

Incoherence in Epistemic Relativism

TAYLOR-GREY MILLER

I. Introduction

In “Epistemic Relativism,” Mark Kalderon defends a view that has become increasingly popular across various academic disciplines. He wrote this article in response to Paul Boghossian’s book *Fear of Knowledge*, in which epistemic relativism is criticized and dismissed as incoherent. Kalderon argues that Boghossian does not accurately characterize epistemic relativism resulting in a hasty dismissal of the view, and when properly characterized, epistemic relativism avoids any of the problems that Boghossian attributes to it. But, while Kalderon’s re-characterization allows him to sidestep Boghossian’s criticisms, it introduces different but equally problematic considerations. And because of these, Kalderon’s relativism likewise dissolves into incoherence. The problem here, however, is not just trading one incoherent theory for another, but also the temptation to inappropriately dismiss Boghossian’s work.

In this paper, I will present Boghossian’s characterization and criticism of epistemic relativism followed by Kalderon’s objections. Then I will demonstrate that Kalderon’s argument fails on two accounts: (1) it is incoherent to suggest that one begins with relativized particular judgments, and (2) relativizing epistemic justification to a social agreement presupposes some degree of objectivity. As a result of these flaws, Kalderon’s

Taylor-Grey Miller is a senior majoring in philosophy at Brigham Young University. His primary philosophical interests include logic, philosophy of language, and early modern philosophy. After graduation he plans to attend law school and obtain a J.D. This essay placed first in the 2014 David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Contest.

relativism should be dismissed as an incoherent theory and rejected as a legitimate alternative to epistemic relativism as represented and criticized by Boghossian.

II. Boghossian and Epistemic Relativism

Boghossian defines epistemic relativism as the conjunction of three major premises (84):

- (1) *Epistemic non-absolutism*: There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies.
- (2) *Epistemic relationalism*: If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not understand utterances of the form "E justifies belief B" as expressing the claim that E justifies belief B, but rather as the claim that *according to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B*.
- (3) *Epistemic Pluralism*: There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts can prove or justify one of these systems as more correct than any of the others.

On this model, a judgment of the form, "Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations," must not be understood to express Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations but as expressing Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations according to some epistemic system, Science, which the speaker accepts. Judgments of the first form, because they make un-relativized claims, must be considered false. Boghossian focuses on epistemic relationalism and pluralism and demonstrates that there are strong reasons to reject both positions. I will present each argument in turn, but first, some terminological distinctions will be introduced.

First, a proposition is *epistemically justified* if there are sufficient considerations that weigh in favor of the proposition's truth (Kalderson 226). For example, Galileo used his telescope to observe that there were mountains on the moon, and because this weighed in favor of his

belief that there are mountains on the moon, the observation served as epistemic justification for his belief.¹

Second, a *particular epistemic judgment* is a proposition that connects an item of information with a belief that it epistemically justifies (226). These speak of particular people, beliefs, and evidential conditions. Boghossian gives the following example: “If it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is *prima facie* justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon” (Boghossian 85).

Third, an *epistemic principle* is a universal claim about justification generalized from a particular epistemic judgment that connects an item of information with a belief (Kalderon 226). So, while particular judgments do this by reference to specific people, beliefs, and evidential conditions, epistemic principles do so without reference to any particulars. For example: “(Observation) For any observational proposition *p*, if it visually seems to *S* that *p* and circumstantial conditions *D* obtain, then *S* is *prima facie* justified in believing *p*” (Boghossian 85). And, finally, an *epistemic system* is a set of epistemic principles. We now turn to Boghossian’s arguments.

Boghossian attacks epistemic relationalism by drawing attention to the relationship between particular epistemic judgments and epistemic principles. Recall that the relativist claims that there are no absolute epistemic justifications. Therefore, particular epistemic judgments can only be justified by reference to some epistemic system. Since these systems are comprised of epistemic principles, particular judgments can only be justified by reference to a system’s general principles—they are justified if they follow from the epistemic system’s general principles. This presents a difficult problem for the relativist, who claims that all judgments of the form “if it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is *prima facie* justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon” are false, since they are claims about absolute justification. These, however, function as the source from which the general principles are derived. If the instance from which the principle is generalized is false, then the general principle must also be false. For example, consider the two following propositions:

(1) Penguins can fly.

(2) All birds can fly.

¹Although what constitutes a sufficient consideration for justification may vary, a discussion of such is not important here.

If (1) turns out to be false then surely (2) is false since the instance from which it is derived likewise functions as its counter example. In like manner, each absolute particular judgment refutes the epistemic principle derived from it (Boghossian 86).

It then follows from this view that the epistemic system would be comprised of entirely false principles. And given that acceptance of some epistemic system is central to the relativist's position, the relativist must defend why any agent should accept a system of uniformly false principles. If one adopts epistemic relationalism, one must maintain that one's epistemic system is uniformly false, which undermines the normative authority of that system.

It is worth pausing here to note that the relativist may disagree with Boghossian's characterization of the view, and in fact Kalderon does. But, there is good reason to think about relativism in the terms that Boghossian provides: it represents the intuitive view of how we form judgments. When someone makes a judgment, say about a stapler being on a table, the individual making the judgment will look at the stapler and say that he sees it sitting there, and he will assume that the fact that he sees it is a good enough reason for others to believe that it is sitting there. So while a more sophisticated form of relativism may not agree that particular judgments are absolute, the intuitive view of how we make judgments provides at least *prima facie* support for Boghossian's characterization.

Next, Boghossian targets epistemic pluralism, the view that there are "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" (85). His argument is as follows: Suppose there are two epistemic systems, C1 and C2, and that these systems are contradictory pairs. If C1 maintains that E justifies belief B, then C2 maintains that it is not the case that E justifies belief B. When assigning truth values to these propositions, the relativist in the case of C1 would assign a false truth value to "E justifies belief B" since it is an absolute claim about justification. The opposite truth value then would be assigned to the proposition represented by C2, making "it is not the case that E justifies belief B" true. If we agree with the relativist that C1 makes a false assertion on the grounds that it is an absolute judgment, then we must maintain at the same time that C2 makes a true one. And wouldn't this be grounds for saying that C2 is in some respect more correct than C1? Given that any possible epistemic system would have a possible contradictory alternative, it seems, then, that on the relativist's account we can make judgments about which systems are more correct than others (91). Thus, it is difficult to see how pluralism could be true. Therefore, given the incoherence of

both epistemic relationalism and pluralism, epistemic relativism should be rejected.

III. Epistemic Relativism Defended

Contrary to Boghossian, Kalderon maintains that epistemic relativism is not, in fact, incoherent because (1) the epistemic relativist need not begin with particular judgments about absolute justification, and (2) justification need not be tied to the general principles of an epistemic system.

Remember, Boghossian asserts that for the relativist all judgments of the form “E justifies belief B” are false, since they are about absolute justification. We begin with particular judgments about absolute justification and from them draw relativist conclusions. But Kalderon notes that “no epistemic relativist worth his salt” would agree that we begin with *absolute particular judgments*, but would instead suggest that we begin with *relativized particular judgments* (231).

Kalderon illustrates this point with the following example. Motion or rest can only be attributed to an object relative to a spatiotemporal framework. If I claim that some body is in motion, it is implied by the relevant conversational framework that the body is in motion relative to some spatiotemporal framework. The thought about motion is not that all particular judgments about motion are uniformly false, but all *particular absolute judgments* about motion are uniformly false. In like manner, epistemic relativism requires only that all particular propositions about absolute epistemic justification be false. So, if I make the judgment “E justifies belief B” it is conversationally implied that I mean that it is only true relative to the epistemic system that I adhere to, and I avoid any commitment to absolute justification. Since I begin not with uniformly false but relatively true particular judgments, the principles from which they are generalized are not uniformly false.

In similar fashion, Boghossian’s case against pluralism collapses. Take contradictory epistemic systems C1 and C2. If one stipulates that the judgments are justified relative to the system, conflicting principles, such as *E justifies belief B* and *it is not the case that E justifies belief B*, never actually conflict, and the truth value of one never entails the denial of the truth value of the other. It appears then that if the relativist can get away with making initially relativized judgments then they can dodge Boghossian’s criticisms (Kalderon 232).

Moreover, Kalderon contends, justification need not be tied to the general principles of an epistemic system. When presenting epistemic relativism, Boghossian characterizes it in terms of an epistemic system

that an individual accepts, but given the context of a discussion about social constructivism, Kalderon maintains that it would be more relevant and less problematic to characterize it in terms of an epistemic system that a community agrees upon (234). If we were to do so, epistemic systems would not be understood as sets of epistemic principles individuals accept, but as sets of epistemic principles that communities accept. As a result, epistemic justification would not ultimately be relative to the *epistemic principles* agreed upon but to the community's *agreement* upon those principles (235). Justification obtains then insofar as a community agrees upon some epistemic system. So, in the case of Galileo, only if his contemporaries agreed that observation is a valid epistemic principle, could Galileo be *prima facie* justified in his belief that there were mountains on the moon. One then would not derive the truth-value of a general epistemic judgment from a particular epistemic principle of which it is a generalization. On Kalderon's view, the relativist may begin with an epistemic contract which outlines the system's principles and from them, determine what particular judgments are justified. Relationalism, therefore, need not risk circularity, nor risk asserting uniformly false or normatively impotent epistemic systems (236).

IV. Problems with Kalderon's Defense

As we have seen, Kalderon's defense relies on two premises: (1) the relativist begins not with absolute particular judgments from which they draw relativistic conclusions, but with relative particular judgments. This enables epistemic relativism to dodge Boghossian's argument about the universal generalization of false particular judgments; and (2) justification is relative not to general epistemic principles but to the agreement a community reaches about them. However, I will demonstrate that Kalderon's relativism likewise dissolves into incoherence and does not provide the epistemic relativist with an option any more appealing than the one Boghossian criticizes.

Relativized particular judgments presuppose an epistemic system. For example, judgments of the form *E justifies belief B* for Kalderon must read *E justifies belief B according to the epistemic system that I accept*. You cannot have a particular judgment without a system already in place. I mentioned earlier, however, that epistemic systems are sets of general epistemic principles, and that these principles are generalizations from particular epistemic judgments. The system then is generated from the particular epistemic judgments.

But can you have a system already in place if the system's generation depends on generalizing from particular judgments? The conditions for creating an epistemic system occlude the possibility of beginning with relativized particular judgments.

Kalderon may, however, object to such a conclusion through an appeal to the second premise. If justification refers to an agreement that a community reaches, it is plausible that prior to making any particular judgments, there would have been a type of social contract agreed upon by the community of adherents which would determine what principles would constitute the epistemic system. The adherent would then identify what particular judgments conform to this pre-determined collection of principles and would be able to make relativized particular judgments without any risk of assuming that the system derived from the relativized judgments. But this response, as well as the general notion of agreement serving as the locus of justification, has a number of problems.

Consider this hypothetical epistemic town hall meeting. When deciding upon which principles to accept, what would incline the body of persons to select one set of principles as opposed to another set of principles? Either there are no considerations that weigh in favor of selecting one above another or there would be some considerations that favored the adoption of certain principles. If the first is true, why would anyone care about any epistemic system? Any considerations would be arbitrary and any resulting knowledge could only resemble some subjective preference. Knowledge would simply be a matter of taste akin to decorating the Christmas tree or one's living room. If this were the case, then justification, as is here discussed, would cease to be a meaningful concept.

Suppose instead that there are considerations that weigh in some principles' favor—perhaps they have some pragmatic value or align better with the vision of what an epistemic system should be. In such a case, does this not imply there is something objective about them? When a legislative body meets to discuss what laws should be enacted, each member of the body will come with presuppositions about what kinds of laws should and should not be enacted. The legislative body as a whole will then enact laws in virtue of these presuppositions. In the case of the epistemic town hall meeting, the presuppositions come in the form of pre-existing particular epistemic judgments. One member may say that every time he sees a stapler sitting on a table—given that he is in a healthy state of mind—that the stapler is, in fact, sitting on the table. He will then suggest to the body as a whole that they should adopt the principle that every time someone sees some object, they are justified in believing that that object exists.

The particular judgments then function as reasons for adopting certain epistemic principles. And these reasons must have objective content for they make claim on the other members of the legislative body. But for Kalderon's sake, suppose that these reasons do not make claim on the other members of the body, that a reason for one member does not constitute a valid reason for another. In order to justify such a position, the relativist must give reasons which support that conclusion, reasons which he will presuppose to have universal sway. Consider the following argument:

- (1) Particular epistemic judgments function as reasons for adopting certain epistemic principles.
- (2) Reasons can only provide justification relative to an epistemic system.
- (3) Therefore, a reason to accept an epistemic principle for one member does not necessarily constitute a valid reason for another.
- (4) In order to justify (2) the relativist must provide reasons for accepting (2).
- (5) The reasons for accepting (2) make claim either (a) on others regardless of their epistemic view, or (b) only on those who share their epistemic view.
- (6) If (a), then (2) is false.
- (7) If (b), then any reasons to assent to (2) will not constitute a valid reason for the members who do not share their epistemic view, and they are justified in denying the truth of (2).
- (8) One is therefore justified in claiming that reasons make claim on others regardless of their epistemic view.
- (9) Therefore, particular epistemic judgments have objective content.

Now Kalderon may take issue with the moves from (7) to (9) by arguing that (7) can only provide relativized justification for (8). Only according to my epistemic system am I justified in claiming that reasons make claim on others regardless of their epistemic system; it could not serve as a compelling reason for Kalderon to abandon his position. But

this raises a deeper problem for Kalderon's relativism. If it follows from epistemic relativism that I can be justified in rejecting it then why should anyone care about it in the first place? There is something dubious about a position that justifies its own rejection.

Moreover, neither the pre-existing particular judgment nor any other reasons to which the council member makes reference in making his case for some principle can be put forth as referring to some epistemic system, for he is there with others to determine what that epistemic system should be. If, prior to the social determination of an epistemic system, one must assume a relativized but universally accepted epistemic system, one may ask how that epistemic system was determined. If done by some form of social contract, the relativist risks implying an infinite regress of epistemic town hall meetings; unless, of course, the epistemic systems were chosen on the basis of things which did not make use of justification, such as personal taste. But this would risk the absurdity articulated in the first objection. One simply must begin with non-relativized particular judgments and from them generalize to the principles he thinks should constitute his epistemic system.

Hence, Kalderon appears to be caught on the horns of a dilemma; either risk absurdity or in arguing for his position, assume the objectivity of some forms of justification. In order to preserve some form of relativism, Kalderon may grant that there are facts about justification but maintain that facts themselves are social constructions. And by making such an appeal he could avoid the issues with objectivity. The member of the town hall meeting who states that every time he sees a stapler sitting on a table, the stapler is, in fact, sitting on the table, would not be asserting some objective ontological fact but rather asserting an ontological fact that could not obtain independent of his and others' contingent needs and interests. But how is this plausible? It would appear ludicrous to say that we just make facts out of contingent needs; that somehow Isaac Newton's need for an attractive force is what made facts about gravity obtain.

Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and Social Hope* gives an account of how this may be possible. We can construct facts by adopting certain ways of talking which describe the fact. He states:

We describe giraffes as we do, as giraffes, because it suits our needs and interests. We speak a language that includes the word 'giraffe' because it suits our purposes to do so. The same goes for words like 'organ', 'cell', 'atom', and so on—the names of the parts of things out of which giraffes are made so to speak. All the descriptions we give of things are suited for our purposes. (xxvi)

We have words like “giraffe” and “atom” because some need or interest we have makes it convenient to linguistically divide up the world in a particular way which creates certain facts. Similar to our making constellations, we draw lines around or connect the dots of the picture of reality according to what seems most practical to us, but were we to have different needs or interests we might just as likely connect the dots in a different way (Goodman 156). For example, if our town hall council member or all of them for that matter were blind and did not need to see, then visual observation as a fact about epistemic justification would not necessarily be required and therefore never need to obtain for them. language.²

There are, however, a couple of issues with this alternative. First, this view raises questions about the status of contingent needs and their relationship to what we construct. Our needs and interests must exist prior to and independent of our constructions, since the constructions are motivated by them.³ This introduces the following dilemma. Either our needs are non-constructed reality or they are constructed reality. If they constitute non-constructed facts about reality then the claim that all facts about reality are constructed necessarily fails. If our needs are, in fact, constructed reality, our needs are somehow indicative of a deeper constructivism introducing a layering of constructivism that results in an infinite regress.

Recall visual observation. If it were a constructed fact about justification that it weighed in favor of believing in a proposition, we could peel back the construction and see that need that motivated it, namely a need to see the things that we believe exist. Since this is also constructed reality we could peel it back and see what need motivated its construction, namely the need to see the things that we believe exist, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Additionally, this view seems to endorse factual contradictions. Suppose two societies each with fundamentally different needs and interests. The first (S1) has need X and the second (S2) has need Y. S1 then constructs fact F, but because S2 has need Y they construct fact $\sim F$. Since needs are a sufficient condition for the construction of a fact, both

²While this is a somewhat terse description of the position given constraints of the paper’s length, a fuller articulation may be found in Nelson Goodman’s “Notes on the Well Made World,” in *Starmaking: Realism, Anti-Realism, and Irrealism*, ed. Peter McCormic (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996).

³I’m indebted to David Jensen for this line of argumentation.

F and \sim F could obtain simultaneously. For example, Copernicus could maintain that the Sun is the center of the universe and his detractors could simultaneously maintain that the Earth is the center of the universe, and both would be talking about a fact of the matter. But how could it be the case that the Earth is both the center of the universe and not the center of the universe at the same time? This is simply an untenable option. Constructivism then is not a viable escape for Kalderon.

V. Conclusion

The epistemic relativist who takes Kalderon's approach is, therefore, left with two options: (1) concede that he cannot begin with non-relativized particular judgments and remain susceptible to Boghossian's initial criticisms; or (2) admit that knowledge is simply a matter of taste and risk forfeiting the normative force of epistemic systems. So while Kalderon may have succeeded in giving an alternative to the type of relativism Boghossian responds to, it is not clear that his is any more appealing or coherent. Kalderon's relativism should then be dismissed as an incoherent theory and rejected as a legitimate alternative to epistemic relativism as represented and criticized by Boghossian.

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