sense, justification is not "absolute," I deny that this contextualist view amounts to epistemic relativism. On the contrary, contextualism is the cure for all skeptical temptations, relativism included. Or rather, it is the cure for all skeptical temptations *that ought to matter to us*.

My argument will proceed in four stages. First I shall explain what I understand by epistemic relativism. Then, glancing back at classical foundationalism, I shall isolate a notion of absolute justification, teasing out the conception of objective epistemic standards that it implies. With this notion of absolute justification in hand, and drawing on Wittgenstein's notes in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969)[4] I shall sketch the contextualist alternative, highlighting the ways in which it departs from the foundationalist's "absolute" and "objective" conception. Finally, I shall argue that my denial that justification is "absolute" or "objective", in the senses indicated, entails no objectionably relativistic consequences. Rather, what is often taken for relativism, on

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the part of writers like Wittgenstein or myself, is really something else: not pessimism about objective knowledge but a certain skepticism about the pretensions of traditional epistemology.

2. I am going to take epistemic relativism to be relativism about (epistemic) justification.[5] So even when, for variety of expression, I speak of knowledge, my primary interest will be in justification. Further, though relativism can take individualist forms ("justified for me"), the cultural version is what seems to be popular today. Accordingly, I shall be primarily concerned with epistemic relativism as a form of cultural relativism, though what I have to say goes for epistemic relativism in all its forms.

Using the phrase "epistemic system" in a very broad sense to refer to the assemblage of principles and procedures that a given society or culture (allegedly) relies on, explicitly or implicitly, in distinguishing justified from unjustified beliefs, we can characterize epistemic relativism in terms of three theses:

> *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.

Clearly, epistemic relativism is a notably skeptical doctrine. Indeed, if we really came to think that our own epistemic system was not better than any alternatives, it is not clear that we could continue to think of our beliefs as justified *even by our own lights*. Relativism has a tendency to collapse into skepticism.

Examples of cultural variation in epistemic procedures are not hard to come up with. Many cultures have consulted oracles to foretell the future; we don't. Some culures take tribal myths and traditions, or literal readings of sacred texts, to be the last word on the origins of the tribe and even the world; we tend to approach such issues scientifically. But although such examples lend colour to the idea of epistemic relativism, at bottom relativism is not an empirical thesis. The relativist's crucial normative claim cannot be established simply by pointing to differences of opinion, even if the differences concern how to form one's opinions. The fundamental argument for epistemic relativism is a variant of one of the oldest forms of skeptical argument: the *diallelos* or "wheel". The argument aims to show that epistemic systems cannot be defended in a non-circular way.

> *Fundamental argument for epistemic relativism.* In determining whether a belief – any belief – is justified, we always rely, implicitly or explicitly, on an epistemic system: some standards or procedures that separate justified from unjustified

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> convictions. But what about the claims embodied in the system itself: are they justifiable? In answering this question, we inevitably apply our own epistemic system. So, assuming that our system is coherent and does not undermine itself, the best that we can hope for is a justification that is epistemically circular, employing our epistemic system in support of itself. Since this procedure can be followed by anyone, whatever his epistemic system, all such systems, provided they are coherent, are equally defensible (or indefensible).

Variations on this theme are common in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. As a particular application of one of the Five Modes of Agrippa – the Mode of Circularity – the wheel is intimately connected with what we think of as the regress problem. Tracing the connections illuminates how the argument for relativism treats epistemic systems.

Suppose that someone (call him "the claimant") makes a claim, P, in such a way that he represents himself as knowing P to be true: a challenger can ask him *how* he knows. After all, we might think, if someone represents himself as knowing something, rather than *merely* believing it, he invites the question, which therefore cannot reasonably be refused. However, if the claimant accepts the challenge, he must give his reason for believing that P, citing evidence for P or other grounds for supposing P to be true. In so doing, he enters a new claim, Q, and the question will arise as to whether Q is something that he knows (or justifiably believes). But since anything he says in support of Q may itself be challenged, requiring a further supporting claim we seem to have opened up a vicious regress of reasons for reasons for reasons, and so on without end.

In practical terms, the danger of getting trapped in an infinite regress is remote. When challenged to justify a claim, we all run out of things to say *very quickly*. In some cases, this may lead the claimant to wonder whether the belief expressed by his claim is as well founded as he supposed. But if he continues to think of it as well founded, this will be because in giving backup for backup, etc., he eventually comes upon some claim, B, that he takes himself to *just know* to be true. Maybe, in some cases, his initial claim strikes him this way, so that he refuses to respond even to the first challenge. But at whatever point, if the claimant simply refuse to respond to a challenge, the challenger (now revealed as the skeptic) will say that the claimant is just *making an assumption*.

In all likelihood, since the claimant thinks that the belief expressed by his initial claim is justified, he will repudiate the charge of making a mere assumption. Granted, he may say, he cannot give *specific reasons* for thinking B to be true. But he can still defend B's epistemic credentials by saying something like "I can see that B" or "I remember vividly that B" or "I read that B only this morning" or that "Everyone knows that B" or "It stands to reason that B." That is, he will cite some relevant *source of knowledge* (or justified belief): perception, memory, expert opinion, the *consensus gentium*, or elementary logical insight. Such a source, he implies, is authoritative: information derived from it is definitely *to be trusted*. In this way, the claimant reveals his commitment to a *source principle*.

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To treat a source as authoritative is to take it be reliable, or at least not wildly unreliable. What justifies this? Some sources may be derivative: I may be able to justify relying on them by citing evidence that is itself legitimated by more fundamental sources. Perhaps I have found that following Ordnance Survey maps is a very good way of getting around Britain, from which I conclude that such maps are a highly reliable source of information. But obviously this can't go on for ever. At some point – and again, almost certainly rather quickly – I am going to get down to one or more *fundamental* source. But by definition, once we get down to fundamental sources, there is nowhere else to go. Accordingly, *fundamental sources can be validated only by employing them*: i.e. circularly. So if different cultures recognize different epistemic systems, in the sense of different sets of fundamental source principles, there is no way to argue that one system is superior to another. This is how we find ourselves on the wheel. The argument can be given a relativist spin or a skeptical spin. It is the same argument either way. At bottom, it exploits *Agrippa's Trilemma*, the thought that any attempt to justify a belief must end in one of three unsatisfactory ways: a vicious regress, a brute assumption, or circular reasoning.

3. The problem of justification is to halt the regress without getting stuck on the wheel. By far the most popular approach to this problem has been to develop some foundational theory of justification. But traditional foundationalism has another motive: to articulate the fundamental epistemic framework within which all significant disputes can, in principle, be rationally resolved. Foundationalism connects the *problem of justification* with what we can call the *problem of method*. This connection will prove worth looking into.

Foundational theories of justification postulate basic beliefs. Different kinds of basic beliefs correspond to different source principles. Non-basic beliefs depend for their justification on the evidence provided by basic beliefs, so foundational theories also recognize a range of distribution principles, which transmit positive epistemic status from basic to non-basic beliefs.

By definition, basic beliefs do not depend for their justification on further evidence. It is natural to think that there must be *something* to this thought. There must be some distinction between inferential and non-inferential justification: for example, between *concluding* that something is so and *seeing* that it is. However, there is a lot more to traditional foundationalism than respect for this commonsense distinction.[6] Foundationalists hold that certain beliefs (or perhaps some more primitive cognitive states or episodes, such as perceptual experiences) constitute *ultimate* sources of justification. On this approach, beliefs will not be truly basic unless they are justified independently of whatever else we happen to believe, if anything. Basic beliefs must therefore constitute an autonomous class or stratum of justified beliefs. This *independence condition* is a serious constraint on how we think about justification (and indeed much else besides). For example, suppose that we could not have any beliefs *at all*, unless we had lots of other beliefs. If this were so, though we might have beliefs that were in some sense non-inferential, those beliefs would not be basic. The

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independence condition excludes semantic as well as epistemic holism.

Today, many philosophers are *externalists* about justification. They hold that beliefs count as justified if they are *in fact* the products of some reliable process (i.e. a process that tends to produce a preponderance of true beliefs). To be justified, beliefs need not be known or even believed to be such products. For externalists, I can know things without knowing that I know them: animal knowledge is generally thought to be like this. By tracing justification to the fact of reliability, externalism offers a way off the wheel. However, traditional foundationalism respects internalist intuitions. Every traditional foundationalist accepts at least the following constraint:

> *Weak Internalism.* If for all you know (or have reason to believe) your epistemic system is wildly unreliable, then relying on that system to form or evaluate beliefs does not yield beliefs that are justified.

Combining weak internalism with the independence condition further constrains basic beliefs: not only must such beliefs not presuppose any further beliefs, they must not depend for their credibility on *general empirical facts*. Obviously, basic beliefs can't derive their credibility from *beliefs* about reliability: that would make them inferential. But weak internalism also precludes their deriving their credibility straight from the reliability-facts themselves.

According to traditional foundationalism, then, basic beliefs are *intrinsically* credible. They don't depend for their credibility on anything. Their credibility is *absolute*. Some forms of foundationalism are *strong*, insisting that basic beliefs are indubitable or incorrigible. This is absolute justification in its most uncompromising form. Other forms of foundationalism are modest: while always *prima facie* justified, basic beliefs can sometimes be rejected down the line (though never wholesale). But whether the credibility of basic beliefs is total or only *prima facie*, it is always *intrinsic*. This is the idea of absolute justification that I reject.

The idea of intrinsic credibility is problematic. If it cannot be clarified, foundationalism's escape from the regress is a case of explanation *obscurum per obscurius*. Further, it seems obvious that most of our beliefs are not intrinsically credible. Basic beliefs must be beliefs of some very special kind. How are such kinds to be identified? Now it may seem that explaining intrinsic credibility – identifying the sources of basic beliefs – threatens to put the foundationalist back on the wheel. Though the matter is delicate, it can be argued that this need not be so. Basic beliefs are not credible because they belong to certain kinds. Rather, the character of the kinds is determined – thus the source of intrinsic credibility identified – is by examining examples of beliefs that clearly have the right kind of epistemic status. In Chisholm's terms, a foundationalist can be a *methodological particularist*, though his aim, as a theorist, remains to characterize basic beliefs in a general way.[7]

The traditional approach has been to identify basic beliefs by their subject matter. For example, it has often been noted that I cannot be mistaken about perceptual appearances. Suppose that it seems to me that there is something red in front of

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me: I may be mistaken in thinking that there really is something red there (I may be hallucinating), but I cannot be mistaken about how things seem to be. Things can seem to be other than they are, but can't seem to seem other than they seem: the "seems" operator doesn't iterate. It has often been concluded that such seemings are "self-presenting states": knowable by their mere presence to the mind and thus suitable objects of basic beliefs. Thinking along these lines, traditional foundationalists sort beliefs into fundamental epistemic kinds, according to certain broad features of their content. These kinds are thought to stand in a hierarchy according to relations of epistemic priority. At the foundation are the basic beliefs, which are prior to all other beliefs. Next are beliefs that are directly inferentially dependent on basic beliefs. Above them come whatever beliefs are inferentially dependent on beliefs at the second level, and so on. For example, it might be held that beliefs concerning natural laws depend on beliefs about particular events in the external world, which in turn depend on basic experiential beliefs. Here is another aspect in which foundational justification is absolute. Not only are there basic beliefs, there is an invariant order of epistemic priority between fundamental epistemic kinds.

The conception of absolute justification we have been exploring goes with a comparably demanding idea of what it is for epistemic standards to be "objective". Consider a natural kind: acids, say. We can state a non-trivial criterion for acidity, a principle that we can use for sorting chemical compounds into acids and non-acids. Now contrast acids with things that happen on a Tuesday.[8] Obviously, there is no non-trivial criterion for determining the kind of thing that happens on a Tuesday. There is no kind of thing that happens on a Tuesday: things that happen on a Tuesday are a mere aggregate, not a natural kind. Now, as we have seen, traditional foundationalism treats the class of justified beliefs as theoretically tractable. So for foundationalists, justified beliefs are more like acids than like things that happen on a Wednesday. It is the nature of a basic beliefs to be intrinsically credible, as it is the nature of an acid to be a proton donor. Other beliefs are naturally non-basic: they owe any credibility they have to evidence provided by beliefs that are naturally epistemically prior to them. Beliefs fall into natural epistemological kinds, ordered by natural relations of epistemological priority: what Descartes called "the order of reasons".

The domain of epistemic facts that traditional epistemologists have purported to investigate is supposed to be not only theorizable but also autonomous. For example, intrinsic credibility, as traditionally understood, entails that the epistemic status of basic beliefs owes nothing to empirical facts. Thus it has traditionally been held that there is a basic observational vocabulary – composed of terms suitable for capturing our ultimate evidence – that is invariant, thus not subject to revision in the light of empirical developments. I sometimes call the idea that (ultimately) standards of justification reflect an autonomous domain of epistemic facts "epistemological realism". Contextualism says that epistemological realism is false. If this is what it is to reject "full objectivity" with respect to epistemic standards, then full objectivity should be rejected.

Although problematic, traditional foundationalism has its attractions. Its strong

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invariantism – its postulation of a base level of intrinsically credible beliefs, formulated in basic observational vocabulary and lying at the base of a definite hierarchy of epistemic kinds – promises a "permanent neutral matrix" for the rational resolution of all significant disputes. The solution to the problem of justification also solves the problem of method. If we deny that there is such a matrix, it looks as though we may be opening the door to epistemic relativism. But as I shall argue, this is not so.

4. Contextualism is a radical alternative to traditional foundationalism. There are two main lines of defense for the contextualist view: that it stays much closer to ordinary epistemic practice; and that alternatives serve only to generate unnecessary skeptical puzzles, such as epistemic relativism. Since, in my view, skepticism and traditional epistemology are two sides of the same coin, a good way to develop contextualism is diagnostically: by identifying certain presuppositions of skeptical argumentation and seeing what happens if they are denied.

Let us go back to the regress of justification. The skeptic assumes that epistemic challenges are indefinitely iterable. Behind this is the assumption of a fundamental epistemic claimant-challenger asymmetry.

> *Claimant-challenger asymmetry.* Whenever knowledge is claimed, the burden of justification lies with the claimant. If I represent myself as knowing that P, I invite you to ask me how I know. There is nothing you have to do, or no way that things have to be, in order for you to have the right to enter a challenge.

This principle reflects a particular model of epistemic justification, in which justification depends on positive authorization. Whenever a belief or claim is justified, there is some statable *positive property* in virtue of which it is justified. All the skeptic wants is to be told what it is: a reasonable request, given the model.

Behind the positive authorization requirement lies the assumption of epistemological realism. To see this, we need only remind ourselves that the *general* threat of a trilemma – regress, assumption or circular reasoning – is entirely theoretical. In practice, though some conversations get stuck in a rut, others don't. You may be skeptical of some claim I advance. But when I explain my reasons for advancing it, you may find them acceptable and convincing. However, the skeptic will say that such a resolution is *merely dialectical*: even if a series of claims and challenges ends in agreement, there is still the question of why either of us is justified in holding to the claims we agree on. The skeptic – who might as well be the traditional epistemologist – wants to get at the underlying epistemological facts. And his assumption is that these owe nothing to agreement. Quite the opposite: when justified, agreement owes everything to them.

Although it may seem plausible at first, the principle of claimant-challenger asymmetry will be false if challenges are themselves subject to justificatory constraints, so that challenges that fail to respect them are not legitimate. And if challenges are not always legitimate, there need not always be some positive property on which a claim's positive epistemic status supervenes. Maybe it is justified because, in the circumstances,

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there is nothing to be said *against* it. Globally, justification will not conform to a positive authorization model but will exhibit what Robert Brandom calls a "default and challenge structure."[9] Positive authorization will be an essentially *local* phenomenon. Contextualism accepts this structure. But it adds that the factors influencing default justification are contextually sensitive. I will briefly discuss four kinds of factor that can place propositions at least temporarily beyond question, or which limit how they can be questioned. They are semantic, methodological, dialectical, and economic. I will then say something about the place of source principles in the contextualist picture.

Beginning with semantic factors, to be legitimate, a challenge must at least be intelligible. This is not automatic. I take it for granted that two plus three equals five. It would be ridiculous for someone to say "I see what you mean, but why do you say that?" Anyone who thinks that a challenge is in place here does not see what I mean. Of course, traditional foundationalists have often thought of basic beliefs for which understanding and truth are closely linked. However, for the contextualist, this sort of immunity from challenge is not the special prerogative of any particular kind of judgment. Rather, there is a general connection between meaning, truth and immunity from epistemic challenge in that our getting lots of things right – and agreeing about them – is a condition of our having any thoughts at all. This is a central theme in Wittgenstein:

> 79. That I am a man and not a woman can be verified, but if I were to say that I am a woman, and then tried to explain the error by saying I hadn't checked the statement, the explanation would not be accepted.
> 80. The truth of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements.
> 81. That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them.
> 156. In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind.

Nor does the point apply only to *standing certainties*. In the right circumstances, simple perceptual judgments are comparably insulated from doubt in that, if someone expressed reservations, we would have no idea what he was getting at. Thus Wittgenstein:

> 17. Suppose now I say "I'm incapable of being wrong about this: that is a book" while I point to an object. What would a mistake here be like? And have I any clear idea of it?
> 155. In certain circumstances a man cannot make a mistake. ("Can" is used here logically, and the proposition does not mean that a man cannot say anything false in those circumstances.)....

There are circumstances in which giving voice to particular falsehoods would be evidence of some kind mental disturbance, thus not a case of expressing an unjustified belief. It would not be an appropriate occasion for asking "Why do you say that?"

The reference to circumstances brings a dimension of contextual variability to concepts like "mistake" and "legitimate challenge". Given the right setting, judgments that would not normally be questionable might become so. Suppose that I am in an

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antique shop, specializing in smoking paraphernalia, where there are not only books about tobacco but also cigarette boxes that look like books. In this situation, my pointing to a "book" could legitimately be challenged. But in other cases not so: for example, when I am holding the book, riffling the pages, etc. Similarly, in the right circumstances, facts that it would not normally be appropriate to check – indeed, where seeming to "check" would be a bizarre parody of investigation – can be looked into. That I have two legs is as certain as anything gets to be. But if I were caught up in a bombing outrage, I might find myself looking nervously toward my lower extremities.

Now it may look as though the conception of justification we are working towards is a kind of foundationalism, though with shifting rather than fixed foundations. However, it is important to be clear just how different the conception is from that enshrined in traditional foundationalism. In particular, we must be absolutely clear that the kind of certainty that is connected with the impossibility of mistake – or with the unintelligibility of epistemic challenges – does not allow us to define the epistemic kinds that are the hallmark of traditional foundationalism. First, as Wittgenstein is quick to insist, the boundary between certainties and hypotheses is not a sharp one:

> 52. [The] situation is...not the same for a proposition like "At this distance from the sun there is a planet" and "Here is a hand" (namely my own hand). The second can't be called a hypothesis. But there isn't a sharp boundary between them.

Second, whether tokens of the same judgment-type are intelligibly questionable can vary with circumstances in ways that cannot be reduced to rule. If we try to formulate rules or criteria, we will find ourselves using phrases like "normal circumstances", and it is far from obvious that we can determine, in any general way, what circumstances count as "normal". Wittgenstein claims (plausibly) that we can't and that it wouldn't do us any good if we could.

> 25. One may be wrong even about "there being a hand there". Only in particular circumstances is it impossible. – "even in a calculation one can be wrong – only in certain circumstances one can't."
> 26. But can it be seen from a *rule* what circumstances logically exclude a mistake in the employment of rules of calculation?
>
> What use is a rule to us here? Mightn't we (in turn) go wrong in applying it?
> 27. If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression "in normal circumstances". And we recognize normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones.

Circumstances are normal provided they are not "funny" in some way or other; but although we can typically recognize when circumstances are normal – and thus know what can and cannot appropriately be questioned – we cannot state a criterion of normality. But Wittgenstein adds the important *caveat* that, even if we could state a criterion, our epistemic situation would not be improved. Contextually embedded

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certainties are *already* as certain as any propositions could be. We would only seek rules if we were already in thrall to the skeptical demand for authorization by epistemic principles, which is the very model we are trying to undermine. So the claim that a certain kind of epistemological understanding is off-limits – not because we can't get at the epistemic facts, but because justification doesn't work like that – is no cause for alarm. Contextualism suggests that we don't *need* that kind of understanding in the first place.

Challenges that are potentially intelligible need not always be immediately so. Thus the correct response to an epistemic challenge can often be: "What's the problem: where do you think I might be going wrong?" One reason that this is often an appropriate first move is that you can't respond appropriately to a challenge without determining precisely what you need to respond to. It is not generally sufficient for a challenger to reply "I don't have anything particular in mind, but no one's infallible."

Even when intelligible, challenges are not always legitimate. They can be far-fetched or utterly groundless. The logical possibility of a certain kind of error is not generally sufficient for a legitimate challenge. Often one needs some reason to think that the possibility is live: that there is some reasonable probability of its having been realized. Challenges can also fail to be legitimate by being irrelevant to current concerns. So another potent source of epistemic entitlement is *direction of inquiry*. What we are looking into is a function of what we are leaving alone. This is true even in mundane matters. But it is particularly interesting as an aspect of more formal varieties of investigation. Wittgenstein makes a lot of this:

> 341. ... the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.
> 342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are indeed not doubted.
> 343. But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for this reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

I call such presuppositions, which give particular forms of inquiry their characteristic shape and direction, *disciplinary constraints* or *methodological necessities*. Wittgenstein again:

> 163. We check the story of Napoleon, but not whether all reports about him are based on sense-deception, forgery and the like. For whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested. Now am I to say that the experiment which perhaps I make in order to test the truth of a proposition presupposes the truth of the proposition that the apparatus I believe I see is really there (and the like)?

Methodological necessities are standing presuppositions such that questioning them would lead one to question the competence of the form of inquiry they enable. In this way, they determine the *disciplinary meta-context* for such practices as historical

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research.

Presuppositions of this kind are not mere assumptions. For even though they make more detailed kinds of justification possible, they are not beyond evidence. First, though they may begin life as postulates, perhaps never even articulated, if inquiries that proceed on their basis throw up significant results, such methodological necessities acquire a measure of indirect validation. Second, they can be questioned and revised. The motive for questioning may be internally generated; our inquiries get into difficulties. Or challenges may come from outside, as when physical methods give us new ways of dating or authenticating historical artifacts and documents. However, radical questioning can involve a change of subject. This is especially relevant to skeptical questioning. Raising general doubts about the usability of documentary and other historical evidence would not be not an especially rigorous approach to historical research, any more than entertaining skeptical doubts about the reality of the external world would be an exceptionally careful way of conducting experiments in physics. Rather, to bring up such issues changes the subject from history, or physics, to (a certain kind of) epistemology (which, as we are discovering, has disciplinary presuppositions of its own).

Here we must make a concession: practices like doing historical research are culturally variable, contingent developments. Wittgenstein insists on this.

> 85. [W]hat goes into someone's knowing ... history, say? He must know what it means to say: the earth has already existed for such and such a length of time. For not any intelligent adult must know that. We see men building a house and demolishing houses, and are led to ask: "How long has this house been here?" But how does one come on the idea of asking this about a mountain, for example?

The presuppositions of historical thinking are not common knowledge. They do not automatically fall out of everyday experiences. There is a leap from asking about the age of a house to asking about the age of the earth. Whether this raises the specter of relativism is a question I shall return to. For the time being, I want to stress yet again contextualism's theoretical modesty. While we can point to the importance of methodological necessities in generating default entitlements, by virtue of enabling definite forms of inquiry, there is a good deal of indeterminacy as to which propositions have that status. While we can't do history at all if we are *a priori* distrustful of all potential evidence, the reliability of many of our sources is itself often a perfectly reasonable topic of investigation. In any case, "hinge" propositions are not confined to epistemological presuppositions. In physics, the question of whether a certain surprising experimental result might be accounted for by divine intervention doesn't arise at all: an appeal to the supernatural just doesn't count as a physical explanation. But commitments like this are not set in stone. Partisans of a rigorously mechanical conception of nature were distrustful of Newton's theory of gravitation: it smacked of a reversion to occult powers and stellar "influences", just the sort of supernaturalism that science should dispense with. But the insistence on rigorously mechanical

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explanations of physical processes proved to be a straightjacket and was abandoned, largely because of the success of Newton's more flexible approach. There is no sharp boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method; and even the vague boundary is one that propositions can cross. Here we encounter a further instance of limits to epistemological theorizing.

Contextually determined entitlements are also affected by dialectical factors: for example, the state of discussion at a given time. I said that challenges sometimes need legitimation. But sometimes they don't. Even with semantic and disciplinary constraints in place, a claim or belief may face standing objections that need to be dealt with. Or new problems may arise, as new evidence comes in or old evidence is impugned. Theoretical innovations, too, can affect the range of hypotheses that we can even take seriously. This means that the epistemic status of a belief can change with developments in the dialectical environment, developments that are in principle unpredictable – another limit to epistemological understanding.

Justification also has a pragmatic dimension. For one thing, epistemic standards are affected by *economic* considerations, which can vary from context to context. I am justified in accepting a hypothesis if I have sufficient evidence: but how much is enough? When is it legitimate to demand more? Here we must remember that information isn't free: it has to be gathered, which imposes costs, including opportunity costs. (We all have better things to do than conduct investigations.) If I need to make a decision, if the cost of error is low, and if the cost of gathering further information is high, I may be justified in accepting a proposition on relatively weak evidence. But if the costs of error are high, much more rigorous standards may be in order. Once more, it is doubtful how far any of this can be reduced to rule. Economic factors are not generally thought of as epistemic. But they are relevant to rational conduct: including rational epistemic conduct. Descartes's idea of "pure inquiry" – where only epistemic factors are in play – is a fantasy.

There is one further topic that calls for some comment. If we follow Wittgenstein and stress the primacy of *particular certainties*, we may wonder whether general epistemic beliefs concerning the reliability of various information-sources are of any importance at all. As we have seen, such commitments will number among the methodological necessities of various specialized forms of inquiry. But is there any role for generic source-principles asserting the reliability of perception, say, or memory? Not only does Wittgenstein have little to say on this topic – a lacuna in his thinking – he shows signs of questioning whether generic reliability-knowledge is important at all. Thus:

> 34. If someone is taught to calculate, is he also taught that he can rely on a calculation of his teacher's? But these explanations must after all sometime come to an end. Will he also be taught that he can trust his senses – since he is indeed told in many cases that in such and such a special case you cannot trust them?
>
> Rule and exception.

Now we already know that the extent to which judgments can be challenged is heavily

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restricted by intelligibility constraints. If you don't get lots of things right, you won't have any beliefs at all. Calculating correctly, in elementary cases, is a possession-condition for numerical concepts; a reliable recognitional capacity is a possession-condition for a concept in its observational use, though these are enabling conditions, rather than things that could be straightforwardly appealed to in ordinary contexts of justification. However, if this is all we say, we are left with a version of externalism, albeit with a semantic spin. This will make contextualism implausible to those who think – as I do – that internalist intuitions cannot simply be dismissed.

Contextualists can say more. If we think that justification conforms to a default and challenge structure, we must hold that knowing how we can mis-perceive our situation is an essential ingredient in knowing how perceptually-based beliefs can legitimately be challenged, and what we have to do to meet such challenges. Indeed, we can think of this as itself an essential ingredient in the mastery of the observational use of concepts. In this way, contextualism incorporates weak internalism. It also shows why the much of force of the rule derives from the exceptions: the exceptions do the essential conceptual-epistemic work. Knowledge of our reliability – particularly knowledge of its limits – can be essential, even though such knowledge does not always serve to authorize particular performances.

A further motive for countenancing basic observational (or experiential) beliefs is that we want observational evidence to carry special weight. Here is a second asymmetry principle: observation-theory asymmetry. Ultimately, theory should be answerable to observation in a way that observation is not answerable to theory. Reliability-knowledge is the key to meeting this requirement. Well-entrenched beliefs about the reliability of basic information-sources increase the epistemic weight of beliefs arising from them. We can't ride rough-shod over the evidence derived from such sources without calling into question what we have already found to be essential reliability-presuppositions. But it does not follow from this that beliefs deriving from such sources are always implicitly *justified* by reliability-commitments.

While much more could be said on this topic, I hope that I have said enough to explain how reliability-knowledge concerning basic information-sources can be epistemically vital, without that knowledge functioning to ground *ultimate* source-principles. On the view I am suggesting, questions about the reliability of sources cannot be decided independently of substantive knowledge about ourselves and the world. Reliability-principles, with respect to such information sources as observation, are fact-dependent; and the facts in question are not "purely epistemological". There are questions about *what* is observable. These can be world-directed, in that they concern whether there is anything to be observed. An example would be whether "true" motions are observable, a question that divided Galileo and his Aristotelian critics and that cannot be decided independently of physics. But questions about what is observable can also be observer-directed. People with special training (birdwatchers, say) can spot at a glance things that non-specialists have to identify by consciously applying simpler criteria (checking size, markings, etc. and consulting a field guide). Further, there are questions about how reliable observation is with respect to particular things and

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circumstances. Naturally, there can be individual variation here: think of the "personal equation" for astronomers, which takes account of differences in reaction time. Our knowledge of the extent and reliability of observation is indefinitely refinable.

Let me sum up the crucial features of the contextualist conception of justification just sketched.

(i) The skeptic's assumption of claimant-challenger asymmetry is false. Claimants and challengers are both subject to justificatory burdens. Who has it depends on contextually variable factors. This point alone derails the traditional threat of an infinite regress of justification.

(ii) Justification, in the sense of "being justified," does not always require positive authorization. One can be justified in accepting a proposition if there is no serious reason not to accept it: one does not have to be able to justify it. This is not to say that, in claiming knowledge or justified belief, one has *no* burden of justification. The point is rather that one does not acquire such a burden *merely* by taking oneself to be justified. Rather, one must know how to recognize and to respond to legitimate challenges *when they arise*. Accordingly, justification, in the special form of giving reasons, takes place at the margins. It is an essentially local undertaking.

(iii) Factors that *explain* why it is that we are often entitled to hold particular beliefs need not be factors that justify or even could justify our holding those beliefs: certainly not to a determined skeptic. The explanation for why beliefs of a certain kind tend to be true may be no more certain than the beliefs in question, and may well be less so.

(iv) "Epistemic systems" involve much more than generic source and distribution principles. Standing certainties and contextually fixed commitments encompass not just general epistemic principles, or beliefs validated by them, but a wide array of particular, factual commitments. "We use judgments as principles of judgment."[10]

(v) There are indeed generic sources of justified beliefs – observation, memory, and so on – and it is important that they be reliable. Indeed, it is important that we know something about their reliability, thus satisfying Weak Internalism. But the role of reliability-knowledge in our epistemic economy is not always that that of authorizing particular beliefs.

(vi) Generic source-principles are not *ultimate* but rather empirical and open to revision. Moreover, they are essentially incomplete. We learn their limits in particular cases: mirages, funny lighting, and so on. There is no recipe for identifying in advance all the error-possibilities we may eventually need to allow for.

(vii) There is no fixed observational vocabulary, adequate to resolve all significant questions, of the sort envisaged by traditional foundationalism. Nor is there an invariant, content-related order of epistemic priority. What is properly used to test what varies with our interests, the dialectical environment and our real-world circumstances. There are no fundamental epistemic kinds.

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(viii) The massive background of beliefs, recognitional capacities, investigational procedures, etc., which is required for playing the game of justification must be acquired through education and training. Even then, what we can personally discover or verify is extremely limited. Most justification depends on deference. Knowledge is an essentially social achievement. This implies that what is taken to be common knowledge is culturally variable.

(ix) Epistemic justification is not theoretically tractable. We can describe, in a general way, the factors that determine our epistemic entitlements. However, we cannot do so in a way that permits the formulation of general rules or criteria for effectively sorting out justified from unjustified beliefs. "Justified" lies somewhere between "acidic" and "happens on Tuesday." Contextualism about knowledge and justification is more descriptive (phenomenological, in Heidegger's sense) than it is theoretical. But although it rejects what I call "epistemological realism," in another sense of "realistic" it is much more realistic that traditional foundationalism. Contextualism takes its cue from epistemic practices as we find them, rather than from a purely theoretical threat of skepticism.

(x) What makes contextualism's dismissal of "ultimate" principles and theoretical tractability innocuous is its *comprehensive fallibilism*. Epistemic systems are as open to correction as anything else.

5. It should be clear that contextualism does not encourage epistemic relativism. Epistemic relativism depends on the idea that ultimate source principles cannot be justified in a non-circular way. The main thrust of contextualism is to deny that justification depends on such principles in anything like the simple way that the sceptical-relativist argument requires. "Epistemic systems" are more complex, variable and fact-dependent than the fundamental relativist argument supposes. Neither is justification as straightforwardly system-dependent as the relativist imagines. (For the contextualist, these points are really the same point, differently stated.) So while the relativist suggests that an epistemic system (composed of source and distribution principles) either undermines itself, and is thus incoherent, or offers only question-begging self-support, the contextualist replies that the dilemma is false. Self-support (of the kind envisaged) is not needed, and self-undermining is not incoherence but the occasion for revising our epistemic procedures or standards.

This said, contextualism is easily misunderstood in ways that encourage the charge of relativism.

One mistake is to rigidify the idea of context. For example, Robert Fogelin objects to contextualism that I may concede that a person is justified in reaching a certain conclusion, given the "epistemic framework" he is operating in but deny that he is justified *simpliciter*. For example, I may object to his framework: perhaps he is using astrological tables.[11] But no contextualist denies this. As we have seen, epistemic procedures are as open to challenge as anything else. Methodological presuppositions do not create hermetically sealed disciplines. On the contrary, results from one

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discipline can influence work in another. The evaluation and authentication of historical documents profits from the development of carbon-dating. Indeed, Fogelin's own example – astrology – makes the point. What undermined belief in astrology was not so much empirical problems arising within the framework – failed predictions can always be explained away, at least to the satisfaction of true believers – but a new conception of the physical universe, which made the astrologer's geocentric world of stellar and planetary influences hard even to take seriously. Belief in witchcraft suffered a similar fate: a mechanical world just seemed to have no place for it. Of course, the physical ideas that turned astrology and witchcraft into superstitions were themselves open to refinement and even fundamentally revised or abandoned. But this is the open-endedness of inquiry, not the traditional regress of justification. To sum up, justificatory frameworks (if we are to use this language at all) – precisely because of their factual commitments – are essentially penetrable. They can be discredited from without as well as from within. Fogelin's criticism misses the point that contextualists not only can but must be as fallibilist about epistemic frameworks as they are about beliefs in general. For contextualists, there is no sharp line between epistemic and factual commitments, and so no clear boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method. Fogelin's criticism equates the contextualist's revisable methodological presuppositions with the relativist's ultimate principles.

A second source of misplaced charges of relativism is the recognition, on the part of contextualists, that what is taken to be common knowledge is to some extent culturally variable. For semantic reasons, human beings can never *wholly* lack common ground, or even common epistemic procedures. But while we all use our eyes and ears and share discriminative capacities, not everything that we would take to be common knowledge is something that every rational person would be bound to accept. Since we use judgments as principles of judgment, and since our epistemic beliefs (about the reliability of various sources of information) are heavily fact-committed, if we assign either kind of element in the epistemic systems of different groups to the culturally variable segment of supposed "common knowledge," we seem to concede the cultural relativity of epistemic systems.

I do not think that we do. It is one thing to admit that, in an given situation, there may be limits to our *powers of argument* or persuasion. It is something else entirely to assert that all ways of viewing the world are equally valid, or that all epistemic procedures are equally reliable. No route leads from the first claim to the second.

Foundationalists have tended to think otherwise. According to traditional foundationalism, all justification depends on fundamental source and distribution principles that are constitutive of our human epistemic condition. So given sufficient time and good will, anyone can rationally be convinced of anything that is itself rationally justifiable. For a contextualist, this is one of foundationalism's great illusions. What we can argue for depends on rich commitments about the world around us. This means that individuals and groups can vary widely in their epistemic resources. Accordingly, whether you can convince another person by argument depends on how much common ground there is between you. However, these limitations are contingent

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and variable: they do not reflect imprisonment in permanently incommensurable world-views.

Wittgenstein is sensitive to this point. Writing before space-flight, and thinking of Moore's assurance that he knows that neither he nor anyone else has ever been very far from the surface of the Earth, Wittgenstein wonders:

> 106. Suppose some adult had told a child that he had been on the moon. The child tells me the story, and I say it was only a joke, the man hadn't been on the moon; no one has ever been on the moon; the moon is a long way off and it is impossible to climb up there or fly there. – If the child now insists, saying perhaps there is a way of getting there which I don't know, etc. what reply could I make to him? What reply could I make to the adults of a tribe who believe that people sometimes go to the moon (perhaps that is how they interpret their dreams), and who indeed grant that there are no ordinary means of climbing up to it or flying there? – But a child will not ordinarily stick to such a belief and will soon be convinced by what we tell him seriously.

This prompts a question from Wittgenstein's interlocutor:

> 108. "But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it true, or false, that someone has been on the moon?" If we are thinking within our system, then it is certain that no one has ever been on the moon. Not merely is nothing of the sort ever reported to us by reasonable people, but our whole system of physics forbids us to believe it. For this demands answers to the questions "How did he overcome the force of gravity?" "How could he live without an atmosphere?" and a thousand others which could not be answered. But suppose that instead of all these answers we met the reply "We don't know how one gets to the moon, but those who get there know at once that they are there; and even you can't explain everything." We should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from someone who said this.

For us, physics is a potent source of standing objections to the claims of the moon-visitors. The presence of such objections is a prominent feature of the dialectical environment. If people simply refuse to recognize the force of such questions – turning aside specific challenges with a bland, all-purpose epistemic response ("Even you don't know everything"), there is no arguing with them. This is a fact of life. But it imposes no obligation to accept equal validity. Wittgenstein again:

> 286. What we believe depends on what we learn. We all believe that it isn't possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that it is possible and that it sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief – they are wrong and we know it.
>
> If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far.

But to get them to see this, or even to appreciate the force of our doubts, we should have to teach them physics – *teach*, not argue with them – which means that they would have to be willing to learn. They might not be, in which case we would be stuck. This is what Wittgenstein is getting at when he asks:

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> 608. Is it wrong for me to be guided in my actions by the propositions of physics? Am I to say I have no good ground for doing so? Isn't this precisely what we call a 'good ground'?
> 609. Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist they consult an oracle. (and for that reason we consider them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it? – If we call this "wrong" aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs?
> 612. I said I would 'combat' the other man – but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)

If the persuasion works, and they learn some physics, they will probably stop believing that they go to the moon, or that they should consult oracles, without the need to be convinced by particular arguments (as Europeans lost their beliefs in astrology and witchcraft in the light of the Scientific Revolution). If we can't get them to listen, they will remain in their ignorant state.

While this may sound like cultural arrogance, the point in question should be uncontroversial. Switching for the moment from cultural to subjective relativism, would it show anything about the tenability of some arcane piece of theoretical physics that its proponents couldn't convince *me* to accept it? Of course not. Still, the objection will now be lodged "Ignorant according to whom?" Or "Who are you to say?" Contextualism may seem to invite such questions. Tellingly, a critic might note, Wittgenstein only observes that we will *say* that we know a lot that they don't; he doesn't say that we would be *definitely right*. That's true, but I don't think that Wittgenstein's reticence has anything to do with relativism. What it reflects is something that contextualists are committed to, namely, not expecting too much from epistemology. We can describe the language game, but we cannot provide it with the kind of "external" endorsement that makes our beliefs more secure than they are anyway. The best reasons for trusting physics come from physics itself. They don't get better for having a philosopher's *imprimatur*.

The point is worth pursuing. Here is another pregnant passage from Wittgenstein:

> 599. [O]ne could describe the certainty of the proposition that water boils at circa 100°C. That isn't e.g. a proposition I have once heard...I made the experiment myself at school. The proposition is a very elementary one in our textbooks, which are to be trusted in matters like this because... – Now one can offer counter-examples to all this, which show that human beings have held this or that to be certain which later, according to our opinion, proved false. But the argument is worthless. To say: in the end we can only adduce such grounds as *we* hold to be grounds, is to say nothing at all.
>
> I believe that at the bottom of this is a misunderstanding of the nature of our language-games.

The argument under review is that, since we have gone wrong in the past, we have no reason to suppose that we are any better placed now. A relativist could make this the basis of an equal validity claim: we can only offer such grounds as we hold to be

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grounds; and anyone else can do as much. But the argument amounts to an attempt to move from fallibilism (I might be wrong) to skepticism (I am not entitled to suppose that I am right). The argument is fallacious and will seem in order only if one is already willing to concede the principle of claimant-challenger asymmetry. With that principle in place, the mere possibility of error places the burden of justification on the claimant. Any attempt to discharge it will eventually run into commitments that not all groups share (grounds that *we* hold to be grounds), at which point the skeptic remarks that one dogma is as good as another. But that is not how justification works or even could work. Default-justified beliefs are neither *mere* assumptions nor dogmatic commitments: many are revisable. With enough stage-setting, perhaps all are. Detached from the skeptic's contentious presuppositions, all the argument for epistemic relativism comes to is that in inquiring, arguing, justifying, etc., we work with whatever beliefs and techniques we currently have on hand; and to say that really is to say nothing at all. It is like saying you are always where you happen to be.

We have worked our way back to our recurrent theme: the limits (and limited utility) of epistemological theorizing. Contextualists think that we simply have to live with a modest level of epistemic self-understanding. They also think that the sort of modest understanding that the subject matter allows shows that there is no passage from a general understanding of epistemic justification to a method for resolving disputes. As a rule, when people's beliefs differ profoundly, there is no guarantee that there will be neutral epistemic principles adequate for determining who is right and who is wrong. To be sure, human beings can never lack altogether for common ground. However – and this is hardly surprising – the issues that divide them most seriously are those that common knowledge does not easily resolve. This doesn't mean that such questions cannot in principle be decided. It does not even mean that they cannot be decided to the satisfaction of all parties. Where common ground does not exist, we can look for it. Or perhaps we will stumble across it while looking for something else. Who knows? Only relativists think of different groups as locked into different, fundamental epistemic systems. But resolving deep differences of opinion depends on ingenuity and luck: epistemology cannot offer guarantees. So while, unlike relativists, contextualists don't make equal validity claims, they don't say that all disputes are in principle rationally resolvable either. They think that resolvability is a contingent matter. We never know what we might find out, or think up, such that parties to even the most intractable dispute suddenly see matters in a new light.[12] Thus whereas traditional foundationalism sees the problem of justification as the key to the problem of method, contextualism suggests that they should be decoupled or, rather, that there is no such thing as method; there are only methods, which change with our understanding of the world and ourselves.

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NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Symposium on Epistemic Relativism, APA Central Division meeting 2006. My co-symposiast was Paul Boghossian.

2 Annis (1978). The name may be unfortunate, since "contextualism" is now widely used to designate a different (though not entirely unrelated) epistemological view concerning the truth conditions for attributions of knowledge. My kind of contextualism is sometimes called "issue contextualism" to distinguish from contextualism of the other kind. But lacking a better name, I am going to continue to call my view "contextualism". Readers can take "issue" as understood. For a brief statement of my view, see Williams (1999). For more detailed treatments, see Williams (1996, 2001).

3 In Kim and Sosa (2000), selections from *Unnatural Doubts* (Williams, 1996) appear in the section "Epistemological Relativism."

4 Quotations in the text are identified by paragraph number.

5 This doesn't beg any questions, since I am placing no undue restrictions on the factors that may be relevant to justification. In particular, I am not suggesting that justification always involves having reasons or being able to produce evidence. Justification is a matter of positive epistemic status, whatever that is and however it is acquired. Since knowledge is by definition an epistemically positive state, knowing implies being justified. This terminological convention is compatible with pure externalism. I focus on justification for two reasons: to avoid getting entangled in Gettierology and (knowledge being factive) to avoid as far as possible discussing relativism with respect to truth.

6 For more on foundationalism, particularly the idea of basic beliefs, see my exchange with James Pryor in Steup and Sosa (2005, ch. 7).

7 Chisholm (1982). See for example ch. 5.

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8 The example is Jerry Fodor's, but I cannot recall where he gives it.
9 Brandom (1995, ch. 4).
10 Wittgenstein (1969, para.124).
11 Fogelin (1994, 95-8).
12 Paul Boghossian takes Richard Rorty to task for suggesting that there was no way of saying that, in condemning Galileo, Cardinal Bellarmine was "unscientific" in taking scriptural texts to be relevant to the acceptability of the Copernican system. First, I think that Boghossian is a bit hard on Bellarmine. Bellarmine did not object to Galileo's teaching the Copernican hypothesis as a hypothesis: the objection was to his teaching it as a truth. He did not think that scriptural evidence trumped scientific evidence: on the contrary, he held that God has given us Reason as a way of coming to understand the world around us, so that if Reason led decisively to the conclusion that the Earth was in motion (which was the crux of the dispute), scripture would have to be re-interpreted. But being acutely concerned with the authority of the Church, he held that the verdict of Reason had to be truly decisive. Quite rightly, he thought that Galileo had failed to make his case. Galileo had no dynamical theory that would make sense of the motion of the Earth. His argument from the tides was inconsistent with his own principle of relativity. The telescopic evidence settled nothing, for even if the Ptolemaic system had to be abandoned, there was still the Tychonic alternative, which reserved the Earth at rest. Neither Bellarmine nor Galileo could have foreseen the Newtonian synthesis, which led the Church to change its position. Indeed, Galileo was unsympathetic to ideas that turned out to be crucial to getting the Copernican system to work. Most notably, he remained under the spell of the naturalness of circular motion. He seems never to have appreciated Kepler and did not take seriously the possibility of elliptical orbits. He also tried to account for the apparent straight-line descent of a heavy object dropped from a tower by postulating something like a principle of *circular* inertia. (I say "something like" because it is not clear how general the principle is supposed to be. Galileo certainly knew that, if I twirl a weight on the end of a string and let go of the string, the weight flies off at a tangent and does not continue going round and round. It seems that the Earth is still playing an important role in fixing what motions are "natural".) Considering the Galileo case, Rorty writes:

> the conclusion I wish to draw is that the "grid" which emerged in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not there to be appealed to in the early seventeenth century, at the time that Galileo was on trial. No conceivable epistemology, no study of the nature of human knowledge, could have "discovered" it before it was hammered out. The notion of what it was to be scientific was in the process of being formed. If one endorses the values – or perhaps the ranking of competing values – common to Galileo and Kant, then indeed Bellarmine was being "unscientific." But of course, almost all of us...are happy to endorse them. (Rorty 1979, 330)

Boghossian thinks that Rorty is advocating relativism. I don't. So while I find things to criticize in this passage, they aren't the same things. First, Bellarmine was well aware that his reluctance to re-interpret scripture to suit every fashionable speculation on the part of some natural philosopher was guided by more than narrowly "scientific" considerations. Second, as indicated above, I think that Bellarmine was right in thinking that Galileo's scientific arguments were less compelling than Galileo liked to suppose. Third, I don't think that what settled the dispute was a new set, or ranking, of epistemic values (or standards): that sounds way too like a criterial conception of justification to me; and this is the very conception that

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encourages relativism. But all that said, Rorty has a good point about epistemology. What eventually vindicated Galileo were developments in physics, thus neither highly general considerations about the nature of human knowledge nor a new set of "values". After all, the Church reconciled itself to Copernicanism, without changing its views on either Reason or Scripture. For Rorty's discussion of Galileo, see Rorty (1979, ch. 7). For Boghossian's discussion of Rorty (and also Wittgenstein), see Boghossian (2006, ch. 5). He attacks their alleged relativism in ch. 6.

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