

Against relativism: Boghossian

BOGHOSSIAN'S COMPLAINT. Boghossian holds, in plain words, that relativists talk impenetrable nonsense. One must wonder how such sophisticated thinkers like Goodman and Putnam, also Rorty, could all commit that grave philosophical sin. I think that Boghossian's arguments are a straw man affair, and that the matter is more complex than what he wants us to think.

The fact-constructivist says, according to Boghossian, that there can be no fact independent of societies and their contingent needs and interests. But there were mountains before there were people. Hence there is at least one fact independent of people and societies: 26

Mountain-fact There were mountains 1,000,000 YA.

One response by the relativist is to bite the bullet and say that Mountain-fact is not a fact, and there were no mountains 1,000,000 YA. Though this is the response by the much reviled Bruno Latour (for the case of TB), let's reflect on it a bit. The Latour-relativist here doesn't say, 'There were no mountains, only plains.' Nor does he say that there were no plains, mountains, or any landscape—indeed, nothing at all. He says that *we* oughtn't describe as 'mountains' 1,000,000 YA the same things we *currently* describe as 'mountains'. To do so would be anachronistic. 26

Well, how *should* we describe any particular feature of the landscape or geology? I suspect that any description, including any mentioning of 'landscape' and 'geology' to begin with, would be anachronistic. And dating too is anachronistic. So a non-anachronistic version of the Mountain-fact may be just this:

(21-1) There was *X*.

That's not very edifying, because to agree or disagree with you I must understand what *X* is. But that I can't do, on pains of anachronism. So the final answer of the Latour-relativist will just be silence.

Where did we go wrong (if indeed we did)? As Boghossian says, we have to accept that there were facts before humans. Better put, we have to accept that not *all* statements of fact are anachronistic, so that, e.g., the Mountain-fact would be OK. What, then, is the relativist's claim? 27

Boghossian formulates it as the 'Description Dependence of Facts'. The gist of that is: facts can only be identified with our particular ways of describing. To think of facts as independent of our descriptions is a confusion. 28

Boghossian grants that *some* facts are description-dependent (e.g., 'Gold is valuable' or 'So-and-so is a priest'). But he claims that not all facts are so dependent. 28

Remark 1. As far as I can see, the 'homosexual' example is irrelevant here, since it is another instance of an alleged anachronism, rejected earlier.

What are Boghossian's reasons? He seems to give two. (i) It's intuitively obvious that facts about mountains are in a different league from facts about money and priests. (ii) What purpose would the rejection of naive realism serve? Why would we bother even to consider rejecting naive realism in favour of relativism? Boghossian doesn't clearly distinguish between these two reasons, but I think we should.

It's not clear what to say about (ii). What's the puzzle of naive realism that encourages us to search for alternatives? One motivation was, historically, the threat of scepticism (see Berkeley). Speaking Goodmanese, if there is *the* way the world is, then what's the guarantee that we grasp that way? Indeed, as Boghossian and others admit, we only approximate the way the world is to the best of our abilities. But we never quite get there (there are independent reasons to think that we don't). If, however, you quit the talk of *the* way and are satisfied with different 'versions' each acceptable for pragmatic reasons, then scepticism is put to rest. 31

How good is this motivation? Perhaps not too good, since the costs of relativism and anti-realism may seem to you too high. But then, it's not clear why there should be any specific puzzle that must doom naive realism. Perhaps you begin to doubt it simply upon reflecting on our epistemic, theoretical practices. That, I think, is Goodman's own path to relativism.

Regarding (i), Goodman explicitly addressed this issue and claimed that no good distinction can be made between description-dependent and description-independent facts. That's because we should ask, in the first place, how we came to accept our putatively description-independent facts. Goodman argues that such facts were accepted as part of our inductive practices. These practices rely, among other things, on the employment of theoretical predicates. But such employment is subject to the 'new riddle of induction'.

Remark 2 (Short digression on 'grue'). Consider the statement (a hypothesis):

(21-2) Emeralds are green.

What empirical support can we gather for this statement? Presumably we should collect many emeralds and observe their colour. But now, it seems that whatever evidence we have gathered for (21-2) by the year 2022—this evidence would also count as evidence for:

(21-3) Emeralds are grue,

where 'grue' is introduced through this clause (to simplify quite a bit):

(21-4) x is grue iff x is green before the year 3000 and blue after 3000 (there is nothing special about the year 3000, it's just some point in the future relative to the present time).

' x is green' and ' x is grue' are not equivalent predicates. Yet our evidence cannot distinguish between them. Based on logic and evidence *alone* we can't say in general whether emeralds are green or grue. Nor can we say of an individual emerald whether it is 'really' green or 'really' grue.

So what's the difference between 'green' and 'grue' that explains why we use one and not the other? Goodman argues that the only significant difference is that 'green' is 'entrenched' in our inductive practices. It is not that 'green' better approximates the 'real' condition of emeralds.

Boghossian wishes to contrast fact-constructivism with the thesis of the social relativity of descriptions. The latter is the claim that our conceptual schemes (i.e. the adoption thereof) are driven by our practical concerns like prediction, as well as general pragmatic concerns like elegance and simplicity. Why are the two claims not equivalent? Because, Boghossian says, I can describe the giraffe as a 'giraffe', but also as an 'object four miles from the Emperor Nero'. Well, the former description is certainly better, 'truer', closer to *the way things are*!

This is a bad non-sequitur. Boghossian seems to argue that there *are* giraffes out there, and that if I describe the (real) giraffes as giraffes, I'm doing much better than if I describe them as an object some distance from another object. But the relativist, of course, disputes the premiss. We are not entitled to assume that there are real giraffes. *All* we have ever done, in our theoretical enquiries, is to adopt certain ways of speaking and classifying on the grounds of their usefulness. The little words 'real' and 'true' have a life within our conceptual schemes. But to turn around and say that one, and only one, conceptual scheme is itself true or real is entailed neither by scientific practices, nor by philosophical reflection.

Boghossian also argues that to say, of a giraffe:

(21-5) Here is a tree!

is to say something false, 'not corresponding to the way things are'. This is another bizarre non-sequitur. A relativist can certainly accept that (21-5) is false. It is false—or worse, logically inconsistent—within our folk classification of fauna and vegetation, or within the more refined biological theory. Or so the relativist would argue. He doesn't have to say (nor, I think, does any actual serious relativist say so) that 'anything goes', that any description is as good/true/acceptable as any other. Recall Goodman's discussion of paintings. There are, the relativist may be happy to admit, better or worse paintings judged so on the strength of aesthetic criteria. But the best possible painting needn't be the best possible photograph: paintings and photographs do not converge on one true representation of the object. Indeed, a painting judged worse than another one may nevertheless capture better the photographic resemblance between the painting and the object.

THE BIG DIPPER. Goodman argued, quite plausibly, that constellations can't be part of 'the way the world is', since their identification so heavily, or entirely, depends on our perception and convenient arrangement of experienced objects. Boghossian has no quarrel with Goodman about constellations. But he protests that to extend this reasoning, as Goodman does, to all facts and entities is wrong.

One reason why Goodman's generalisation is wrong, says Boghossian, is that 'constellations' are defined in the dictionary as nothing but star configurations that have been noticed by human observers to have a certain (interesting) shape. But not every term is so defined. So Goodman's generalisation fails.

This argument is a non-sequitur, because it is wildly anachronistic. *Of course* the modern OED would say so. But that is only because it has (implicitly) adopted a modern scientific perspective. For the ancients, quite likely, constellations were not just stars that happen to be agglomerate in some interesting shapes in our visual field. They reflected some deeper facts of reality. Nor would the ancients even recognise our concept of a star. So, are there *really* constellations? Well, it depends who you ask. The relativist needn't quarrel with the OED, unless we take OED to be the arbiter of truth.

Thankfully, Boghossian doesn't pin his critique entirely on the OED entries. He also says that the relativist wants us to be satisfied with our theories and classifications without saying anything about the reality as it is. But if we create more and more refined classifications, they must be classifications of *something*, of the primeval 'dough'. This something and this dough is the reality as it is. Relativism only makes sense once we couple it with the assumption of *the way the world is*.

But this argument is misdirected. The relativist, at least of the Goodmanian persuasion, does not assume solipsism or Berkeleyan idealism. He does not claim that all that there is in the world is our minds and ideas (=descriptions). Note too that, had he done so, Goodman's polemic with the 'mystic' would have proceeded

very differently. He would likely have employed a Berkeleian gambit and said that the very concept of the external world is unintelligible. Instead, he says that the objective description of the world is unintelligible.

So there is the world, something, out there. We describe the world (rather than our own ideas). But we shouldn't think that the world has definitive properties we are approximating with greater or lesser success. We shouldn't think that there are descriptions of these properties that capture how the world actually is (i.e. 'correspond' to the world) without any input from epistemic agents with their idiosyncratic interests and means. Nor, secondly, is any such objectivist assumption useful for, or warranted by, our theorising. Once we realise that our theorising is driven much more by practical concerns than theorists would like to admit, subjectivism runs out of steam. It is shown to be nothing more than a dogma.

The same considerations tell against Boghossian's objection from backward causation. The relativist doesn't claim that we are self-created or coming from nothing. He only claims that our explanations of how we came about are theory-bound, just like explanations of anything else.

It is, of course, quite a different question whether the relativist *must be* committed to Berkeleian idealism (minus God) or solipsism *malgre lui*. As mentioned, it's clear that Goodman, for one, countenances no such commitment. This, indeed, didn't stop other critics, too, from levelling this objection. If Boghossian could show that such a commitment is entailed by relativism, this, I am sure, would be very embarrassing for Goodman. However, he gives no such argument.

CARNAP OR GOODMAN? It is worth trying to compare Goodman's relativism with Carnap's conventionalism. Both endorse some principle of tolerance. Do not say:

(21-6) Giraffes exist, period!

Say rather:

(21-7) Giraffes exist, given a particular theory.

A theory ('inquiry') comes first. This agreement is clearly due Goodman's and Carnap's shared heritage of pragmatism, though likely received by different channels. However, there are also interesting differences. Goodman does not insist on a 'convention' that have to agree on in order to endorse a particular theory. Nor does he insist on the overall empiricist criterion for adjudicating among rival frameworks and judging their usefulness. Perhaps one might say that Goodman's tolerance goes one step further, compared to Carnap's.

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