



# **Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism**

*Paul Boghossian*

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## **Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism** Paul Boghossian

Relativist and constructivist conceptions of truth and knowledge have become orthodoxy in vast stretches of the academic world in recent times. In his long-awaited first book, Paul Boghossian critically examines such views and exposes their fundamental flaws.

Boghossian focuses on three different ways of reading the claim that knowledge is socially constructed--one as a thesis about truth and two about justification. And he rejects all three. The intuitive, common-sense view is that there is a way the world is that is independent of human opinion; and that we are capable of arriving at beliefs about how it is that are objectively reasonable, binding on anyone capable of appreciating the relevant evidence regardless of their social or cultural perspective. Difficult as these notions may be, it is a mistake to think that philosophy has uncovered powerful reasons for rejecting them.

This short, lucid, witty book shows that philosophy provides rock-solid support for common sense against the relativists. It will prove provocative reading throughout the discipline and beyond.

## **Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2006 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780199287185

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Format : Hardcover 139 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Nonfiction, Science

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# From Reader Review Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism for online ebook

## Joshua Stein says

Boghossian's book is thoughtful, carefully argued, and concise. He notes that it was difficult to put together a project that covers these challenging arguments in a way that is accessible. I think there's something to be said for how important it is to do that well, as a professor, and I'll acknowledge that if there's one major part of this writing, it is keeping the conversation accessible. It does require some familiarity with the way analytic philosophers approach problems, and some comfort with those methods.

The book addresses one of the most frustrating movements in contemporary social sciences, the constructivist/relativist movement as it talks about science. Boghossian subjects social scientists, in the beginning, to some seriously rigorous epistemology, but then smartly moves on and notes that the more important thing is to address the actual philosophers who are sympathetic to this view, and so he spends the majority of the book dealing with Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, and the arguments for epistemic relativism, and explores the implications that way.

The worst thing that a philosopher can do in a critique is misrepresent his opponents, and as a serious veteran of philosophy Boghossian takes great pains to show that he is not doing this, often splitting up interpretations of positions and showing weak and strong readings of views, acknowledging that these weak and strong positions both exist, and then dedicating them both to exploring them both at length. This makes it understandable when he talks in the beginning about how hard the text was to write.

Is Boghossian's attack on relativism and constructivism successful? It is hard to say. Ultimately, I think that some of the volleys are more interesting and devastating than others, but that may have a lot to do with the changes in my sympathies to certain positions. I'm more sympathetic to the views of Quine and Duhem than I am to those of Rorty and Putnam, and so I'm suspicious of my feeling that his critique of the former is somehow weaker than his critique of the latter. But I think that, by and large, the arguments that Boghossian presents are interesting and important in coming to an understanding of why these positions are deeply problematic.

At any rate, for those interested in the major epistemological problems that the relativists like Rorty present, I strongly recommend the book. It is a very short read, only around 140-or-so pages of text and so, even if you don't think that you have the level of proficiency to work through serious analytic philosophy, the book is short enough that you can parse it out and take your time and not feel that the task ahead of you is daunting.

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## Nat says

This book is part of the recent wave of anti-relativist, anti-constructivist, anti-pomo works by philosophers aimed at a general audience. Other examples of the genre include Simon Blackburn's *Truth: A Guide*, Michael Lynch's *True to Life*, and Ian Hacking's *The Social Construction of What*. Boghossian's contribution is the most austere philosophical, focusing on raw argument rather than diagnosis or explaining the motivations for relativism or constructivism. That makes the book wonderfully short (you can easily read it on a flight from coast to coast) and the arguments punchy. But it also means that explanation of the title

issue, the "fear of knowledge", gets confined to three page epilogue, and isn't very compelling. Why is relativism, even the most implausible, factual variety, so weirdly compelling? Boghossian says that relativism is the dominant outlook in all academic disciplines except philosophy, but I think it has a significant, if shadowy, following throughout philosophy. Radical contextualists in the philosophy of language adhere to some mildly concealed form of relativism about facts. According to Boghossian, the explanation for the appeal of relativism is mainly just confusion and belief in bad arguments. That hardly seems adequate.

I do like Boghossian's improved argument against relativism about truth. The traditional argument is that the relativist faces a dilemma: either the claim that the truth of all claims is relative to some point of view is itself relative to some point of view, or it's not. If it's not, then the relativist has an inconsistent view. If it is, then there's nothing to recommend the relativist's view over the view that not all claims are relative to some point of view. Boghossian's version of the argument generates a regress for the relativist who embraces the second horn, and then claims that the regress is vicious--no one could grasp the content of any claim if relativism were true. But I don't see why grasping the content of a claim requires grasping the content of the claim that the first claim is relative to some point of view. If the relativist insists that that's not required, then the regress doesn't mean that the truth of relativism makes it impossible to grasp the content of any claims.

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### **Roxanne Russell says**

I encourage any dissertation mentees to read this who plan to use social construction as a theoretical framework. It's important to understand counterviews and consider those views when designing research.

I don't think Boghossian's approach considers contextual dynamics enough to be as useful for educational researchers as other approaches, but his dissent is an important consideration. His common sense approach is accessible enough for researchers to question themselves and struggle with the pitfalls of relativism before fully embracing it.

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### **Lane Wilkinson says**

Let's be clear...this is not a typical polemic against postmodernism. For what its worth, over the past decade, postmodern constructivism has been reasonably confined within English and Interdisciplinary Studies departments where it can do no harm (other than perpetuate the myth of the irrelevance of liberal arts programs, but that's another issue). What Boghossian presents is a well-timed argument against the spectre of constructivism in traditional philosophic studies.

Philosophy, as a field of study, has largely avoided the relentless onslaught of relativistic thinking; unlike some other areas in the humanities, philosophy has resisted such passing, cyclical intellectual fads. Yet, there have been attempted breaches by constructivist theories, and it is to the proponents of such theories that this book is directed. In particular, Boghossian directs his attention at analytic philosophers such as Nelson Goodman or Hilary Putnam: both well-respected titans within their fields. Yet, these thinkers (along with Boghossian's other whipping boy, Richard Rorty, who I can only guess is included as a rhetorical straw man) are not typical po-mo targets. Forget your Koertge-style surveys of unintellectual intellectuals like Derrida, Irigaray, or Kristeva...this book takes on real philosophers on their own turf. From arguments against moral

expressivism (and I am a quasi-realist) to category mistakes that arise when conflating Millian and Fregean conceptions of propositional content, Boghossian avoids the politicizing, rhetorical flourishes, and wolf-crying of other diatribes against relativism.

In sum, this is a book by a philosopher, about philosophy, and written for those who wish to take the philosophical high-road against the inanity of constructivism. To summarize Boghossian, I don't care if you want to make *Hamlet* a bi-univocal, ethno-hermeneutic discourse on Zuni nationalism, just stay the hell away from we philosophers and our respect for reality.

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### **Kristopher says**

I wish that I could give this a 3.5. It's clear, and really pretty fair. I would use parts of it in the introductory section to my intro to philosophy class just to help motivate what I take to be basic assumptions that are central to analytic philosophy. That said, even though I'm wholly on board with his conclusions, I think that the arguments go pretty quickly, and so if one were committed to a social constructivist position, and was so committed in a sophisticated way, I don't think they would be swayed. For intro students or the unthinking relativists in your life, this is a fine work.

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### **Armin Mohammadi Asl says**

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### **Alex Birchall says**

Relativism is the quaint belief that there are no truths in the world, only 'understandings' from either different individual or cultural points of view. Different groups have different epistemic frames and all should be respected. It is an argument of what Meera Nanda describes as 'epistemic charity.' This mode of thinking is rife today despite its incoherence. Boghossian aims to interrogate its central claims as well as its partner claim that knowledge is 'socially constructed' - i.e. it is created by different groups and its essential inauthenticity needs to be exposed or its illusion of meaning debunked.

Brilliant rejoinders to relativism have been advanced by sociologists of education such as Rob Moore. The simplest is that relativism is self-refuting - the claim 'there are no truths' is itself a claim to truth. It is a claim to radical particularism that disposes of its own particularity. Boghossian doesn't accept this claim however, as relativists would say 'our claim is true relative to a theory X' - of what the relativists 'find agreeable to say' but based on principles held by relativists and non-relativists alike. But this argument equally could be rejected as it creates a problem of infinite regress - the claim is true relative to a theory X which itself needs to be true relative to a theory Y, which that claim itself needs to be true relative to a theory Z, and so on. The 'theory' explanation becomes increasingly more difficult to sustain.

The relativist argument seems to stem from a denial that an independently existing reality in fact exists. In that respect relativism is opposed to realism (my tendency is towards Bhaskar & Norrie's dialectical critical realism). There are several facets to anti-realist argument:

1. That of Bruno Latour where it is claimed that categories such as diseases and technologies only exist once they are named (a kind of constructo-nominalism), also seen in Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* when he says there were no 'homosexuals' before the category of homosexuality existed, only men who preferred to have sex with other men. (I think Foucault's claim may have greater force, however, than Latour's.)
2. Richard Rorty's postmodern pragmatism. Using the example of Galileo, he claims that the move from an Earth-centric to a heliocentric model of the solar system was simply an expression of preference for a particular scientific model over others. There is no objective basis for selecting one over the other according to Rorty. This appears to be a mistranslation of Thomas Kuhn's argument in relation to 'paradigm shifts'.
3. The claim of 'epistemic charity' or cultural relativism made by Wittgenstein and others that it is unacceptable to judge others' epistemic frames of reference. Hence science becomes equalised with the witchcraft systems of the Azande. Such claims only seem to be made in defence of seemingly benign alternative systems. But in fact this also means that cultural relativists must be prepared to defend problematic positions such as creationism, caste structures in Hinduism and Calvinist theories of predestination, etc... as legitimate systems of epistemic knowledge production, by the same logic. This problem has particularly beset anthropologists in their ethnographic medium of study, and, increasingly, sociologists as they too adopt its form.
4. The claim made by identity-based particularists in the new identity politics, that knowledge is reflective of a particular standpoint mandated by group membership and/or subjective experience. It is impossible, claims this group, for men to know how women experience the world due to an essentialist border between genders. This explanation is proliferated along lines of race, sexuality.... etc.

The conclusion Boghossian arrives at is that constructivism about truth is incoherent and constructivism about justification is hardly preferable. This is achieved using arguments from analytic philosophers such as Thomas Nagel. Constructivism, however, has its uses. I agree with Boghossian that works by feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and others as well as anti-race scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah demonstrate the power of sociological constructivism in debunking naturalised assumptions about those ascriptive categories. This is because they are liberating of those categories in a way that is based on reason and analysis.

Relativism however is based on neither. It is incompatible with the democratic, anti-capitalist Left despite claims from radical Left postmodernists. It throws reason to the winds and instead often lapses into arguments of authority. We are inclined to believe something is true based on what people say. The creation of different cultural 'knowledges' has led to new cultural elites emerge that lead by authoritarian example and have often promoted irrationalist ideas that threaten the challenge of democracy to capitalism. Essentialism in this vein reinscribes and traps people within the same categories from which reason promises escape. Boghossian indeed emphasises this claim I have repeated over and over - with immense backlash and accusations that I am an 'assimilationist' - that arguments from authority are more damaging to the oppressed than they are to elites already in possession of that authority.

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## **Adam Lewis says**

I've been wanting to sort out my views on what is generally referred to as modernism and post-modernism for quite a while. While these topics have been touched on in some books that I have read, I had never previously taken the time to read a book entirely devoted to the epistemological issues undergirding them. This book helped me sort out my views.

I think that given the topic that this book discusses, it almost requires the reviewer to state their own beliefs. I consider myself a “neo-modernist” in that I agree with the author that there are independent facts about the world. I eschew extreme relativism. However, I think that post-modernism does have many good points that should be taken into account when trying to understand belief formation. Boghossian basically comes to the same conclusion in this book. And while doing so, gives relativism and constructivism a careful and objective look, pointing out their uses and strengths. But in the end, he comes to the conclusion that in their extreme forms such as “equal validity” for issues such as biological evolution and creationism, they are incoherent and fail as a valid philosophical viewpoint.

If you can look past the slightly opaque writing, this book would be a good read for anyone wanting to know more about the subject.

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### **Siu Hong says**

Clear and rigorous critique on Rorty's relativism and Kuhn's theory of paradigm change in science. A very enjoyable reading experience.

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### **Makomai says**

Oltre ad essere laureato in filosofia, Paul Boghossian è laureato anche in fisica, e si vede - se non altro dal rigore dell'esposizione.

Più che commentare (andrei certamente *ultra crepidam*), evidenzierai

?\* un passaggio dalla prefazione che inquadra bene il tenore del libro:

“Dal momento che le questioni affrontate (...) suscitano interesse ormai presso un vasto pubblico, ho cercato di rendere questo libro accessibile a chiunque abbia a cuore l'argomentazione rigorosa. Non so quanto ci sia riuscito, ma so che avevo completamente sottovalutato la difficoltà del compito”.

e

?\* un passaggio dall'epilogo che secondo me fornisce il messaggio più rilevante:

“(...) le idee costruttiviste sulla conoscenza sono strettamente connesse ai movimenti progressisti come il postcolonialismo e il multiculturalismo perché forniscono loro i mezzi filosofici con cui difendere le culture oppresse dall'accusa di avere idee false o ingiustificate. Ma (...) se il potente non può criticare l'oppresso, perché le categorie epistemologiche fondamentali sono inesorabilmente connesse alle rispettive prospettive, ne segue anche che l'oppresso non può criticare il potente. Il solo rimedio (...) è accettare apertamente il doppio standard: è concesso criticare un'idea discutibile se è sostenuta da coloro che si trovano in una posizione di potere – il creazionismo cristiano, per esempio – ma non se è sostenuta da coloro che sono oppressi dai potenti – come il creazionismo degli Zuni, per esempio.”.

Esattamente ciò che (troppo) spesso avviene. Al che consegue, a ben vedere, che nei fatti il relativismo riconduce (e riduce) il mondo a rapporti di forza (anche se a volte paradossalmente invertiti).

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## **Melvin says**

Although I find the argument fascinating, Boghossian could not convince me in the end. His main claim is that relativism and constructivism (even in the weak form) leads to an infinite regression. While for some claims this might not be sustainable, I think for humanistic concerns, it is often moving target that needs to be constantly discussed and assessed. Still, worth the read.

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## **Justin Rock says**

I wish I could give this book two ratings. 1: Intro to Epistemology Rating = 4 stars / 2. Philosophical Insight = 2 stars. Ultimately, I decided to rate it from my subjective situation, ironically.

Boghossian does a fantastic job laying out the position of the constructivism and relativism (epistemic, moral, etc.), giving every consideration to the opposing side in which he is critiquing. The problem with this book, which is unfortunately not unique to this book, is the reductionist tendencies of the analytic tradition, which Boghossian seems completely unaware of throughout the book.

Overall, this book is a great introductory book for freshman college students (or people just venturing into issues of epistemology, rationality and relativism). For those engaged in this debate already, this book adds very little.

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## **Vladimir says**

Reductionist and misguided view of constructivism.

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## **Tyler says**

Boghossian uses *Fear of Knowledge* to distinguish between true or false ideas and justified or unjustified beliefs. This book looks at constructivism and relativism as they relate to the latter, so the author focuses on epistemology.

Constructivism, the argument for the equal validity of claims, contrasts with a classical view of the problem of justification. The author notes, among other problems, that constructivism confuses the idea of the description dependence of facts with another idea, the social relativity of descriptions.

Relativism, he tells us, is the proposition that there are no absolute facts about justification. This claim is vulnerable to the fact that it cannot be made without reference to some epistemic system, plus the fact that the general claim cannot be true unless it follows that all particular epistemological justifications are likewise ungrounded.

Boghossian raises the points that observation and self-evidency both factor into justifications and cannot



easily be set aside. A refutation of the application of relativism, whatever the merits of relativism to other fields, is comparatively simple in philosophy.

The book is easy for anyone with a basic understanding of philosophy to follow. The arguments are spare, but the audience is the reading public, so it works for me. The author's discussion of underdetermination late in the book is an excellent explanation of the concept for non-philosophers. The book is an accessible, worthwhile read.

Interesting side note: The photograph on the cover is of the Bibliotheque Nationale de France. W.G. Sebald savages that structure in *Austerlitz*, noting that everything about it is antithetical to the idea of a library as an accessible repository of knowledge. Boghossian must share the same opinion. The photo is perfect for the book.

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## **IWB says**

Boghossian argues that constructivism has 3 defects. To maintain constructivism, one must adopt relativism; but relativism is defective. He discusses constructivism/relativism in the domains of facts, justification, & explanation. Since constructivism/relativism is defective, realism is the best bet.

The book's tone is a bit unprofessional & dogmatic. He doesn't do a great job of offering objections to his own views; he argues against weak formulations & omits good replies available to his opposition. Absent is any account of fictionalism, which purports to avoid the pitfalls of constructivism & realism. This leaves the book incomplete.

Boghossian says a social construction is something that is built. What is built, if it is to qualify as socially built, is done so by a group of people organized in a certain way, with certain values, interests & needs. The things built are not the objects of everyday life, like coins. Facts are built. A fact is constructed just in case it could only have been brought about by the intentional activity of a group. Fact construction reflects society's contingent needs & interests: had society not had those needs & interests, it might not have created the fact in question.

Boghossian gives a cursory account of objectivity. If a belief is true, the corresponding fact of that belief holds for everyone. My belief that the earth is spherical is not only true for me, but also for everyone whether this belief is shared or not. Fact objectivity is universal, invariant among persons & communities. Facts are mind-independent. If no human had ever existed, it remains a fact that the earth is spherical. True beliefs have a corresponding fact in virtue of which our belief is true, & these facts are universal & mind-independent. When beliefs are false, it is b/c they don't correspond to any fact in the world.

This view is problematic. It's unclear how facts are mind-independent & how they correspond to the world. He also assumes that our beliefs are either true or false. But it's not always clear that our words apply to facts. Much of the vocabulary of everyday discourse is vague, seemingly neither true nor false. Boghossian doesn't address this possibility. He thinks facts are related to beliefs b/c facts are the objects to which true beliefs correspond. But we understand facts b/c of concepts. If facts consist of concepts, & some concepts are contingent aspects of society's needs & interests, then much of what it is to be a fact is constructed by us. If you think that our concepts mediate descriptions of the world, then what it means to have a true belief differs from Boghossian's view. He fails to give a robust account of facts & their relation to concepts, what mind-independency is, & how all this relates to truth.

Boghossian claims constructivism has 3 defects. They are the problems of causation, of conceptual competence, & of disagreement. He says that these 3 defects decisively count against the coherence of constructivism. Let's consider each.

It is a truism that the objects & facts we talk about, such as mountains, dinosaurs, etc., existed before we did. If their existence antedates our own, their existence cannot depend on us. He says that constructivism entails backward causation. If the fact that dinosaurs existed is a social construct, then our constructing it so makes it so; i.e., we presently cause the past existence of dinosaurs. This is the problem of causation.

The second is that of conceptual coherence. Suppose backward causation were a coherent notion. Boghossian says we still can't explain how it is that we don't utter falsehoods when speaking about, say, dinosaurs. It is part of the concept of a mountain or dinosaur, he claims, that these things were not constructed. If it is part of the concept of these things that they are not constructed, then it is either false or incoherent to say that they are constructed.

The last problem for the constructivist is that of disagreement. Suppose that we construct some fact that P, & that the construction of P is contingent. It follows that it is possible that some other society should concurrently construct the fact that  $\sim P$ . Boghossian says that the constructivist must then face the following argument: Since we constructed the fact that P, then P. It is possible that another community should construct the fact that  $\sim P$ , so possibly  $\sim P$ . Ergo, it is possible that both P &  $\sim P$ .

Boghossian says this shows that constructivism violates the law of non-contradiction: Necessarily:  $\sim (P \& \sim P)$ . He says that these 3 problems devastate constructivism so that the only way to maintain the thesis is to adopt some form of relativism.

I think that the fact-constructivist can answer the 3 problems w/o having to resort to relativism.

Boghossian's claims the constructivist is committed to backward causation. The constructivist need not be committed to this view. Boghossian's charge is an historical claim that when there was no concept of a dinosaur, there were no dinosaurs. The constructivist is making a different claim, a counterfactual claim that if there were no concept of a dinosaur, there would be no dinosaurs. Once the concept of dinosaur is in place, it applies to all members of its extension, past, present, or future members. Boghossian's argument against the constructivist presupposes the concept of dinosaur as it is presently used. Our present use permits us to distinguish between kinds & delineates the criteria for what counts as a dinosaur, what changes something can undergo & remain a dinosaur, etc. Apart from such criteria, what counts as a dinosaur is indeterminate. When he speaks of dinosaurs antedating our constructions of them, he helps himself to the very construction he says commits one to backward causation. The concept dinosaur is utterly dependent upon us; moreover, this concept does the work of applying to the objects in question timelessly: past, present, & future dinosaurs fall within its designative scope. So the constructivist is not committed to backward causation b/c he is not making an historical claim, but a counterfactual claim. The counterfactual claim takes concepts as applying to their objects timelessly, & any notion of a kind existing apart from a concept of it is indeterminate as to what constitutes the kind. Boghossian's claim is self-stultifying.

The constructivist can avoid the problem of conceptual competence. Since our ordinary use of terms as "dinosaur" & "mountain" involve the concept of not having been constructed, it seems that we are using language wrongly when we say that facts about such things are socially constructed. Thus, the constructivist must explain how our ordinary use of these terms does not riddle our everyday discourse with falsehoods. But the constructivist need not accept this as part of ordinary use. An alternative is to suggest that our ordinary use of dinosaur doesn't involve the concept of not having been constructed; instead the concept involved could be that of having existed millions of years before us. Thus we coherently speak of things in the world antedating our existence w/o stating their category of kind. Our ordinary use does not yield

falsehoods b/c we are still talking about things existing, & it is our concept that designates timelessly what that existence entails. But suppose our ordinary use does involve the concept of not having been socially constructed. Since the concept of a dinosaur has been formulated, it designates timelessly. Saying that dinosaurs have not been constructed presupposes the present concept in a world in which there are no concepts. That is, if our ordinary usage involves the concept of dinosaurs not having been socially constructed, then when one speaks ordinarily one imagines that a transporting has taken place to a world in which no one has devised the concept of a dinosaur, but yet speaks of such concepts. If there is no concept for the term, then one cannot meaningfully speak about it. Our ordinary use of "dinosaur" agrees with it being the case that socially constructed concepts designate timelessly. It fits our conceptual competence b/c the concept involved is that something existed before us, which does not commit the speaker to imply that dinosaurs have been constructed & hence existed before our concept of them. Even if our ordinary use did involve the concept of not having been a construction, this is solved by recognizing that once a concept is in place, it designates the members of its extension timelessly. The counterfactual claim is if there were no concept of dinosaur, there would have been no dinosaurs. Boghossian's view that dinosaurs are not social constructions involves the concept of a dinosaur, so our ordinary use is fine b/c of timeless designation.

The constructivist also avoids the problem of accommodating concurrent contradictory views among societies. The constructivist can admit both  $P$  &  $\sim P$  in explanations, while holding that causal relations in the world are objective. Another approach is to appeal to the virtues of theories embedded in the societies. Suppose society A claims that  $P$ , & society B claims that  $Q$  which entails  $\sim P$ . Appealing to the various explanatory virtues of one theory over those of another, the constructivist can say that one is better than another. One appeals to the fact that the theory of society A explains more of the phenomena in question, has simpler mechanics, & greater predictive value. So there is no admitting of both  $P$  &  $\sim P$  concurrently, since one fails to have the theoretical virtues of the other. Thus there is a way the world is, which holds universally, but is not explained independently of certain contingent facts.

All and all, even if its not Boghossian's strongest work, the subject itself is sufficiently interesting and the basic arguments he treats in this book are still worthy of attention.

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