

Review: Fear of relativism?

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## Fear of relativism?

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### 1

To many in or on the edges of the Academy, “Relativism” is a word with overtones of sinister iconoclasm, representing a kind of intellectual and ethical free-for-all in which the traditional investigative virtues of clarity, rigour, objectivity, consistency and the unbiased pursuit of truth are dismissed as illusory and the great scientific constructions of the last 200 years, together with our deepest moral convictions, rated merely as ‘our way of seeing’ the world, more elaborate and organised but otherwise on all fours with the cosmology and customs of primitive tribes.

In his short book, Paul Boghossian aims to address, and to expose as bankrupt, the idea that there is even a coherent, let alone defensible philosophical stance about truth and knowledge that can underwrite these ‘pluralist’, or ‘postmodernist’ tendencies. But since it is crucial to his project that his style of discussion makes it available to non-specialists, much of the recent more technical, less emotional debate *within* analytical philosophy about relativism’s renaissance as a particular form of semantic theory is passed over unmentioned. Part of my aim in what follows is to illustrate how Boghossian’s discussion connects quite straightforwardly with relativism in its contemporary analytical philosophical livery—what I have elsewhere called New Age relativism<sup>1</sup>—and how some of his critical arguments may be presented in that setting. My main contentions will be, first, that when relativism about epistemic justification, and about morals, are couched in the currently canonical sort of form, they still remain in range of artillery that

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<sup>1</sup> See Wright (2007).

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Boghossian positions in Ch. 6 of his book;<sup>2</sup> second, that there is evasive action that they can take; but, third, that when they take it, they effectively have nothing to offer over other well established forms of—broadly speaking—anti-realism, and that the play with specifically *relativist* ideas becomes nugatory. New Age relativism, about morals and epistemic justification at least, is nothing distinctively to be afraid of. If concern is fitting, it is centred on the capacity of our aspirations to epistemic and moral objectivity to withstand attacks that neither need nor prosper under the flag of relativism but are best articulated differently.

## 2

There are, of course, certain differences among the forms of the various proposals made by contemporary analytical relativists.<sup>3</sup> It will be convenient for our purposes to work with a simple *assessment-relativism*. This can be characterised as the doctrine, for some or a number of regions of discourse, that in a single world the very same token claim can take different truth-values when considered in different *contexts of assessment*.<sup>4</sup> The root semantic idea proposed is already present in Lewis's (1980), where an utterance of a sentence like "It is raining" is conceived as receiving a truth-value only when the value of a parameter of place—an 'index'—is fixed to which there is no semantic reference (not even by an 'hidden indexical') within the claim in question. Assessment-relativism for a region of discourse is what results when you construe the semantics of its claims as relevantly like that of "It is raining" on the Lewis treatment,—but then incorporate the idea that the truth-values of utterances of *these* claims are dependent upon a new kind of index whose value is not settled once and for all by the context of utterance—the circumstances and occasion in which the claim takes place—but varies with certain variable characteristics of (hypothetical) assessments.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Boghossian's discussion here needs to be taken in association with his 2006b.

<sup>3</sup> The lion's share of the work of developing the broad approach has of course been carried by John MacFarlane (2003a, 2003 unpublished, 2005a, b, 2007 forthcoming a, b), but significant, and significantly different, developments have also been made by, for example, Max Kölbel, Mark Richard and Peter Laserson in the researches cited in the list of References. For misgivings about the underlying semantic assumptions, see Cappelen and Hawthorne, forthcoming. For various specific difficulties with the approach, both local and general, and misgivings about its motivations, see Hawthorne (2007), Wright (2006, 2007) and forthcoming, and Moruzzi and Wright, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> It is, of course, a crucial issue whether the contents of utterances that are the bearers of assessment-relative truth values in a given region of discourse could be anything very like *propositions* as traditionally conceived—whether, for example, there is any good sense in which a pair of thinkers in different assessment contexts who each comprehendingly accept a particular such claim as true, can be said to *agree*. The issues here are absolutely central to the interpretation and evaluation of truth-relativism in general. For discussion in depth, see Cappelen and Hawthorne (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> You *could* so conceive of utterances of "It is raining". The result would be a conception of the truth-conditions of weather reports where the parameter of relevant place was determined by properties of an assessor, rather than the utterer. How bizarre that might be would depend on *which* properties of the assessor were supposed to do the job.

Proposals following this broad model have been made recently for quite a diversity of regions of discourse, and have postulated a variety of relevant kinds of assessment-contextual parameter. These include:

- *Time of assessment*—for the application of assessment-relativist ideas to future contingent statements and the problem of the ‘Open Future’,<sup>6</sup>
- *Information state* of the assessor—for the case of epistemic modals and conditionals,<sup>7</sup>
- *Salience*s to and/or *stakes* for an assessor—in the case of ascriptions of knowledge,<sup>8</sup> and
- *Standards* of an assessor—in the case of judgements of taste, aesthetic statements more generally, moral judgements, judgments of epistemic justification, and knowledge ascriptions again.<sup>9</sup>

Of special interest—and at centre stage, in effect, in Ch. 6 of Boghossian’s book—is the last: the idea that the truth-values of certain classes of claim may be sensitive to assessors’ *standards*, and vary in tandem with those even though all other relevant circumstances remain the same.

However we need to make a distinction here. We speak quite loosely of standards, and of differences among different people’s standards, in a large number of areas of preference- or aversion-expressive judgement—taste in food and drink, humour, obscenity, sexual attractiveness, appreciation of popular music, for instance—when what are really involved are, in the broadest sense, mere variations in dispositions of evaluation. You and I may have different standards in Asian cuisine, you preferring fiery Indian curries while my taste is for the subtler flavours of the Thai tradition. But we do not judge *by* these ‘standards’. They are not objects of possible consultation to which we might in principle appeal, or actually do tacitly appeal, to determine our appraisal of the dishes in front of us. Any general statement of them, if such a thing is possible, will stand to our actual patterns of appraisal as a codification of regularities rather than a normative constraint. How exactly the notion of truth as relative to standards should be made out in this kind of case, is something that would merit independent investigation.<sup>10</sup> But in any event, such cases contrast with those on which Boghossian’s discussion bears. Boghossian’s cases are exactly those where standards *do* potentially inform judgement and provide norms for its appraisal. And two cardinal examples are exactly expressions of moral and epistemic evaluation. It is a paradigm of the most traditional relativistic thinking to hold that there are indeed no defensible absolute notions of morally justified action, or of evidentially justified belief, in exactly this sense: that whether an action, or a belief, is justified depends on one’s standards, where the

<sup>6</sup> MacFarlane (2003a, b) and (forthcoming). (Actually, as Paula Sweeney reminded me, the relativisation proposed by MacFarlane (forthcoming) is to *moments*, rather than times—i.e., to nodes which may be positioned at the same time but on different paths through a branching structure of possible histories).

<sup>7</sup> See MacFarlane (2003 unpublished) and (forthcoming b); Egan et al. (2005); Weatherson (2007).

<sup>8</sup> See Richard (2004); MacFarlane (2005a).

<sup>9</sup> See MacFarlane (2005a); Lasersohn (2005); Richard (2004) and (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> For one suggestion, see Wright (2006) §§7,8.

standards concerned are conceived as *principles governing* evaluation, rather than *projections of actual patterns* of evaluation, and as subject to no objective notion of correctness.

This important kind of relativism—relativism, I venture to suggest, pretty much as generally and traditionally understood—is clearly easily assimilated to the New Age template. One has merely to take principles of moral and epistemic evaluation as a relevant kind of assessment-contextual parameter. Accordingly, should Boghossian's objections to its coherence prove successful, that will be both an historically important finding and a significant limitation on the range of interesting applications of relativism as it is conceived in the modern debate.

### 3

That said, Boghossian's own characterisation<sup>11</sup> of epistemic relativism is, admittedly, more elaborate than these reflections anticipate. It amalgamates three claims:

- 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 claims of the form

"E justifies belief B"

as expressing the claim

*E justifies belief B*

but rather as expressing the claim:

*According to the epistemic system C, that 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)

What is the rationale for including component B—"Epistemic relationism"? Here is what Boghossian says:

Let's begin by looking at particular unrelativised epistemic judgements, such as:

- 1. Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations.

The relativist says that all such judgements are doomed to falsehood because there are no absolute facts about justification. If we are to retain epistemic discourse, the relativist urges, we must reform our talk so that we no longer speak simply about what is justified by the evidence, but only about what is justified by the evidence according to the particular epistemic system that we happen to accept, noting, all the while, that there are no facts by virtue of which our particular epistemic system is more correct than any of the others.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Fear of Knowledge* p. 84 (Boghossian 2006a).

<sup>12</sup> *Fear of Knowledge* *ibid.* (Boghossian 2006a).

We can envisage an epistemic relativist feeling very distant from this characterisation and of its implicit perception of the situation. Boghossian is taking it that the truth of unrelativised claims such as (1), straightforwardly construed, is intelligible only if supported by absolute facts about justification. Since—for the relativist—there are no such facts, sentences like (1), if they “are to have any prospect of being true”, have to be construed as making some other kind of claim, whose truth can be supported by facts of a kind that relativism can consistently countenance; and then the only salient candidate facts are the explicitly relational ones invoked by the epistemic relationism clause, B. But this is simply tantamount to the insistence that if relativism is to be in any position to regard claims such as (1) as true at all, then it is obliged so to construe their content as to enable them to be made *absolutely* true or false by some class of facts that it countenances. That is just to fail to take seriously the thesis that claims such as (1) can indeed be true or false, albeit *only relatively so*.

In fact it is clear that any attempt to construe claims of type (1) in accordance with the broader strategy proposed in clause B—i.e., as in effect elliptical expressions of certain neighbouring explicitly relational claims, is completely unworkable. To begin with, it involves a confusion between making a judgement *in the light of* certain standards and judging that those standards mandate that judgement. A judgement of the latter kind may be perfectly rationally endorsed by a thinker who is not at all inclined to the original judgement—because he does not share the standards in question. If it is rejoined that, according to Boghossian’s formulation, the judgement concerned involves a hidden indexical reference to the thinker, so that actually he will accept standards concerned, then we get instead the no less awkward result that when you endorse the claim that E justifies belief B, and I reject it, we each make an indexical judgement concerning what is properly judged *by our own* respective standards—whereas it was supposed to be a major point for assessment-relativism that it allegedly provides a way of *preserving content* across variable assessments of truth-value.

Worse follows. If we now try to combine the idea that the truth-value of claims of type (1) is standard-relative with the suggestion that their content is that of the kind of explicitly relational formulation that epistemic relationism proposes, then we commit ourselves to saying, incongruously and probably incorrectly, that the truth-value of the latter kind of claim is in turn relative to the same standards. The misery is merely compounded by the reflection that, according to clause B, the words “E justifies belief B” recur as a proper part of the unpacking of their content—how can a content be a proper part of itself?—and indeed will regressively continue to do so no matter how many times the unpacking is iterated.

The moral seems unmistakable: assessment-relativism, if it is to be anything coherent, must insist on a sharp separation between the making of a claim that is apt merely for relative truth and the making of the (potentially) absolute claim of the obtaining, in a particular case, of the relative-truth constituting relationship. Epistemic relativism, on Boghossian’s formulation, fails to make this separation and indeed winds up with no coherent story to tell about the content of the claims about justification for which its trademark thesis is that truth is standard-relative. Indeed, in casting about for acceptable, potentially absolute truth conditions for them to

take, it effectively loses sight of the very relativism that it intends to propose. All this would be grist to Boghossian's mill if something along the lines of clause B were indispensable to the epistemic relativist view. But the more plausible assessment is that these are the troubles of an avoidable misformulation.

#### 4

It merits emphasis next, however, that Boghossian's own discussion actually doesn't really capitalise on the infelicities of clause B: his central objections remain pertinent even when that clause is dropped and the relativist thesis is pared down to an endorsement of a suitable instance of the New Age template,<sup>13</sup> together with something corresponding to the pluralist clause C. Simply stated, it is the thesis that the truth of statements about epistemic justification is assessment-relative, with systems of standards providing the relevant assessment-contextual parameter, together with the contention that alternative such systems are possible and nothing enforces the choice of any one of them as uniquely correct or best. At least some of the problems that Boghossian's discussion points up still engage this sparser view.

The problems concerned result from pressing three questions:

- (i) What exactly is a (moral or epistemic) *standard*?
- (ii) When standards supply the relevant assessment-contextual parameter, what does the assessment-relativity of the truth of claims expressing judgements of epistemic, or moral, justification *consist in*?
- (iii) What is it to *accept* a standard?

There are three very natural answers:

- (i) A standard is a *general proposition*, stating—to fix on just one, salient rubric—that certain kinds of judgement/action are (epistemically, or morally) justified/unjustified in certain specified kinds of circumstance—typically, in the epistemic case, the possession of certain kinds of evidence.
- (ii) Where standards, so conceived, supply the relevant parameter, the assessment-relativity of an utterance expressing a claim of type (1) (or an analogous moral claim) consists in its having a content that opens it to *entailment* by some such general propositions, when taken in conjunction with relevant collateral data, but to *incompatibility*, modulo the same collateral data, with certain other such general propositions which in some way compete with the first for regulation of the relevant range of claims.<sup>14</sup>

These ideas could no doubt stand further clarification. But the crucial point for our purposes is that the notion of assessment-relativity is here cashed out in terms of *entailment* by general propositions and collateral data. Finally

<sup>13</sup> —which effectively covers clause A.

<sup>14</sup> There are issues about whether this genre of alleged assessment-relativity should be formulated, as here outlined, in terms of entailment and inconsistency, or whether it would not be better to work with entailment and independence. Nothing in that distinction will affect the discussion to follow, however, so I will not press the matter here.

- (iii) To accept a standard is to believe the general proposition articulating it—i.e., to take it to be true.

One way of viewing the critical thrust of Boghossian's discussion is that these natural answers prove to be out of reach of the relativist, and that there are salient no other acceptable answers that are available instead.

Why should this be? Consider again the initial claim in the passage from Boghossian's chapter quoted above about claims of type (1):

1. Copernicanism is justified by Galileo's observations. Boghossian remarked:

The relativist says that all such judgements are doomed to falsehood because there are no absolute facts about justification.

We already observed that it does the relativist gratuitous disservice to saddle the contention that there are no *absolute* facts of the type in question with the consequence that all claims of the relevant genre are *false*. But let us run with it for a moment. Standard-relativity, on the model we are working with, is a matter of entailment: standard-relative claims are entailed by some sets of propositions articulating relevant general standards, together with collateral information, but not by others. Clearly, if we suppose, as we may, that the collateral information is, for its part, good, but allow that the entailed type (1) proposition is, strictly speaking, false, then we will have to suppose the same about at least some of the relevant general propositions which entail it. A relativist who allows that type (1) claims are literally false, as Boghossian suggested, is therefore adopting a philosophical view which implicitly discredits the very standards to which it is averred that the acceptability of claims in the relevant discourse is relative. The account of assessments of epistemic justification (and moral justification) being advanced thus emerges as in effect an error theory of the judgemental practices concerned, and therefore in tension with their continuation with any intellectual integrity. What are we doing judging in accordance with a set of general precepts that are no better than a tissue of untruth? Error-theoretic proposals about a region of discourse do, of course, sometimes involve a kind of extenuating story, consistent with massive untruth, to sanction its continuing practice.<sup>15</sup> But such manoeuvring would hardly be consistent with an intentionally *relativist* stance; the whole point of such a stance was supposed to be to explain and vindicate a sense in which the characteristic claims are *true*, just not absolutely so.

For relativism's purposes, the suggestion that type (1) claims are strictly false is accordingly just as untoward as the suggestion that they be construed as judgements of explicitly relational truths. And it is, indeed, open to the same complaint: that it simply fails to take seriously the mooted idea of *relative truth*.

<sup>15</sup> The prototypical such account is Hartry Field's attempt to rehabilitate the (in his view) literally false theories of classical mathematics in terms of the virtue of inferential conservativeness. The locus classicus is Field (1980).

Boghossian canvasses a third construal of the content of type (1) claims—the suggestion that the characteristic expressions of type (1) claims are *semantically incomplete*; that when someone says “The judgement that P is justified by evidence E”, this is a remark that stands comparison with: “John is taller”—said in a context where the question has arisen whether either of the twins, John and Jim, has a height advantage over the other, and I’ve just measured up—or with “The Sheikh of Dubai is richer”,—when the question has arisen about the relative wealth of Liverpool Football Club’s American owners and their principal competitor in the acquisition of the club. In such cases one and the same form of words may, without any shift in the semantic value of any explicit constituent, effect a true claim in one context and a false claim in another. But that is because the contexts concerned determine differing completions that are not fully explicit in the semantics of the overt claim. This seems agreeably unmysterious. Moreover the assessment-relativity of the claims concerned is unreflected at the level of the contents they are being used to convey—this third construal involves no relativity of truth at the level of propositional content.

The proposal amounts, in effect, to a pragmatic, rather than semantic, version of epistemic relationism—Boghossian’s clause B—that I claimed above is hopeless. I leave it to the reader to ponder whether the drawbacks outlined earlier are to any significant degree mitigated by its now taking a pragmatic form. As Boghossian quickly observes, however, it is anyway no good in the present context. The immediately foreseeable problem is that the inexplicit standard, mention of which would need to be made to recover the relevant complete proposition, would itself simply be a general statement similar in essential respects to the targeted incomplete statement. If

Judgment P is justified by evidence E,

is incomplete in the relevant kind of way, then so, presumably, must be any expression of a sponsoring general standard:

Whenever you have evidence of type K (and no other relevant evidence), a judgement of type L is justified by that evidence

—supposing that P is a judgement of type L, and E is evidence of type K. The proposal to construe the expression of type (1) claims as incomplete, with a gap calling for completion by an expression for a standard, or set of standards, cannot avoid construing the very statement of the relevant standard(s) as itself likewise incomplete. That is going to make an utter mystery of what it is to accept such a standard and of how doing so might normatively constrain ones evaluations.

This, in effect, is where Boghossian leaves the discussion of the content of type (1) claims in Ch. 6 of “Fear of Knowledge”, apparently satisfied that the relativist has no playable construal of them. Three construals of the content of such claims—the explicitly relational construal of clause B, their construal as literal falsehoods, and their construal as literally semantically incomplete—have been reviewed and each accomplishes nothing but trouble for the relativist. But we need to push the discussion further. For all three are open to the charge of failing to take relativism seriously—of failing to reckon with the idea of contents which require no semantic

completion before they are capable of truth-value, but are capable only of *relative* truth-value.<sup>16</sup>

## 5

To try to take it seriously is to confront hard questions which New Age relativists have, so far, rather tended to avoid. How are we to understand the notion of relative truth at the level of *content*? What kind of construal of the content of the relevant claims is required if the problems we have been reviewing are to be finessed? It is well beyond the scope of this discussion to try to take on this cluster of issues, which arise for assessment-relativism about any region of discourse. What I want to argue to conclude is that whatever might best be said about them, the distinctive peculiarity of the present kinds of case—where truth is purportedly relative to standards understood as general propositional norms of assessment—has the effect that the application of assessment-relativism to them is going to be *pointless*.

Take it, then, that the epistemic relativist insists that type (1) claims are complete, truth-evaluable judgements, whose content is fully explicit in the sentences we use to express them, and that the kind of truth or falsity they are apt for is relative truth and falsity—that their truth-values vary as a function of the standards brought to bear upon them. So type (1) claims are both semantically fully explicit and capable of being true. The same must therefore go, presumably, for the statements of the general standards by reference to which the acceptability of type (1) claims is judged, and to which their truth is allegedly relative. The question, therefore, immediately arises how the truth of these general statements is itself in turn to be conceived? Clearly they cannot be conceived as absolute truths—that would not be consistent with the epistemic pluralist clause C in Boghossian's characterisation and would anyway enforce the absolute truth of their type (1) consequences (assuming the absoluteness of the collateral data.) So should the statements of the general standards be conceived as themselves assessment-relative? Well, what other option is on the table? But what, in that case, are their truth-values relative *to*? It would be potentially regressive to propose that it is always to further standards, somehow determining the acceptability of standards — the same question will simply arise about the next tranche of standards, and so on after that. But if relativity there must in general be, the only other available answer appears to be a reflexive one: that

<sup>16</sup> A fourth proposal, anticipated by Boghossian and (grudgingly) elaborated and defended by Rosen (2007) is to construe epistemic/moral standards as general (conditional) *imperatives* mandating or prohibiting specific judgements/actions in specific circumstances. Boghossian develops further reasons for discounting this direction in his (2007). For reasons of space I must here set aside consideration of it in any detail. One immediate concern about it, unparalleled by the general propositional account of standards, is that any instruction to accept the judgement [that P is justified] is, *ceteris paribus*, an instruction to accept the judgment [that P]. So a theorist who conceives of the acceptability of type (1) judgements as relative to systems of groundlessly accepted imperatives, and offers that as sufficient for thinking of their truth as assessment-relative, will need to explain what, if anything, will prevent the account ramifying to encompass *every* species of judgement [that P] that is suitable for embedding in a type (1) judgement. Such a ramification might be grateful to the Protagorean spirit. But global relativism was not supposed to go with the very territory of *epistemic* relativism.

ultimately, (some) statements of general standards take their truth-values relative just to themselves!

That may seem immediately to induce a crisis: if the truth of the statement of a general standard is conceived as consisting in its acceptability relative to the very standard concerned—i.e., in effect, as self-entailment—then every such statement should be accepted as true.<sup>17</sup> That is manifestly hopeless.

But it is also too fast, of course. Someone who is trying to conceive of the truth of statements of general standards as itself standard-relative should invoke the distinction, adverted to earlier, between judging *by a standard* and judging *what a standard requires*. Judging by a standard issues in an evaluation with which the assessor identifies: it involves both a judgement of what the standard requires—a judgement about an entailment—and an acceptance of the standard concerned. It is only when particular standards are accepted that the relevant assessment-contextual parameter takes on a value and the extension of the truth-predicate in the assessment context concerned becomes determinate. So one who is trying out the idea that the truth of statements of general standards can be itself reflexively standard-relative may properly insist that more than self-entailment is needed for truth: such statements will take truth-values only relative to the standards actually accepted in the relevant range of assessment contexts.

This is the right reply. But its effect is to shine a spotlight on a range of difficulties that relativism encounters with the third of the questions we originally distinguished—the question of what it is to *accept* a standard in the first place. There are a number of issues but here, in particular, is a wrinkle about truth. We are thinking of standards as general propositions. So to accept one, you would suppose, ought to be to believe it, or anyway to take it as true—in some sense of ‘true’.<sup>18,19</sup> But something coherent needs to be said about what conception of truth can be involved here when, for example, one is considering such a proposition for the first time and wondering whether to accept it. Let the context be one in which one is so far committed to no view—a case where the epistemic pluralist component in relativism permits one to ‘go either way’. So one is rationally free to accept the standard; i.e., to accept the truth of the proposition concerned. But this precisely cannot be understood as a permission to accept that it is true relative to one’s present context of assessment. That claim is, by hypothesis, false. If that is the only notion of truth the relativist has to work with, then relativism cannot after all make sense of its pluralist—clause C—component. Clause C requires that there are general propositions about epistemic, or moral justification, whose basic place in one’s epistemic, or moral, system goes with their acceptance being effectively rationally or cognitively unconstrained. But if all truth in the region of discourse in question is standard-relative truth, then the question whether to accept a standard—i.e., to

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Boghossian (2007) pp. 62–3.

<sup>18</sup> The point will go through no matter what attitude we take acceptance to be. In general, it is a consequence of the platitude that propositional attitudes generally are attitudes to truth: that to doubt, fear, wonder, intend, etc., that P is to doubt, fear, wonder, intend that P is true.

<sup>19</sup> Such an attitude need not be explicit or fully self-conscious. But we may take it that the ascription of a tacit attitude only makes sense if it *could* be self-conscious. That will be enough to set up the issues now following.

accept its general statement as *true*—will be tantamount to the question whether to take it that its acceptance is mandated in one's present assessment context. Since it is of the essence of epistemic, or moral relativism that a freedom is operative which is inconsistent with the question invariably being so understood, we may conclude that the notion of truth that goes with the acceptance of general standards cannot always—consistently with relativism—be relative truth. So standard relative truth cannot be the *only* notion of truth operative throughout discourse of epistemic and moral evaluation.

If this is correct, however, then the whole motivation for the New Age template as a vehicle for the general philosophical spirit expressed in clause C disappears. The kind of standards-relativism on which we have been focusing cannot avoid admitting a notion of the truth of statements of general standards which is not to be recovered in terms of their truth relative to an accepted standard. This notion need not, of course, be cashed out in terms of their *absolute* truth—at least, not if absolute truth is to carry the realist import that relativism opposes. It need be no more than a deflationary, or minimalist notion, of the kinds that have long figured prominently in the philosophical debates about realism and objectivity. But once such a notion is brought into play, and includes in its range of application statements of the primitive standards whose acceptance defines an assessment-context, there is no longer any need for another, relativistic notion to apply to their type (1) consequences. The same notion will serve in both cases.

The crucial, load-bearing idea in the views about moral and epistemic justification that Boghossian is attacking is that of the rationally unconstrained acceptance of (propositions articulating) basic moral and epistemic standards. This—effectively the thrust of clause C—has long been explored and debated under various 'non-cognitivist', 'non-factualist' and 'minimalist' rubrics. The main point I have been arguing here is that these debates are not furthered at all by superimposing the New Age relativist semantic template onto the discourses concerned. If it is insisted that assessment-relative truth is the only notion of truth that engages those discourses, the effect of the template is to throw a spanner in the works when we seek to say something coherent about applications of the truth predicate to statements of general standards. If it is not so insisted, the effect is to construct an idle wheel.

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