

**Boghossian on Epistemological and Moral Relativism:
A Critique
(Third draft)**

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Paul Boghossian has published a number of papers and a book investigating and attacking various forms of relativism (Boghossian 1996, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2006a, 2006b). These writings have rightly attracted attention both within and beyond the boundaries of analytic philosophy. Boghossian updates a number of received arguments and puts forward new perspectives and criticisms. Friends and foes of relativism will profit from investigating his train of thought. In this paper, I shall present the results of my own attempt to do so.¹

Let there be no false suspense: although I admire the depth and sophistication of much of Boghossian's argumentation, ultimately I remain unconvinced. In response to every point of criticism that Boghossian deems decisive, it seems possible to suggest a relatively moderate modification to the relativistic position under discussion, a modification that protects the position from refutation.

I shall concentrate on Boghossian's attacks on epistemic and moral forms of relativism, and leave aside his analyses of "fact-constructivism" or "strong constructivism" (2006a: Chs. 3 and 8). The latter analyses seem to me largely unoriginal and insufficiently charitable.² My discussion will be structured around five central ideas:

- Boghossian's proposal that epistemological and moral forms of relativism should be taken to advance metaphysical rather than semantic claims;
- Boghossian's reconstruction of an argument by Richard Rorty in defence of epistemological relativism;
- Boghossian's objection to Rorty's defence;
- Boghossian's reformulation of the traditional self-refutation charge; and
- Boghossian's critical discussion of a general "template" for various forms of relativism.

¹ Other attempts that I have learnt from are Bloor (unpublished), Haddock (unpublished), Kalderon (2006), MacFarlane (forthcoming), and Neta (2007). See also Blackburn (2006). – This paper grew out of my contribution to a symposium on *Fear of Knowledge* organised by the Institute of Philosophy in London, in November 2006. Boghossian acted as commentator. Despite the fact that we found little common ground, I have learnt much from his reply. – I have also benefited from discussing Boghossian's work with Arif Ahmed, David Bloor, Adrian Haddock, Richard Raatzsch, Simon Schaffer, and Barry Smith. For comments on previous drafts, I am grateful to Stephen Grimm, Jeff Kochan, Markus Lammenranta, Peter Lipton, Ram Neta, Richard Raatzsch, Mark Sprevak and David B. Wong.

² For instance, Boghossian's criticism of Nelson Goodman's and Hilary Putnam's "fact-constructivism" re-invents the wheel (Boghossian 2006a: Ch.3; cf. Haack 1998; McCormick 1996; Searle 1995), and pays no attention to recent attempts to defend Goodman and Putnam (e.g. Lynch 1998; Kusch 2002). Siegel (2007) shares this assessment. More generally, Boghossian ignores much recent important literature on relativism, both defences of forms of relativism (e.g. Kölbel 2002) and criticisms (e.g. Siegel 2004). – Boghossian's criticism of David Bloor's Strong Programme (2006a: Ch. 8) fails to acknowledge Bloor's view that "naturally there will be other types of causes apart from social ones which will cooperate in bringing about belief" (Bloor 1991: 7).

2. Facts and Meaning

I agree with Boghossian's insistence that epistemological and moral forms of relativism are best regarded as claims about *what the facts are* rather than as claims about *what our sentences mean*.³ Boghossian argues as follows. Assume the moral relativist were taken to do no more than put forward the *semantic thesis* according to which the sentence (1):

(1) It is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary

does not express the proposition (2):

(2) *It is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary*

but instead expresses the relational proposition (3):

(3) *According to moral code M_1 , it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.*

Let the relativist be right. There then would remain the possibility that – despite our relativistic way of talking – there are absolute moral facts “out there”, facts that we have not yet learnt to properly represent. Surely a relativism that leaves open this possibility is too tame to be worthy of extended philosophical debate (REF!!!) In order to merit the latter, the relativist should be taken to propose that facts about epistemic justification, and facts about morality, are relative and not absolute.

3. An Argument in Favour of Epistemological Relativism

Boghossian spends a whole chapter of his book *Fear of Knowledge* on developing an argument in defence of epistemological relativism (2006a: Ch. 5). The starting point is an idea from Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1981): the idea of a multitude of epistemic systems that are, in some sense, “equally valid”. Rorty explains his view by reminding us of the dispute between Galileo Galilei and Cardinal Roberto Bellarmine. The latter is of course notorious for believing that the Bible is a better source of evidence about the stars and planets than are telescopes. Rorty defends the cardinal against the charge of being “illogical and unscientific”. According to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Bellarmine inhabited a “grid” or “system” of epistemic principles that is fundamentally different from both Galileo's and our own. Bellarmine's grid did not allow for our principled distinction between science and religion. Rorty goes on to suggest that there is no absolute vantage point from which our grid can be judged to be superior. That we believe our grid to be more “objective” or more “rational” is nothing but an accident of history.⁴ From within our system it is epistemically justified to believe in the Copernican theory, from within Bellarmine's epistemic system is it justified to stick to the Ptolemaic view (Rorty 1981: 328-329; Boghossian 2006a: 63).

Boghossian seeks to make Rorty's thought more precise. In a first step Boghossian reconstructs the *constituents* of epistemic systems, that is, epistemic principles, in more detail. He distinguishes between “generation” and “transmission” principles on the one hand, and “fundamental” and “derived” principles on the other hand. Generation principles produce justified beliefs on the basis of something that is not itself a belief, transmission principles prescribe how to move from one justified belief to another. A fundamental principle is one “whose correctness cannot be derived from the correctness of other

³ This agreement is for the sake of argument only. Elsewhere (Kusch 2002) I have defended a form of epistemic relativism that is motivated by semantic considerations. But I do not have the space here to introduce and motivate this position.

⁴ Note that Rorty is not denying that the heavens are Copernican rather than Ptolemaic. His relativism concerns epistemic justification, not the way the world is.

epistemic principles” (2006a: 67). This contrasts with derived principles. Here are examples of the four categories:

(*Observation*) [a fundamental generation principle] 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 . (2006a: 64)

(*Deduction*) [a fundamental transmission principle] If S is justified in believing p and p fairly obviously entails q , then S is justified in believing q . (2006a: 66)

(*Observation-dog*) [a derived generation principle] If it visually appears to S that there is a dog in front of him, and circumstantial conditions D obtain, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing that there is a dog in front of him. (2006a: 64)

(*Modus Ponens-rain*) [a derived transmission principle] If S justifiably believes that it will rain tomorrow, and justifiably believes that if it rains tomorrow the streets will be wet tomorrow, S is justified in believing that the streets will be wet tomorrow. (2006a: 66)

Finally, Boghossian also proposes a formulation of Bellarmine’s central 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. (2006a: 69)

Boghossian situates Rorty’s epistemic relativism in the proximity of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (1975).⁵ As Wittgenstein has it, when two epistemic systems or principles clash, *reason-giving* cannot be effective; each system will generate its own reasons. Such a clash leaves room only for name-calling:

#611. Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic. (1975)

Having introduced and clarified the very idea of fundamentally different epistemic systems, Boghossian proceeds to formulating more explicitly what he takes to be Rorty’s argument. Epistemic relativism combines three key theses. The first, “epistemic non-absolutism”, is that all facts about justification – all facts about what information justifies what belief – are relative to a system. The second, “epistemic relationalism”, holds that true epistemic judgements must express this relativity. And third, “epistemic pluralism”, claims that all epistemic systems or grids are equally correct (2006a: 73).

The detailed argument for this position takes the following form:

- (a) If there are absolute epistemic facts about what justifies what, then it ought to be possible to arrive at justified beliefs about them.
- (b) It is not possible to arrive at justified beliefs about what absolute epistemic facts there are.
- (c) There are no absolute epistemic facts. (Epistemic non-absolutism)
- (d) If there are no absolute epistemic facts, then epistemic relativism is true.
- (e) Epistemic relativism is true. (2006a: 74)

⁵ Boghossian also discusses the Azande’s oracle and seemingly deviant logic in this context. Since his discussion of this topic does not advance on the many previous rounds of debate, I shall ignore it here.

(a) does not demand that epistemic facts must be known in all their details; rough approximations suffice. Boghossian believes that (d) is not beyond doubt but grants it in the present context. The main weight falls on claims (b) and (c). (b) and (c) can be defended *prima facie*, Boghossian submits, by considering cases where our epistemic system clashes with other, fundamentally different ones. How can we justify to ourselves that our system is superior, indeed absolutely correct? The problem, it seems, is that any such justification would have to be circular: it would have to be using the very system the absoluteness of which it is trying to establish. Perhaps this is what one would expect of an absolute system. But a moment's reflection brings home that advocates of an alternative epistemic system, say that of Bellarmine, might defend *its* alleged absoluteness in exactly the same way. Bellarmine's supporters might be using their epistemic system in an effort to support *its* absoluteness. Our encounter with a fundamentally different epistemic practice, a practice involving *Revelation*, would thus be an encounter of two "self-supporting practices" neither of which can establish its superiority over the other on *neutral* grounds. And from this realisation it is but a short step – short for the relativist anyway – to the conclusion that our system cannot be shown to be absolutely correct. The linking principle here is Richard Fumerton's thought according to which "there is no philosophically interesting notion of justification or knowledge that would allow us to use a kind of reasoning to justify the legitimacy of using that reasoning" (1995: 180, Boghossian 2006a: 79). This is of course tantamount to saying that a circular justification of the kind currently considered is no justification at all. And once this idea is accepted, (b) and (c) seem established and (e) inevitably seems to follow: no self-certification of epistemic systems, no possibility of establishing absolute epistemic facts, no route to avoiding epistemic relativism.

4. Refuting the Argument in Favour of Epistemological Relativism

Although Boghossian goes to considerable length to formulate the above argument in defence of epistemological relativism, he does not ultimately deem it successful. His first criticism focuses on "*Encounter*":

(Encounter) If we were to encounter a fundamental, genuine alternative to our epistemic system, C_2 , we would not be able to justify C_1 [our epistemic system] over C_2 , even by our own lights. (2006a: 96)

Boghossian begins by pointing out that C_2 must fulfil certain conditions for it to be counted as equally correct: it must not, directly or indirectly, deliver inconsistent verdicts; it must not prescribe, directly or indirectly, inconsistent beliefs; it must not be self-undermining; and it must not make arbitrary distinctions (if two propositions, p and q , are treated according to different principles, then there must be a relevant distinction between p and q). Boghossian holds that meeting these demands is not optional: "each of these norms of coherence can be shown to flow relatively directly from the very *nature* of an epistemic system" (2006a: 98).

The core of Boghossian's objection to *Encounter* is the idea of "*Blind Entitlement*":

(Blind Entitlement) Each thinker is 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. (2006a: 99; cf. Boghossian 2003).

Boghossian recognises that relativists too might find *Blind Entitlement* congenial, but he nevertheless uses it to undermine the relativist's argument of the previous section. His thought is that *Blind Entitlement* raises the bar that an alternative system C_2 has to clear before it can be counted as a genuine alternative, that is, as an alternative that makes us "legitimately ... doubt the correctness" of our own system C_1 (2006a: 100). Once *Blind*

Entitlement is in play, an encounter with another coherent and self-certifying system is not enough to undermine our justification for relying on our system, and on our system only. Something stronger is needed:

For this encounter to have the desired [relativism inducing] effect, this alternative epistemic system would clearly have to be a *real-life* epistemic system, with a proven track record, not just some theoretical possibility. Its *actual* achievements would have to be *impressive* enough to make us legitimately doubt the correctness of our own system. (2006a: 101)

Boghossian is wise not to tackle the thorny issue of when the achievements of another system are “impressive enough” in this sense. But he obviously thinks that “our system” – the “we” here presumably refers to the inhabitants of a Western scientific secular culture – has never encountered such an impressive alternative. Bellarmine’s system, for example, does not qualify for this status.

In fact, Boghossian goes further and denies that Bellarmine’s system is fundamentally different from our own. This is Boghossian’s second main criticism of the epistemic relativist’s case. In order for Bellarmine’s system to qualify as fundamentally different from our own, Boghossian insists, his system must contain at least one *fundamental* epistemic principle that we do not recognise. No doubt Bellarmine and we share many fundamental epistemic principles: like us, Bellarmine accepts the above-quoted fundamental principles *Observation* and *Deduction*, for example. Indeed, if it were not for Bellarmine’s adoption of *Revelation* we might be hard pressed to find many differences between our respective systems. *Revelation* is included in Bellarmine’s system, but it is not part of ours (at least for most of us). Boghossian’s key move is to question the assumption that *Revelation* is a *fundamental* principle. For *Revelation* to be a fundamental principle, Boghossian thinks, it would have to apply to *all* propositions about the heavens. And propositions about the heavens would have to be principally different from propositions about “earthly matters”. Of course, Bellarmine does not think of *Revelation* in this way, and does not offer the needed principled distinction. Bellarmine is perfectly happy to form perceptual beliefs about the positions of the sun, the moon and stars on the basis of *Observation* (2006a: 104).

Moreover, Boghossian suggests a way in which *Revelation* might have been derived from more fundamental principles:

... we had better regard his [i.e. Bellarmine’s] system as differing from ours only in some derived sense, attributing to him the view that there is evidence, of a perfectly ordinary sort, that the Holy Scripture is the revealed world of the Creator of the Universe. And it is only natural for someone with that belief to place a great deal of stock in what it has to say about the heavens ... (2006a: 104-5)

This is a little sketchy but I suppose Boghossian is suggesting here that Bellarmine’s religious beliefs in general, and his belief in the Bible in particular, are due (primarily) to testimony, observation and inference to the best explanation. All these are governed by fundamental epistemic principles, principles that are shared between Bellarmine’s and our secular epistemic systems. Once Bellarmine’s religious belief, and his belief in the Bible as the word of God, are in place, he indeed has reason to also accept *Revelation* as a further principle. And yet, without the more fundamental principles, *Revelation* could not have been motivated.

Finally, since Bellarmine’s system differs from our own only slightly, and only with respect to a derived principle, there can be a *rational* debate over the justifiability of *Revelation*. The question is simply whether there is “evidence of a perfectly ordinary sort for believing that what was written down in some book by a large number of people over a vast period of time, internal inconsistencies and all, is really the revealed word of the Creator” (2006a: 105).

5. A Contemporary Example of an Alternative Epistemic System

Boghossian's first criticism of relativism, summarised above, is in good part original and deserves careful and detailed scrutiny. I shall try to respond in a slightly roundabout way. In assessing Boghossian's claims it seems useful to have before us a clear contemporary example of an epistemic system that, at least *prima facie*, and at least for a good number of readers, constitutes an *alternative* to their own. Here I follow Boghossian in construing an alternative epistemic system C_2 as differing from our own ($=C_1$) in at least one fundamental epistemic principle. To keep the discussion within sight of Bellarmine's case, it seems natural to pick a contemporary Christian philosopher who defends the possibility of basing one's religious beliefs on an alleged special epistemic access to God. William P. Alston's *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (1991) fits this bill perfectly. As a bonus, Alston is also a first-rate epistemologist and has important things to say about blind reasoning, the clash between religion and science, and the principles underlying *Revelation*. I begin with a brief summary.

The core of Alston's book is a defence of the idea that it is possible to perceive God and his messages. A Boghossian-style formulation of the underlying principle could be put as follows:

(Mystical Perception) If it seems to S that God is telling him that p , and circumstantial conditions D obtain, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing that God is telling him that p .⁶

Alston cites many examples of reports of mystical perceptions of God. The following passage is typical:

... all at once I ... felt the presence of God ... I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him ... I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day, in humility and poverty, leaving him, The Almighty God, to judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more consciously. (Alston 1991: 12)

Alston maintains that such experiences deserve to be taken as cases of perception. Mystical experience is perception since in it "it seems to the subject that something (identified by the subject as God) is directly presenting itself to his/her awareness as so-and-so" (1991: 67). Alston does not regard mystical perception as "self-authenticating"; that is, he holds that, at least sometimes, one might be deluded into believing that one is perceiving God (1991: 80). In the cases of both sensory perception and mystical perception we find an "overrider system": although it can seem to the subject that p , a background belief, or a system thereof, might show that not- p . In the case of mystical perception such overriding beliefs might be that the devil is trying to mislead the subject or that the putative mystical perception causes perturbation rather than "interior peace", despair rather than trust in God, or impatience rather than calm (1991: 203).

Alston goes to great length trying to establish that there cannot be a noncircular demonstration of the reliability of sensory perception. To establish this point is not a goal in itself: the upshot of his considerations is to insist that in this regard sensory and mystical forms of perception are in the same boat (1991: 143). Nevertheless, we are right to trust sensory and mystical perception more than, say, "entrail reading or crystal-ball gazing": sensory and mystical perception are socially established practices; their outputs are free

⁶ In order to minimise the distance between Alston's and Boghossian's positions, I here ignore the fact that Alston would not agree with the internalism that Boghossian's formulations seem to involve. More generally, I am here more interested in the *type* of position that Alston represents rather than with the details of his views.

from massive contradiction; they support themselves to a significant degree; and they fit in with other epistemic practices (1991: 184-185). Alston puts the last-mentioned point as follows:

An individual cannot acquire the background system of doctrine involved in the overrider system without using sense perception – to read sacred writings, for example – memory, and various kinds of reasoning. And just as with other socially established practices, one must perceive other people, understand what they are saying, remember it, and reason from it, if one is to learn the practice (1991: 188).

Alston has plenty to say on the criterion of absence of massive contradiction. He holds that an acceptable epistemic practice must not persistently yield “massively inconsistent outputs” (1991: 234). But he immediately adds that “a modest degree of internal inconsistency will not disqualify” an epistemic practice. Alston finds such “modest degree of internal inconsistency” in sensory perception, mystical perception and the epistemic practice of rational intuition. As far as sensory perception goes, Alston reminds his readers that “witnesses to a crime or an automobile accident not infrequently contradict each other”. And rational intuition too often generates incompatible outputs, especially in metaphysics: people have widely varying intuitions on freedom of the will, backward causation, or personal identity (1991: 154, 235). Regarding the degree of inconsistency of mystical perception Alston makes several points. First, he acknowledges that mystical perception generates more inconsistencies than other “basic secular practices” like sensory perception or rational intuition. Second, he qualifies this admission by adding that the magnitude of difference in this respect depends on “bookkeeping decisions”. We get high degrees of inconsistency if we treat mystical perception as a single epistemic practice. We remain with a much smaller degree if we isolate a “‘mainline Christian’ [mystical perception] from outlying districts” (1991: 236). Third, although the number of unresolved inconsistencies might be higher in Christian mystical perception than in sensory perception, the number alone gives a misleading picture: maybe the number of *important* unresolved issues is much smaller. Fourth, throughout his book Alston warns his readers of the “epistemic imperialism” that takes the standards of one practice as normative for all (1991: 199). Applied to the present case this presumably means that we should not expect Christian mystical perception to have the same degree of consistency as various secular practices. And fifth, it is reasonable to assume that our cognitive grasp of God and salvation is much less firm than our cognitive grasp of the natural world. Alston takes this to be an insight we gain from Christian mystical perception itself. Again he acknowledges and accepts the circularity involved in this reasoning: “... in what I just said I was using Christian mystical perception itself to determine how much we know about its subject matter” (1991: 237). Alston concludes: “I will take it that internal inconsistency gives us no reason to assign so low a reliability to Christian mystical perception as to override its *prima facie* rationality.” (1991: 238)

In the present context it is particularly noteworthy what Alston writes about the possible conflict between Christian mystical perception and the results of science. When the outputs of the two practices conflict as far as nature and history is concerned, Alston is willing to go with science. Indeed, he opposes an “overly literal reading of the Bible (...) that conflicts with scientific results or historical investigation”. It is rational to follow science since it is “a more firmly established practice”. And yet, Alston is also adamant that no scientific result poses a threat to mystical perception or the Christian faith (1991: 239-240).

Finally, Alston distinguishes between three forms of revelation. The first consists of “messages delivered to His people at large through selected messengers”. These messages depend on mystical perception. The second are “divine inspirations of writings or oral communication”, and the third “divine actions in history” (1991: 291). Alston suggests that the second and the third are inferred by the religious believer. The inferences in questions are instances of inference to the best explanation. Believers infer that certain

texts are divinely inspired or that certain worldly events are due to divine interventions. The same is not true of the first form of revelation: it is due to mystical perception alone. It is precisely for this reason, Alston thinks that mystical perception makes a crucial contribution to his overall system of religious belief (1991: 293, 299, 302-3).

6. Encountering an Alternative Epistemic System

One of the first lessons to be learnt from the encounter with Alston's book is that we should be more cautious than Boghossian in speaking of "our" epistemic system. If the "we" is meant to cover "us 21st century analytic philosophers", then Alston should surely be included. This inclusion would however fit badly with Alston's acceptance of *Mystical Perception*. To keep matters simple, I shall therefore simply refer to the contrast between Alston and myself. I am inclined to regard Alston's epistemic system as an alternative to my own. Alston's epistemic system contains *Mystical Perception*, mine does not. Moreover, it seems reasonable to categorise *Mystical Perception* as a *fundamental* principle for Alston.⁷ Although he tries to explain *Mystical Perception* to his readers by appealing to epistemic principles that his system shares with secular ones, he is not trying to *derive* it from such principles. After all, Alston thinks – rightly in my view – that a noncircular justification of basic epistemic practices, of which sensory and mystical perception as well as rational intuition are examples, is impossible. If we could derive *Mystical Perception* from, say *Inference to the Best Explanation*, we would be providing *Mystical Perception* with a justification of sorts. Alston does not speak of *Blind Entitlement*, but he obviously rejects Fumerton's stricture according to which "there is no philosophically interesting notion of justification or knowledge that would allow us to use a kind of reasoning to justify the legitimacy of using that reasoning" (1995: 180, Boghossian 2006a: 79).⁸

Consider next what might happen when I first encounter Alston. If Boghossian is to be believed, both me and Alston are blindly entitled to use our respective systems – each one of us is entitled to regard our epistemic system as correct. I assume that there is no compelling ground for trusting *Mystical Perception*, Alston assumes that there is. Should we regard each other's systems as sufficiently coherent to be in the running for being a genuine alternative? Assume that Alston judges my epistemic system to be coherent.

⁷ Boghossian's suggestion according to which *Observation* is a fundamental principle assumes that there are several fundamental perceptual principles, corresponding to the various perceptual modalities (visual, olfactory, etc.). Alternatively, one might claim that there is only one fundamental perceptual principles relevant to perception:

(*Perception*) For any perceptual proposition *p*, if it perceptually seems to *S* that *p* and circumstantial conditions *D* obtain, then *S* is *prima facie* justified in believing *p*.

(Similar broad categories might apply to testimony, or memory, or rational intuition.) I shall here go along with Boghossian's proposal. – However, it is worth noting in passing that some of Boghossian's objectives might be better served by opting for the broader construal of fundamental principles. It would make it more difficult to argue for the possibility of an alternative epistemic system. For instance, the difference between Alston's and my own system – he accepts *Mystical Perception*, I do not – would no longer be a difference in fundamental principles. Instead it would be more of an empirical disagreement, perhaps about which sorts of perceptual seemings actually occur, or are actually truth-oriented. Such move would invite a different relativist move: to insist that alternative epistemic systems need not differ in fundamental principles.

⁸ Alston's position on this question has changed over time, and is more complex than I have space to discuss here; see especially Alston (2005).

Should I return the favour? Alston tries to convince us that mystical perception does not produce an unacceptable degree of inconsistency. I agree on the basis of *my* criteria for what are acceptable and unacceptable degrees of inconsistency. But even if I were to disagree on the basis of *my* criteria, I might still reach the conclusion that – given Alston’s epistemic system and its criteria for acceptable degrees of inconsistency – mystical perception does alright as far a consistency goes. Finally, are either Alston or I forced to find each other’s system “impressive enough to make us legitimately doubt the correctness of our own” (Boghossian 2006a: 101)? I suspect not. Given that Alston too accepts the principles upon which science is based, switching from his to my epistemic system would not increase his access to impressive scientific achievements. I in turn do not find the deliveries of mystical perception impressive enough for me to adopt *Mystical Perception* or Alston’s Christian credo. So each one of us can stick to his own. He reasons that my system lacks an important principle and practice, I can feel justified in thinking that mystical perception is not a source of knowledge.

Assume that Alston and I each reason in this way, recognise each other’s train of thought, and become aware of the impossibility of convincing each other. Should we nevertheless continue regarding our own respective epistemic systems as absolutely correct and the alternative as absolutely incorrect? Or should we move to some form of epistemic relativism? This is a big and difficult issue, and a proper treatment would have to be much more extensive than what I can offer in this context. Suffice it here to match the level of detail that Boghossian offers in his anti-relativistic argument. It seems to me that adopting epistemic relativism is a very natural response to my encounter with Alston, and a response that does not violate any of my (our?) general secular epistemic principles. Neither Alston nor I conclude that the other’s epistemic system is overall and absolutely incorrect; and both of us acknowledge our own and each other’s blind entitlements to continue using our systems. Epistemic relativism is the response that demands least changes of either of us.

In other words, I propose that *a* – if not *the* – natural response to irresolvable epistemic disagreement⁹, and thus the natural response to difference in fundamental principles, might be similar to what moral relativists like Gilbert Harman (1975, 1996a, 1996b) and David B. Wong (1984, 2006) have suggested for the case of moral disagreement. Here is how Wong puts the key idea in his recent book *Natural Moralities* (2006):

There is ... a kind of moral disagreement that poses special difficulties for universalism. This kind of disagreement evokes a complex reaction I call “moral ambivalence”. We see that reasonable and knowledgeable people could have made different judgements than we are inclined to make about these conflicts, and any prior convictions we might have had about the superiority of our own judgements get shaken. Moral ambivalence is the phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side’s viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgements get destabilized. In other words, the most discomforting kind of moral disagreement is ... a disagreement in which coming to the other side brings along an appreciation of *its* reasons. (2006: 5)

In encountering Alston’s arguments and epistemic system I experience the analogous phenomenon of “epistemic ambivalence”. I admire Alston’s work in (secular) epistemology and thus I have no doubts about his knowledge and his reasonableness. I can perfectly well appreciate the reasons that lead Alston to his defence of mystical perception as a source of knowledge and justified belief. And thus my sense of “unique rightness” of

⁹ “Irresolvable” at least unless I have a “Paul-on-the-way-to-Damascus” kind of revelation from God. If I were to deem such experience impossible then our disagreement would no longer be just epistemic.

my own epistemic system is destabilised. It is not that I wish to give up my system; but I do recognise that there are at least some equally irrefutable alternatives.¹⁰

This result is not however what Boghossian would predict. Boghossian insists that my encounter with Alston should turn me into an epistemic relativist if and only if Alston's system is "impressive enough to make [me] legitimately doubt the correctness of [my] own". Note that Boghossian writes: "correctness", not "unique" or "absolute correctness". This cannot be right. If Alston's system were so impressive that it makes me legitimately doubt the correctness of my own, then my response should be a radical overhaul of my principles, scepticism, or perhaps even the adoption of Alston's system. Boghossian's mistake is to conflate doubting the *correctness* of my system with doubting its *absolute correctness*. The encounter with Alston makes me doubt that there is a vantage point from which we can declare one or another system to be absolutely correct, but it does not make me doubt the *relative* correctness of my own. The encounter makes me realise that there is a distinction between relative and absolute correctness, and both Alston and I can reach – with respect to our systems – only relative correctness. Boghossian's fails to mark all uses of "correctness" as either "relative" or "absolute correctness". This allows him to move from (i) to (ii):

(i) I have not encountered an alternative epistemic system that legitimately makes me doubt that my own system is correct.

(ii) I am justified in my belief that my own system is absolutely correct.

If "correct" in (i) means *absolutely correct* then (i) seems false, for the reasons explained above: the encounter with an alternative system (e.g. of Alston's kind) can make me legitimately doubt that my system is absolutely correct. But if "correct" in (i) means *relatively correct* then (ii) does not follow.

Up to this point I have followed Boghossian in assuming that the relativism-inducing alternative system would have to be "a *real-life* epistemic system, with a proven track record" (2006a: 101). Once we realise that relativists do not *doubt* their own epistemic systems, this demand begins to seem too strong. Such demand is natural only in a situation in which an alternative system is meant to make us doubt the correctness – both absolute and relative – of our own. It does not matter whether Alston's epistemic system is real or not. Even if *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* were a work of fiction, written by myself, it could well have the exact same relativism-inducing effect. The crucial insight – that there is no absolute point from which the two internally coherent systems can be measured – remains in force, regardless of whether they meet in the real or some possible world.

Boghossian's failure to properly distinguish between *correctness* and *absolute correctness* also affects the plausibility of *Blind Entitlement*. We should all agree that we are entitled to use our epistemic system "without having first to supply an antecedent justification for the claim that it is the correct system" (2006a: 99). To deny this principle would lead to intellectual paralysis. Fumerton's previously cited thought – "there is no philosophically interesting notion of justification or knowledge that would allow us to use a kind of reasoning to justify the legitimacy of using that reasoning" – is tantamount to accepting scepticism. And yet the question remains how far *Blind Entitlement* reaches, or, how its term "correct" is to be understood. It is one thing to assume that we are faultless in using the system we happen to find ourselves with; it is quite another to take ourselves to be entitled to regard our system as absolutely correct. If *Blind Entitlement* is understood in

¹⁰ The phenomenon of disagreement between epistemic peers has recently become the focus of much intriguing work in epistemology (Christensen 2007, Elga 2007, Feldman 2006, Kelly 2005). For the present context this literature is not of much help, however, since it has tended to concentrate on disagreement between "peers" who share the same epistemic system.

the first sense, then it does not constitute a principle that keeps relativism at bay: it does not invoke a sense of correctness that the relativist will find problematic. If *Blind Entitlement* is interpreted in the second sense, then it seems unsupported by our intuitions. It does not lead to intellectual paralysis to think of one's epistemic system as relatively rather than absolutely correct.¹¹

7. Bellarmine's System Revisited

Above I have treated Alston as an advocate of an alternative epistemic system – alternative relative to my own system which has no space for his fundamental epistemic principle of *Mystical Perception*. In doing so I have relied on Boghossian's criterion according to which alternative epistemic systems differ in at least one fundamental principle. Perhaps Boghossian should reply by insisting on our limited knowledge of the absolute epistemic facts. He is adamant that we are able to know “absolute epistemic facts only in rough approximation”, that at most we are able to “rule out *radical* alternatives”, and that we are “unable to decide between two very close contenders” (2006a: 76). Aside from *Mystical Perception* and some related principles and beliefs, Alston's epistemic system is probably not very different from my own. Alston is adamant that *Mystical Perception* does not override the epistemic principles upon which the natural sciences and the humanities are based. Thus Boghossian might say that Alston's system and my system are not “radical alternatives”, and that at present we have no way to telling which one of two systems is a better approximation of the absolute epistemic facts.

While this response is certainly possible, it does not seem to me to fit well with Boghossian's general scientific and philosophical commitments: it is hard to imagine that for him a reliance on *Mystical Perception* is anything but irrational. For Boghossian the only legitimate methods for finding out about the world are those that loom large in the sciences (2006a: 4). And there is no suggestion anywhere in his texts that this commitment leaves space for other, non-scientific, methods – never mind whether these are allowed to overrule science or not.

My argument that epistemic relativism is a natural response to my encounter with Alston does not, in any case, depend crucially on the observation that, were it not for Alston's adherence to *Mystical Perception*, our epistemic systems would be identical. I would respond with epistemic ambivalence towards Alston's system even if he were to allow *Mystical Perception* to overrule some areas of science: I would still respect his formidable intellect and knowledge; I would still accept that by its own lights his system and its verdicts are coherent to a considerable degree; and I would still recognise the impossibility of arguing – without begging the question – for the absolute superiority of my own system over his. And to react with epistemic ambivalence is to take the step towards epistemic relativism.

How does Bellarmine's epistemic system compare with Alston's?¹² The fact that Bellarmine is willing to have the Bible overrule the results of science suggests that we

¹¹ Admittedly, this distinction between “Absolute Blind Entitlement” and “Relative Blind Entitlement” calls for more elaboration than I have space here. I have to confine myself to three brief further remarks. First, Absolute Blind Entitlement is the weaker, less contentious, principle. Second, it is difficult to argue for either principle in separation of one's general views pro or contra relativism. Third, the advocate of Absolute Blind Entitlement will worry that Relative Blind Entitlement leads to scepticism, and the whole point of the entitlement principle is to block scepticism. To answer this charge would involve clarifying the difference between relativism and scepticism.

¹² Here I am going along with Rorty's and Boghossian's description of Bellarmine's position. It cannot be stressed enough, however, that their portrayal of Bellarmine is seriously misleading. First, contrary to what Boghossian alleges, Bellarmine did *not* refuse the invitation to look through his Galileo's telescope “saying that he had a far better source of evidence about the make-up of the heavens, namely, the Holy Scripture itself”

should place him at a greater intellectual distance from me than we should place Alston. After all, Alston does not accept Bellarmine's *Revelation*. This result – that Alston is closer to me than Bellarmine – does not fit with Boghossian's claim according to which Bellarmine's epistemic system is actually the same as ours (the scientifically-minded agnostics or atheists, I presume). Boghossian's claim was, it will be recalled, that Bellarmine's *Revelation* is domain-specific and derived. I am unconvinced. I have three misgivings.¹³

First, Boghossian's claim that *Revelation* must be derived from principles that Bellarmine shares with us (i.e. the irreligious) is wrong. We know from Bellarmine himself that he believed the authors of the Bible to have been divinely inspired:

... the words "the sun also riseth and the sun goeth down, and hasteneth to the place where he ariseth, etc." were those of Solomon, who ... spoke by divine inspiration ... (Bellarmine's letter to P. A. Foscarini, 12 April 1615; quoted in de Santillana 1955: 105)

Maybe Bellarmine's belief that the Bible is divinely inspired is due to testimony and inference to the best explanation. But if the Bible is divinely inspired then what it says is true. Now, the Bible frequently reports that God speaks to prophets and kings directly; in other words, the Bible tells of numerous instances of mystical perception of God. And it implies that God's true subjects adopt the epistemic principle of *Mystical Perception*. Moreover, God's faithful subjects make this principle their own not as a derived principle; they treat it as fundamental. When God spoke to Adam, Noah, Jonah, and Moses – amongst numerous others – they did not reflect on the epistemic propriety of *Mystical*

(Boghossian 2006a: 60). Note the following letter by Bellarmine, dated 19 April 1611, and addressed to "the Mathematicians of the Collegio Romano": "I know that Your Reverences are aware of the new celestial observations by a worthy mathematician using an instrument called a *cannone* or *ochiale*. By means of this instrument even I have seen some very marvellous things concerning the moon and Venus, but I wish that you would do me the pleasure of telling me sincerely your opinion concerning these things." (quoted from Lattis 1994: 190). Second, Bellarmine's position on Copernicanism was sophisticated: he thought that "since movement is relative, all the planetary movements posited by Copernicanism could be equally successfully modelled in a system where the earth is stationary and the sun moved" (Wootton 2007). Such system had been proposed by Tycho Brahe. Third, for Bellarmine the Bible did not simply overrule astronomical observation and theory. In fact, Bellarmine was willing to entertain the possibility that astronomy might lead to a re-interpretation of the Bible: "I say that if there were a true demonstration that the sun was in the centre of the universe and the earth in the third sphere, and that the sun did not travel around the earth but the earth circled the sun, then it would be necessary to proceed with great caution in explaining the passages of Scripture which seemed contrary, and we would rather have to say that we did not understand them than to say that something was false which has been demonstrated. But I do not believe that there is any such demonstration; none has been shown to me. It is not the same thing to show that the appearances are saved by assuming that the sun really is in the centre and the earth in the heavens. I believe that the first demonstration might exist, but I have grave doubts about the second, and in a case of doubt, one may not depart from the Scriptures as explained by the holy Fathers" (Letter to P. A. Foscarini, 12 April 1615). This last quotation might even lead one to doubt that Bellarmine's and Galileo's epistemic systems were far apart – perhaps they were no further apart than Alston's and mine.

¹³ For further criticism, see MacFarlane (forthcoming).

Perception. They accepted it without further argument. It follows that the Bible itself teaches us to take *Mystical Perception* as fundamental. You can see where this is leading: if Bellarmine accepts *Revelation* at least in part because of his commitment to *Mystical Perception*, then he does not derive *Revelation* from epistemic principles that he shares with us (scientifically-minded agnostics or atheists).

Second, Boghossian deems *Revelation* a derived principle also on the grounds that it does not apply to *all* propositions about the heavens. Some truths about the heavens can be obtained through visual observation, testimony or inference, other truths about the heavens can be gotten only via *Revelation*. Bellarmine does not suggest a dividing line between the two sets of truths. – Again it is hard to take this point as decisive. Why not simply say that the domain of *Revelation* is circumscribed by the content of the revelatory text, that is, the Bible?

Third, Boghossian overlooks that a principle can be fundamental in two different senses. On the one hand, a principle might be called “fundamental” on the grounds that it has not been derived from other principles. This is the sense of “fundamental” that Boghossian has in mind when calling *Revelation* a derived principle. On the other hand, a principle might also be regarded as fundamental on the grounds that it is treated as overriding whenever its verdicts conflict with the verdicts issuing from other principles. It seems perfectly possible for a principle to be derived in the first sense, and yet to be fundamental in the second sense. In particular it is not difficult to imagine that *Revelation* could have been arrived at in the way Boghossian suggests and yet still be fundamental in the sense of overriding. If that is true, then Boghossian’s consideration concerning the genesis of *Revelation* in Bellarmine’s mind, and in the epistemic system of the Catholic Church, is besides the point. Bellarmine treats *Revelation* as a fundamental overriding principle and we do not. Hence – if difference in fundamental principles makes for fundamental difference in epistemic system – Bellarmine and us, or Bellarmine and Galileo, have different epistemic systems.

Finally, if Bellarmine does have an epistemic system that differs fundamentally, though for different reasons, from Alston’s, Boghossian’s and my own, can relativism be an acceptable response to my encounter with him? Can I experience “epistemic ambivalence” in this case, too? I do not see why not. Just as in Alston’s case I find myself unable to dismiss Bellarmine as simply irrational. On the contrary, even a superficial study of his arguments and reasoning reveals a man of most impressive intellectual ability. I also am in little doubt that his position is internally coherent. And I cannot see a non-circular way of showing that my epistemic system is superior. Allowing that Bellarmine’s response to Copernicanism is relatively correct, correct relative to his epistemic system, does not mean that I have to accept it. After all, according to my epistemic system his response is not correct. Again, opting for epistemic relativism is not to repudiate one’s standards; it is to accept that there is no vantage point from which these standards can be judged to be absolutely correct.

8. *Updating the Classical Self-refutation Argument*

As shown above, Boghossian’s first line of argument against epistemological relativism is not successful. His second criticism is based on a updated form of the often-heard self-refutation charge. Boghossian formulates the original version as follows:

The claim “Nothing is objectively justified, but only justified relative to this or that epistemic system” must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either objectively justified, or only justified relative to this or that particular epistemic system. But it can’t be objectively justified, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be justified only relative to the relativist’s epistemic system, since in that case it is just a report of what he finds it agreeable to say. If he also invites us to join him, we need not offer any reason for declining since he has offered us no reason to accept. (2006a: 83)

Boghossian has a number of misgivings about this argument. First, the argument does not show that epistemic relativism is false; it merely establishes that epistemic relativism is not assertible or believable. Second, the argument depends on folk-psychological and folk-epistemological terms. If eliminativists about folk-psychology are to be believed, these terms are on their way out. Third, and most importantly, the argument rests on the questionable assumption that the relativist stands *outside* of *our* community. This assumption is unmotivated. If the relativist is a member of our culture, then relativist and the rest of us share the same epistemic system. And in that case whatever is a justification for the relativist must also be a justification for us. Put differently, the relativist takes it that his position is “justified by principles that are endorsed by relativists and non-relativists alike” (2006a: 83; 2003: 27-29). While Boghossian is unsatisfied with the first two responses to the self-refutation charge, he regards the third counter as a convincing defence – at least against the above formulation of the self-refutation charge.

The qualification (“at least against the above formulation ...”) is crucial however. Boghossian thinks that the classical self-refutation charge can be reformulated in a way that sidesteps the third response. Key here is the concept of being “epistemically blameless”: Person *S* is epistemically blameless in believing that *p* if and only if there is no rational scope for criticising him for his belief (2003: 30). Now consider a community *C*, a given state of information *I* in which *C* happens to find itself, and epistemic principles *E* that would justify the adoption of a belief in proposition *P*:

If justificatory relativism is true, then, even while keeping the state of information *I* fixed, it is *possible* for *C* to believe *any* proposition *P* that it wants, and be blameless. All *C* has to do is adopt whatever epistemic norms [=E] sanction *P* under *I*. Since, according to the relativist, there can be no higher facts about which epistemic principles it would be correct to adopt, *C* can adopt any epistemic principle it wants and be blameless. Since, for any *P*, there will be some set of principles that will sanction believing it, any state of information is consistent with blameless belief in *any* proposition, if relativism is true. In particular, *C* can blamelessly adopt epistemic norms that prohibit a relativism about justification. ... By the relativist’s own lights, there can be no objection to this manoeuvre. (2003: 30-1)

If this is correct, Boghossian insists, two corollaries follow immediately. On the one hand, relativism can after all be blamelessly rejected. By the relativist’s own lights, we are entitled to adopt such principles as will sanction the adoption of anti-relativism. And, on the other hand, it now turns out that epistemological relativism is indeed “an unacceptable form of ‘anything goes’” (2003: 31).

9. Problems with Updating the Classical Self-refutation Argument

Boghossian presents his updated version of the self-refutation charge in a paper published in 2003, but does not repeat it in his 2006 book. Perhaps this is an indication that he no longer puts great weight on this idea. Be that as it may, it is not difficult to show that Boghossian’s reformulation fails to strengthen the original argument.

A first reason to be sceptical of the reformulated self-refutation charge is that it is couched in terms that suggest what Robert Brandom, in a different context, has called a “mythological conception of communities” (1994: 594, cf. Kusch 2006: 195-200). Boghossian seems to be happy to “personify the community, [to] talk about it as though it were able to do the same sorts of things that individual community members can do ...” (Brandom 1994: 38). In the passage above, Boghossian speaks of the community believing, wanting, doing, and adopting things, without any indication of how such talk is to be understood. Reasonably sophisticated relativists will avoid such talk. They will focus

on the interaction between individuals in and between groups, not on the actions of whole groups.

Second, the significance of avoiding the mythological conception of communities becomes clear once we turn our attention to the claim that a community can blamelessly adopt any *E* it wishes to adopt. The mythological conception of communities prevents us from appreciating the possibility of rational argumentation *within* a community. A community can adopt epistemic principles only insofar as its members – or their functionaries – licence such principles. And here the sensible relativist will surely allow, or indeed insist, that proposals to accept or drop some epistemic principle must be based on considerations that constitute good epistemic reasons for community members (or their functionaries). For a sensible epistemic relativist, communal debate over which beliefs and epistemic principles to licence is constrained by previously adopted beliefs and epistemic principles. A communal decision-making process concerning what to believe has to be so constrained on danger of losing its status as an *epistemic* process. Put differently, the relativist denies that communities can blamelessly adopt whatever *E* best supports *P*. It is the mark of an epistemic decision-making process that such move is illegitimate. A community that decides in this way is not an epistemic community and thus not a community with respect to which the relativist is willing to relativise justification.

Third, if this is true then of course Boghossian is wrong to say that our community *C* can blamelessly adopt principles that imply the falsity of epistemic relativism. In his criticism of the old version of the self-refutation charge, Boghossian himself allows epistemic relativists to regard themselves as sharing the same epistemic system with absolutists. But this permission is tantamount to saying that the epistemic relativists are part of *C*. And thus absolutists cannot simply pick absolutist epistemic principles out of the blue: they need to argue with, and convince, the relativists. For the relativist, absolutists do not constitute another community; they are erring members of the same community. Absolutists generally tend to think along similar terms regarding relativists. Absolutists who – without a convincing argument – pick such principles as support absolutism, would not be regarded, by the relativist, as forming or being part of, an epistemic community.

10. Replacement Relativism

Arguably Boghossian's most important original contribution to the debate over relativism is his discussion of the proposal to model philosophical forms of relativism (especially moral and epistemological relativism) on the relativity claim advanced in physics by Galileo. The general idea is not new – Boghossian takes it from Gilbert Harman (1996b) – but he develops it in much greater detail.

Galileo proposed a relativistic thesis in physics. Galileo discovered that motion is relative to a variable frame of reference. Galileo found out new things about the world: namely that facts about motion are relative facts. Put differently, before Galileo it was natural for people to believe that, say, the sentence “the ship moves” expresses the proposition *the ship moves*, and that the latter is true, if and only if the given ship has the *monadic* property expressed by “moves”. Galileo showed that there is no such monadic property, and that therefore utterances of the form “x moves” are untrue – either false or incomplete. Moreover, Galileo also pointed out that the closest truths in the vicinity of these untruths are relational truths of the form *x moves relative to frame of reference F*. And hence it is natural to take Galileo to make a recommendation concerning how we should speak: *replace* the non-relativized sentences with relativized ones, and assert only the relational propositions. And finally, Galileo offers an analysis of what are possible frames of reference.

Galileo's relativism is an instance of an general template that Boghossian calls “replacement relativism”. It is worth quoting the template in full:

Relativism about a monadic property P is the view that:

(A) “x is P” expresses the proposition *x is P* which is true if and only if x has the monadic property expressed by “P”.

(B) Because nothing has (or can have) the property P, all such utterances are condemned to untruth.

(C) The closest truths in the vicinity are the related relational truths of the form:
x is P relative to F

where “F” names some appropriate parameter.

(D) If our P-utterances are to have any prospect of being true, we should not make judgements of the form:

x is P

but only those of the form:

x is P relative to F.

(E) There are the following constraints on the value that F may assume: ...
(2006b: 20-21)

Philosophical forms of epistemological and moral relativism seem to fit the same template. Consider moral relativism. The moral relativist takes himself to have discovered that a sentence like (1)

(1) It is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary

that expresses the proposition (2):

(2) *It is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary*

is untrue since there is no monadic property for “morally wrong” to express. The closest truth in the vicinity of (2) is the relational proposition (3):

(3) *According to moral code M_1 , it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.*

Hence the moral relativist recommends that we speak accordingly, and make the relativity explicit in sentences like (4):

(4) According to moral code M_I , it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

The same moves can be made by the epistemic relativist. He takes himself to have discovered that a sentence like (1')

(1') It is epistemically irrational for Otto to believe that p

that expresses the proposition (2):

(2') *It is epistemically irrational for Otto to believe that p*

is untrue since there is no monadic property for "epistemically irrational" to express. (1') is thus untrue. The closest truth in the vicinity of (2') is the relational proposition (3'):

(3') *According to epistemic system S_I , it is epistemically irrational for Otto to believe that p*

Hence the epistemic relativist recommends that we speak accordingly, and make the relativity explicit in sentences like (4'):

(4') According to epistemic system S_I , it is epistemically irrational for Otto to believe that p.

Replacement Relativism can be developed further in different ways. One important choice facing its advocate concerns the character of the relativising frameworks. Boghossian considers two main options: the components of the relativising frameworks can be taken to be either *general propositions* or *imperatives*. Boghossian dubs the first alternative "Fictionalist", and we might call the second "Non-fictionalist". Fictionalist Replacement Relativism needs to decide whether the non-relativised original sentences (1) and (1') are to be treated as false or incomplete: let us call the first option "Error-theoretical", and the second "Incompleteness-theoretical". Boghossian seeks to establish that none of these options is acceptable and that thus all forms of Replacement Relativism fail. Let us consider each option in turn.

Fictionalist, Error-theoretical Replacement Relativism seems the most natural proposal. Alas, it faces two difficulties. The first is the *Normativity Problem*. Whereas the original sentences (1) and (1') were normative, sentences (4) and (4') are not; the latter merely report what is morally wrong or epistemically irrational according to a moral code or epistemic system. The insertion of an "I accept" clause does not seem to help:

(5) According to moral code M_I , which I, the speaker, accept, it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

(5') According to epistemic system S_I , which I, the speaker, accept, it is epistemically irrational for Otto to believe that p.

This manoeuvre does not help, Boghossian insists, since rather than turning (4) and (4') into normative claims, (5) and (5') are statements about the speaker's own mental states (2006b: 25).

The second difficulty for Fictionalist, Error-theoretical Replacement Relativism is the *Endorsement Problem*. Recall that the version of relativism currently under scrutiny treats the original non-relative moral statements as false. A true sentence results only once the original false sentence is combined with the relativising qualifications "according to epistemic system S_I ", or "according to moral code M_I ". Fictionalist Replacement

Relativism treats these systems or codes as consisting of general propositions. How are we to conceive of the relationship between these general propositions and the particular propositions that we know to be false? Boghossian claims that this relationship must be one of entailment. Particular moral sentences like (1) and particular epistemic sentences like (1') are entailed by general moral and epistemic principles respectively. And now the relativist is in a quandary: if all particular sentences of kind (1) and (1') are false and entailed by general principles, then the general principles must be false, too. After all, the general principles are just more general versions of the very particular sentences we started off with. But if both particular and general moral and epistemic statements and principles are false, how can a relativist ever accept them, how can a relativist ever *endorse* them? Moreover, on pain of contradiction, it cannot be the case that all moral codes are false. If M_1 insists that slavery is prohibited and M_2 holds that it is permitted, then one of them must be true – at least with respect to slavery (2006a: 85-86; 2006b: 27).

Fictionalist, Incompleteness-theoretical Replacement Relativism takes the original sentences (1) and (1') to be not false but incomplete. Unfortunately, this is no improvement over the previously investigated option. According to Boghossian, it amounts to interpreting the original sentences as “an incomplete proposition, in much the way that

Tom is taller than ...

is clearly incomplete” (2006a: 88; cf. 2006b: 25). The proposal faces three difficulties. First, the *Endorsement Problem* resurfaces. If the particular epistemic and moral statements are incomplete, so must be the general principles. And it is hard to understand how anyone could endorse a set of incomplete principles. Second, if the general propositions are incomplete then we need to be told what makes them propositions that belong to one moral system rather than another, or propositions that belong to one epistemic system rather than another. To decide this question, however, we would have to know how these propositions ought to be completed. But to know *that* we would already have to know to which epistemic or moral system they belong. And third, and finally, it is difficult to understand how incomplete general principles could entail incomplete particular propositions (2006a: 89; 2006b: 26).

Non-fictionalist Replacement Relativism conceives of relativising frameworks as systems of imperatives rather than as systems of general propositions. This leads to more problems for the relativist (2006a: 92-93; 2006b: 33-34). First, the relativist owes us an account of what makes a given set of imperatives moral rather than epistemic, prudential rather than aesthetic. Perhaps the place to look for such criteria is in the mindset of the individuals who accept these imperatives. But no promising proposal for doing this is on the table. Second, the imperatival construal has difficulties capturing norms of permission. Imperatives tell us what we should, or should not, do. They are not fit to express what we are allowed to do. Third, just like previously considered forms of Replacement Relativism so also Non-fictionalism has no good answer to the *Normativity Problem*. And fourth, and finally, if the framework (code, system, grid) is made up of general imperatives, then presumably particular sentences of type (1) and (1') also express imperatives. And yet, if they do express imperatives then it is hard to understand how they could possibly be untrue: imperatives are neither true nor false.

If Replacement Relativism does not work for epistemic and moral relativism, how can it possibly work for physics? Boghossian offers the following analysis. Of the various forms of Replacement Relativism considered above, the one closest to the physics case is the Fictionalist, Error-Theoretical version. That is, Galileo is naturally assumed to consider an unqualified sentence like “The Earth moves” to be false. But there the similarities end. The crucial difference between the physical and the philosophical relativisms is that the “underlying logical forms” of

(α) x moves relative to framework F

on the one hand, and

(β) According to moral code M_I , x is morally wrong

or

(γ) According to epistemic system S_I , x is epistemically irrational

on the other hand, are very different. In the cases of philosophical relativism, the original false sentence or proposition (here underlined) is preserved *within* the relativistic statement. In moving from (1) to (4) or (1') to (4'), we move "from a judgement of the form:

x is P

to a judgement of the form:

(x is P) bears [relation] R to S ." (2006b: 30)

In the physical case, this is not so (2006b: 31). Here the logical form of the replacing proposition is:

$x R y$.

The replacing proposition is not constructed around the original x is P . The claim is not:

According to some frame of reference, x moves.

It is:

x moves-relative-to(-frame-of-reference)- F_I .

Given that physical relativism does not preserve the unqualified "moves" within the relativized proposition, the question arises why replacing "moves" with "moves-relative-to- F_I " amounts to relativism *rather than eliminativism*. Put differently, why is the relation between "moves" and "moves-relative-to- F_I " not like the relationship between "phlogiston" and "oxygen"? Boghossian answers by suggesting that there is "a more general concept, MOTION, itself neither absolutist nor relativist, such that both the absolutist and the relativistic notions could be seen as subspecies of it". More generally, to replace non-relativized concepts with relativized ones, constitutes relativism rather than eliminativism if, and only if, the old and new concepts are "sufficiently intimately related to each other" (2006b: 32).

Finally, does the moral or epistemic relativist have the option of taking another leaf out of Galileo's book and relativize (1) and (1') not as (4) and (4') but as (6) and (6')?

(6) That Otto hits Mary is wrong-relative-to- M_I

(6') That Otto believes that p is irrational-relative-to- S_I .

Boghossian himself asks this question (2006a: 32), but he does not provide a general answer.

11. The Normativity Problem Reconsidered

Boghossian's discussion of Replacement Relativism is intriguing and important. Identifying a general template for a range of philosophical forms of relativism is a significant new insight. Similarly impressive is the way in which Boghossian links the analysis of relativism to themes more familiar from contemporary philosophical semantics, meta-ethics and the philosophy of science. But here too I do not regard his arguments as conclusive.

According to Boghossian, the Replacement Relativist is unable to capture the normativity of moral and epistemological sentences. To repeat the main idea, let us focus on the case of morality. A sentence like

(1) It is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary

seems clearly normative. The Replacement Relativist insists that (1) is untrue and needs to be replaced with (4):

(4) According to moral code M_I , it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

In replacing (1) with (4), the Replacement Relativist fails to capture the normativity of (1): (4) is a descriptive statement about what a given moral code entails. It does not tell us what to do, or abstain from doing. Things do not get better if we replace (1) and (4) with (5):

(5) According to moral code M_I , which I, the speaker, accept, it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

As Boghossian has it, (6) is "in effect, what (5) states":

(6) I believe that it would be wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

And (6) "looks to be just a description of one's own mental states" (2006b: 25).

Boghossian's criticism underestimates the resources of Replacement Relativism. First of all, it does not seem right to say that (6) is "in effect, what (5) states". (6) is true if and only if I have a certain belief about the wrongness of Otto's action. But (5) is true if and only if (a) M_I really does entail that it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary, *and* (b) the speaker really does accept M_I . Moreover, acceptance is not always the same as belief: to accept you as my equal is more than to believe that you are my equal. Acceptance comes with an element of recognition and acknowledgement that is missing from simple belief. Thus (5) is not just a description of one's own mental states.

Second, and much more important, sophisticated proponents of moral relativism (Wong 1984, 2006, Harman 1996a, 1996b) combine their relativism with a form of emotivism, namely "quasi-absolutism". The basic idea is that we sometimes, though not always, use moral terminology to *express* – not *talk about* – our approval of certain moral codes or standards. Let us mark such uses of moral terminology by capitalising the relevant words. Consider (7):

(7) It is morally **WRONG** of Otto to hit Mary.

Uttered by me, this sentence expresses my approval of a moral code in which it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary. Assume you approve of a different moral code in which it is not wrong of Otto to hit Mary. You might express yourself by using (8):

(8) It is not morally **WRONG** of Otto to hit Mary.

We disagree with one another on what Otto should do. You approve of a moral code in which Otto is permitted to hit Mary, I do not. (7) is *not synonymous* with (5), but if I accept (7) I must also accept (5).

Are (7) and (8) normative? It is hard to see how one could give a negative reply. A sentence is normative if it expresses a norm. And being a norm is related to the phenomena of praise and criticism, approval and disapproval. To pick a definition almost at random: “any respect in which performances of an act can deserve praise or criticism is a *norm* for that act” (Williamson 2000: 238). When I utter (7) I criticise Otto’s action of hitting Mary; when you utter (8) you refuse to criticise him (perhaps indicating criticism of those who would criticise him). Of course, the respects in which we assess Otto’s action are not identical: I assess his action relative to one moral code, you relative to another. But this relativity does not cancel out the criticism. My criticism of Otto’s action involves my disapproval of moral codes that permit (and require) him to hit Mary. And your permitting of Otto’s action involves your approval of moral codes that allow his hitting Mary. Having an attitude of approval towards M_I amounts to having the disposition to disapprove of actions that run counter to M_I , the disposition to oneself try hard to follow M_I , the disposition to attempt to convince others of M_I , and the disposition to apportion praise or criticism on the basis of whether actions are conforming to M_I , or not.

12. *The Relativist’s Discovery and the Incompleteness of Propositions*

In this section I shall try to show that Boghossian has not succeeded in refuting *all forms* of Replacement Relativism. I shall sketch a version of *Fictionalist, Incompleteness-theoretical Replacement Relativism* that is able to answer Boghossian’s objections. I shall again focus on the moral case; the epistemic case can be dealt with in analogous fashion.

A first key element of my version of Replacement Relativism concerns the dialectical situation in which the relativist makes his “discovery”. As I see it, the relativist does not discover that his own previous position was one of absolutism and therefore false or incomplete. We should distinguish between three viewpoints: the position of the non-philosophical “ordinary man”, the standpoint of the absolutist, and the stance of the relativist. By “ordinary man” I mean a man or woman who is a competent user of moral language, who participates routinely in moral discourse, and whose actions are judged along this dimension by others. The crucial point here is that the “ordinary man” is *not a philosopher*. That is to say, he has no philosophical commitments to *meta-ethical* views. Moreover, I shall also assume that relativist, absolutist and the ordinary man belong to one and the same moral community. They do not disagree in their judgements as to which actions or beliefs in their own community deserve praise or blame.

Consider again the sentence (1):

(1) It is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

Assume that this sentence, and sentences like it, are routinely used by ordinary men to pass moral judgement. According to Boghossian’s Error-theoretical Replacement Relativist, (1) is false on the grounds that there simply is no monadic property for the predicate “morally wrong” to express. My (version of the) Replacement Relativist is more charitable. Most ordinary men, when asked – by a member of their own society, ‘what morality do you have in mind in saying (1)?’, will readily reply:

(9) *Our* morality, of course.

This suggests to my (Replacement) relativist that the ordinary man would not object to the suggest that (1) is – very roughly – synonymous with (8):

(10) According to our morality, it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

In order to do justice to this readily available gloss, and in order to be charitable to the ordinary man, my relativist takes it that (1) expresses the proposition (11):

(11) *According to our morality, it is morally wrong of Otto to hit Mary.*

Just like Boghossian's Replacement Relativist, my relativist too denies that there is a real *monadic* property which "morally wrong" expresses. But other than Boghossian's Replacement Relativist, mine is ready to grant that both the ordinary man, and even some versions of absolutism are not committed to monadic properties of this kind. The key question for my relativist at this stage of the dialectic is whether the predicate (12):

(12) ... morally wrong according to our morality ...

expresses an real *dyadic* property or not. For my relativist this depends on how we understand "our morality" in (12). If we take (12) to mean (13):

(13) ... morally wrong according to the one and only valid morality ...

then my Relativist will insist that (12) does not express a real property. Put differently, to accept the rendering of (12) as (13) is as unacceptable to my relativist as is assuming the reality of *monadic* properties of moral value. In other words, the issue is not, or not only, whether the relevant properties here are monadic or dyadic; the issue is whether there is only one valid morality, or whether there are many. My Relativist takes (10) to express a real property only if it is taken to mean (14):

(14) ... morally wrong, according to our morality – which is one of many equally valid moral codes ...

All absolutists reject the suggestion that (14) expresses a real property, but not all of them will accept the idea that they too are committed to dyadic properties of moral value. Some absolutists will insist that (1) is complete as it is, and that (1) is a much better reflection of real moral properties than is (10) or (15):

(15) According to the one and only valid morality, it is wrong of Otto to hit Mary.

We might distinguish the two camps within absolutism as "dyadic-property-absolutists" and "monadic-property-absolutists".

Now the upshot of my distinguishing between *three* rather than *two* viewpoints will not come as a surprise: I want to suggest that the ordinary man is *neither* a relativist *nor* an absolutist. Within the confines of this paper, I cannot make a conclusive case for this view of the ordinary man. To do so would be to conduct, and present the results of, an extensive empirical investigation. Here I shall be satisfied to make the following hypothetical argument: *if the ordinary man is neither a moral relativist nor a moral absolutist*, then we can better understand both the context of the relativist's discovery, and see why a certain version of Incompleteness-theoretical Replacement Relativism can survive Boghossian's criticism. But I should at least explain why I feel the antecedent might be entertained seriously and not be dismissed out of hand.

Philosophers tend to assume that the frequency with which the ordinary man makes non-relativized statements like (1) indicates his commitment to monadic-property absolutism. This assumption does not seem to me to be obvious. I have already mentioned the readiness of the ordinary man to gloss (1) and (10), and thereby to express himself in ways that suggest a dyadic-property view. More importantly, note that many philosophers find the philosophical untrained insufficiently committed to absolutist views. Remember only the frequent philosophers' lament about the allegedly flat-footed relativism amongst

their undergraduates. Moreover, going only by my own encounters with ordinary men, when pressed on the stance vis-à-vis the relativism-absolutism opposition, they produce as many relativistic as absolutistic intuitions – and without that these could be easily made coherent. To me this does not suggest that the philosophically untrained are moral relativist; what it does indicate instead is that the introduction to, and practice of, moral discourse does not involve becoming familiar with the meta-ethical choice between absolutism and relativism. Most of our moral discourse functions in ways that simply does not bring this meta-ethical alternative into view. And hence ordinary men tend not to be committed either way.

My main interest here is with philosophical forms of relativism. It seems at least possible however that the same proposal might also work for the physical cases. Recall that Boghossian himself suggests that there is “a more general concept, MOTION, itself neither absolutist nor relativist, such that both the absolutist and the relativistic notions could be seen as subspecies of it” (2006b: 32). Boghossian does not elaborate on this proposal and thus it is difficult to know how he wants it to be taken. One way of interpreting it is to say that before Galileo made the distinction between absolute and relative motion clear and concise, we simply were not aware that there was a choice to be made. Our concept of motion was not one of absolute motion, and it was not a concept of relative motion. It was a concept of MOTION.

It is because the moral judgements of the ordinary man carry neither absolutist nor relativistic commitments, that the relativist takes them to be *incomplete* rather than *false*. Statements like (1) can – as far as ordinary man determines – be interpreted along the lines of dyadic-property absolutism, monadic-property absolutism, or relativism. As my relativist sees it, this is unsatisfactory: in order to properly reflect the relativist’s discovery, (1) should be replaced by statements of the form:

(16) It is morally-wrong-according-to-our-moral-code for Otto to hit Mary – where our moral code is one of several equally valid ones.

My relativist prefers (16), with its new hyphenated predicate over the alternative (17):

(17) According to our moral code – which is one of many equally valid moral codes – it is wrong for Otto to hit Mary.

Sentence (17) gives Boghossian the space for his Endorsement Objection. (16) takes a page out of the book of the relativist about motion. Just like the physicist replaces “x moves” with “x moves-relative-to- F ”, so my Replacement Relativist replaces “morally wrong” with “morally-wrong-according-to- M_I ”. And he must do so both in particular judgements and in general principles. The hyphenated successor concept to the pre-philosophical “wrong (simpliciter)” must even be used when it comes to expressing the relativist’s reasons for approving M_I itself. To insist on this point is to reaffirm the idea – discussed above in the context of Alston and Bellarmine – that epistemic and moral systems can be justified only in a circular way. Note that in his paper “What is Relativism?” Boghossian himself mentions the possibility that the philosophical Replacement Relativist might follow the physicist’s technique of relativizing by hyphenating. He promises to look at this proposal later in his paper, but does so only for the case of Non-Fictionalist Replacement Relativism (2006b: 31-32).

13. Facing Boghossian’s Objections

Is the version of Fictionalist, Incompleteness-theoretical Replacement Relativism sketched above able to handle Boghossian’s powerful objections? In this section I shall try to show that it is. Boghossian offers three considerations against the Incompleteness-theoretical position.

The first objection is the *Endorsement Problem*. It surfaces not only in the context of Error-theoretical but also in the context of Incompleteness-theoretical relativism:

... just as it was hard to see how anyone could believe a set of propositions that they knew to be false, so it is hard to see how anyone could believe a set of propositions they knew to be incomplete (2006b: 29).

I do not think that my version of relativism suffers from this problem. True, the particular moral judgements and general moral principles of the ordinary man are – in the eyes of my relativist – incomplete insofar as they do not express the thought that ours is just one of many equally valid moral codes. This incompleteness, however, is not “an incomplete proposition in much the way that:

Tom is taller than ...

is clearly incomplete” (2006b: 28-29). In the present, moral case what is needed to effect the completion is the addition of a specific meta-ethical philosophical gloss. The absence of this specific completion does not leave behind a meaningless torso of words or concepts: it leaves behind the very principle to which the relativist – insofar as he too has been an ordinary man all along – has been, and continues to be committed. In other words, I am proposing that we distinguish between the *first-order* endorsement of a moral code as *our* code, and the *second-order* endorsement of our moral code as either being the only valid one, or as being one of many equally valid ones. The incompleteness of the ordinary man’s particular moral judgements and general moral principles is due to the fact that he has not endorsed either absolutism or relativism. But this leaves his ability to endorse our moral code *as our moral code* undamaged.

Boghossian’s second objection is that Incompleteness-theoretical Replacement Relativism leads to an infinite regress:

... if the propositions that constitute the code are incomplete, it is very hard to see how they could constitute a conception of anything, let alone a conception of right and wrong. Before they could be said to amount to a conception of anything, they would have to be completed. But our only idea about how to complete them is by reference to moral codes! And now we would seem to have embarked on a vicious regress in which we never succeed in specifying the conception of permission and prohibition which is supposed to constitute a particular community’s moral code. (2006b: 29.)

Here too the objection is of devastating force only as long as we conceive of the incompleteness in question on the model of *Tom is taller than ...* The situation is very different for my proposal. According to my proposal the incomplete propositions constitute a very specific conception of right and wrong, to wit, the conception we (ordinary men) have had all along. The absence of a stance on the meta-ethical choice between relativism and absolutism does not create a vagueness in which we no longer have a conception of anything.

At this point it will perhaps be suggested that although my proposal nevertheless involves an infinite regress. For my relativist, general moral principles and particular principles involve predicates like “morally-wrong-according-to-(moral-code)- M_I -(which is one of many equally valid moral codes)”. But how are we going to determine what this predicate means? In order to find out what it means have to work out the content of moral code M_I . And to determine that content, we need to turn to the general principles that constitute it. Alas, the general principles contain the predicate “morally-wrong-according-to-(moral-code)- M_I -(which is one of many equally valid moral codes)” ... and so on.

Fortunately, this problem too is solved by remembering that “morally-wrong-according-to-(moral-code)- M_I -(which is one of many equally valid moral codes)” is a

close successor concept to the concept of “morally wrong” in the language of ordinary men. We do not need to work out laboriously what it is for something to be “morally-wrong-according-to-(moral-code)- M_I -(which is one of many equally valid moral codes)”; we pretty much know it already. The extension of this predicate is pretty much what we learnt as the extension of the predicate “morally wrong” in ordinary, pre-philosophical life. We only now need to add the observation that our morality – the morality we had all along – is just one of many equally valid ones.

Boghossian third objection homes in on the relationship between particular judgements and general principles:

... how are we to understand the phrase ‘relative to moral code M’? Since we have said both that the propositions which constitute a moral code as well as the target propositions are incomplete, that relation cannot be the relation of logical entailment. ‘Relative to moral code M’, then must be understood as expressing some non-logical relation that obtains between x’s being morally prohibited and some moral code. But what could such a non-logical relation possibly be? (2006b: 29)

The thought presumably is that since incomplete propositions lack truth value they cannot entail or be entailed by other (incomplete) propositions. But this is just not so. Gilbert Harman points this out in the very text that is the primary target of Boghossian (2006b):

... many philosophical logicians suppose that claims that lack truth value because they involve false presuppositions can be entailed by other claims. For example, many philosophical logicians hold that ‘The present King of France is bald’ has no truth value because both it and its seeming denial, ‘The present King of France is not bald’, presuppose falsely that there is a present King of France. They might also hold that ‘The present King of France is bald’ is entailed by ‘Either the present King of France is bald or the present Queen of England is bald’ and ‘The present Queen of England is not bald.’ One version of an ‘error thesis’ takes moral claims to involve a false presupposition, e.g. of Moral Absolutism. In this version, moral claims are neither true nor false, even though entailments can hold among them. (1996a: 173.)

Clearly Harman’s consideration applies with full force to the present case. Moreover, on my version of Replacement Relativism, in moving from the position of the ordinary man to that of the relativist, we pretty much retain and preserve the inferential relations between general principles and particular moral judgements.

I have now answered those of Boghossian’s objections that are directed specifically against Incompleteness-theoretical Replacement Relativism. This leaves me with the task of answering two worries concerning my suggestion that the relativist replaces the concept “morally wrong” with the concept “morally-wrong-according-to-our-moral-code- M_I ”.

The first worry picks up on Boghossian’s distinction between relativizing and eliminating. Physicists eliminated *phlogiston* but they relativized *motion*. The difference is that, in the case of the pair *absolute motion vs. relative motion*, but not in the case of the pair *phlogiston vs. oxygen*, the old and the new concepts are “sufficiently intimately related to each other”. In the case of *absolute motion vs. relative motion* this intimate relation is due to the existence of a “more general concept, MOTION, itself neither absolutist nor relativist, such that both the absolutist and the relativistic notions could be seen as subspecies of it” (2006b: 32). Can we make a related case for philosophical forms of relativism?

The challenge can be met. On my proposal, the absolutist’s absolute concepts and the relativist’s relativized concepts as two different sets of successors to the pre-philosophical concepts. The relativist’s and the absolutist’s concepts are two different

ways of completing the pre-philosophical concepts. This gives us one reason to insist that the pre-philosophical and the philosophical concepts are intimately related. To complete a concept by adding modifiers is not to replace it. Or put the other way around, the concept of *oxygen* was not introduced to *complete* the concept of *phlogiston*. A further reason for insisting on the required intimate relation has already been introduced above. The relativist-philosophical successor concepts preserve the inferential relations between the pre-philosophical general principles and particular judgements.

The second worry shifts the focus to an issue considered briefly in the context of the Normativity Problem: the possibility of disagreement between two relativists. How could two relativists possibly disagree with one another, given that one uses “wrong” for the concept *morally-wrong-relative-to-M₁* and the other uses “wrong” for the concept *morally-wrong-relative-to-M₂*? Fortunately, the issue was not only mentioned in the context of the Normativity Problem, a solution to it was proposed too. The relativist using the concept *morally-wrong-relative-to-M₁*, and the relativist using the concept *morally-wrong-relative-to-M₁* can disagree over the question whether a given action is WRONG: they can disagree over the question which moral code ought to be approved. The “ought” here is again the moral ought; and the circularity that opens up here is precisely the circularity of self-certification we encountered in the first half of this paper.¹⁴

14. Conclusion

In this paper I have assessed Boghossian’s discussion of various forms of epistemological and moral relativism. I have focused on his attempt to refute Rorty’s argument in defence of epistemic relativism, his way of updating the classical self-refutation argument, and his reconstruction and criticism of different versions of Replacement Relativism. It turned out that none of Boghossian’s attacks proved decisive. At the same time, however, Boghossian’s original and forceful analyses enabled us to see much more clearly how the relativist must formulate his position if he is to avoid trouble.

I do not think of course that relativism is home dry just because it can be shielded from Boghossian’s arguments. Many a critic remains to be answered, and many shallow false friends must be rebutted. For once I can agree with Boghossian whole-heartedly:

¹⁴ A different way of putting the second worry is this. If relativism is true and proponents of different normative systems are facing off against each other in debate, then what proposition is it that one of them affirms and the other denies? And if there is no such proposition then in what way do they disagree? Again, it seems to me that Harman’s work on moral relativism provides the most promising direction for a response. Assume Mr. Jones and Ms. Smith are moral relativists and advocates of different moral systems. They see that Otto hits Mary. Jones utters: (a) “It is WRONG of Otto to hit Mary.” In making this utterance, and using “wrong” in this way, Jones expresses his disapproval of moral codes that permit Otto to hit Mary, and thereby his disapproval of Otto hitting Mary. Jones would not (and is not entitled to) utter (a) unless he believed: (b) It is wrong-in-my-moral-system-*M₁* to hit Mary. But (a) and (b) are not synonymous. Smith utters: (c) “It is RIGHT of Otto to hit Mary.” In making this utterance, and using “wrong” in this way, Smith expresses her disapproval of moral codes that forbid Otto to hit Mary, and thereby his approval of Otto hitting Mary. Smith would not (and is not entitled to) utter (c) unless she believed: (d) It is right-in-my-moral-system-*M₂* to hit Mary. Jones and Smith disagree insofar as (a) contradicts (c); they disagree in their attitudes of disapproval vs. approval towards moral systems that forbid and allow Otto hitting Mary. This solution hinges on the idea that (a) and (b) and (c) and (d) are not synonymous; perhaps one might say that (b) is a condition for the appropriateness of (a). Finally, what are the truth conditions of these claims, e.g. (a) and (c)? Jones and Smith agree that (a) is true iff it is WRONG of Otto to hit Mary. And they agree that (c) is true, iff it is RIGHT of Otto to hit Mary. In other words, we can use the quasi-absolute “WRONG/RIGHT” for stating the truth-conditions; we do not need to use the relativistic “wrong/right-according-to-*M₁*.”

“many important questions remain unexplored and there is much interesting work that remains to be done” (2006b: 37).

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