1. Background

The Paradox: Chapter 5 provides a strong reason to accept relativism; Chapter 6, a strong reason to reject it.

Boghossian resolves this paradox by refuting the reasons offered in Chapter 5.

An absolute epistemic fact is of the form evidence $E$ justifies belief $B$.

Arriving at justified beliefs about epistemic facts doesn’t need to entail certainty about every detail of an epistemic fact, but it should mean that we’re able to distinguish between radical alternatives.

Ex. it should be able to tell us if observation and logic provide justification and mythology doesn’t.

1.1. Argument for Epistemic Relativism (Boghossian’s Target)

R1. If there are absolute epistemic facts, then it ought to be possible to arrive at justified beliefs about them. (Possible)
R2. It is not possible to arrive at justified beliefs about what absolute epistemic facts there are. (Justification)
R3. $\therefore$ There are no absolute epistemic facts. (From R1, R2)
R4. If there are no absolute epistemic facts, then epistemic relativism is true.
R5. $\therefore$ Epistemic relativism is true. (From R3, R4)

1.1.1. The Norm Circularity Argument for R2 (Justification)

Suppose that there are two epistemic systems, $C1$ and $C2$, such that:

a. According to $C1$, $E$ justifies $B$;

b. According to $C2$, $E$ does not justify $B$; and

1. If it’s an absolute fact that $E$ justifies $B$, then there is some justification for favoring $C1$ over $C2$. (From R1)
2. The only justification for favoring $C1$ over $C2$ presupposes $C1$.
3. If the only justification for $C1$ over $C2$ presupposes $C1$, then that justification is circular.
4. According to any acceptable epistemic system, circular justification is impossible.

R2. $\therefore$ It is not possible to arrive at justified beliefs about what absolute epistemic facts there are. (From 1-4)

According to Boghossian, the Norm Circularity Argument only works on the following assumption:

(Encounter) If we were to encounter a fundamental, genuine alternative epistemic system, $C2$, to our own epistemic system, $C1$, we would not be able to justify $C1$ over $C2$, even by our own lights.

Question: Is it possible to accept the Norm Circularity Argument without accepting Encounter?

2. Boghossian’s Assessment of (Encounter)

2.1. The Coherence Constraint on Encounter

An alternative $C2$ to our own epistemic system, $C1$ is only genuine if $C2$ is coherent.

What is coherence?

• If $C2$ is inconsistent, prescribes inconsistent beliefs, or is self-undermining, then $C2$ is incoherent.

• If an epistemic system proposes to treat two propositions $p$ and $q$ according to distinct epistemic principles, it must recognize some epistemically relevant differences between $p$ and $q$.

• If an epistemic system proposes to treat two propositions $p$ and $q$ according to the same epistemic principles, it must not recognize any epistemically relevant difference between $p$ and $q$.

2.2. Blind Reasoning Constraint on Encounter: Boghossian’s Gloss

1. If nobody is entitled to use an epistemic system $C^*$ without first justifying it, then any attempt to justify that system will depend on the entitlement to use another epistemic system $C^{**}$.
2. $\therefore$ This leads to a regress. (From 1)
3. $\therefore$ If nobody is entitled to use an epistemic system without first justifying it, then nobody is entitled to use an epistemic system. (From 2)
4. Somebody is entitled to use an epistemic system.
5. $\therefore$ Somebody is entitled to use an epistemic system without first justifying it. (From 3,4)
2.3. **Modifications to (Encounter)**

Boghossian uses the Coherence and Blind Reasoning Constraints to revise (Encounter) as follows:

(Encounter**)  If we were to encounter an actual, coherent, fundamental, genuine alternative $C_2$ to our epistemic system, $C_1$, whose track record was impressive enough to make us doubt the correctness of our own system, $C_1$, we would not be able to justify $C_1$ over $C_2$, even by our own lights.

The **bold** is the Coherence Constraint; the *italics* is the Blind Reasoning Constraint. Are they supported by the arguments above?

3. **What does (Encounter**) do to the Relativist’s Argument?**

He then notes that if (Encounter**) is to validate (Justification), the latter must revised as follows:

(Justification*)  If a legitimate doubt were to arise about the correctness of our ordinary epistemic principles, we would not be able to arrive at justified beliefs about its correctness.

But this won’t deliver the relativist’s desired conclusion. In particular, note that the original (Justification) may be false, i.e. it is possible to arrive at justified beliefs about absolute epistemic facts, even if the modified (Justification*) is true: we cannot arrive at these justified beliefs in the face of legitimate doubt. But if there are absolute epistemic facts under other doubt-free situations, then the argument for relativism falls apart.

3.1. **How Boghossian Glosses the Revised Argument**

P*.  If there are absolute epistemic facts about what justifies what, then we know what they are. (Possible*)

J**.  If a legitimate doubt were to arise about the correctness of our ordinary epistemic principles, we would not know which epistemic principles are objectively true. (Justification***)

R6.  Legitimate doubt has arisen about the correctness of our epistemic principles has arisen. (Because we have encountered alternative epistemic systems whose track record is impressive enough to make us doubt our own).

R7.  \[ \therefore \text{ We don’t know which epistemic principles are true. (From P*, J*, R6)} \]

R8.  \[ \therefore \text{ If we don’t know which epistemic principles are true, then epistemic relativism is true.} \]

R5.  \[ \therefore \text{ Epistemic relativism is true. (From R7, R8)} \]

3.2. **How Boghossian Assesses the Revised Argument**

(Possible*) is not as plausible as (Possible): while it makes sense to say that we can have some rough and ready justified beliefs about our epistemic principles, we shouldn’t have to have to “know what they are here and now, in the actual world.”

*Comment:* But note that the revisions to (Encounter**) didn’t require this; Boghossian snuck it in!

Also, Boghossian claims that R6 is not defensible: we have not encountered genuine alternatives.

- Bellarmine used Observation, Induction, and Deduction, and so has the same epistemic system as Galileo. So, the disagreement is “within a common epistemic system, as to the origins and nature of the Bible.”
  - *Comment:* Two epistemic systems aren’t identical simply if one contains all the principles of the other. Rather, Bellarmine has observation, induction, deduction, plus Revelation, and that makes it different than Galileo’s.

- If the Azande really endorsed the inferences that contradict modus ponens, we should think that they made a mistake, or that we didn’t translate their word for ‘if’ properly, or that the Azande aren’t that interested in the inferences under consideration.
  - *Comment:* This is partly an empirical question, based on other hypotheses and evidence we have about the Azande.
3.3. How I Would Revise the Argument

R1. If there are absolute epistemic facts, then it ought to be possible to arrive at justified beliefs about them. (Possible)

Jk. If there are coherent alternative epistemic systems that posit different absolute epistemic facts, then we are unable to arrive at justified beliefs about which system has posited the correct absolute epistemic facts. (Justifications)

CA. There are coherent alternative epistemic systems that posit different absolute epistemic facts. (Coherent Alternatives)

R3. ∴ There are no absolute epistemic facts. (From R1, Jk, CA)

R4. If there are no absolute epistemic facts, then epistemic relativism is true.

R5. ∴ Epistemic relativism is true. (From R3, R4)

Look at the conclusion of §2.2:

• Somebody is entitled to use an epistemic system without first justifying it.

One thing we might be incapable of doing is justifying our belief that we are entitled to use our epistemic system without first justifying it. (In other words, there is no guarantee that we are “the somebody” who is entitled to use our epistemic system. Of course, there is also no guarantee that the relativist is that “somebody,” either.)

Furthermore, if we can’t justify this, then we are in no position to justify any pronouncements about which epistemic facts are absolute.