

## Discussion

# Reply to Amini and Caldwell, “Boghossian’s Refutation of Relativism”

**Paul Boghossian**

New York University  
paul.boghossian@nyu.edu

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### Abstract

Majid Amini and Christopher Caldwell charge that I misconstrue the relation between relativism and constructivism, on the one hand, and between relativism and skepticism, on the other. In this brief response, I rebut their charges.

### Keywords

constructivism; relativism; skepticism; epistemic systems

## 1. Overall Argument

According to Majid Amini and Christopher Caldwell:

Boghossian attempts to argue against the challenge of epistemic relativism in his *Fear of Knowledge*. The argument, in outline, attacks relativism by connecting it to constructivism and, by showing the untenability of constructivism, relativism is *ipso facto* rendered unsustainable. Two major problems exist within Boghossian’s discussion. First, constructivism does not entail relativism. Second, and the real focus of this paper, the argument conflates relativism and skepticism and does not thereby clearly articulate the relationship between these two different epistemic stances. (2011, 79–80)

According to the authors, then, I argue as follows.

1. Constructivism entails relativism.
2. Constructivism is false. Therefore,
3. Relativism is false.

They repeat this attribution several times over the course of their paper. They say that they will argue that my premise 1 is false and that I misconstrue the relationship between relativism and skepticism. They might have saved themselves a lot of trouble by just pointing out that the argument they attribute to me commits the fallacy of denying the antecedent, and been done with it.

Fortunately for me—and perhaps also for the authors—I don't argue in the way they describe but rather as follows:

- A. Constructivism (of a specified sort) entails relativism.
- B. Relativism is false. Therefore,
- C. Constructivism (of a specified sort) is false.

Their two main claims remain relevant to this corrected account of the overall argument I was pursuing.

## 2. Constructivism and Relativism

The authors laboriously point out that constructivism *per se* does not entail relativism.

Clearly, it is not the case that a commitment to constructivism entails a commitment to relativism. ... In *What We Owe to Each Other*, T. M. Scanlon provides just such an account. Scanlon draws upon the contractualist tradition within morality to formulate a justification of moral obligation as objective, non-relativistic in nature ... The fact that the obligations are constructed does not make them relativistic. ... Ultimately, constructivism does not entail relativism, which is a major problem for Boghossian's argument as he connects epistemic relativism to constructivism. (2011, 91–2)

In insisting on this point, the authors are merely echoing what I myself say repeatedly. For example, I say:

The ordinary notion of a constructed fact is perfectly compatible with the idea that a particular construction was forced, that we had no choice but to construct that fact. According to Kant, for example, the world we experience is constructed by our minds to obey certain fundamental laws, among them the laws of geometry and arithmetic. But Kant didn't think that we were free to do otherwise. On the contrary, he thought that any conscious mind was constrained to construct a world which obeys those laws. (Boghossian 2006, 17–8)

So, yes, constructivism about arithmetic *per se* does not entail that there can be many conflicting arithmetics, each equally valid.

But I went on to emphasize that the sort of social construction theorist I was talking about

is not typically interested in such mandated constructions. He wants to emphasize the *contingency* of the facts we have constructed, to show that they needn't have obtained had we chosen otherwise. (2006, 18)

Which is why, as I explained,

... a typical social construction claim will involve not merely the claim that a particular fact was built by a social group, but that it was constructed in a way that reflects their contingent needs and interests, so that had they not had those needs and interests they might well not have constructed that fact. (2006, 17)

I come back to this point later in the book:

As I pointed out in the last chapter, it is in principle possible to combine a constructivism about a given fact P with the view that we were somehow metaphysically constrained to construct P ... But as I also pointed out, the social constructivist is not interested in such mandated constructions. His whole point is to emphasize the dependence of any fact on our *contingent* social needs and interests, so that if our needs and interests had been different, then so, too, would have been the relevant facts. (2006, 39)

The central claim that I wanted to emphasize is that, for the sort of social constructivist that I was interested in, namely, the sort who thinks that while one society might have constructed the fact that P, another society might have simultaneously constructed the fact that not-P, relativism is unavoidable. It is needed in order to avoid a commitment to saying that in one and the same world, both P and not-P. This is achieved, on the view I describe, by insisting that we may only talk about 'P relative to a community C'.

Incidentally, the authors also seem to misunderstand which thesis I meant by "relativism." The doctrine of Equal Validity is not meant to be the definition of relativism. I give quite complicated definitions of relativism, both moral and epistemic. Equal validity is supposed to be a consequence of relativism, not its main content.

### **3. Relativism and Skepticism**

We next come to the second main claim made by Amini and Caldwell, that I systematically conflate relativism with skepticism.

[Boghossian] connects relativism and skepticism in a subtle way. His descriptions of relativism appear to entail a commitment to skepticism and his arguments against relativism are arguments against skepticism. ...

The textual evidence for Boghossian's failure occurs in two basic categories. The first category includes passages meant to be descriptions of relativism. These passages, however, are either actually descriptions of skepticism and not relativism or are at least consistent with skepticism. The second category includes passages

that are meant to be arguments against relativism. However, these are also either actually against skepticism only or at least arguments against skepticism as well as relativism. (2011, 92–3)

Amini and Caldwell's support for these claims struck me as very poor. It would be too tedious to go through each and every one of the passages they discuss. I'll just comment on the one they say is most important for their purposes.

They cite my description of our ordinary epistemic system:

Between them Observation, Deduction and Induction specify a significant portion, even if not the whole of, the *fundamental* epistemic principles of our ordinary, "post-Galilean" epistemic system. ... By a "fundamental" principle I mean a principle whose correctness cannot be derived from the correctness of other epistemic principles. (2006, 67)

They comment:

This passage is probably the most important passage in illustrating how the positions of relativism and skepticism become conflated in Boghossian's work. The passage entails that there is no justification possible for a fundamental principle. That Boghossian denies the possibility of such justification is evident in his discussion of "blind entitlement." As he states: "All parties to this dispute should agree that each thinker is blindly entitled to his own epistemic system—each thinker is entitled to use the epistemic system he finds himself with, without first having to supply an antecedent justification of the claim that it is a correct system." ... The position is not that some aspects of an epistemic system are not in need of justification, but that such justification is impossible. Boghossian, thus, is clearly committed to the idea that some aspects of an epistemic system cannot be justified. The denial of the possibility of justification of a fundamental principle is precisely the claim that a skeptic would endorse, not a relativist. (2011, 94–5)

This is confused in at least two ways. First, they seem to be faulting me for embracing a "skeptical" view of an epistemic system, rather than a relativist one. But why would I embrace a relativist view? I am supposed to be arguing *against* relativism.

Second, the position I describe can hardly be called "skeptical." It's the view that, with respect to the fundamental principles that make up our epistemic system, we are entitled to use them without first supplying an explicit justification for them. This is the view that some philosophers, Harry Field, for example, describe by saying that we have a "default justification" for employing such principles (see Field 2000).

To say that we are entitled, or justified, in using an epistemic principle without having first to supply an explicit argument for it doesn't sound like a skeptical view to me. Rather, it sounds like the opposite. Amini and Caldwell may have been misled on this point by virtue of not recognizing a distinction

that many philosophers in epistemology make nowadays: between being justified in believing/infering something (an epistemic status) and being able to provide a justification for that belief/inference (an activity). There are many contexts in which it is crucial to recognize such a distinction, the present context being one of them.

I did not see anything in the rest of their discussion that shed any more light than this. It is obvious that the main argument I supply on behalf of the epistemic relativist is an argument in which skepticism plays an important role. It is basically an argument to the effect that any conflict between two competing epistemic systems will be rationally irresolvable. On this basis, the relativist is then able to argue that the only way to avoid an intolerable skepticism about our ability to know epistemic truths is to go relativist about them. This is a classic form of argument for relativism, very familiar from the moral arena. I think of it as a powerful motivation for an ultimately misguided view. How such an argument plays out in the epistemic domain seemed to me to be something that had not been sufficiently studied, which is why I devoted so much space to it in my book. But why it should occasion concern that skepticism and relativism are being conflated remains a mystery to me.

## References

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