

## Epistemic Relativism

Relativists claim that there are no absolute facts – facts which don't differ from individual to individual or from community to community – within some domain. Their relativism can be either global or local. Global relativists claim that there are no absolute facts at all, whereas local relativists restrict the domain of relative facts. While ethical relativism is a rather familiar sort of local relativism, epistemic relativism is another type of local relativism, and one which is beginning to receive more attention. Whereas ethical relativism claims that there are no absolute ethical facts, epistemic relativism claims that there are no absolute epistemic facts. So, according to epistemic relativism facts about what an individual is justified in believing or what an individual knows are not absolute, but rather relative to individuals or communities. It is clearly true that not every individual knows or is justified in believing the same propositions, and that what any individual knows or is justified in believing often changes over time, however, epistemic relativism, at least as it is being understood here, is making a more radical claim than this. Epistemic relativism claims that the very standards for knowledge and justification are not absolute, but rather relative to individuals or communities. Since the standards of knowledge and justification are thought to be relative, the truth of epistemic claims are also thought to be relative. So, according to the epistemic relativist, we can fix what information a particular individual has at a particular time, and there are still no absolute facts about what that individual knows or is justified in believing at that time. According to epistemic relativism there may be some standards or rationality by which the individual is epistemically justified in

believing some proposition and other standards of rationality by which the individual is not epistemically justified in believing that proposition, and no absolute facts regarding one of these sets of standards being more correct or better than the other. So, the epistemic relativist claims that whether some belief is justified or an item of knowledge is in some sense relative to some set of standards of rationality that can vary from individual to individual or community to community.

Are there good reasons for thinking that epistemic relativism is true? In what follows I will examine the case for epistemic relativism focusing on an argument for epistemic relativism formulated (though not endorsed) by Paul Boghossian. Before examining Boghossian's argument, however, it is worth first examining some preliminary considerations for and against epistemic relativism.

First, if global relativism is correct, then epistemic relativism will also be correct. If all facts are relative, then it follows that the epistemic facts are relative. So, if there was good reason to endorse global relativism, there would be good reason to endorse epistemic relativism. That said, there aren't good reasons to endorse global relativism. In fact, there are powerful reasons to reject global relativism.<sup>1</sup> For one thing, facts about history, mathematics, and geometry are clearly not relative to individuals or communities. So, motivation for epistemic relativism must focus on some feature of *epistemic* facts that is not shared by all the other types of facts and has the consequence that epistemic facts are not absolute.

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<sup>1</sup> For theoretical reasons to reject global relativism see Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*. Oxford University Press, p. 15 and Paul Boghossian *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford University Press, pp. 52-57.

As with ethical relativism, motivation for epistemic relativism might be thought to come from the widespread and persistent disagreements that we are aware of regarding epistemic claims (claims of the form: S knows p, S is justified in believing p, etc.). We are all very familiar with disputes about who knew what and who should believe what – disagreements that persist even when all parties agree about the relevant descriptive facts. One explanation for these disagreements is that there are no absolute epistemic facts – that the truth-value of epistemic claims is relative to individuals or communities. If this explanation is the best explanation of the existence of these disagreements, then we would have good reason by way of an inference to the best explanation to believe epistemic relativism. That said, it is implausible that epistemic relativism is the best explanation of such disagreements. A more plausible explanation is simply that epistemology is difficult and that it is often quite hard to discover the absolute facts regarding who knows what and who is justified in believing what. In addition, parties to such disagreements typically take themselves to be disputing absolute epistemic facts. This shows that most of us (at least implicitly) take epistemic facts to be absolute facts.

Additional problems for epistemic relativism become apparent once one examines what the truth of claim would entail. First, it is possible that individuals or communities adopt utterly foolish standards of rationality. So, given epistemic relativism, each of the following epistemic claims could be false (at least to such an individual or community), where S is a normal adult American living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

- A. S is not justified in believing that the Earth is flat.
- B. S is not justified in believing that S does not exist.

- C. S is justified in believing that the United States is a country.
- D. S is justified in believing that  $2+2=4$ .

Given the information possessed by a normal adult American living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century A – D are all true. A – D may not be recognized to be true by individuals in other communities, but A – D are nonetheless true – they are absolute epistemic truths. Since epistemic relativism has the consequence that A – D can be false for some individuals<sup>2</sup> or communities, epistemic relativism is false.

Second, if epistemic relativism is correct, then we cannot correctly judge one standard of rationality as being epistemically better or worse than any other standard of rationality. If epistemic standards are relative to individuals or communities and there are no absolute epistemic standards, then no epistemic standard is any better or any worse than any other epistemic standard. But it is clear that some epistemic standards are better or more correct than others. For instance a standard that requires an individual to proportion her beliefs to the evidence is a better or more correct epistemic standard than one that requires an individual to believe the third proposition they consider every Wednesday and disbelieve the fourth proposition they consider every Friday.<sup>3</sup>

While these seem to be strong reasons to reject epistemic relativism, a more powerful argument for epistemic relativism could cause us to reject these considerations against it. In *Fear of Knowledge*, Paul Boghossian examines one such

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that there are not individuals (individuals who are not normal adult Americans living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) who if you substituted them for S in A – D would have the result that A – D would be false.

<sup>3</sup> These criticisms of epistemic relativism parallel criticisms of ethical relativism put forward by James Rachels. See Rachels "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism" *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Random House, 1999, p. 20-36.

argument for epistemic relativism. In particular, Boghossian attempts to reconstruct, motivate, and respond to an argument for epistemic relativism coming primarily from Richard Rorty<sup>4,5</sup>. The argument is as follows:

- P1. If there are absolute epistemic facts about what justifies what, then it ought to be possible to arrive at justified beliefs about them (at least in rough approximation).
- P2. It is not possible to arrive at justified beliefs about what absolute epistemic facts there are (even in rough approximation).
- P3. There are no absolute epistemic facts (epistemic non-absolutism is true). (from P1 and P2)
- P4. If there are no absolute epistemic facts, then epistemic relativism is true.
- C. Epistemic relativism is true. (from P3 and P4)

Boghossian's primary focus in *Fear of Knowledge* is P2, which he ultimately rejects, thus crippling the argument for epistemic relativism. But before looking at the case regarding P2, it is worth briefly examining what Boghossian claims about the other key premises: P1 and P4.

Boghossian doesn't say much regarding P4. He is willing to grant it, while noting that versions of epistemic non-cognitivism would present a challenge to it. Epistemic non-cognitivist views contend that epistemic claims are not true or false at all, but

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<sup>4</sup> In particular see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Boghossian understands epistemic relativism slightly differently than I have been understanding it. As Boghossian sees it epistemic relativism consists of the following three claims:

*Epistemic non-absolutism*: there are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies.

*Epistemic relationism*: If S's epistemic judgment of the form "E justifies belief B" is to be true, it must be seen as expressing "according to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies B."

*Epistemic pluralism*: there are many fundamentally different, genuine alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any other.

*Fear of Knowledge*, p. 73.

rather are mere expressions of emotion, prescriptions, or expressions of other non-cognitive attitudes. While embracing epistemic non-cognitivism provides a route of escape from the argument for epistemic relativism, the cost of embracing epistemic non-cognitivism is indeed high. It seems clear that there are epistemic facts like those given above (where S is a normal adult American living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century):

- A. S is not justified in believing that the Earth is flat.
- B. S is not justified in believing that S does not exist.
- C. S is justified in believing that the United States is a country.
- D. S is justified in believing that  $2+2=4$ .

The cost of rejecting that A – D are facts is simply too great a cost. So, like Boghossian, I too am willing to grant P4. Since there are epistemic facts, if there are no *absolute* epistemic facts, then there must be *relative* epistemic facts. Epistemic non-cognitivism is not a viable alternative.<sup>6</sup>

Boghossian also accepts P1. In defense of P1, Boghossian claims, “what would be the interest of an absolutism about epistemic truths which combined that absolutism with the affirmation that those truths are necessarily inaccessible to us?”<sup>7</sup> Boghossian tries to further motivate his claim by comparing the oddity of rejecting P1 with the apparent oddity of claiming that there are absolute moral truths, though we cannot be justified in believing what they are (even in rough approximation).

While such a view may be odd in that it posits facts that are inaccessible (at least epistemically) to us, there may be good reasons for endorsing such a view. Boghossian

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<sup>6</sup> This discussion of epistemic non-cognitivism is admittedly quick. For a more detailed discussion on epistemic non-cognitivism see Michael P. Lynch “Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming), Mathew Chrisman “From Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism” *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming), and also Allan Gibbard *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* and *Thinking How to Live* Harvard University Press, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 76.

here seems to be ignoring the possibility that there are good reasons for being an absolutist (whether moral or epistemic) even in the absence of good reasons to think that we can be justified in believing what these absolute facts (whether moral or epistemic) are. The appeal of these skeptical positions might end at their truth, but being a true view ought to give each of these absolutisms at least *some* appeal. Further we have seen some good reasons to think that epistemic relativism is false, so such a move is not without motivation.

Boghossian's remarks here are particularly puzzling since Boghossian himself gives powerful reasons to reject epistemic relativism.<sup>8</sup> In brief, his argument is that the self-aware epistemic relativist will have to adopt epistemic principles which he must take to be false, or at least untrue, prior to his adopting them given his epistemic relativism. Having adopted the (taken to have been untrue) principles, our self-aware relativist should then form and revise his beliefs in accordance with these principles – the very principles he took to be false or at least untrue at the time of adoption. Boghossian's claim is that such a picture is incoherent. We simply shouldn't care about what we should believe according to principles that we can recognize as false or at least untrue.

So, while neither moral skepticism nor skepticism about epistemic facts is appealing, both are more appealing than their alternative relativist thesis, at least

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<sup>8</sup> See *Fear of Knowledge* chapter 6.

without further motivation for those relativist claims.<sup>9</sup> If the choice is between epistemic relativism, epistemic non-cognitivism, and skepticism about (absolute) epistemic facts, then given the initial considerations at the outset of this paper, there seems to be good reason to choose skepticism about (absolute) epistemic facts. At the very least, P1 needs more motivation than simply pointing out that the view which rejects it would 'lack interest' – we need reason to think that such a view is false regardless of how interesting one might find it. Nevertheless, Boghossian's primary focus is P2 and following Boghossian that will be my primary focus as well.

The case for P2 comes from thinking about possible encounters, particularly encounters with individuals who have alternative epistemic systems to our own and who disagree with us about the justificatory status of some belief, while at the same time agreeing with us about all the relevant descriptive facts. As Boghossian understands it, an epistemic system is some sort of grid for determining what is evidence for what, and how much each bit of evidence counts. Epistemic systems are comprised of a set of epistemic principles (hereafter EPs), which either claim that some epistemic property obtains whenever some descriptive property obtains (these are generative EPs) or claim when one can transition from one epistemic state to another (these are transmission EPs). A plausible example of a generative EP is the following:

GEP: If it visually appears to S as if p, then S is *prima facie*<sup>10</sup> justified in believing p.

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<sup>9</sup> In other words, motivation for P1 itself requires motivation for epistemic relativism – at least motivation for it as opposed to an absolutist skepticism about epistemic facts. Without such motivation, P1 is insufficiently motivated and this argument for epistemic relativism will fail.

<sup>10</sup> S is *prima facie* justified in believing p when (i) S has justification to believe p, (ii) that justification to believe p can be defeated or undermined, and (iii) if that justification for believing p is not defeated, then S is on balance justified in believing p.

In contrast, a plausible example of a transmission EP is the following:

TEP: If S is justified in believing p and justified in believing that p entails q, then S is justified in believing q.

EPs can also be either fundamental or derived. The fundamental EPs of a system need not be derived from any other EPs and the positive epistemic status they enjoy, if any, does not depend upon other EPs. In contrast, the derived EPs enjoy positive epistemic status, if they do, in virtue of other EPs in the system – at root, in virtue of the fundamental EPs – from which they are ultimately derived. That said, an EP could be fundamental even if according to a derived EP our subject was justified in believing the fundamental EP. The overdetermination of its positive epistemic status need not rule out that EP being fundamental. However, if the *sole* epistemic support for any supposed fundamental EP came from a derived EP, then the EP in question is not a fundamental EP, but a derived one.

The EP of phenomenal conservatism is a plausible example of a fundamental EP:

PC: If it seems to S that p, then S is thereby *prima facie* justified in believing p.<sup>11</sup>

Taking PC as the fundamental EP of our epistemic system, the derived EPs of our system would be those EPs (whether generative EPs or transmission EPs) which follow from PC -

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<sup>11</sup> Boghossian does not give PC as a fundamental epistemic principle. Rather he offers principles like *Observation*: for any observational proposition p, if it visually seems to S that p and circumstantial conditions D obtain, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing p. *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 64. However, it seems that Observation is actually a derived principle, one that is derived from PC. For one thing, Observation cannot provide epistemic support for itself since one cannot observe that observation is true. So, in what follows I will be using PC as my example of a fundamental epistemic principle. However, which fundamental epistemic principles there are (and what they are) is not central to my argument. For more on phenomenal conservatism see Michael Huemer's, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

- the EPs which seem true to us. With these clarifications in hand, let's turn to the case for P2.

The argument for P2 begins by thinking about the fundamental EPs of any epistemic system. Do fundamental EPs themselves have a positive epistemic status? And, if so, from what do these fundamental EPs get their positive epistemic status? Their positive epistemic status cannot come from other EPs, or at least it cannot *depend* upon other EPs. If it were to, then the principle in question would not be a *fundamental* EP after all. So, what are we to say?

One option is the following:

SELF-SUPPORT: A fundamental EP is justified when that fundamental EP has the consequence that it is justified.

According to this option a fundamental EP enjoys (or at least can enjoy) a positive epistemic status, though it is granted this status from itself in some sense. On this picture, the positive epistemic status that any fundamental EP enjoys, it enjoys in virtue of what it itself claims. For instance, S can be justified in believing *PC* in a self-supporting, or norm-circular, way when it seems to S that *PC* is correct. Satisfying the relevant type of descriptive property in *PC* can make it that one is justified in believing *PC*.

Boghossian considers SELF-SUPPORT as a response to P2 and notes that this alternative comes with two worries: (i) that this kind of circularity cannot provide epistemic support, and (ii) that whatever kind of support this kind of circularity can give, it can be had by numerous alternative epistemic systems for their fundamental EPs. If

either worry is correct, then SELF-SUPPORT will not be successful in providing a way of rejecting P2.

Regarding the first worry, we have Richard Fumerton:

[T]here 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.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the second worry, we should recognize although *PC* can be justified according to *PC*, *PC* is not unique in this regard – other fundamental EPs can also be self-supporting. For instance we can consider the following competitor fundamental EP:

*TEA LEAF:* If *S*'s tea leaf has pattern *X*, then *S* is *prima facie* justified in believing *p*.

Like *PC*, *TEA LEAF* can also be self-supporting. It may be that *S*'s tea leaf has a pattern that, according to *TEA LEAF*, renders *S* justified in believing *TEA LEAF*. Given this, it may appear that the adherer to *PC* is in no better epistemic position regarding her fundamental EP than the adherent of *TEA LEAF* is regarding her fundamental EP. Both have a fundamental EP according to which each respective individual is justified in believing their own fundamental EP. Further everything that the adherer to *PC* can say in justifying her fundamental EP can be mimicked by the adherer to *TEA LEAF* in justifying her fundamental EP. It seems that if either party were to defend her fundamental EP by referencing the very EP under scrutiny she would be begging the question and doing nothing more. As Boghossian puts it,

The most that any epistemic practice will be able to say, when confronted by a fundamentally different, genuine alternative, self-supporting epistemic practice, is that it is correct by its own lights, whereas the

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*, Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, p. 180.

alternative isn't. But that cannot yield justification of one practice over the other, without begging the question.<sup>13</sup>

If that is the case, then the worry is that neither adherent is justified in believing her fundamental EP.<sup>14</sup> So, we have two powerful worries for SELF-SUPPORT. If either (i) or (ii) is correct, then it looks like SELF-SUPPORT does not provide a way of denying P2.

Indeed, in *Fear of Knowledge* Boghossian rejects SELF-SUPPORT for these reasons and in its place puts forward the following alternative:

BLIND ENTITLEMENT: We are blindly entitled to the epistemic system we have adopted, at least until we become aware of a better alternative epistemic system.

Initially an appeal to blind entitlement may seem like simply an insistence that P2 is false – an insistence that we can be justified in believing epistemic facts. Boghossian tries to take the sting out of this alternative by noting the unavoidability of adopting an epistemic system before one can even undertake the project of justifying an epistemic system or the EPs contained therein. After all, epistemic systems are justified (if at all) in virtue of fundamental EPs, since those are the things that ultimately prescribe under what conditions beliefs are justified. But which fundamental EPs should one use to determine which epistemic system one is justified in adopting? Alternative epistemic systems have alternative fundamental EPs, so to pick a set of fundamental EPs by which to evaluate various alternative epistemic systems is to *already* have adopted an epistemic system and set of fundamental EPs. Here is Boghossian on the topic,

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<sup>13</sup> *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> This type of objection has been referred to as 'the Great Pumpkin Objection'. This name traces back to Alvin Plantinga and an objection he considered to his reformed epistemology. Michael Bergmann has also used this term to refer to such an objection. See Bergmann "Evidentialism and the Great Pumpkin Objection" In *Evidentialism and its Discontents* (Ed. Trent Dougherty), Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 195-209.

[I]f no one is entitled to use an epistemic system without first justifying it, then no one could be entitled to use an epistemic system, for any attempt by the thinker to justify it will depend on his being entitled to use some epistemic system or other.<sup>15</sup>

According to Boghossian, BLIND ENTITLEMENT allows for the falsity of P2 since when we are entitled to an epistemic system we are justified in believing what that system claims that we are justified in believing. Since epistemic claims can be among the propositions which our epistemic system claims we are justified in believing, this alternative is incompatible with P2 and provides a way out of the argument for epistemic relativism. For instance, if I am entitled to adopt *PC* (and the resulting epistemic system which has *PC* as the fundamental EP), then I am justified in believing what *PC* claims that I am justified in believing – the things that seem true to me and do not have this justification defeated. Among the propositions that I may thereby be justified in believing are a number of EPs. So, if I can be entitled to adopt an epistemic system, it is possible to have justified beliefs about epistemic claims. So, BLIND ENTITLEMENT does provide a way out of the argument for epistemic relativism. If BLIND ENTITLEMENT is true, P2 is false.

But even if this is so, is BLIND ENTITLEMENT really acceptable? The problems for it begin by examining how we are to understand the kind of entitlement mentioned therein. Either the entitlement in BLIND ENTITLEMENT is a kind of *epistemic* entitlement or it is not. Let's start by thinking of it as a kind of positive epistemic status. The problem here is that route from unavoidability to *epistemic* entitlement is not a good one. An unavoidable choice might provide pragmatic reasons to take one option over another, but it is hard to see how *epistemic* reasons could be so generated. For instance, coming

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<sup>15</sup> *Fear of Knowledge*, p. 99.

to a fork in the road and needing to get to the destination may give pragmatic reasons to take one of the forks, but the need to take an option would not itself give any *epistemic* reason to believe that any one fork was the correct path to take. The need to make a choice does not itself give one any *epistemic* reasons in favor of any choice.

Further, entitlement understood this way, simply gives the wrong verdicts in theoretical cases. For instance, according to this understanding of entitlement, even the adherer to *TEA LEAF* is *initially* epistemically entitled to adopt that epistemic system. So, what is justified for this individual at that time is whatever *TEA LEAF* claims is justified for her. This is implausible. The adherer to *TEA LEAF* never has her beliefs enjoy a positive epistemic status simply in virtue of what the EP *TEA LEAF* claims.<sup>16</sup> So, Boghossian's BLIND ENTITLEMENT is not plausible when the entitlement is understood as epistemic entitlement.

However, if the entitlement in BLIND ENTITLEMENT is not a kind of epistemic entitlement, then Boghossian's alternative faces distinct problems. If the entitlement in is not a kind of *epistemic* entitlement (if it does not give some positive epistemic status to the fundamental EPs), then this alternative gives us no reason to think that one's fundamental EPs have *any* positive epistemic standing. Positive epistemic standing simply does not result from non-epistemic entitlements. If the entitlement is non-epistemic, then one's fundamental EPs do not have a positive epistemic status even if

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<sup>16</sup> It's worth noting that *PC* allows for the possibility for an individual to be justified in believing *TEA LEAF*, yet it would do so in virtue of it seeming to the subject that *TEA LEAF* is correct – it would be in virtue of *PC* that this is so, not in virtue of *TEA LEAF*. In such a situation, it is the seeming state that is doing real epistemic work, not the mere 'indications' of the *TEA LEAF*.

the individual is entitled to them. So, regardless of how we understand the entitlement in Boghossian's alternative, serious problems ensue.

A third alternative for rejecting P2, one not considered by Boghossian, is the following:

COHERENCE: EPs are justified when they cohere with one's system of beliefs, and cohere with one's system of beliefs better than alternative EPs.

COHERENCE utilizes a coherentist theory of justification to justify EPs. A coherentist theory of justification claims that beliefs are justified in virtue to their relations to other beliefs, and by coherence relations in particular. Coherentists have a holistic conception of justification rather than the more traditional linear notion. COHERENCE appears to allow for the falsity of P2 since individuals do have systems of beliefs and it is at least possible that some EPs will cohere with these beliefs and cohere with these beliefs better than competitor EPs. So, if COHERENCE is true, then it looks like it is possible to have justified beliefs about what the epistemic facts are.

While COHERENCE has promise, unless SELF-SUPPORT OR BLIND ENTITLEMENT is also correct, COHERENCE offers no help in allowing *fundamental* EPs to be justified. While COHERENCE can allow for other EPs to be justified, it does so as a fundamental EP – it is in virtue of COHERENCE that the other EPs are justified. However, for an individual to be justified in believing COHERENCE itself, SELF-SUPPORT OR BLIND ENTITLEMENT must also be correct. COHERENCE might be justified for an individual because it coheres with her system of beliefs and does so better than alternative EPs, but if so, then SELF-SUPPORT has been utilized. Alternatively, COHERENCE might be justified for an individual because she

has accepted it and has not come across a better fundamental EP or epistemic system, but if so, then BLIND ENTITLEMENT has been utilized. Without affirming either SELF-SUPPORT or BLIND ENTITLEMENT it does not appear that an individual could be justified in believing the fundamental EP COHERENCE.

Further, if it is in principle impossible for an individual to be justified in believing the fundamental EP COHERENCE, then any justification for EPs provided by COHERENCE will disappear once this fact is realized. If an individual recognizes that COHERENCE is the fundamental EP by which she is seeing the other EPs in her epistemic system to be justified and that she *cannot* be justified in believing COHERENCE, then any justification that individual had for believing those other EPs will be defeated or undercut.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, for this very reason, COHERENCE does not provide any advantage in rejecting P2. Like COHERENCE, *PC* too could allow for some EPs to be justified – the EPs that seemed true to the individual in question. But both *PC* and COHERENCE have the problem that without SELF-SUPPORT or ENTITLEMENT the fundamental EP in the epistemic system is in principle unable to be justified. Once this is recognized, any justification provided for the derived EPs by way of the fundamental EP will be defeated or undercut.

So, while *PC* and COHERENCE allow for some EPs to be justified, unless SELF-SUPPORT or BLIND ENTITLEMENT is also correct, they only do so when the individual in question has been unreflective and has not considered the justificatory status of the fundamental EP

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<sup>17</sup> Such a situation is a case of higher-order defeat. For more on higher-order defeat see Matheson "Conciliatory Views of Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Philosophy* (2009) 6(3): 269-279.

of her epistemic system. While allowing for some EPs to be justified is sufficient for the falsity P2 (since P2 claimed that it is not possible to come to justified beliefs about what the epistemic facts are), it seems that we have only pushed the epistemic relativist to a slightly revised argument with the following key premise in place of P2:

- P2' It is not possible to arrive at justified beliefs about what absolute epistemic facts there are (even in rough approximation) once you reflect on how your beliefs are ultimately justified (what fundamental EP you are utilizing).

This premise is no less plausible than P2, and the requisite revisions to P1 do not make it any less plausible either. Since COHERENCE does not provide a way of rejecting P2' without also embracing SELF-SUPPORT or BLIND ENTITLEMENT, it has not helped in disarming the argument for epistemic relativism.

This should cause us to revisit SELF-SUPPORT. Perhaps Boghossian's dismissal of SELF-SUPPORT was too quick. Recall that SELF-SUPPORT raised two worries:

- (i) That this kind of circularity cannot provide *epistemic* support, and
- (ii) That whatever kind of support this kind of circularity can give can be had by numerous alternative epistemic systems.

If SELF-SUPPORT is to be accepted and P2 and P2' rejected, both (i) and (ii) must be shown to be faulty. Let's take these two worries in turn. The first concern was motivated by Fumerton's claim given above. One thing to note here is that we typically *do* think that this kind of norm-circularity can provide *epistemic* support. Deductive defenses of deduction, and inductive defenses of induction both appear to be legitimate ways of

justifying their own use.<sup>18</sup> For instance, it appears that I can prove that *Modus Ponens* is a valid argument form as follows:

1. If a *Modus Ponens* argument cannot have all true premises and a false conclusion, then *Modus Ponens* is valid.
2. A *Modus Ponens* argument cannot have all true premises and a false conclusion.
3. *Modus Ponens* is valid.

While this argument is itself a *Modus Ponens* argument, it nonetheless makes it reasonable to believe that *Modus Ponens* is a valid argument form. This kind of norm-circularity can provide positive epistemic support since *Modus Ponens* is in fact a good argument form.<sup>19</sup> Since reasoning according to *Modus Ponens* is a good way to reason, reasoning in this way, even when the content of the argument concerns *Modus Ponens* itself, is a good way to reason.<sup>20</sup>

Along these lines, there are theoretical reasons to reject (i). Let's continue to take it that *PC* is a correct fundamental EP. If *PC* is true, then seemings provide *prima facie* justification for the propositions that seem true to those to whom they seem true. If seemings provide *prima facie* justification for such propositions, then they can do so regarding *PC* itself. *PC* can simply be one such proposition that *PC* applies to. If *PC* is correct, then seemings do provide *prima facie* justification for propositions that seem

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<sup>18</sup> This is also why induction and deduction are plausible candidates for fundamental epistemic principles, though by assumption they gain their positive epistemic standing by way of *PC*.

<sup>19</sup> For more on this point, see James Van Cleve "Reliability, Justification, and the Problem of Induction" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 9(1): 555-67.

<sup>20</sup> Similarly regarding induction, since the past being a certain way does give a reason to believe that the future will be that way, the fact that induction has been a good guide in the past gives us good reason to believe that induction will be a good guide in the future.

true, and they do so regardless of *which* propositions seems true.<sup>21</sup> To reject this is already to have rejected *PC*, which we are assuming is true. Such a norm-circular justification of *PC* is surely dialectically ineffective, but if *PC* is true, then *S* can be justified in believing *PC* by it seeming to *S* that *PC* is correct – this is simply entailed by what we are assuming to be true, namely *PC* itself.<sup>22</sup> No one who was not already convinced of *PC* would become convinced that another individual is justified in believing *PC* by having it pointed out that *PC* seems true to that individual. However, we should recall here the need to keep distinct the *project* of justifying one's beliefs from the *state* of being justified in believing a proposition. Our concern here is the state of being justified, not the project of justifying.<sup>23</sup>

What about the second worry with SELF-SUPPORT? Our response to (i) provides a foundation for a response to it as well. Important to our response to (i) was that *PC* was in fact true, not simply that *PC* was the fundamental EP within our accepted epistemic system. So, while the adherent to *PC* and the adherent to *TEA LEAF* both have epistemic systems which are justified according to the fundamental EP contained within each respective epistemic system, these alternative epistemic systems do not each have a *true* fundamental EP. Alternative epistemic systems have distinct fundamental EPs, and epistemic relativism is false, so there are objective facts about what the true EPs are.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Parallel points apply to COHERENCE.

<sup>22</sup> This point is made by Earl Conee "First Things First" in *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> For more on this distinction see James Pryor "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist" *Nous* 34(4): 517-49.

<sup>24</sup> Here again, this move in the objection to the argument for epistemic relativism will be dialectically ineffective since it is relying on the falsity of epistemic relativism. That said, the project here is to find good reasons to reject the argument, even if those reasons would not convince an epistemic relativist. In this way my project here is like the less ambitious response to the skeptic which does not attempt to

So, while it might be true that according to *TEA LEAF* we should believe *TEA LEAF*, if *TEA LEAF* is not in fact true, then the adherer to *TEA LEAF* in fact has no reason to believe *TEA LEAF* coming simply from the revelations of a tea leaf. If, as we are supposing, *PC* is correct, then seemings do provide *prima facie* justification for what seems true. And if *TEA LEAF* is incorrect, then the fact that a tea leaf has a pattern which according to which *TEA LEAF* presented as true, itself gives no reason to believe *TEA LEAF*. It simply makes no difference what false EPs claim, even when one of the things they claim is that we are justified in believing those very principles. Only true EPs have affect on what we should believe. So, there is an important difference between the adherer of *PC* and the adherer to *TEA LEAF* – only the former has an epistemic system with a true fundamental EP (at least by supposition), and this difference allows for some EPs to be justified and others not.<sup>25</sup>

So, according to *SELF-SUPPORT*, *P2* and *P2'* are false. It is possible to arrive at justified beliefs about what absolute epistemic facts there are, even upon reflection about how one is justified in believing the fundamental EP of one's epistemic system. One can do so by believing in accordance with the correct EPs. One thing that it is possible for the correct EPs to claim is that we are justified in believing that some

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convince the skeptic by her own terms, but to provide a satisfactory response to her arguments by our own non-skeptical lights. Additionally, if the epistemic relativist must rely on epistemic relativism to make the case for *P2* or *P2'*, then the argument for epistemic relativism here will be question begging.

<sup>25</sup> In his reply to Ernest Sosa (see "Replies to Wright, MacFarlane, and Sosa" *Philosophical Studies* 141: 409-432), Boghossian seems to endorse the view that what the correct fundamental EP(s) are will make a difference as to which epistemic system one is and can be justified in adopting. I take it that this is a departure from Boghossian's view expressed in *Fear of Knowledge*. After all, if one is adopting an epistemic system because according to the correct fundamental EP(s) one is justified in adopting it, then there does not seem to be any room left for blind entitlement to play – in such a case, one has justification for adopting that system.

principle is an epistemic fact, and this is so even if the EP in question is taken to be a fundamental EP. So, P2 and P2' should be rejected, and the argument for epistemic relativism fails.

The endorsement of SELF-SUPPORT may sound like the type of response to this argument for epistemic relativism offered by Ernest Sosa – a response which embraces a kind of norm-circularity and externalism about epistemic justification.<sup>26</sup> While we have endorsed a form of norm-circularity, we have seen no reason to resort to externalism about epistemic justification here. Everything said here is completely consistent with internalism about epistemic justification. According to externalism about epistemic justification, at least some of the factors that contribute to the justification of a belief are external to the subject's mind. In contrast, internalism about epistemic justification claims that all of the factors which contribute to the justification of a belief are within the subject's mind – that epistemic justification supervenes on the mental.<sup>27</sup>

According to *PC* what justifies a belief are seeming states -- its seeming to S that p provides *prima facie* justification for S to believe p. But seemings occur *within* the mind – they are a kind of mental state. Further, this point can easily be divorced from *PC*. Other internalist fundamental EPs about epistemic justification will have a similar result. In general, internalist EPs about epistemic justification will claim that it is some feature(s) internal to the subject's mind that provide(s) *prima facie* justification (and only such feature(s)). Any true fundamental internalist EP will be able to provide *prima*

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<sup>26</sup> Ernest Sosa, "Boghossian's Fear of Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 141(3), p. 407.

<sup>27</sup> Conee and Feldman "Internalism Defended" (in Hilary Kornblith (Ed.) *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism*, Blackwell, 2001.) defend this understanding of internalism as mentalism.

*facie* justification for itself, and this justification will come from some feature(s) within the subject's mind.

Now, the relevant internalist EP, whether *PC* or something else, is not *itself* within the subject's mind, but internalism was never committed to *this* claim. To claim that the factors which justify a belief are internal to the subject's mind is not to claim that the correct EPs are *themselves* within the subject's mind.<sup>28</sup> No plausible epistemology makes this later claim. For these reasons, internalism about epistemic justification should be kept distinct from a kind of subjectivism about justification which claims that one's beliefs are epistemically justified so long as one is doing one's best by one's own lights.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, this may be enough to make the epistemic internalist worry. After all, according to this story the justification for one's fundamental EPs in some sense depends on *external facts* – facts that are out there in the world – and not simply on one's perspective. Wasn't this the problem that internalists had with externalist account of justification in the first place?<sup>30</sup>

Fortunately for the internalist about epistemic justification, there is still an important distinction to be made. According to internalist theories of epistemic

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<sup>28</sup> Alvin Goldman appears to make a similar mistake when he charges that since the fittingness relation is not itself a mental state, evidentialism (the claim that the doxastic attitude that is justified for an individual at a time is the one which fits the evidence the subject has at that time) is in conflict with internalism (at least as understood as mentalism). See Goldman "Toward a Synthesis of Reliabilism and Evidentialism" in *Evidentialism and its Discontents* (Ed. Trent Dougherty), Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 393-426, p. 411. However, the internalist is simply not committed to this. Just as the internalist is not committed to EPs being mental states, the internalist is not committed to any fittingness relation being internal – only the factors to which the justified doxastic attitude fits need to be internal.

<sup>29</sup> For a defender of this type of subjectivism, see Richard Foley's *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>30</sup>This charge is explicitly made by Michael Bergmann in "Evidentialism and the Great Pumpkin Objection" responding to an evidentialist response to worry (ii) like I have outlined here.

justification, while the (mind independent) epistemic facts matter (and shouldn't we all think that?), the true facts about epistemic justification claim that epistemic justification supervene on features within the subject's mind. While these epistemic facts *themselves* don't depend on the subject's perspective (and who would want that?), the true principles about epistemic justification claim that the descriptive properties upon which epistemic justification supervenes can be (and plausibly are) properties which make a difference from the subject's perspective. The seeming states relevant to *PC* are but one example of this. It is here that internalist and externalist theories of justification differ. Externalist theories claim that the relevant descriptive properties upon which epistemic justification supervenes can include properties outside of the mind of the subject. This is denied by internalist theories of epistemic justification (perhaps because such properties cannot make a difference from the subject's perspective). So, internalists can still maintain that they give the subject's perspective its due – that they make it essential – even while claiming that the epistemic facts themselves don't depend on anyone and that what the epistemic facts are affects who is justified in believing what.

Further all of this is consistent with the internalists supervenience claim: that epistemic justification supervenes on the mental. Epistemic justification will still supervene on the mental even though what an individual is justified in believing will depend in some sense on the epistemic facts. The supervenience relation will still hold since the epistemic facts aren't just absolute facts, they are necessary truths. The epistemic facts do not differ from individual to individual, community to community, or

even possible world to possible world. Since epistemic facts are necessary truths, there will be no change in epistemic justification without a change in mental properties. Since the epistemic facts never change, they never get in the way.

While we have seen that epistemic internalism is not committed to the claim that the epistemic principles must themselves be mental, this is not to say that no internalist epistemology requires that the subject be justified in believing the relevant epistemic principles. Strong internalist accounts of justification require just this.<sup>31</sup> But while such theories require that one possess or be aware of the relevant EP, this is still distinct from requiring that the principle *itself* be within the subject's mind. Further, endorsing SELF-SUPPORT does not rule out such strong internalist epistemologies.

Suppose instead of *PC* being correct, *SPC* is the truth of the matter:

*SPC:* S is *prima facie* justified in believing p if and only if it seems to S that p and it seems to S that something's seeming true provides *prima facie* justification for believing it.

The defender of a strong internalist theory like *SPC* still does not claim that *any* principle, including *SPC*, must be within the subject's mind. Rather, the defender of *SPC* claims that there must be several seeming states in the subject's mind. While one of these seeming states is a seeming that a certain EP is true (that seemings provide *prima facie* justification for what seems true), it is the *seeming* which must be in the subject's mind, not the principle itself.

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<sup>31</sup> Though even here, not all internalist epistemologies are strong internalist epistemologies, so from what has already been said there is already a way for an internalist about epistemic justification to accept SELF-SUPPORT. For more on the distinctions between weak and strong internalist theories see Michael Bergmann's *Justification Without Awareness*, Oxford University Press, 2009, and Rogers and Matheson "Bergmann's Dilemma: Exit Strategies for Internalists." *Philosophical Studies* (2011) 152(1): 55-80.

So, the view on offer here is wholly compatible with internalism about epistemic justification (even strong internalism), and its compatibility with internalism does not rest on the epistemic status of seemings. For parallel reasons, alternative internalist epistemologies can also endorse SELF-SUPPORT. Of course, externalist theories of justification can also endorse SELF-SUPPORT. SELF-SUPPORT simply does not affect the internalist/externalist debate in epistemology.

In concluding I want to consider a further objection to SELF-SUPPORT, one not considered by Boghossian. It might be thought that SELF-SUPPORT does not square well with prevalent views in the epistemology of disagreement. While we saw early on that disagreement itself does not provide support for epistemic relativism, there is a rapidly growing debate on how discovering that another disagrees with you should affect what you believe. SELF-SUPPORT shares some similarity with what has been termed the 'right reasons view'<sup>32</sup> in the debate on the epistemic significance of disagreement.<sup>33</sup> SELF-SUPPORT claims that there are true EPs, and so long as you believe in accordance with them, you will be justified in what you believe. Similarly, the 'right reasons view' of disagreement claims that the party who reasoned correctly in a case of disagreement

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<sup>32</sup> This view is often attributed to the view at one time defended by Thomas Kelly "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement" in John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler (Eds.) *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> For more on the epistemology of disagreement see Christensen, D. (2007). "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116: 187-218, Richard Feldman (2006). "Reasonable Religious Disagreements." In L. Antony, ed., *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, and Thomas Kelly (2005). "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne, eds., *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

remains justified in what she believes (and to the same extent) even after encountering a disagreement with an epistemic peer<sup>34</sup> on the matter. Consider the following case:

Disagreement: S and S' each look at a moderately complicated math problem. S concludes that the answer is 17. S knows that S' is S's epistemic peer. S' then tells S that the answer is 15. In fact, S performed the math correctly, and the answer is 17. What should S now believe the answer is?<sup>35</sup>

According to the right reasons view, S has the right reasons to believe the answer is 17, and thus should go on believing (and just as confidently) that the answer is 17 even though S has since learned of S' belief on the matter. Given this, the 'right reasons view' is not a very plausible view about the epistemic significance of disagreement.<sup>36</sup> It seems that S should become less confident having discovered this disagreement, so does this spell trouble for the view on offer here? After all, both views seem to say that what matters is simply following the true EPs. So, the worry here is that while SELF-SUPPORT has it that P2 and P2' are false, it only accomplishes this task by making it far too easy to be justified in believing propositions.

I don't think that there is a problem here for SELF-SUPPORT. While what one should believe is entirely a matter of what the true fundamental EPs are, there is no small step from this to the 'right reasons view' of disagreement. This is because one of the things that the true fundamental EPs can (and plausibly do) claim (even if indirectly

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<sup>34</sup> Various formulations of epistemic peers have been given in the literature. What these accounts share, and what is vital to two individuals being epistemic peers is that they are equally likely to be right about the matter. Plausibly this requires that they have the same evidence (or equally good evidence), they have been equally responsible in thinking the matter through, they are equally intelligent, etc.

<sup>35</sup> This case parallels one given by David Christensen in "The Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News" *Philosophical Review* 116(2): 187-217.

<sup>36</sup> See Matheson "Conciliatory Views of Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Philosophy* (2009) 6(3): 269-279. Kelly has also since made clear that he never meant to endorse such a view.

through their endorsement of derived EPs) is that cases of peer disagreement are epistemically significant. Let's continue to consider *PC* as a true fundamental EP. According to *PC*, the justification that S has for believing p can decrease (even dramatically) once S encounters an individual who seems to S to be S's epistemic peer and seems to disagree with S about p. The story about what S is justified in believing about p having encountered the relevant kind of disagreement can be done entirely in terms of how things seem to S. If it seems to S that S' is just as likely to be right about p, and that S' disagrees with S about p, then according to *PC*, S is *prima facie* justified in believing these things. If this justification is not defeated for S, then S is on balance justified in believing these things, and if so, then S will become less justified in believing p (perhaps quite dramatically).<sup>37</sup> Here again though, this is not some special feature of *PC*. Rather many fundamental EPs will give such a verdict. It appears that plausible fundamental EPs will give such a verdict and take the epistemic significance of disagreement seriously. But, we have seen that *PC* can do this, and for similar reasons other internalist fundamental EPs can do the same.

In addition, while *PC* and SELF-SUPPORT made it possible for an individual to be justified in believing epistemic principles, given *PC* this justification is *prima facie* – it can be defeated. Plausibly, cases of peer disagreement are cases where such justification is defeated. The problem for the 'right reasons view' of disagreement is that it appears to make reasoning according to correct principles *sufficient* for being on balance justified in believing something. This is why the 'right reasons view' gives the wrong verdicts in

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<sup>37</sup> For more on this kind of defeating effect see my "Conciliatory Views of Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Philosophy* (2009) 6(3): 269-279.

cases of disagreement. But, *PC* makes no such sufficiency claim, and plausibly the correct fundamental EPs (whether they be *PC* or something else) do not either.

To sum up, we have seen good reason to reject epistemic relativism and no good reason to affirm it. While we have seen a powerful argument for epistemic relativism there are critical problems with both P1 and P2. Further, while epistemic relativism is to be avoided, the best way of avoiding it comes not from endorsing Boghossian's BLIND ENTITLEMENT, but in accepting SELF-SUPPORT and noticing that it entails the falsity of P2 and P2'. We have seen that endorsing this type of response does not require an endorsement of externalism about epistemic justification and does not fail to take seriously the epistemic significance of disagreement.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Special thanks to Trent Dougherty, Theodore Locke, Kevin McCain, and Sarah Wright for helpful discussion on this topic.