

Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge, Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. x+139pp. ISBN 019928718X. \$40.00.

Paul Boghossian is Professor of Philosophy at New York University in New York City, in the department long chaired by Sidney Hook. The present slim book complains of a “fear of knowledge” among various relativists and social constructivists. “Why this fear of knowledge?” Boghossian asks in his Epilogue, “Whence the felt need to protect against its deliverances?” (p. 130). Briefly, the answer given to this question is that relativist and constructivist views of knowledge “supply the philosophical resources with which to protect oppressed cultures from the charge of holding false or unjustified views” (ibid.). Or at least, the analysis is that they purport to do so, though the author sees a quite conservative upshot of contemporary conflicts, where, though the powerful cannot criticize the oppressed, still, the oppressed can’t criticize the powerful either—the only alternative to this standoff of silence being a social-epistemic double standard of allowing questionable ideas to be criticized if held by the powerful but not if held by the less powerful. In either case, it seems, the ideal of reasonable discourse settling outstanding conflicts with mutual respect for represented interests will be totally lost from sight: Not an appealing prospect.

This concise, well written and often convincing book of 9 short chapters is designed to defend “the intuitive view that there is a way things are that is independent of human opinion, and that we are capable of arriving at belief about how things are that is objectively reasonable” and thus “binding on anyone capable of appreciating the relevant evidence” (pp. 130-131). Boghossian draws upon Gilbert Harman and Thomas Nagel as significant sources of support, and the chief targets of criticism include Richard Rorty and Nelson Goodman. The book avoids overly technical philosophical language and thus deserves attention from a broad range of academic disciplines—including the various strongholds of relativism and constructivism. “At its best”, Boghossian remarks, citing writings of Simone de Beauvoir, K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman, social constructivist thought “exposes the contingency of those of our social practices which we had wrongly come to regard as naturally mandated;” but “It goes astray when it aspires to become a general theory of truth or knowledge” (pp. 129-130).

Boghossian’s criticism of relativism and constructivism parallel similar arguments to be found in a 1998 book by Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate, Unfashionable Essays*; and Boghossian may remain open to a line of criticism which Haack encountered. But this is a fine little book which fully deserves to be understood in its own terms before useful comparisons can be made.

The Introduction of the present book opens with an examination of a front-page story from the *New York Times* from 1996, “Indian Tribes’ Creationists Thwart Archeologists.” The story dealt with the question whether American Indian populations originated from migrations across the Bering Strait some 10,000 years ago, as is maintained by archeologists who have studied the evidence or whether they had instead originated, as some of the tribal beliefs dictate, when they emerged from a “subterranean world of spirits” (p. 1). Is science a special or *privileged* way of seeing the world, or do alternatives, such as the religious beliefs of the Zuni have “equal validity?” “In vast stretches of the humanities and social sciences,” says Boghossian, “‘post-modernist relativism’ about knowledge has achieved the status of orthodoxy;” this is the notion that “There are many radically different, yet ‘equally valid’ ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them” (p. 2). Some famous authors are quoted or cited in defense of this idea, including, Paul Feyerabend, Barry Barnes, and David Bloor. While not challenging the viability of moral or aesthetic relativisms, which “do not immediately strike us as absurd,” our author holds out for “some objective fact of the matter” regarding the origin of the American Indians and maintains that in view of its methods and reliance on evidence, “scientific knowledge had

better *be* privileged” (p. 4). Boghossian aims to dispute arguments for the claim that “whether a belief is knowledge necessarily depends at least in part on the contingent social and material setting in which the belief is produced (or maintained)” — what he calls a *social dependence* conception of knowledge” (p. 6). This idea has also received support, according to Boghossian, from prominent philosophers in the analytic tradition, including “Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Richard Rorty, Thomas Kuhn, Hilary Putnam and Nelson Goodman” though this tendency does not represent the mainstream; and similar ideas can be traced back to Kant, Hume and Nietzsche (p. 7). Overall, Boghossian aims “to clarify what is at issue between constructivism and its critics, and to map the terrain in which these issues are embedded” (pp. 8-9).

Chapter 2, “The Social Construction of Knowledge” is devoted to basics concerning belief, facts and truth plus Ian Hacking on the theme of social construction; Chapter 3, “Constructing the Facts,” includes criticisms of Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty, and Chapter 4, “Relativizing the Facts,” is largely devoted to Richard Rorty’s anti-representationalism. All of this culminates in Chapter 4, “Epistemic Relativism Defended,” which attempts to give the best positive exposition of the claims under criticism. The remaining chapters, 6-9, are then devoted to Boghossian’s criticisms.

To say of something that it is “constructed” is to say that “it was not there simply to be *found* or discovered, but rather that it was *built*,” and to say that something was “socially constructed is to add that it was built by a society, by a group of people organized in a particular way, with particular values, interests and needs” (p. 16). What is emphasized by constructivism, is, then, the non-inevitability of what is constructed and the idea that what is socially constructed could not have come about by purely natural forces. What is socially constructed arises essentially from the particular contingent needs and interests of some particular group. Thus, a coin, in contrast to a lump of metal, is socially constructed to serve particular economic needs and interests; and though a rock might be put on a hill top by a group of people, this is not a compelling example, since a rock might come to rest on a hill top through natural forces. Though Kant held that “the world we experience is constructed by our minds to obey certain fundamental laws, and “Kant didn’t think we were free to do otherwise,” the social constructivist “is not typically interested in such mandated constructions,” instead what interests the social constructivist is that something “constitutively social had come to masquerade as natural” (p. 18).

The aim of the social constructivist is to “unmask” (using a term from Hacking) what is socially contingent and conventional — though disguised as inevitable and natural. It goes unremarked by Boghossian in this connection, however, that any similar conception of knowledge clearly rests on a radical nominalism. Otherwise, it would surely be more plausible to ask about “constructed” belief and related claims to knowledge, whether the way in which they are constructed can be judged of as “better or worse” than possible alternatives; and this would bring us directly back to questions of method and evidence of the sort which Boghossian generally emphasizes and esteems.

Boghossian basically endorses a classical conception of knowledge as justified, true belief (p. 15), allows that inquirers may be biased in such a way that their values bring them to beliefs unsupported by sufficient evidence (p. 20), but insists that “many *facts* about the world are independent of us, and thus independent of our social values and interests” (*ibid.*). While there is little to object to in the author’s account of facts and knowledge, it belongs to the plausibility of social constructivism that we go through particular sorts of social processes of investigation and verification in coming to know, and that these processes may plausibly be thought to help us in arriving at our standards of judgment or epistemic values — “by their fruits shall you know them.”

From this perspective the chief objection is not to “construction” as an intuitive idea but instead to the notion that one construction is just as good as another — radical nominalism concerning both methods and conceptual forms. Part of the point is that our conceptual system and methods of inquiry, while not “mandated,” as Kant had it, regarding conceptual forms, do

change slowly for the better over time, and we judge of their effectiveness and value partly in light of the success of first-order inquiry. That we readily speak of oxygen and not phlogiston, for instance has everything to do with the success of Priestly and Lavoisier in explaining and predicting the facts of combustion. That we speak of curved “space-time,” instead of space and time as separate Newtonian “containers,” has everything to do with the success of Einstein’s theory of gravitation in predicting observed phenomena. In this way, we avoid a purely *a priori* conception of the better and worse in claims to knowledge. In some sense, our scientific view of the world surely is constructed—in accord with the best evidence and theory we have (or so we hope.)

Basically, the relativism and constructivism which Boghossian criticizes (I speak as a sympathetic reader), arise from the interaction of science with the wider reaches of culture, society and politics. Political, social and religious elements in any society tend to be revered as constitutive of the social order, and yet they can be put under question by scientific results. The point is well understood in relation to historical examples in the Western world, such as the “Copernican Revolution,” which by removing the earth from the center of the universe tended to put in question traditional religious beliefs regarding Divine Providence. Again, we are still dealing, a century and more later, with the broad social consequences of Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection.

Revered intellectual and moral contents of particular societies and cultures provide niches for more conservative thinkers, who are then in a position to use the weight of their social-cultural niche against even the most rational critic. This in turn generates resentment and jealousies, and there is a call for fairness involved in the attempt to provide some equivalent protection to the revered, constitutive beliefs of less powerful cultures (or sub-cultures). Radical nominalism tends to support high-handed politics of every sort, based, we may suppose, on an exaggeration of the occasional need of political actors to enforce conformity with crucial political and social features of particular societies. Their critics, in an equally nominalistic spirit, demand to have the same or similar power for unorthodox aims. Whatever the merits of such philosophies, however, they clearly go overboard in attacking the ideal of objectivity. Difficult as our ideals of objectivity may be, as Boghossian’s conclusion puts it, “it is a mistake to think that recent philosophy has uncovered powerful reasons for rejecting them” (p. 131).

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