Relativism in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge Revisited

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Abstract

This paper revisits, from a new angle, some of the debates over the relativism of the "Sociology of Scientific Knowledge" (=SSK). The new angle is provided by recent work on relativism in epistemology and the philosophy of language. I defend three theses. First, SSK-relativism is not an instance of Paul Boghossian's well-known "template" for relativism. Second, SSK-relativism is therefore not directly threatened by arguments targeting this template position. And third, SSK-relativism is nevertheless in the vicinity of this template, and it offers at least sketches of arguments for distinctive and original relativist theses.

1. Introduction

This paper revisits the relativism of the "Sociology of Scientific Knowledge" (=SSK) in light of recent work on relativism in epistemology and the philosophy of language. Many authors have contributed to SSK; I shall focus primarily on the writings of the Edinburgh sociologists Barry Barnes and David Bloor, as well as my own previous contributions.

Relativism in SSK plays two roles: as a substantive position and as a methodology. The latter role is summed up in the "impartiality" and "symmetry" tenets of the "strong" programme of SSK:

> It [i.e. the "strong programme"] would be *impartial* with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure. Both sides of these dichotomies will require explanation.

> It would be *symmetrical* in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain say, true and false beliefs. (Bloor 1991, 7; italics added.)

The substantive position is summed up in the following passage:

> For the [SSK-] relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. … [He] thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality … (Barnes and Bloor 1982, 27)

I shall focus primarily on the substantive position, and try to defend three theses. First, SSK-relativism is not an instance of recently-much-debated "templates" for relativism. Second, SSK-relativism is therefore not threatened by arguments targeting these template positions. And third, SSK-relativism is nevertheless *in the vicinity* of these templates, and it offers noteworthy sketches of arguments for original relativist claims. In speaking of "recently-much-debated 'templates' for relativism", I am referring primarily to ideas introduced in Paul Boghossian's 2006-study *Fear of Knowledge* (subsequently "FK"). I shall structure my investigation into SSK-relativism around Boghossian's template for relativism. In so doing I also address his arguments for and against positions that instantiate his template.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 explains Boghossian's template and its three tenets. For each tenet FK first either reports or invents a relativist argument in its favour, before subsequently marshalling an absolutist rejoinder. Sections 3 to 5 outline and evaluated the case for SSK-relativism relative to Boghossian's template and arguments.

2. Boghossian's Template

Boghossian formulates epistemic relativism as a combination of three theses:

(I)   There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (Epistemic non-absolutism)

(II)   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 [i.e. the proposition] *E justifies belief B* but rather as expressing the

claim: *According to [the] epistemic system, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.* (Epistemic relationism)

(III) There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no fact by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic pluralism) (FK 73)

Note concerning relationism that it is couched in terms of a *non-relativistic* notion of truth. What is relativized in (II) is not truth but the *content of the proposition*. Using the language of today's philosophy of language, epistemic relationism is thus a form of "(semantic) contextualism", not of "(semantic) relativism" (cf. MacFarlane 2014). (II) also introduces the central concept of "epistemic system" (subsequently "ES"). An ES is made up of "epistemic principles," such as *"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" (FK 84). Finally, epistemic pluralism (=III) is tantamount to the thesis of "equal validity": "There are many radically different, yet 'equally valid' ways of knowing the world …" (FK 2).

2. 1. The Argument for Non-Absolutism

According to Boghossian, epistemic absolutism and relativism agree on the *internalist* assumption that "… if there are absolute epistemic facts, it must be possible to come to have justified beliefs about what those facts are" (FK 75). Boghossian's crucial testcase are facts concerning the superiority of one ES over another. Boghossian's absolutist assumes, and his relativist denies, that we can have epistemically justified beliefs about how our ES compares with others. The relativist's denial is based on the following argument (FK 95-102) which I here present in my own words:

Step 1: We encounter "genuine alternative" ESs. To be a genuine alternative to our ES, another ES must differ from ours in at least one "fundamental" epistemic principle, that is, one epistemic principle which is not derived from other epistemic principles.

Step 2: When we encounter a genuine alternative to our ES, say "ES$_{alt}$", we are obliged to justify why we stick to our own ES rather than switch to ES$_{alt}$ (if that is what we choose to do). Call this obligation the "demand for justification."

Step 3: In responding to the demand for justification, we have no choice but to rely upon the resources of our existing ES: after all, it is the only ES we have got. I shall refer to this idea as "ethnocentric justification": epistemic justification of one's own ES cannot but be based upon this very system.

Step 4: Alas, our ES features an epistemic principle, "no-rule-circularity," which blocks the ethnocentric justification of our ES. According to "no-rule-circularity" the justification of a given epistemic rule R must not involve this very R. Generalized for the present case: the justification of our ES must not—on pain of violating no-rule-circularity—use the epistemic resources of our ES.

Step 5: It follows from Step 4 that we cannot have justified beliefs about the epistemic standing of our ES relative to other ESs.

Step 6: Finally, reading Step 5 in the context of the *internalist* assumption ("… if there are absolute epistemic facts, it must be possible to come to have justified beliefs about what those facts are"), we must conclude that there are no absolute epistemic facts, and that epistemic relativism is true.

Boghossian is unconvinced. He insists that the demand for justification (Step 2) applies only when we encounter an alternative "impressive enough to make us legitimately doubt the correctness of our own epistemic system" (FK 101). And no-rule-circularity (Step 4) only holds for epistemic principles that have *independently* become doubtful (FK 100). Moreover, and this speaks against both no-rule-circularity and the demand for justification, "each thinker is blindly [default] entitled … to use the epistemic system he finds himself with, without first having to supply an antecedent justification for the claim that it is the correct system" (FK 99). And finally, Boghossian also gives us the right to dismiss alternative ESs that fail to live up to our demands of "coherence" (FK 96-7). – If Boghossian is on the right track, then Steps 2 and 4 of the relativistic argument are all false.

2.2. The Argument for Relationism

Boghossian has the relativist and absolutist agree that ESs consist of "general epistemic principles" which "entail" "particular epistemic judgements." I have already cited the general epistemic principle of *Observation* above, here is an example for a particular epistemic judgement: "If it visually seems to Galileo that there are mountains on the moon, then Galileo is justified in believing that there are mountains on the moon …" (FK 85)

Following Gilbert Harman (1996), Boghossian formulates relationism by way of a parallel with "relativism in physics," that is, for instance the relativisation of movement to frameworks in Galileo's physics. On this reconstruction, the *un-relativized* claim "The ship moves" is "untrue", that is, either false or incomplete. But the *relativized* claim, "The ship moves relative to framework F" is complete and truth-apt. *Mutatis mutandis* for epistemology: 'Otto's belief in ghosts is unjustified' is untrue. And yet, the relativized claim 'Otto's belief in ghosts is unjustified according my ES' is complete and truth-apt. In other words, physical and epistemic relativism are cases of "replacement relativism": un-relativized expressions need to be replaced with relativized expressions (FK 83-87).

Boghossian's criticism focuses on the relationship between general epistemic principles and particular epistemic judgements (that, as long as they are un-relativized, are held to be untrue by the relativist). Boghossian allows the relativist different options for fleshing out general epistemic principles and un-relativized epistemic judgements. The former may be thought of as either general propositions or imperatives; and the latter may be rendered—as we have already seen—as either false or incomplete. Boghossian tries to show that none of these renderings works.

Option A (FK 91-93): *general principles are general imperatives; particular unrelativized judgement are untrue*. Here we are to think of general imperatives as ordering us to believe p only if we have the right kind of evidence. According to Option A, (*) 'Otto's belief in ghosts is unjustified' needs to be replaced by something like (+) 'According to the system of general epistemic imperatives that I accept, Otto's belief in ghosts is unjustified.' – Option A runs into difficulty with the intuitive and pre-theoretical thought that judgements like (*) (in their un-relativized form) are "normative"; they express the thought that Otto *ought not to* believe in ghosts. Whatever the relativist offers as a replacement for (*), FK maintains, it

ought to preserve this normative character. Unfortunately, (+) does not do so. (+) is not a claim about what anyone ought to believe; it is a claim about what a particular ES counts as epistemically justified. (+) is a descriptive and not a normative statement.

Option B (85-89): *general principles are general propositions; particular un-relativized judgements are untrue*. This does not get rid of the problem with normativity. (*) would be replaced with ($) 'According to the system of general epistemic propositions that I accept, Otto's belief in ghosts is unjustified.' The replacing proposition fails to preserve the normativity of (*).

Option C (FK 85-86): *general principles are general propositions; particular un-relativized epistemic judgements are false*. This causes further problems for the advocate of relationism. If particular un-relativized are false, Boghossian holds, then so are epistemic principles *qua* general propositions. This is because particular epistemic judgements like (*) and epistemic principles like *Observation* are propositions "of much the same type" (FK 86): "the epistemic principles … are just more *general* versions of particular epistemic judgements" (FK 86). Can the relativist bite the bullet and declare general un-relativized principles false? No. This move faces the "endorsement problem": how can we possibly endorse an ES that consists of nothing but false principles?

Option D (FK 87-89): *general principles are general propositions; un-relativized particular epistemic judgements are incomplete*. Here too the relativist faces the endorsement problem: if particular epistemic judgements are incomplete, then so are the general epistemic principles qua propositions. D must treat both as propositions "of much the same type." But saying that one endorses a system of incomplete principles makes little sense. To make matters worse, D also owes us an account of how an incomplete general principle can *entail* particular judgements.

Summa summarum, Boghossian believes that the relativist argument in favour of relationism fails.

2.3 The Relativist Argument for Pluralism

I have already mentioned the distinction between "fundamental" and "derived" epistemic principles. A fundamental principle is one "whose correctness cannot be derived from the correctness of other epistemic principles" (FK 67). Recall also the idea of a "genuine alternative to our ES": such alternative differs from our ES in at least one fundamental principle. Boghossian's relativist argues for pluralism by offering plausible historical instances of such alternatives. Such cases are meant to be intuitively plausible cases of "equal validity."

One often cited case is the clash between Galileo Galilei and Cardinal Roberto Bellarmine (Feyerabend 1975, Rorty 1981). Boghossian's relativists describe Galileo's and Bellarmine's disagreement as follows. Bellarmine's ES included the *fundamental* epistemic principle "*Revelation*": "For certain propositions p, including propositions about the heavens, believing p is prima facie justified if p is the revealed word of God as claimed by the Bible" (FK 69). Galileo's ES did not feature *Revelation*, and nor does ours today. Bellarmine's ES was thus a genuine alternative to Galileo's and our ES(s). Moreover, since *Revelation* was fundamental for Bellarmine, we cannot dislodge it by arguing that is fails to follow from other principles Bellarmine accepted. *Ergo:* we have no way of refuting *Revelation* in a non-question-begging way. But then, so the relativist reasons, it seems that Bellarmine's ES is as valid as is our own (FK 69).

Boghossian's criticism questions whether Bellarmine's ES really is a genuine alternative to Galileo's and our own. Boghossian tries to make the case for a negative reply by arguing that—on grounds of interpretational charity—we had better not regard *Revelation* as a fundamental epistemic principle in Bellarmine's ES:

Step I: If another ES is incoherence, then we must reject it out of hand. (FK 96)

Step II: An ES is incoherent if it features epistemically unprincipled, arbitrary distinctions. If two propositions are treated epistemically differently, then the ES must provide a rationale for this asymmetry. (FK 98)

Step III: Assume *Revelation* were a fundamental epistemic principle in Bellarmine's
ES. In that case, Bellarmine's ES featured an epistemically unprincipled,
arbitrary distinction. It was incoherent (cf. Step II), and we must reject it (in
line with Step I).

Step IV: Step III is justified by the following consideration. If *Revelation* had been
fundamental for Bellarmine, then he would have used ordinary epistemic
principles like *Observation* for "propositions about objects in his vicinity," but
Revelation for propositions "about the heavens." *Observation* for "earthly
matters," *Revelation* for "the heavens." This differential treatment of earthly
and heavenly objects was unprincipled. What is worse, Bellarmine himself
accepted that *Observation* is often important in forming judgements about
the heavens: after all, Bellarmine "used his eyes to note that the sun is
shining, or that the moon is half full, or that the clear night-time Roman sky is
littered with stars." Bellarmine thus accepted that "the heavens are in a
physical space that is above us, only some distance away." Boghossian
concludes: "If all this is true, how could he think that observation is not
relevant to what we should believe about the heavens, given that he relies on
it in everyday life?" (FK 104)

Step V: We thus have a choice. If we assume that for Bellarmine *Revelation* is a
fundamental principle, then his ES is incoherent and we have reason to reject
it, and deny it the status of being as valid as our own. If we treat *Revelation*
as a derived principle, then we avoid the incoherence. This is the option
interpretational charity calls for. But then Bellarmine's ES is not a *genuine
alternative* to our own: it does not differ from ours in at least one
fundamental epistemic principle.

Step VI: But how can treating *Revelation* as derived rather than fundamental avoid
the incoherence? FK answers as follows: If *Revelation* is derived, then most
plausibly it is accepted on the basis of evidence, say, evidence for the belief
that the Bible is "the revealed word of the Creator of the Universe". And if
that evidence is strong, then "perhaps" there is reason "to override the
evidence provided by observation." (FK 104-5)

To sum up, as Boghossian has it, *Pluralism* is not supported by the example of Bellarmine's ES.

2.4 An Alternative Template

Finally, and before turning to SSK, I want to flag Crispin Wright's proposal on how to improve on Boghossian's template (Wright 2008). As pointed out earlier, there are (at least) two ways of capturing semantically the relativization central to relativism: relativizing the semantic content of the proposition, or relativizing the truth-predicate. Boghossian does the former, Wright suggests the latter; terminologically, Boghossian commits the relativist to "(semantic) contextualism", Wright to "(semantic) relativism" or "New-Age relativism". The difference between these two positions can also be described by saying that contextualism operates with "thick propositions," and semantic relativism with "thin propositions." Compare the two rendering of the utterance "E justifies belief B":

(Thick proposition) *According to ES$_i$, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B.*
(Thin proposition) *E justifies belief B.*

Wright's alternative to the second element of Boghossian's template can thus be formulated as follows:

B*. Utterances of the form: "E justifies belief B" are not *absolutely* but *relatively* true. They express the "thin" proposition: *E justifies belief B.* Their truth-values are relative to the standards of different contexts in which the proposition is assessed. And there are many different such contexts.

Wright thinks that his reconstruction deals the relativist a better hand than does Boghossian's template. And yet, ultimately Wright too thinks that the relativist position is untenable. A first problem is an infinite regress. If particular epistemic judgements are merely relatively true, that is, true relative to an ES, and if – as Boghossian has argued – particular epistemic judgements and general epistemic principles are "of much the same type" (FK 86) – then general epistemic principles can also at best be relatively true. And if "being relatively true" means "being true relative to a set of epistemic principles," then we

need second-order epistemic principles to account for the truth of first-order principles. Alas, in order to account for the relative truth of second-order principles, we need third-order principle … And so on *ad infinitum* (2008, 388).

The relativist might try to avoid the regress by suggesting that the relative truth of a given general epistemic principle means truth relative to, and determined by, all of the other existing (first-order) principles of a given ES. Wright is not impressed. His reason is (what I will call) the "adoption problem." Assume the relativist is in a situation in which her existing epistemic principles do not yet commit her to either accepting or rejecting a given newly-encountered epistemic principle (say of another ES). In such situation the relativist is dealing with principles "whose basic place in [her] … epistemic … system goes with their acceptance being effectively rationally or cognitively unconstrained" (Wright 2008, 388). Unfortunately for the relativist, this crucial condition cannot be met if the relative truth of an epistemic principle is determined by the rest of the epistemic principles that belong to the same ES. An epistemic principle that the relativist encounters for the first time, naturally is not (yet) part of her ES. But then, by the presently considered proposal, it is not even relatively true: it is relatively false. And if it is relatively false, then the relativist is not rationally or cognitively unconstrained in considering it: clearly, she ought *not* to accept it (ibid.).

3. From Relationism to Communitarian Finitism

I now turn to relating Boghossian's and Wright's templates and arguments to SSK. I shall begin with the semantic issues.

SSK's theorising about language draws on philosophical ideas that are not centre-stage when Boghossian and Wright discuss the semantic aspects of epistemic relativism. SSK's semantic theorising draws on Wittgenstein "rule-following considerations" (subsequently "RFC"). One important aspect of this difference in starting point is that SSK does not offer reflections in terms of *propositions*. Bloor for one does not find propositions a useful tool when discussing meaning in the context of epistemic relativism. Obviously, given constraints of space, I cannot here present a conclusive case for Bloor's, or my own, take on the RFC (cf. Bloor 1983, 1997; Kusch 2002, 2006). I shall be satisfied if I manage to state clearly what the SSK-option amounts to.

There are two main dividing lines with respect to rule-following and meaning: the first separates "individualists" from "communitarians." The individualist maintains that we can, at least in principle, make sense of the idea that an individual *I* follows a rule *R* in total social isolation. For the communitarian, to make sense of rule-following and meaning, we have to study communal language-games in which rules and meanings are attributed to others. Moreover, to declare *I* a follower of *R*, is to give *I* a certain social status.

The second fault-line in the literature on rule-following is the difference between "meaning-determinist" and "meaning-finitist" conceptions. The advocates of the former position believe that to follow *R* is to have a mental state, or behavioural disposition, determining which behaviour is correct. The meaning-finitist conceives of individual acts of following *R* as acts of *extending an analogy* with previously learnt exemplars of following *R* correctly. In new circumstances following *R* requires a decision concerning the question which behaviour counts as being most in line with past precedents. This decision will generally be based on a broad range of factors, of which past use is but one. In other words, past use alone underdetermines present and future use.

SSK combines meaning-finitism with communitarianism. It thus holds that the attribution of meaning and rules to others is based on analogies with previously established precedents, as well as on negotiations and the formation of a (temporary) consensus. Finally, SSK's communitarian meaning-finitism is a form of *semantic relativism*: it says that there is not *one correct way* of extending an analogy with previously learnt exemplars. Different individuals or groups may develop language in different ways, and there is no "neutral" perspective from which one of these developments can be declared "right," "correct" or "true" in an absolute sense.

The above sketch suffices as background for discussing how SSK would respond to Boghossian's and Wright's semantic arguments. I shall begin with Boghossian. Remember that he commits the relativist to the idea that utterances of the form "E justifies B" are candidates for truth only if they are taken to express the claim "*According to the ES, that I, S, accept … E justifies … B*." Moreover, if the utterance "E justifies B" is taken to express merely the claim or the proposition "*E justifies B,*" then the utterance is false or incomplete.

Boghossian goes on to show that this view runs into problems with normativity, endorsement and entailment.

How could SSK respond? To begin with, it should deny that the utterance "E justifies B" expresses the claim or proposition *According to the ES, that I accept, E justifies B*. After all, SSK takes its lead from Wittgenstein who urges us to focus on how expressions are *used*; and, as Boghossian reminds us, the two formulations have different uses. The first has a normative use, the second does not. Of course, this is not yet a fully convincing answer to Boghossian; the SSK-theorists must explain how they can avoid having to formulate their semantic view in the way Boghossian suggests.

First, it is not obvious that – given Boghossian's own premises – the absolutist can avoid the problems with normativity, endorsement and entailment (cf. Kusch 2009). To see this, we need to ask: Why is only the relativist obliged to insist that the allegiance to a specific ES has to be made explicit? Doesn't the absolutist too have an ES? This system may well be (in the eyes of the absolutist) the one and only correct system, but a system it is nevertheless. If that is true, however, then, by Boghossian's lights, the absolutist must also commit to saying that the utterance "E justifies B" is truth-apt only if it expresses the claim *According to ES … E justifies B*. Moreover, and still following Boghossian's reasoning *mutatis mutandis*, the absolutist also has reason to take the claim *E justifies B* to be incomplete or false. After all, it is a claim that fails to declare allegiance to the one correct ES. Once this much is accepted, the dialectic advantage of absolutism over relativism disappears. If Boghossian's anti-relationist arguments work against relativism, then they also work against absolutism. This should make it doubtful, even to the absolutist, that Boghossian's reflections on relationism can be on the right track.

Second, SSK-theorists do not accept the key premise of Boghossian's rendering of relationism, to wit, that the *conditions of the possibility* of an utterance are part and parcel of the claim the utterance expresses. For the utterance "E justifies B" to be meaningful and truth-apt there has to be a context consisting of previously socially-accepted precedents, a social group with its interests, values and forms of linguistic and epistemic negotiations, and the possibility of a consensus on questions of correctness. But this complex context is not part of the claim expressed. Here the SSK theorist can draw on Wright for support. As

we saw, Wright is also unconvinced by Boghossian's way of packing the context of an utterance into the relevant proposition.

Third, Boghossian is obviously guided by the thought that *prima facie* someone expressing an un-relativised proposition is thereby committing to absolutism. This is why he thinks the relativist has to insist that "according to ES …" must be added to mark the relativistic rendering. SSK-theorists qua communitarian finitists find this far from obvious. "E justifies B" has its uses in specific (types of) (epistemic) language-games. But these language-games can be played without committing to either absolutism or relativism. That is to say, the form of the utterance "E justifies B" does not tell us anything the speaker's absolutist or relativist commitments. Where the speaker stands with respect to relativism or absolutism can only be determined by inquiring about their philosophical views.

Turning from Boghossian to Wright, SSK-theorists can accept his idea that, for the relativist, claims of the form "E justifies B" are relatively true – at least when the relevant contexts consist of precedents, negotiations and consensus-formation. And this can be done without falling foul of infinite regresses or the adoption problem.

Take first the objection that New-Age relativism involves an infinite regress. For SSK-theorists, claims of the form "E justifies B" are true relative to epistemic precedents and negotiations; these precedents are true relative to further epistemic precedents and negotiations … and so on. Is this a vicious infinite regress? There is indeed an infinite regress here, but it is *not vicious*. For the SSK-theorists such regress in simply an expression of our historical contingency. Historians of science try to understand the history of the processes in which precedents are established and abandoned. There are no first and absolute beginnings to this sequence. When we pass epistemic judgements today, we do so in light of the precedents and negotiations we find ourselves with. We do so without worrying about the potential infinite regress that would result from if we aimed for an "ultimate" justification by running back along the historical sequence. Put differently, to couch the historical contingency as an infinite regress is to adopt the absolutist position – it is not an argument for it.

SSK-theorists also have an answer to the adoption problem. To avoid the infinite-regress-problem, Wright allows the New-Age relativist to say that a *relatively true* principle is one

that the rest of your ES commits you to; and that a *relatively false* principle is one that the rest of your ES does not commit you to. This then allows Wright to highlight a difficulty with respect to those newly-encountered principles concerning which your ES is not committed either way. Wright's relativist takes herself within her right to adopt such principles at her pleasure. And yet, given the definition of "relatively false," the newly-encountered principles would be false relative to the existing ES.

Wright's argument is easily blocked. The key move it do insist that for a principle p to be *relatively false* is *not* for the rest of the ES to lack any commitment concerning p, but for the rest of the ES to involve a commitment *against* p. In other words, lack of a system-commitment concerning p is not a system-commitment *against* p. What then should the SSK-relativist say about newly-encountered principles concerning which her ES contains no commitments? She should say that the relevant group of epistemic agents needs to make a decision: Does adopting the new principle facilitate epistemic practices? Does it increase overall coherence of the ES? Does it chime with epistemic or other values, or interests of various kinds? If the answer to these questions is positive, then the ES will likely be adjusted in such a way that it does involve support for the newly-encountered precedent.

To sum up the discussion of relationism and New-Age relativism, the semantic views of SSK differ from both of the views attributed to epistemic relativism by Boghossian and Wright. And the arguments with which the two philosophers target relationism and New-Age relativism do not affect the communitarian finitism adopted by SSK.

To conclude the discussion of finitism, note that it has also a wider implication concerning the framing of relativism. Central in Boghossian's framing is the distinction between two (or more) "systems" of "fundamental" and "derived" rules or principles. Call this view "regularist foundationalism" to mark the fact that it centrally features a *foundation* of fundamental *rules* which enables one to rationally negotiate disagreements amongst empirical claims and derived rules. SSK-theorists are suspicious of such hierarchical and rule-centred picture of epistemic practices. SSK follows Thomas Kuhn's (1962) well-known case for the priority of exemplars over rules. That is to say, SSK replaces regularist foundationalism with a position one might call "finitist coherentism": instead of foundational and derived rules, SSK talks of finite numbers of precedents or exemplars. Precedents or exemplars are at the centre of a web of beliefs, values, preferences, actions

and instruments. But this does not mean that they are sacrosanct: all it means is that in general actors seek to protect the exemplars from change. Actors prefer to make changes elsewhere in the web.

4. Pluralism Reconstructed

I now turn to contrasting Boghossian's and SSK's take on Bellarmine. I have three main comments. The first concerns historical accuracy. If we are to use historical events as material against which to test our philosophical theories then it is important that we get our facts straight. Remember in this light Boghossian's argument that attributing to Bellarmine acceptance of *Revelation* as a fundamental principle is to saddle him with an incoherent system. Allegedly Bellarmine had no justification for letting *Revelation* trump *Observation* when it came to propositions about the heavens. Boghossian insists that arbitrary choices make a system incoherent. And incoherent systems should be rejected.

This reasoning is based on ignorance of the actual historical context (Kinzel and Kusch 2018, Kusch 2017, cf. Biagioli 1993, Blackwell 1991, Finocchiaro 2007, Heilbron 2010). Bellarmine did have a twofold justification for using *Revelation* rather than *Observation* for *certain* propositions about the heavens. One reason was the millennia-old opposition between "sublunar" and "celestial" realms. According to the dominant astronomy and physics of the day, these two realms were governed by different laws of nature. Hence it was not arbitrary to think that these two realms might involve different epistemic sources, or at least the same sources to different degrees. Another reason was the equally old distinction between observables and unobservables. Given the astronomical and physical data available to astronomers in Bellarmine's days, the movement of the Earth could not be observed. Nor could it be "demonstrated" by Aristotelian standards; such demonstrations required necessary premises. Bellarmine took the lack of observations and demonstrations in support of Copernicanism to justify doubts about its truth, and "in a case of doubt, one may not depart from the Scriptures as explained by the holy Fathers" (Bellarmine 1615). Needless to say, this is not a reasoning we today would accept. But this is not what is at issue at this point. The question here is simply whether Bellarmine's uses of *Observation* and *Revelation* would have been arbitrary if he had thought of *Observation* as a fundamental principle. The answer to this question is "no".

My second comment with respect to Boghossian's discussion of *Pluralism* concerns the idea of "equal validity." Boghossian commits epistemic relativism to the idea that all ESs are equally valid. One problem is that Boghossian fails to spell out what exactly "valid" means in this context. Does it mean "valid" in the logical sense? Or does it simply mean "true" or "justified"? A further problem is that *Equal Validity* is not generally a commitment that card-carrying epistemic relativists have been willing to take on. Barnes and Bloor have insisted on this point at least since 1982:

> Our … postulate … is not that all beliefs are equally true or equally false, but that … all beliefs without exception call[..] for empirical investigation and must be accounted for by finding the specific, local causes of [their] credibility (Barnes and Bloor 1982, 23).

Similar denials can be found in other card-carrying epistemic relativists: Lorraine Code (1995, 202-3), Paul Feyerabend (1975, 189; 1978, 82-84; 1999, 215), Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2018, 26), or Hartry Field (2009, 255-6). Note also that Christopher Herbert concludes a lengthy discussion of the issue with the remark: "Nowhere does any 'relativist', to my knowledge, assert that all views are equally valid …" (2001, loc. 440).

Of course, absolutist critics of relativism need not be impressed with such denials. They may insist that *Equal Validity* is a *tacit* commitment of the relativist, a commitment that follows from other relativist tenets, tenets the relativist is ready to embrace openly. Maybe such argument can be constructed. But Boghossian makes no effort to do so.

My third comment addresses the question what remains of the very idea of pluralism after we have moved from regularist foundationalism to particularist coherentism, and from *Equal Validity* to its rejection. One victim of these two moves is Boghossian's (seemingly) clear and concise criterion for what constitutes a "genuine alternative" to a given ES: an ES that differs in at least one fundamental principle. This option is off the table when we give up regularist foundationalism.

The main alternative to Boghossian's pluralism, and the alternative SSK favours, is that there is more than one web of precedents, beliefs, values, interests, policies, and achievements, and that some such webs differ—and are indeed perceived by their respective actors to differ—in fundamental ways. It is hard to quantify such differences in a

general way; too many considerations potentially bear upon the question. Still, one rough indication of distance between two webs is the frequency or perceived ease of people "moving" from one such web to another. Another indication is the degree to which advocates of different webs find it important and useful to engage with one another in ways that both sides render as meaningful and reasoned debate. This is messier and more complicated than Boghossian's snappy formula, but this is what our messy social and historical world requires.

5. Non-Absolutism and Rule-Circularity

To begin with, it is worth pointing out that for Bloor non-absolutism is the necessary and sufficient condition for relativism: "… relativism is the negation of absolutism. To be a relativist is to deny that there is such a thing as absolute knowledge and absolute truth.". Absolute knowledge would be knowledge that is "perfect, unchanging, and unqualified by limitations of time, space, and perspective. It would not be conjectural, hypothetical, or approximate, or depend on the circumstances of the knowing subject." (2011, 436-7)

Bloor's and Boghossian's renderings of absolutism are similar enough for us to regard Bloor's and other SSK-theorists' arguments against absolute knowledge and absolute truth as considerations challenging Boghossian's absolutism. There are five such arguments. I shall be brief regarding the first four since they do not *directly* challenge Boghossian's reasoning. I mention them here only to indicate that the SSK-case for non-absolutism does not exclusively rest on critical reflections concerning rule-circularity.

The first and "flagship" SSK-argument for non-absolutism is an induction on the history of science (e.g. Bloor 2011). SSK-theorists take it for granted that work on the history and sociology of science has shown that all systems of beliefs are ultimately based on but local and contingent causes of credibility.

In conversations with SSK-theorists I have occasionally encountered a second line of thought against absolutism. It is an instance of what cognitive psychologists call the "tool-to-theory heuristic" (Gigerenzer 1991). The starting point is the observation that non-absolutism has proven a highly successful tool in history, sociology and cognitive science of science. The success of this tool needs an explanation. And the best explanation is that non-

absolutism is the correct theory concerning the human epistemic and moral predicament. Non-absolutism is thus not just useful; it is true.

A third SSK argument for non-absolutism is that it follows from "naturalism." The naturalist theorist emphasizes that we cannot ever "transcend the machinery of our brains and the deliverances of our sense organs, the culture we occupy and the traditions on which we depend" (Bloor 2007, 252).

A fourth SSK defence of non-absolutism targets self-proclaimed absolutists' account of, or examples for, absolute facts or absolute knowledge. One concern here is that self-proclaimed absolutists often take for granted that absolutism is the natural philosophical attitude and thus beyond the need for clarification. Boghossian's book is a case in point. Although detailed and complex when it comes to characterizing relativism, *FK* says very little about (different ways to spell out) absolutism (Bloor 2007, 253).

Finally, and fifth, I turn to considerations that SSK-theorists (might) direct against Boghossian's reflections on what he takes to be the relativist's best argument against absolutism. Note to begin with, that the issue of rule-circularity was mentioned already in Barnes and Bloor's first relativist credo, their 1982-paper "Relativism, Rationalism, and the Sociology of Knowledge":

> In the last analysis, he [the SSK relativist] will acknowledge that his justifications will stop at some principle or alleged matter of fact that only has local credibility. The only alternative is that justifications will begin to run in a circle and assume what they were meant to justify. (Barnes and Bloor 1982, 27; cf. Seidel 2013, 135).

Is this (at least part of) the argument Boghossian is advancing on behalf of the relativist? Not quite: Barnes and Bloor are not arguing that since rule-circular reasoning is prohibited, we are unable to justify our ES. Rather their point is that allowing rule-circular reasoning does not avoid non-absolutism or relativism. That this is indeed what is meant is obvious from Bloor's 2007-discussion of Boghossian's defence of circular reasoning (in order to motivate absolutism). Bloor stresses that circular arguments are unable to establish—in a neutral way—the absolute superiority of our ES over others. If we allow ourselves to reason in a circular fashion, then we must grant the same option also to advocates of other,

alternative, ESs. Bloor applies these considerations also to the debate between absolutists and relativists: "if absolutists can use circular arguments to justify their position, then relativists can also avail themselves of this move." Bloor invokes similar considerations against Boghossian's "blind entitlement" (Bloor 2007, 261).

Going beyond Bloor's arguments, assume we have indeed been able to show—in rule-circular fashion—that our ES is superior to another ES. Even rule-circularity to one side, why should such historically situated and contingent result give us the confidence that we are at least roughly on the road to absolute knowledge or absolute standards? Why think that our assessment transcends ultimate dependence upon local and contingent causes of credibility? Anyone impressed by the already-mentioned considerations in favour of non-absolutism is unlikely to be persuaded otherwise by Boghossian's thought-experiment.

Given SSK's Wittgensteinian sympathies, it is also worth pointing out an oddity about Boghossian's "blind entitlement". As Boghossian notes, he takes this idea to be inspired by §219 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: "When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly." I am not convinced that this is in the spirit of Wittgenstein's position. Wittgenstein's remark about obeying a rule blindly is not a remark about an *entitlement*. It is an observation about what we do. Moreover, while Wittgenstein, for instance in *On Certainty* frequently speaks about our "systems" of beliefs, he does not couch our relationship to such systems in terms of "entitlements." Instead Wittgenstein speaks of this relationship as "something animal" (§359). And "something animal" does not sound like a platform from which to reach absolute standards.

Finally, the issue of rule-circularity in epistemology—or "epistemic circularity"—has been discussed extensively in recent years. Thus even someone who agrees with SSK concerning Boghossian's arguments might still suspect that SSK's non-absolutism runs afoul of other epistemologists' reflections on epistemic circularity. Obviously I cannot review here the rich literature on this topic. But I shall at least briefly comment on two epistemologists who have been central in this debate.

I begin with William Alston (1982, 1991, 1993), and focus on the latter two book-size studies. Alston argues that we cannot know that our basic sources of beliefs are reliable. The best we can do is come to appreciate that they are "practically" without alternative for

us. This makes it "reasonable" for us to rely on them—at least when these practices are psychologically, historically and socially deeply embedded. Interestingly enough, for Alston "mystical perception" qualifies by these criteria. Does this kind of position threaten SSK's non-absolutism? I think not. If practical reasonableness is the best we can get, then there is no reason to assume that we have justified beliefs about absolute epistemic principles—something Boghossian takes to be possible. Indeed, that we are limited to this kind of merely practical endorsement is what some card-carrying relativists (e.g. SharonStreet 2013) mean by their denial of absolutism.

Ernest Sosa (2009) distinguishes between "animal" and "reflective" knowledge: the former is externalist-reliabilist; the latter internalist-coherentist: "awareness of how one knows" (2009, 200). Sosa believes that Alston is right only if we think of epistemic justification as linear. But it is "weblike" and delivers "mutually supportive comprehensive coherence." And this enables a "reflective endorsement" of sources of belief. Our basic sources of belief are justified—in a non-circular fashion—insofar as they are based on our coherent "common sense and scientific knowledge of ourselves and the world" (ibid.).

SSK-theorists would applaud the distinction between animal and reflective knowledge, albeit Bloor emphasizes as the dividing criterion whether knowledge is based on social-cultural resources or not. Bloor makes room for animal knowledge, knowledge not based on social cultural resources, even in humans (Bloor 1992). But Sosa's attempt to deliver a non-circular justification for our basic sources of belief is unconvincing. If epistemology is part and parcel of our overall web of belief, it too will change: a point stressed in various ways by Feyerabend (1975) or Bas van Fraassen (2002). Nothing is in principle safe from revision. And this thought should make us sceptical about the prospects of reaching justified beliefs about absolute principles. Moreover, it is important to remember that there can be more than one coherent web of "common sense and scientific knowledge of oneself and the world." Remember for example that Alston has a web of beliefs in which mystical perception has a legitimate place. Which one of the competing webs gets to decide on the fundamental epistemic sources?

Finally, consider the "raft" (Sosa 1980) of our common-sense and scientific knowledge of ourselves and the world. How likely is it that this rafts drifts towards an ever better grasp of absolute epistemic principles? SSK follows Kuhn in thinking about the development of

science in evolutionary terms (Bloor 2007). But for Darwin evolution has no telos. Not to forget that for SSK the selecting environments are (natural-social-cultural) "niches" caused or constituted by our (collective) activities and beliefs. This kind of perspective give little support to the thought of our getting ever better justified beliefs about absolutes.

6. Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to relate SSK-relativism to recent theorising about relativism in epistemology and the philosophy of language. I have tried to show that Boghossian's template does not fit SSK-relativism and that SSK-theorists have a battery of arguments that threaten Boghossian's absolutism. Whatever the merits or weaknesses of my individual arguments, I hope to at least have made plausible that the contemporary debate over epistemic relativism in Anglophone philosophy and the theorizing in SSK are not incommensurable. There is a substantive debate to be had here. [i]

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