Hitting the Straw Man, Missing the Parade

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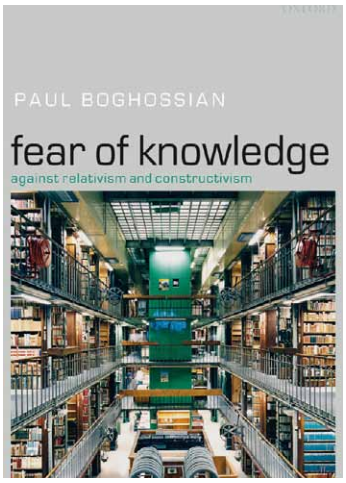
> Upshot • During the late 1990s' "Science Wars," the concept of "social construction" was hotly debated between postmodernist scholars and realist scientists. In this context, Paul Boghossian delivers a concise critique of a Rortyan constructivism. Yet in doing so, he excludes the majority of constructivisms and relativisms from his analysis, fails to engage in the existing literature on those arguments he analyses, and, occasionally, misreads his opponents.



Review of "Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism" by Paul Boghossian. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. ISBN 978-0-19-923041-9. 139 pages.

This unassuming book of a mere 130 pages has received considerable attention on the philosophical scene, with numerous reviews and two prestigious journals devoting a special issue to its arguments (Schmitt 2007; Boghossian 2008). Author Paul Boghossian, professor of philosophy at New York University, became known to a wider public through articles in *The Times Literary Supplement*, in which he commented on the now-historical "Sokal Hoax" of 1996 and fiercly attacked postmodernists (Sokal & Bricmont 1998; Boghossian 1996, 2001). It is this historical context of the late-1990s' "Science Wars" between postmodernists and realists, mainly within the United States, in which *Fear of Knowledge* is situated. For despite the grandeur of its subtitle, "Against Relativism and Constructivism," it is really an attempt to debunk a very specific brand of linguistic relativism: namely, the works of Richard Rorty.

Boghossian begins by taking issue with what he perceives to be a prevalent notion in postmodern humanities, the notion of "equal validity: There are many radically different, yet 'equally valid' ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them." (2) He sees both political (postcolonialism, emancipation) and intellectual causes at work behind this idea, and considers a social constructivism of knowledge to be its prevalent philosophical bedrock (6). This bedrock Boghossian hopes to dismantle.

To do so, he first outlines the "classical picture of knowledge" he intends to defend, with knowledge as justified true belief, and truth as the correspondence of propositions with facts. The classical picture posits objectivity for (1) facts, (2) justification, and (3) rational explanation. Accordingly, Boghossian distinguishes three types of his opponent, "social constructivism":

- Constructivism about Facts: "[a]ll facts are socially constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests" (22)
- Constructivism about Justification: "Facts of the form – information E justifies belief B – are not what they are independently of us and our social context" (22)
- Constructivism about Rational Explanation: "It is never possible to explain why we believe what we believe solely on the basis of our exposure to the relevant evidence; our contingent needs and interests must also be involved" (23).

These three types serve to structure the remainder of the book. For each, Boghossian first constructs what he considers to be the strongest possible argument for constructivism, to then dismantle that argument.

Ontological fact constructivism

Boghossian quickly dismisses a literal reading of the first type, fact constructivism, for three reasons: it is illogical that we could retroactively construct facts that predate us; the very concept "object" expresses independence of an observer; and if social construction is necessarily contingent, it is possible that two mutually contradicting facts (p and not-p) were simultaneously constructed, which again is illogical (38–41).

A subtler fact constructivism is the "Description Dependence of Facts" (28). The version put forward by Goodman and Putnam holds that reality does not have a structure "as such." It is human concepts that cut the shapes of facts out of "the worldly dough" like a "cookie cutter." Boghossian responds that the "worldly dough" itself constitutes a necessarily foundational fact, and that it might allow for very many, but not an *infinite* amount of, possible truthful redescriptions (32–38).

The "relational" description-dependence of Richard Rorty, however, escapes this critique. In Boghossian's interpretation,

Rorty holds that no description can be true in and of itself – it can only be true *relative* to a certain language game.

The traditional counterargument is that such an absolutist relativism is either self-contradictory or trivial: if everything is relative, we need not give reasons why we stick to our own language game rather than join the relativist's game. Boghossian disagrees – the relativist might give reasons for his language game that make sense in our own language game – but he dismisses Rorty nevertheless (54–57): if the relativist were to claim that there can only be absolute facts in the form "According to language game X, which I accept, it is true that p," the relativist would have to give good reasons why there can be absolute facts of this kind, but not of other kinds, and why we are in a better position to know this kind of facts rather than any other kinds. If the relativist were to hold even these facts to be relative, they would become illogical "infinitary facts" of the form "According to language game X, which I accept, there is a language game X1, which I accept, according to which there is a language game… etc. *ad infinitum*."

Epistemic constructivism

For the second type, epistemic "Constructivism of Justification," Boghossian again identifies Rorty as his main opponent, whose position he reconstructs as follows:

> "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 judgements 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 B*, but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C, which 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)" (73)

Now within analytic philosophy itself, epistemic relationism has found support in Richard Fumerton's "norm circularity" argument: according to our own standards of rationality, we cannot justify an epistemic system by recurring to that very system. However, if we try to justify our own epistemic system, we necessarily invoke its principles in the course of doing so (78–79).

Still, Boghossian rejects epistemic constructivism. Firstly, as regards epistemic pluralism, if there were potentially an infinite amount of alternative epistemic systems, then "(e)very epistemic system will have a possible alternative that contradicts it." And that would be illogical (91). (To clarify, Boghossian speaks about the *non-existence* of facts to judge epistemic systems, not the *unknowableness* of such facts. He does not provide a counter to the latter, sceptic claim.)

Secondly, as regards epistemic relationism (justifications can only be true relative to epistemic systems), one might argue that again, it is either self-contradictory or trivial. But again, Boghossian grants that the epistemic relativist might provide non-trivial reasons that are considered valid in our own system. His own critique begins with explicating "epistemic systems" as sets of fundamental *principles* whose validity cannot be deduced from other principles: for example, observation, deduction and induction are typical principles of the rationalist epistemic system. Now, on closer examination, Boghossian argues, such epistemic principles are simply *generalized* versions of *specific* epistemic judgements. And this creates a problem: the epistemic relationist denies that any *specific* judgement like "E justifies B" can be truth-apt; however, if he knows that his epistemic principles are basically also such non-truth-apt judgements, why would he endorse those principles? (87) Put differently, Boghossian does not see how a relativist could subscribe to an epistemic system whose principles he himself knows to be not truth-apt.

Boghossian's final line of argument against epistemic constructivism tries to defuse Fumerton's norm circularity with the concept of "blind entitlement": "each thinker is entitled to use the epistemic system he finds himself with, without first having to supply an antecedent justification" – because otherwise, we would never be able even to begin arguing (99). From this surprisingly pragmatic twist, Boghossian concludes: "Fumerton's claim ... is true only in the special, albeit important, case where we have *legitimately* come to doubt the correctness of our own principles." (100) In other words, norm circularity only becomes a problem should we encounter an *actual* alternative epistemic system that is coherent and that raises legitimate doubt in our own system, with significant evidence for its superiority (101). And Boghossian sees no convincing evidence for such an encounter. (Who could judge on what criteria that doubt is "legitimate" or evidence "significant," Boghossian does not explain.)

Explanatory constructivism

Boghossian's critique of the third type of constructivism is by far the shortest and weakest part of the book. To remind ourselves: explanatory constructivism holds that evidence alone never suffices to explain why humans hold certain beliefs. Boghossian concedes right away: "In addition to exposure to the relevant evidence, we would need to have an interest in the question at issue, the conceptual apparatus with which to grasp the evidence and the raw intelligence to compute its relevance." (112)[1] But beyond that, he wonders: "Couldn't my seeming to see a cat on the roof fully explain why I believe that the cat is on the roof on some occasion?" (113)

Here, his main opponent is no longer Rorty, but the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK), specifically Bloor, Kuhn and Duhem. As founder of the "Strong Programme" in SSK, David Bloor argued that SSK should not only study the social institutions of science, but also why and how scientists come to hold certain beliefs as knowledge. Such a strong SSK would be "*impartial* with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure. Both sides of these dichotomies will require explanation"; and it would be "*symmetrical* in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs" (Bloor 1991: 7).

1| Nota bene, this concession is already tantamount to accepting many 'weak' versions of epistemic relationism and explanatory constructivism.

Boghossian counters that impartiality or symmetry in regard to truth would miss how different beliefs are justified differently: that the colour orange is visually more like the colour red than the colour blue is "*intrinsically* credible or self-evident"; in contrast, to justify that the earth is round, not flat, requires significant amounts of data and argument. Furthermore, a symmetry of rationality would provide no justification for *why* evidence would not sometimes suffice to cause our beliefs, nor allow us to separate justified beliefs and unjustified prejudices; finally, it would be self-contradictory when applied to itself (117–118).

In contrast to Bloor's "strong" symmetry postulate, a weak explanatory constructivism would hold that evidence can factor into the explanation of people's beliefs. However, it is never enough: "any evidence that we might possess necessarily *underdetermines* the specific belief that we arrive at on its basis." (118) Boghossian finds a first version of this in Thomas Kuhn's concept of scientific paradigms and paradigm shifts – say, from Newtonian mechanics to Einstein's relativity theory.

What makes Kuhn an explanatory constructivist is that he considers competing paradigms to be "incommensurable" – that is, they cannot be compared in terms of accuracy. To this Boghossian primarily counters that Kuhn was making an empirical argument about actual scientists, not a philosophical, normative argument about logical necessities as regards the explanation of beliefs (123).

The second version of weak explanatory constructivism Boghossian tackles is the so-called "Quine-Duhem thesis." Pierre Duhem noted that an observation contradicting a theory does not immediately tell us *what* we have to revise: the theory itself, our experimental setup, etc. W. V. O. Quine observed that on a purely logical level, any observational evidence for a theoretical claim can be consistent with the falsity of that claim. Boghossian counters that despite the validity of these arguments *in principle*, in any *concrete* situation, based on the evidence, a certain revision or theory will always be more plausible than others (128).

Missing the parade

From a constructivist standpoint, the most obvious shortcoming of *Fear of Knowledge* is its overselling subtitle: "Against Relativism and Constructivism." At its core, a more apt version would have been "A Reply to Rorty." With brief remarks, Boghossian disregards the vast majority of constructivist (and relativist) positions. For instance, by excluding all necessary constructivisms (like Kantian Aprioris) from his analysis, none of his arguments pertain to any cognitively arguing constructivism (17). Thus, Boghossian's conclusion that he "failed to find any good arguments for constructivist views" (129) largely rests on the fact that he did not engage with very many of them.

To be fair, it would be a tough call for any author to deliver a fully-fledged refutation of all varieties of constructivism (*and* relativism) in 130 pages. Boghossian's focus on Rortyan description-dependence creates a clear, concise text that is accessible to a broad audience – no small merit. But even where Boghossian does focus, accessibility is bought with an unsatisfying lack of detail. As reviewers otherwise sympathetic to Boghossian have already pointed out, in many cases, Boghossian addresses neither the amendments his opponents have made in later texts, nor complications to his arguments pointed out by other philosophers (Siegel 2007). A five-page reading of Thomas Kuhn simply cannot do justice to Kuhn's later subtle reworkings of the incommensurability thesis, to say nothing of the vast literature in the history and philosophy of science on the same matter (Bird 2010).

More disconcerting are several significant misreadings. Take the case of Bloor (1991): his argument is by no means constructivist, as Boghossian claims; quite the contrary, Bloor is a staunch materialist. Bloor's "symmetry postulate" is about the *empirical* explanation of *empirically* held beliefs by scientists. It is perfectly in tune with the postulate to explain beliefs regarding colour vision with our biological vision apparatus and beliefs regarding the shape of the earth with the accumulation of data and argument, as well as to explain the holding of certain beliefs with evidence alone, or to apply a symmetrical sociology of science to itself. The point Bloor makes is simply this: if we want to explain why scientist A arrived at belief a1 and scientist B arrived at belief b1, and today we hold belief b1 to be true, we should not fall for a Whig history and say "scientist B obviously had good evidence and reason, scientist A was obviously all blinded by ideology and personal interest;" rather, we should investigate both epistemic and pragmatic reasons for both scientists to explain how each came to believe what each believed.

The same holds true at least in part for Boghossian's reading of Rorty. Indeed, absolute description-dependence – when read through a dualistic representationalist/correspondationalist lens – leads to logic absurdities. But that misses the whole point that the project of Rorty is to *replace* a representationalist dualism of facts *versus* descriptions/observations/propositions with a thoroughly pragmatist account. By necessity, his conceptualisation of "knowledge" and "truth" cannot be about "correspondence" with any "facts," and later Rorty explicitly held that "truth" is a concept without any substantive content. Even if one does not subscribe to Rorty's pragmatism, it would be easy to show how description-dependence read through a nondualist ontology, coherence theory of truth, or a non-naïve replacement of truth with viability would evade the absurdities Boghossian points out. Ironically, Boghossian appears to be so entrenched in his own paradigm as to be unable to grasp that sense could be made of the positions he opposes from within another paradigm.

Hitting the straw man

My final quarrel with Boghossian is that he constructs himself a very convenient straw man to dismantle. As a comparison with Ian Hacking's (1999) careful study of contemporary varieties of social constructivism would show, the three types of social constructivism Boghossian attacks essentially live exclusively on the pages of *Fear of Knowledge*. For instance, Boghossian's critique of epistemic relationism only works by describing epistemic systems as sets of epistemic principles, a description Boghossian develops from a reading of Wittgenstein. Yet Rorty actually dismissed the notion of "principles" as necessary or fruit-

ful components of "webs of belief" (Rorty 1991: 66).

Throughout, Boghossian forces a principled, normative, absolutist position on social constructivism – showing that such a position taken to its logical extremes becomes absurd. But with the notable exception of Rorty and Goodman, the authors he attacks do not make any absolutist claims; they make descriptive claims about the empirical contingencies of human knowledge. Indeed, Boghossian rejects Kuhn for the very reason that he makes an empirical rather than philosophical argument – only to switch to an empirical rather than philosophical argument himself to debunk Duhem and Quine.

With these rhetorical moves, Boghossian claims all moderated middle ground for himself, so that practically all empirically and pragmatically arguing constructivisms would weirdly count on his side. This is biased since the goal of many constructivists is likewise just to demonstrate the necessary absurdity and dogmatism of the classic epistemic position taken to the extreme, e.g. a naive positivism or the hunt for absolute certainty by the likes of Husserl and Russell.

Conclusion

In the end, it would be unfair to judge an author on account of the book one wishes he had written rather than the book he wrote. If Boghossian were ever to publish a comprehensive refutation of the varieties of relativism and constructivism, including nondualist, coherentist, and radical constructivist fashionings, I would love to read it – if only because his rigour would certainly benefit in irritating less thorough constructivist positions. Alas, Boghossian did not write such a book. He wrote *Fear of Knowledge*: a short attack on a somewhat distorted and misunderstood Rorty.

So, in tune with Rorty, my strongest endorsement for the book would be a pragmatic one: reading it provides a formidable health check for the argumentative muscles one would have to employ during an encounter with a good analytic philosopher such as Boghossian.

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