1. The Argument from Skepticism

1.1. The Core Argument

S1. If skepticism is true, then there is no statement about the external world that is knowable.
S2. A statement is knowable if and only if it is true according to some theory that we can accept.
S3. ∴ Either skepticism is true, or all knowable statements about the external world are true according to some theory that we can accept. (From S1, S2)
S4. Skepticism is not true.
S5. ∴ All knowable statements about the external world are true according to some theory that we can accept. (From S3, S4)

This only gives us relativism about knowable statements, not about unknowable statements.

If this is supposed to be relativism about truth and not about some other feature of knowledge, e.g. justification, then the relativist must supplement this argument.

1.2. First Option: Epistemic Theory of Truth

The most direct way of doing this would be as follows:
S6. All truths are knowable.
S7. ∴ All truths about the external world are true according to some theory that we can accept. (From S5, S6)

• However, it’s unclear how the relativist can defend S6. In particular, consider the following “Knowability Objection”
K1. At least one thing is true, but impossible to believe, or impossible to justify, or impossible to Gettier-proof. (Example: a mathematical theorem that is impossible for humans to derive.)
K2. Knowledge is justified true belief that is Gettier-proof.

~S6. ∴ Some truths are unknowable. (From K1, K2)

1.3. Second Option: Pragmatism

An alternative argument appeals to the pragmatism that many relativists adopt:
P1. Unknowable truths have no practical value.
P2. We should not believe in the existence of things that have no practical value.
P3. ∴ We should not believe that there are unknowable truths. (From P1, P2)
S8. ∴ If there are any truths about the external world, we should believe that they are true according to some theory that we can accept. (From S6, P3)

Note that S8 is more or less equivalent to Boghossian’s 2nd Relativist Thesis:

• Relationism: If our factual judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe utterances of the form “p” as expressing the claim p. Rather, utterances of “p” express the claim: According to the theory, T, that we accept, p.

This also alleviates the burdens of proving his 1st Relativist Thesis:

• Non-absolutism: There are no absolute facts of the form p.

S8 doesn’t have to say anything one way or the other about the absolute/relative structure of facts. It simply counsels our beliefs about such facts. Hence even if there are absolute facts, we should think of them in relative terms.

Thus, if the preceding argument is sound, we have a principled reason for adopting a core relativist thesis, Relationism, and for being agnostic about another, Non-Absolutism.

2. The Argument for Pluralism

What then of Boghossian’s 3rd Relativist Thesis?

• Pluralism: There are many alternative theories for describing the world, but no facts by virtue of which one is more faithful to the way things are in and of themselves than any of the others.
2.1. From Pragmatism to Pluralism

P1. If there is a fact $p$ by virtue of which one theory is more faithful to the way things are in and of themselves, then that fact is a truth about the external world.

S8. If there are any truths about the external world, we should believe that they are true according to some theory that we can accept.

PL1. Therefore, if there is a fact $p$ by virtue of which one theory is more faithful to the way things are in and of themselves, then we should believe that $p$ is true according to some theory that we can accept. (From P1, S8)

- In other words, facts that could adjudicate between competing theories are just more theory-relative facts. (This does make the regress problem at the end of Boghossian, Ch.3 more pressing.)
- This doesn’t yet get us pluralism, since it says nothing about there being “many alternative theories for describing the world.” O’Grady offers an argument to this effect:

2.2. The Antireductionist Argument

A1. If any theory is fundamental, it is fundamental physics.

A2. Fundamental physics is an acceptable theory.

A3. Not every acceptable theory (e.g. history, biology, etc.) can be re-described using only the language of fundamental physics.

PL2. Therefore, there are at least two acceptable theories, fundamental physics, and any acceptable theory that cannot be re-described using only the language of fundamental physics. (From A1-A3)

Combined, PL1 and PL2 give us something very close to pluralism: there are multiple acceptable theories, and no theory-neutral way to adjudicate between them.

3. Quine

3.1. Background ideas

Empiricism: All knowledge is based in observation.

Epistemological naturalism: Any acceptable theory of knowledge is a branch of empirical psychology.

Ontological naturalism: For all $x$, it is reasonable to believe that $x$ exists if and only if our best theories entail that $x$ exists.

3.2. The Inscrutability of Reference

Core idea: Statements of the form: 

‘$a$’ refers to $x$

Are neither true nor false. (Thus this is non-absolutism about reference-statements. Since truth is often regarded as a derivative of reference, we get non-absolutism about truth/facts.)

Thus, the following have no determinate truth-value:

- “Khalifa” refers to the instructor of record for PHIL0220A taught during the Spring Term of 2015 at Middlebury College.
- “Snow” in English refers to snow.
- “Neige” in French refers to snow.
- The predicate “is white” in English refers to white things.

3.3. Ontological naturalism and ontological relativism

Ontological naturalism clearly entails relationism: that which is true/exists is relative to our best theories.

However, it’s less clear if Quine endorses pluralism:

- On the one hand, he seems to think that scientific theories are better than other theories, since they are more predictive, explanatory, simpler, and generally square with our observations better than the alternatives. These sorts of considerations would be “a fact in virtue of which one theory is more faithful to reality than another.”
- On the other hand, these are largely pragmatic considerations for Quine. Hence, it’s unclear that Quine has any grounds for claiming that a person less interested in prediction, explanation, and observation is irrational in adopting a non-scientific framework.
3.4. The Argument

Q1. For all $a$ and $x$, the only evidence for the claim that “$a$” refers to $x$ is behavior, e.g. pointing and using other linguistic expressions. (From Empiricism, §3.1)

Q2. For any amount of behavioral evidence, there will always be an object $y$ such that “$a$” could just as well refer to $y$ as to $x$, $y \neq x$, and the $x$- and $y$-interpretation entail that the same sentences are true.

a. Ex. Suppose you are field linguist encountering a new language. The natives use the word “gavigai” every time rabbits are nearby. Does “gavigai” refer to rabbit or to undetached rabbit parts or temporal slice of rabbithood? There is no behavioral evidence that could settle this issue.

b. Moreover, on any of these interpretations, the sentence “Gavigai!” is true if and only if a rabbit is present.

Q3. $\therefore$ For all $a$ and $x$, there will always be an object $y$ such that “$a$” could just as well refer to $y$ as to $x$, $y \neq x$, and the $x$- and $y$-interpretation entail that the same sentences are true. (From Q1, Q2)

Q4. If we are to fix reference between “$a$” and $x$, then we must use a theory/linguistic framework.

a. Theories are used to e.g. “say $x$ is different from or the same as $y$, or we say that there is a little or a lot of $x$ about $y$; to conceive of things as concrete or abstract, singular or plural, as masses or individuals [by] using pronouns, pluralizations, and certain alterations of vocabulary.” (O’Grady, p.66)

Q5. There are different theories/linguistic frameworks.

Q6. $\therefore$ For a given term “$a$” in a language $L$, there are different ways of fixing the reference of “$a$”, each of which is relative to an interpreter’s theory/linguistic framework. (From Q4, Q5)

Q7. For all $x$, it is reasonable to believe that $x$ exists if and only if our best theories entail that $x$ exists, i.e. our best theories fix the reference of some “$a$” to $x$ (Ontological Naturalism, §3.1)

Q8. $\therefore$ For all $x$, it is reasonable to believe that $x$ exists only relative to an interpreter’s theory/linguistic framework. (From Q6, Q8)

4. Devitt’s Objections

4.1. Commonsense objection

C1. If common sense is to be trusted, then facts and entities exist independently of our theories, concepts, minds, etc.

C2. Common sense is to be trusted, unless there are compelling arguments to abandon it.

C3. There are no compelling arguments to abandon the commonsense idea that facts and entities exist independently of our theories, concepts, minds, etc.

C4. $\therefore$ Facts and entities exist independently of our theories, concepts, minds, etc., i.e. realism is true. (From C1-C3)

C5. If realism is true, then relativism about facts is false.

C6. $\therefore$ Relativism about facts is false. (From C4, C5)

4.2. 1st Reply to the Commonsense Objection

1. Relativists and realists agree about commonsense claims, e.g. that electrons exist and dodos no longer do.

2. Relativists and realists debate the interpretation of the words “exists” and “truth.”

3. If common sense is to be trusted, then realists and antirealists should offer only vague interpretations of the words “exists” and “truth.”

4. Realists and antirealists should not offer only vague interpretations of these words.

5. $\therefore$ Common sense is not to be trusted in the realist-relativism debate. (From 1-4)

• In other words, the very nature of the realism/relativism debate provides a compelling argument to “abandon” (or at least go beyond) common sense.
4.3. 2nd Reply to the Commonsense Objection

1. Common sense is culturally relative.
2. \( \therefore \) If common sense is to be trusted in the realist-antirealist debate, then relativism is true. (From 1)
3. If relativism is true, the realism is false.
4. \( \therefore \) If common sense is to be trusted in the realist-antirealist debate, then realism is false. (From 2,3)

4.4. Explanatory Objection

E1. Our experiences are structured as if realism is true.
E2. That realism is true is the best explanation of why our experiences are so structured.
E3. It is more reasonable to believe that the best explanation of any fact is true, than any alternative explanation of the same fact.
E4. \( \therefore \) It is more reasonable to believe that realism is true than it is to believe that antirealism is true. (From E1-E3)