

## Précis of *Fear of Knowledge*

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### 1 Abstract

*Fear of Knowledge* was in many ways an exercise in foolhardiness. It was to be a short book, accessible to the general reader, that would treat some of the trickiest issues in the foundations of the theory of knowledge, but that would nevertheless not seriously shortchange the subtleties that they involve. Someone should have warned me.

The main impetus for the book came from the widespread and often uncritical acceptance within the Academy, especially within the humanities and the humanistic social sciences, of a doctrine I dub

*Equal Validity*: There are many radically different, [mutually incompatible], yet “equally valid” ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them.<sup>1</sup>

I identify three constructivist views that could help justify belief in Equal Validity. They are

*Constructivism about Facts*: ...All facts are socially constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests.

*Constructivism about Justification*: Facts of the form information E justifies belief B... are socially constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests.

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<sup>1</sup> p. 2. The phrase “mutually incompatible” is left out of the initial formulation of the doctrine to keep matters simple at the beginning (see footnote 5, p. 5).

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*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 evidence; our contingent needs and interests must also be invoked.

I discuss each of these theses critically. Since my commentators in this symposium concentrate on the constructivist view of justification, I will do so as well.

With regard to this thesis, I argue first that virtually any constructivist thesis will have to assume a relativistic form on pain of incoherence. Since the constructions in question are socially contingent, it looks as though one society may construct the fact that  $p$  even while another one constructs the fact that not- $p$ . But it couldn't be the case both that  $p$  and not- $p$ . Hence, we should expect the constructivist to say that there can be no such thing as the fact that  $p$  simpliciter but only facts of the form 'p relative to perspective M.'<sup>2</sup>

I next supply a template for generating a relativistic view of a domain and I apply it to the epistemic case. In Chap. 5 I outline what I take to be a compelling prima facie argument for such an epistemic relativism, based on the inevitable norm-circularity of any justification that we might offer for our epistemic system, if that system were challenged. Chapter 6 argues that, the prima facie appeal of epistemic relativism notwithstanding, there are powerful arguments against its ultimate cogency. Chapter 7 attempts to show us the way out of this antinomy, by outlining a line of argument by which the pro-relativist argument might be resisted.

Between them, my commentators take up all the central themes of these three chapters.

Crispin Wright questions my formulation of relativistic views in general and of epistemic relativism in particular.

John MacFarlane claims that the very set-up of the issue about epistemic relativism is mishandled. He thinks that once we get clear about what an epistemic principle must be, we will either not be tempted at all by my prima facie argument for epistemic relativism or that a certain form of epistemic relativism will emerge as inevitable and totally untouched by my arguments.

Finally, Ernest Sosa makes several objections to my attempt to respond to the pro-relativist argument.

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<sup>2</sup> The statement of this simple argument in the hardcover version got badly mangled at proof stage. There is a better statement in the paperback version—see the added footnote on page 41.