

DEFUSING EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the question of whether there is an interesting form of specifically *epistemic* relativism available, a position which can lend support to claims of a broadly relativistic nature but which is not committed to relativism about truth. It is argued that the most plausible rendering of such a view turns out not to be the radical thesis that it is often represented as being.

0. One of the key motivations for relativism is the idea that two parties to a dispute could each be equally in the right. So, for example, you claim—on the basis of your religious worldview and the framework of beliefs that this involves—that it is a historical fact that Moses parted the Red Sea, while I claim—on the basis of my secular worldview and the framework of beliefs that this involves—that no such thing ever happened and yet, the relativistic thought goes, both of us could be right. Opting for truth relativism is one way of accommodating this *faultless disagreement* motivation for relativism, such that what each party to the dispute says could be true. That is, relative to your religious framework, what you claim about Moses could be true while, relative to my secular framework, what I (counter-) claim could also be (simultaneously) true.

One problem with truth relativism, aside from the fact that the view seems to be committed to an independently implausible account of truth, is that it offends against our intuition that there is genuine conflict in the cases in question. That is, if we opt for truth relativism, then rather than getting an explanation of why this is a genuine disagreement between two parties who are, nevertheless, both right, we instead get the result that the disagreement in question wasn't genuine after all. That is, when you say that Moses parted the Red Sea you take yourself to be speaking the truth *simpliciter* (i.e., not the truth relative

to your framework), and accordingly you take anyone who contradicts you to be speaking a falsehood (i.e., and not the truth relative to *their* framework). The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for my counterclaim. This fact alone should make us wonder whether there is not a way of accommodating the key motivation for relativism—the idea of faultless disagreement—without buying into relativism about truth. The obvious way to go in this respect would be to explore the possibility of a specifically *epistemic* relativism—i.e., a relativism about epistemic standing which is not also committed to relativism about truth and so which could, in principle, accommodate our intuition that there is genuine conflict in the cases under consideration. Such a view would also have the added advantage of avoiding the more general problems that afflict truth relativism.¹

1. So an epistemic relativism would hold that two parties to a dispute could be genuinely disagreeing over some fact—e.g., whether Moses parted the Red Sea—but that the disagreement is nevertheless faultless, where the faultlessness is to be construed in a specifically epistemic fashion. Continuing the idea of framework-relative truth, the thought would be that relative to one epistemic framework—such as your religious framework—your claim has a certain epistemic standing, while relative to another epistemic framework—such as my secular framework—my counterclaim would have an epistemic standing of identical strength. While only one of us is in fact right, the point remains that any epistemic criticism I make of your claim will only have force relative to my framework and not relative to yours.

Perhaps the best way of understanding this talk of epistemic frameworks here is in terms of clusters of epistemic principles which determine the epistemic standing of beliefs. A religious epistemic framework, for example, would accord a central role to the testimony of scripture since, as the word of God, this would be treated as a reliable source of true beliefs on relevant subjects (e.g., on the historical episode in which Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt). Given this epistemic framework, agents would thus be at least *prima facie* justified in forming their beliefs on the basis of scripture. In contrast, a secular epistemic framework would not include a principle of this sort, since it would not be part of such a framework to regard the Bible as generally reliable in this way (though it might be thought reliable, *qua* historical text, on a restricted range of propositions).

Simply granting that there are different epistemic frameworks in this sense will not suffice to generate epistemic relativism, however, since what is in addition required is a further thesis to the effect that no epistemic framework is superior to any other epistemic framework. Only once this claim is in play do we get the conception of faultless disagreement that is required, for it now follows that whatever epistemic censure one applies to the other party can be legitimately ignored by that other party (and the same goes for any epistemic censure that they level against you). Once one starts to think of one's epistemic standing as being dependent upon one's epistemic framework, then a motivation for this key relativist claim starts to become apparent. After all, if all epistemic standing is framework-relative, then it follows that there can be no framework-independent way of conducting an epistemic assessment of an opponent's framework. Moreover, it also follows that one cannot offer any framework-independent support for one's epistemic framework. Hence, it follows that all epistemic frameworks are on an epistemic par.

Michael Williams (2007) gives a neat expression to this line of argument—which he calls the “fundamental argument for epistemic relativism”—in the following passage:²

In determining whether a belief—any belief—is justified, we always rely, implicitly or explicitly, on an epistemic framework: some standards or procedures that separate justified from unjustified convictions. But what about the claims embodied in the framework itself: are they justified? In answering this question, we inevitably apply our own epistemic framework. So, assuming that our framework is coherent and does not undermine itself, the best we can hope for is a justification that is epistemically circular, employing our epistemic framework in support of itself. Since this procedure can be followed by anyone, whatever his epistemic framework, all such frameworks, provided they are coherent, are equally defensible (or indefensible). (M. Williams 2007, 3-4)

As Williams makes clear in this passage, the very idea that all epistemic standing is framework-relative entails that one is unable to offer a framework-independent validation of one's own epistemic framework. By the same token, it also entails that one is unable to offer a framework-independent epistemic assessment of an opposing epistemic framework, a framework which will also lack a framework-independent validation. The conclusion is irresistible: all epistemic frameworks are as good (or, if you prefer, as bad) as each other.

Given this argument, it is obviously important to be able to offer some account of how one goes about individuating epistemic frameworks. If one simply identifies an epistemic framework with a set of epistemic principles, then this would almost certainly generate the unfortunate result that no two people share an epistemic framework, since it is

likely that there would be *some* divergence in the epistemic principles that they endorse. The kind of epistemic relativism that would result would be extremely radical. Intuitively, though, epistemic relativism ought not to be committed to a radical thesis of this sort. That is, it is surely not agreement on all the relevant epistemic principles that determines one's acceptance of an epistemic framework, but rather one's agreement on a fundamental sub-set of those principles. I'm unable to offer any compelling basis on which to make this fundamental/non-fundamental distinction, but we can side-step this issue to a certain extent by focussing on disputes where the two participants intuitively do disagree on the fundamental epistemic principles, such as the 'did Moses part the Red Sea' debate between the believer and the non-believer described above. Given that a fudge of this sort makes the epistemic relativist position more palatable, this ought to be an unproblematic move to make.

A second issue that I want to side-step in order to give the epistemic relativist's position the best run for its money is whether one could coherently endorse one's epistemic framework while simultaneously regarding it as no better, epistemically, than any other epistemic framework. As many have noted, epistemic relativism seems to inexorably lead to scepticism, and here is one reason why: if one regards one's epistemic framework as on an epistemic par with any other epistemic framework (including, crucially, frameworks that are fundamentally opposed to one's own), then it is hard to see how that is compatible with the idea that one's beliefs enjoy any positive epistemic status at all. I take it, however, that the interest in epistemic relativism would be severely undermined if it just turned out to be a form of scepticism in disguise. What we are interested in is the possibility of there being genuine positive epistemic status for our beliefs cast along epistemic relativist lines, and scepticism is clearly incompatible with positive epistemic status.³

For the sake of argument, however, let us simply grant that it is plausible to suppose that one could endorse the epistemic relativist claim about all epistemic standing being framework-relative without it having this sceptical consequence. As we will see, there are problems enough on the horizon for the epistemic relativist, so we can comfortably set this difficulty to one side.

With these points in mind, let us examine the epistemic relativist thesis further.

2. The first thing to notice is that given that epistemic relativism is here being construed in

such a way that it is not allied with truth relativism, it trivially follows that there is a sense in which two opponents to a dispute, each employing a different epistemic framework, are not on an epistemic par—after all, only one of the parties can be *right*. Relatedly, it ought to be consistent with epistemic relativism as we have understood it here that one party to a dispute might *know* what she believes whereas the other party does not (i.e., the one party to the dispute has a sufficiently strong framework-dependent epistemic standing in favour of her belief and in addition has a true belief, and so knows, whereas the other party merely has a strong framework-dependent epistemic standing in favour of her false belief). When we say that the two parties to the dispute have an equal positive epistemic standing for their respective beliefs, however, we are clearly not to be read as excluding this particular sort of epistemic disanalogy.

On the face of it, this point might seem harmless, since it appears that the key epistemic relativist thesis remains untouched—i.e., the thesis that, the truth or falsity of the target beliefs aside, all epistemic standing is framework-relative. As we will now see, however, this point does seem to have some interesting consequences, consequences which are unlikely to be welcomed by the epistemic relativist.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that appeal to scripture is indeed a reliable way of forming one's beliefs about relevant subject matters, such as whether Moses parted the Red Sea. One does not need to be an epistemic internalist to hold that such a fact about the reliability of the belief-forming process that one employs could have ramifications for the overall epistemic standing of one's belief, in the sense that one's belief enjoys a greater degree of overall epistemic support if it is reliably formed than if, *ceteris paribus*, it isn't reliably formed. The problem with allowing reliability—or, indeed, any externalist factor of this general sort, such as an indefeasibility condition—to be relevant to the overall epistemic standing of an agent's belief is that—given the denial of truth relativism at any rate—whether or not one's belief is in fact reliably formed is not determined by one's epistemic framework but simply by the relevant facts that obtain. It seems, then, that if one does not ally epistemic relativism to truth relativism, then there is a *substantive* sense in which the epistemic standing of an agent's belief is not a purely framework-relative matter after all.

Now, of course, it need not follow from the fact that the one party to this dispute is forming her belief in a reliable fashion that the other party is forming her belief in an unreliable fashion. Since a belief-forming process could be both reliable and also at the same

time fallible—in that it produces a false belief on this occasion—there is no contradiction in supposing that both belief-forming processes are equally reliable. It thus does not follow from the claim that the reliability of the relevant belief-forming process has implications for the epistemic standing of one's belief that the parties to this debate *must* have beliefs with different overall epistemic standings (even though this does follow from the fact that only one of the beliefs can be true).

Nevertheless, that external—and therefore, it seems, framework-independent—factors can, intuitively, have a bearing on the overall epistemic standing of an agent's belief is still significant for our discussion. After all, we can imagine a situation in which the one party to the debate is forming her belief in a reliable fashion and the other isn't, even though both parties are forming their beliefs entirely in keeping with the strictures laid down by their respective epistemic frameworks, and so enjoy the same degree of framework-relative epistemic support for their respective beliefs. In such a case, the one agent would enjoy additional epistemic support for her belief relative to the other agent, even though the framework-dependent epistemic support is, putatively, the same. If this is right, then there is a clear sense in which although each party to the dispute may enjoy an equal degree of framework-relative epistemic support for their belief, nevertheless, their beliefs are not on an epistemic par.

As we saw above, a core part of the motivation for epistemic relativism is to capture an entirely epistemic conception of faultless disagreement which does not presuppose truth relativism, and we noted that key to such a conception is the thesis that the two parties to the dispute have beliefs that are on an epistemic par. Allowing that the overall epistemic standing of one's beliefs can be influenced by factors outwith one's epistemic framework appears to fatally undermine this thesis.

3. There are a couple of moves that the epistemic relativist might make in response to this problem. One possibility might be to maintain that such 'external' factors can be incorporated into the framework such that they are not framework-independent factors after all. This move might sound entirely reasonable at first pass, but it does not stand up to scrutiny. The reason for this is subtle.

To begin with notice that there is a sense in which external factors of this sort are part

of *every* epistemic framework. If an epistemic framework did not think that, say, the reliability of belief-forming process was relevant to the overall epistemic standing of a belief, then it is hard to see why we would regard it as an *epistemic* framework in the first place. It is for this reason that it sounds initially quite straightforward to subsume the external factors into the framework itself.

The trouble is, however, that to say that a consideration like reliability is part of any epistemic framework is thereby to say that it is not a feature specific to any particular framework and therefore, in the relevant sense, not part of the framework at all. Recall that we described an epistemic framework as being a system of epistemic principles. It is an open question how we are to understand the notion of an epistemic principle, but it ought to be clear that, for example, ‘form one’s belief in a reliable (i.e., truth-conducive) manner’ is not an epistemic principle. The point of epistemic principles, after all, is to guide us, and yet a principle as general as this is of little use in this regard. Instead, what we seek from an epistemic principle is something much more specific, such as ‘if the religious leader tells you that p , then believe p ’. Of course, what would make this principle an *epistemic* principle is the fact that it is at least meant to be truth-conducive, but that is not to say that there is a meta-principle in play here of the more general form but only to identify what all epistemic principles have in common.

We can further emphasise this point by considering what would happen if we regarded the truth condition—an external condition *par excellence*—to be part of the epistemic framework, and thus treated the principle ‘if p is false, then don’t believe p ’ (or something in that general ballpark) as part of the epistemic principles that make up that framework. We noted above that the truth of an agent’s belief has a bearing on the overall epistemic standing of that belief—at least in the minimal sense that one can only know what one believes when what one believes is true—but that whether or not a belief is true is a framework-independent matter. We can now get a clearer grip on why this must be so by considering how any principle which formulated this demand for truth—such as the principle just formulated, ‘if p is false, then don’t believe p ’—would clearly be redundant. Indeed, like the ‘reliability’ principle just described, if a principle like this tells us anything it tells us something about the nature of epistemic principles more generally—i.e., that they are meant to be guides to enable us to form true beliefs.⁴

The upshot of all this is that however we are to think of epistemic frameworks, and the epistemic principles that make up those frameworks, we are not to think of external conditions like the reliability condition, much less the truth condition, as being part of the framework, but rather as inevitable constraints on what counts as an epistemic framework. There is thus no scope to respond to the problem we have noted for epistemic relativism by simply incorporating the relevant external conditions into the epistemic principles that make up the framework.

4. A second way of dealing with this problem could be to deny that external factors like reliability have any bearing on the overall epistemic standing of an agent's belief. The epistemic relativist might hold, for example, that it is only belief-forming processes that are held by the relevant framework to be reliable that can raise the epistemic standing of the target belief, and that whether or not the belief-forming processes are in fact reliable has no additional bearing on the overall epistemic standing of the belief.

Presumably, however, the epistemic relativist would not wish to extend this line of reasoning to the truth condition. For example, they surely would not wish to hold that whether or not a belief counted as an instance of knowledge was dependent solely on the epistemic framework and not, in part, on whether the belief in question is true. Remember that we are interested here in a specifically *epistemic* relativism which is not allied to relativism about truth. Moreover, if the epistemic relativist is not concerned with truth, then it is hard to see why we should regard the epistemic frameworks in question as genuinely *epistemic* in the first place. The trouble is, of course, that once one allows the meeting of the truth condition to be a framework-independent matter then it is hard to see on what principled basis she can object to allowing other relevant factual matters—such as whether or not an agent's belief is indeed reliably formed—as counting as both framework-independent and epistemically relevant too.

Even once we make an exception for the truth condition—an exception which seems entirely *ad hoc*—such that only this condition is framework-independent, it remains that epistemic relativism on this picture would be committed to a rather austere form of epistemic internalism. It would hold there was nothing more to knowledge than the conjunction of a belief which is both true and sufficiently epistemically supported by the lights of the relevant

epistemic framework, regardless of whether the belief so formed is indeed reliably formed. Such an extreme form of epistemic internalism is, however, incoherent.

We can illustrate this point in a rather straightforward way by noting that such a view would be subject to Gettier-style cases. Given that the truth of the relevant belief is a framework-independent matter—and thus that whether or not an agent knows is a framework-independent matter—it follows that a view of this sort will inevitably be susceptible to such cases. In particular, an agent might have excellent framework-dependent grounds in support of her belief, and that belief might be true, and yet the belief has been ‘gettiered’ and so does not count as knowledge. The problem for the view, however, is to explain what such a lack of knowledge would consist in, given that there is meant to be nothing more to the epistemic standing of the target belief than the framework-relative epistemic standing plus the obtaining of the truth condition.

In order to bring this point into sharp relief, consider the following example. Suppose that an agent forms her belief that Moses parted the Red Sea on the basis of the testimony of a religious leader, a belief-forming process which is held to supply robust epistemic support from the perspective of the relevant epistemic framework. Suppose further that Moses did indeed part the Red Sea as our agent believes. The twist in the story, however, is that our agent misheard what the religious leader said, who was actually relating an entirely different historical event. Still, the agent has strong framework-relative epistemic support for her belief and, in addition, her belief is true, and yet we clearly do not want to treat such a belief as a case of knowledge because it is just a matter of luck that her belief is true.

There are various options available to the epistemic relativist at this point. The first is to bite the bullet and argue that the agent in this case does indeed have knowledge. I take it that this kind of response is unsustainable. If epistemic relativism is committed to a theory of knowledge on which lucky true belief of this sort can count as knowledge, then that is, I suggest, a pretty decisive strike against it. Two further options are, however, worthy of a more thorough investigation. The first is to claim that reflection on the nature of the case illustrates that the agent’s belief does not enjoy an appropriately robust framework-relative epistemic support after all. The second, which marks a radical, though perhaps not unprincipled, departure from the epistemic relativist view set out above, simply concedes that there is a type of epistemic standing that is framework-independent, but nevertheless maintains that a legitimate and substantive form of epistemic relativism remains even once

we make this concession. We will take these two proposals in turn.

5. The first proposal might not seem too problematic at first pass. After all, one could reasonably argue that in this particular case the principle in play is not to merely follow what one *believes* are the words of the religious leader, but to follow what *in fact* are the words of the religious leader. With this constraint in play, then it is no longer the case that the agent in the Gettier-style example above does enjoy a robust (i.e., knowledge-supporting) epistemic standing for her belief (though she may enjoy some degree of positive epistemic standing that falls short of a knowledge-supporting epistemic standing). This would ensure that the Gettier-style case would not get the grip that it is meant to, in that there would be an explanation, in terms of the framework-relative epistemic standing of the agent, of why she lacks knowledge.

Such a response may be plausible in this particular case, but the problem with the strategy is that it will not appropriately generalise. We can express this problem in terms of a dilemma. The one horn of the dilemma is the option of allowing that the belief-forming processes in question are fallible in near-by worlds—i.e., can sometimes, in near-by worlds at least, produce false beliefs. Insofar as the relevant belief-forming process is fallible in this sense, however, then we should be able to produce a Gettier-style example. For instance, so long as the belief-forming method of forming one's beliefs in line with what the religious leader in fact states is fallible in near-by worlds, then there will, by definition, be a near-by possible world in which the agent's belief is false and yet properly formed by the lights of that epistemic framework. All we need now suppose, however, is that the proposition in question is true nonetheless, albeit in a way that is unrelated to the manner in which the belief was actually formed, and we have our Gettier-style example. The problem of accounting for why agents in such cases lack knowledge on the epistemic relativist view thus re-emerges.

Consider, for example, the following case. Suppose that forming one's beliefs on the basis of the religious leader's testimony is a reliable belief-forming process, but also a near-by worlds fallible process. Perhaps, for example, the religious leader sometimes, albeit rarely, gets it wrong and so testifies to a falsehood. All we now need to do is imagine a case in which the religious leader gets it wrong, but adapt the case to ensure that her testimony is true after all. Perhaps she inadvertently asserts *not-p* rather than *p* as she intended, and so ends up asserting a truth by mistake. Clearly, however, anyone who formed their belief in *p* on the

basis of this testimony would not thereby gain knowledge because of the epistemic luck involved.

Alternatively—and this is the other horn of dilemma—the claim might be that the relevant belief-forming processes are *all* near-by worlds infallible, in the sense that there is no near-by possible world in which the belief-forming process results in a false belief.⁵ If that were true, then one wouldn't be able to formulate a Gettier-style counterexample to the view, since such counterexamples, as we have just noted, essentially depend upon the possibility that there is a near-by possible world in which the reliable process results in a false belief. It is only if such a possibility is allowed that one could then adapt the case to construct a Gettier-style case.

The problem, however, is that it is hard to see what would entitle one to regard all of one's belief-forming processes as near-by worlds infallible. For sure, one might reasonably claim that *some* of one's belief-forming processes are near-by worlds infallible. Perhaps, for example, one might argue that there could be no near-by possible worlds in which one's religious leader would assert a falsehood. But could one seriously contend that *all* of one's belief-forming processes are near-by worlds infallible? The worry is that it seems that in order for the epistemic relativist to avoid this problem they are committed to making implausible demands on epistemic frameworks.

Moreover, even if we can imagine an epistemic framework in which all the belief-forming processes at issue are near-by worlds infallible—and supposing that we set aside what doubts we might have about the plausibility of such a framework—it still remains that it ought not to be a pre-condition on an epistemic framework that it treats all belief-forming processes in this way. But if epistemic frameworks are unable to accommodate external conditions on knowledge then it seems that the problem that we have just canvassed will resurface. At the very least, those frameworks which sanction belief-forming processes that are near-by worlds fallible will be susceptible to Gettier-style cases and, as a consequence, untenable.

6. This leaves us with our second option, which is to maintain that although the overall epistemic standing of an agent's belief could be dependent on framework-independent factors like reliability, nevertheless there is an important sense in which the epistemic standing of an

agent's belief is framework-dependent in such a way as to capture the core motivations behind epistemic relativism. The view has a certain *prima facie* plausibility. Suppose that we have a dispute in which both parties to the dispute enjoy, relative to their different epistemic frameworks, equal degrees of epistemic support for their opposing beliefs. On the conception of epistemic relativism under consideration it might nevertheless be the case that one party to the dispute has a belief which enjoys a greater degree of overall epistemic support once framework-independent factors like the reliability of the relevant belief-forming processes are taken into account. Nevertheless, the claim would be that there is still a substantive sense in which both beliefs are on an epistemic par and thus in which the disagreement is in the relevant sense epistemically faultless.

One can bring this point out by imagining our two agents locked in debate. Suppose they are debating whether Moses parted the Red Sea, with one disputant maintaining, on religious grounds, that this event took place, and the other disputant maintaining, on broadly secular grounds, that it didn't. The thought would be that while the reliability of the belief-forming processes in question—e.g., forming one's belief in the light of scripture—will have ramifications for the overall epistemic standing of these beliefs, it is precisely because of the 'external' nature of this factor that it is not the sort of consideration that either party could legitimately raise in that dialectical context.

For example, one could imagine the one party insisting that forming one's beliefs about historical events via the evidence of scripture is a reliable method of belief-formation. Clearly, though, the other party to this dispute will simply reject this consideration since she will claim, in line with her epistemic framework, that such a method of belief-formation is unreliable. The crux of the matter is that in proposing one's method of belief-formation as an epistemically legitimate method is thereby to say that by one's lights it is a reliable belief-forming method. If one didn't regard one's belief-forming method in this way, then it is hard to see why one would regard the fact that one has formed one's beliefs in this way as being specifically *epistemically* relevant to the standing of the belief, rather than being relevant in some other way (such as aesthetically relevant). But if that is right then simply to maintain, in addition to offering one's grounds in favour of the target belief, that one has formed one's belief in a reliable fashion is to add very little to the debate since it ought to be taken as given that one so regards one's method of belief-formation. Moreover, since we have a clash of epistemic frameworks here, then it is also inevitably going to be the case that one's opponent

will not accept this reliability claim. Thus, the debate is not advanced one jot by adverting to the fact that one regards one's belief-forming process as reliable. Of course, if one's belief-forming process is indeed reliable, then that will have a bearing on the overall epistemic standing of the belief on this view, but the claim is that it does not have a bearing in the specifically dialectical sense that we are primarily interested in.

I think that the epistemic relativist may be on to something here, but that the form of relativism in play—what we might term a *dialectical epistemic relativism*—is not nearly as radical as it might at first appear.

Before we can properly address this issue, a few remarks are in order regarding the epistemic significance of disagreement. After all, one might hold that the mere fact that someone disagrees with you could have ramifications for the epistemic standing of your belief. For example, one might hold that this constitutes a standing defeater as regards the epistemic standing of your belief in the target proposition. If this is right, then even a dialectical epistemic relativism would have a problem maintaining that the two opposing beliefs in question are on an epistemic par since, if anything, the presence of such disagreement would have the effect of undermining the positive framework-relative epistemic standing of both beliefs. Dialectical epistemic relativism would then provide support for a limited form of scepticism, thereby depriving the view of much of its interest.⁶

That said, I think we can safely ignore this issue, since even those who think that disagreement is epistemically significant in something like this fashion—such as Richard Feldman (2006)—put some relevant constraints on the type of disagreement which is significant (such as that the other disputant must be an 'epistemic peer'). With these constraints in play, the dialectical epistemic relativist would almost certainly be in a position to maintain her thesis that the two opposing beliefs in question are on an epistemic par on account of how the disagreement in question fails to meet the relevant conditions (e.g., one has good framework-dependent grounds for regarding the other disputant as not being an epistemic peer). With this *caveat* in mind, let us now consider just how radical dialectical epistemic relativism is.⁷

7. One reason why one might regard dialectical epistemic relativism as a radical proposal is that it might be thought to offer a mandate for dogmatism, in the sense that one's epistemic

framework could be entirely—and, crucially, *legitimately*—‘closed’ such that it will allow one to discount all counter-arguments and counterevidence that those from different epistemic frameworks might offer. For instance, one might conceive of a religious framework in which any counterevidence is treated as inherently dubious. So, for example, if someone were to produce archaeological evidence which appears to suggest that the Red Sea could not have been parted at the historical juncture in question, then an epistemic principle within the epistemic framework would kick-in to suggest that such counterevidence should be regarded as simply a test of faith.

Now I don’t doubt that a principle of this sort may in fact be part of a particular worldview, but notice that on at least one way of reading this principle it isn’t obviously an *epistemic* principle at all, by anyone lights. That is, if the point of the principle is explicitly to *evade* the truth, then it clearly isn’t an epistemic principle since a minimal requirement of an epistemic principle is surely that it purports to assist one in achieving one’s epistemic goals, like gaining true beliefs. So understood, however, this principle is explicitly designed to *frustrate* one’s epistemic goals.⁸

That said, it may seem as if there are epistemic principles available that would licence such apparent dogmatism. After all, one might, say, regard scripture as a highly reliable source of truths about certain subject matters and, if one did so regard scripture, it would seem to be a natural consequence that one should thereby regard any evidence which seemed to conflict with scripture—such as that the Red Sea was not parted—as being inherently suspect. (Indeed, scripture might even explicitly dictate that one should be suspicious of any evidence that contradicted the testimony of scripture). There is no obvious reason why we should regard the agent in this case as being unconcerned with the truth, and thus one cannot evade the charge of dogmatism here simply by noting that some apparent epistemic principles are not really epistemic principles at all.

I take it that what the defender of such a view has in mind is something like the following argument:

- P1 *S* has excellent framework-relative grounds for believing *p*.
- P2 *S* competently deduces from *p* that any putative evidence against *p* is misleading, thereby coming to believe that any putative evidence against *p* is misleading while retaining her belief in *p*.⁹
- C1 *S* has excellent framework-relative grounds for believing that any putative evidence against *p* is misleading.

This seems like a perfectly good form of reasoning, but if it is then it appears that dogmatism is perfectly epistemically respectable—indeed, it seems to be positively *licensed* in certain cases.

There are a few things that we need to note about this argument. The first is that if it does license dogmatism, then it does so regardless of whether epistemic relativism is true. That is, one could drop the reference to the grounds in question here being framework-relative in P1 and C1 without this in any way undermining the argument—it would still be the case that the argument would support the conclusion that one has excellent grounds to regard any evidence against one’s target belief as misleading.

Relatedly, if this argument holds then it can be made use of by *any* epistemic framework—insofar as that framework supplies strong grounds for believing a proposition then it is thereby in a position to supply strong grounds for believing that any putative evidence against that proposition is misleading. So if this form of reasoning is deemed acceptable, then the problem it poses is entirely general, and not specific to epistemic frameworks that might antecedently be regarded as ‘dogmatic’.

More importantly for our purposes, the third thing to note about this argument is that it doesn’t yet entail dogmatism, but merely implies it. That is, strictly speaking, there is a further inferential step in play here, in the ballpark of C2:

C2 *S* is entitled to disregard any putative evidence against *p*.

Even if one accepts the reasoning up to C1—and I think there is good independent reason to be sceptical in this regard—one might still resist this motivation for dogmatism if one could block the inferential move from C1 to C2.¹⁰ Can such a move be blocked?

I think so. In order to see this, one only needs to note that all C1 motivates is in fact the weaker C2*:

C2* *S* is entitled to be suspicious of any putative evidence against *p*.

That is, C1 simply captures the idea that if you do indeed have good reason for believing a proposition, then you thereby have good reason for thinking that any putative counterevidence should be treated with caution. There is a big difference, however, between treating putative counterevidence with caution and disregarding it out-of-hand in advance, as

C2 demands. Indeed, treating putative counterevidence with caution is entirely compatible with coming to see that such counterevidence is *bona fide*, and so counts against the target belief. C2* thus does not license dogmatism, unlike C2.

So even if the reasoning from P1-C1 is allowed to stand, it still does not follow that dogmatism is thereby validated, since the crucial further inferential step to C2 can be blocked.

8. It is thus far from clear that dialectical epistemic relativism does lead to dogmatism. On the one hand, we have seen that there is no reason for thinking that any principle which explicitly licensed dogmatism would count as an *epistemic* principle in the first place. On the other hand, what general arguments there are for dogmatism are not specific to epistemic relativism and do not, in any case, have any force on closer inspection.

In one sense, this is good news for the dialectical epistemic relativist, since it means that the view does not have one unpleasant consequence that it is often held to have. On the other hand, however, this could also be regarded as bad news, in the sense that it suggests that dialectical epistemic relativism is not nearly as radical a position as it might at first have appeared. For without the dogmatism there is now nothing to ‘insulate’ epistemic frameworks from the influence of judgements made by other epistemic frameworks. This point is especially pertinent given that we remind ourselves that the dialectical version of epistemic relativism presently under consideration is merely an epistemic relativism about an aspect of an agent’s overall epistemic standing, and is not a view about epistemic standing *simpliciter*. So while dialectical epistemic relativism allows that there is a limited sense in which the epistemic standing of two opposing beliefs could be on a par, this thesis is compatible both with the thesis that the overall epistemic standing of the two beliefs could be different and with the thesis that there is no party to this dispute who has a standing epistemic entitlement to completely disregard the views of the other (and so it is also compatible with the rejection of the claim that all epistemic frameworks are as good as each other). But if *that* is right, then much of what was thought to be troubling about epistemic relativism starts to disappear. Indeed, the view that emerges seems entirely palatable.

Consider again the debate between the religious believer and the secular believer regarding the proposition that Moses parted the Red Sea that we looked at earlier. What we

were looking for was a conception of epistemic relativism which could capture the idea of faultless disagreement in this regard but which was not committed to a form of relativism about truth (such that there was a fact of the matter at issue in the debate). In a minimal sense, dialectical epistemic relativism does indeed capture the faultless disagreement motivation for relativism, since it is entirely possible that each of the opposing beliefs could enjoy the same degree of framework-relative epistemic support. Nevertheless, we saw that in order to make the view plausible it was essential to distinguish between a belief's overall epistemic support and its framework-relative epistemic support. With this distinction in mind, it does not follow from the fact that these two opposing beliefs have an equal degree of framework-relative epistemic support that they enjoy an equal degree of epistemic support *simpliciter*. It could be, for example, that only the religious believer is forming her belief in a reliable fashion. In this sense, then, we don't ensure the more robust conception of faultless disagreement.

Equally, we also saw that a dialectical epistemic relativism does not lend support to what we might regard as a natural consequence of a genuine form of relativism, in that it does not sanction dogmatism, at least not in any robust form. The religious believer who enjoys excellent framework-relative grounds for her belief that Moses parted the Red Sea is entitled to be suspicious of any counterevidence offered by the proponent of the opposing belief (who operates within a different epistemic framework), but she is not entitled to dismiss such counterevidence out-of-hand. At most, she is entitled to be suspicious of such counterevidence (though I think even this claim will require qualification in certain ways), but we can surely abide a modest dogmatism of this sort. Indeed, as we have seen, even a non-relativist account of epistemic standing will license dogmatism of *this* sort, so it can hardly be thought to be a peculiarity of the epistemic relativist position that it generates this result.

Indeed, once we recognise that even the holders of well-grounded beliefs by epistemic relativist lights need to be open to counterevidence, including counterevidence offered by those who inhabit different epistemic frameworks, then it becomes clear even the epistemic relativist must allow that there is no epistemic justification for a 'closed' epistemic framework, one that will not countenance engagement with other epistemic frameworks. I don't doubt that it is a simple sociological truth that our religious believer and non-believer may give up on a genuine epistemic engagement fairly quickly, either by ignoring the other person's viewpoint or by resorting to engagement of a different sort (e.g., name calling).

Moreover, there are practical reasons why an epistemic engagement with epistemic frameworks which have very different grounding epistemic principles may be counterproductive. But the crucial point is that by the lights of a dialectical epistemic relativism there is no *epistemological* basis for ignoring the opposing claims made by proponents of different epistemic frameworks.

9. So once one disentangles epistemic relativism from truth relativism, then the only plausible rendering of the view available is a dialectical epistemic relativism of the form just described. But a position of this sort, while capturing the key motivation for relativism—at last in a rather minimal fashion—does so in such a way that the resulting view seems unremarkable, even harmless (which is not of course to say that the view is *correct*). Thus, a specifically epistemic relativism, once brought forth for closer scrutiny and suitably refined so as to make it coherent, is not the philosophical bogey-man that it may first appear.^{11,12}

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NOTES

¹ There has been quite a lot of discussion of relativism about truth in the recent literature. For some of the more prominent discussions, see Lynch (2004), B. Williams (2004), Blackburn (2005), and Boghossian (2006). (See also the recent discussions of the ‘new’ truth relativism—a much more modest thesis than standard forms of truth relativism, though a relativist view nonetheless—such as Kölbel (2002; 2003), MacFarlane (2003; 2005a; 2005b), Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson (2004), Richard (2004), and Brogaard (*forthcoming*)). There has been much less discussion of a specifically epistemic relativism. For two key exceptions in this regard, see Boghossian (2006) and M. Williams (2007). For a response to Boghossian’s treatment of epistemic relativism, see Kalderon (2006).

² Note that Williams discusses “epistemic systems” rather than epistemic frameworks. Since there is no difference in what these phrases mean for our purposes here, I have substituted my terminology for his.

³ Interestingly, there is a way of reading Pyrrhonian scepticism along epistemic relativist lines. For more discussion of this interpretation, see Gaukroger (1995).

⁴ Note that I am not assuming epistemic value monism here—i.e., the thesis that there is only one ultimate epistemic value, in this case truth (or true belief). The point is only that the goal of truth is essential to any properly epistemic framework, not that this is the only epistemic goal. For more on the debate between epistemic value monists and pluralists, see David (2005) and Kvanvig (2005).

⁵ It should be clear, I hope, that a process which is near-by worlds infallible is not infallible *simpliciter* (i.e., infallible across all worlds).

⁶ See Kelly (2005, §1) for a good description of how treating all disagreement as epistemically significant in this way can licence a kind of scepticism (a scepticism which, interestingly, parallels a key Pyrrhonian argument for scepticism). For an endorsement of the idea that reflection on the epistemology of disagreement can license a kind of scepticism, see Frances (2005) and Feldman (2006).

⁷ There is a growing debate on the epistemology of disagreement. See especially, Frances (2005), Kelly (2005), Feldman (2006), Christiansen (*forthcoming*) and Elga (*forthcoming*).

⁸ I think that a failure to recognise this point substantially undermines Boghossian's (2006, *passim*) treatment of the debate between Galileo—as the proponent of a 'new' scientific worldview—and Cardinal Belarmine—who represents the religious worldview. In short, he characterises Cardinal Belarmine's refusal to look down Galileo's telescope as both dogmatic, in that it reflects a fundamental disinterest in the truth, and also the product of some sort of epistemic principle that forms part of his epistemic framework. But what epistemic principle could it be that licenses dogmatism of this sort? It seems, ultimately, that what Boghossian has in mind is merely a religious principle rather than an epistemic-cum-religious principle. Actually, if one examines more closely the historical facts underlying this case, it is more plausible to suppose that Cardinal Belarmine is not being dogmatic at all. To make this point vivid, suppose that Cardinal Belarmine had looked down that telescope—why should what he sees bring him to change his beliefs in a radical way? For one thing, he is unfamiliar with the technology, so it is hardly as if he can make an 'observation' here, in the usual sense of an 'observation'. Indeed, to the untutored eye, all that telescopes would offer the observer at this early stage in the development of this new technology is something akin to smudges, but what moral should one draw from the fact that a new technology provides you with smudges that purport to be of the heavens? I am grateful to Martin Kusch for discussion on this point.

⁹ Note the parallels between how I have formulated P2 and the formulation of the (single-premise) 'closure' principle for knowledge offered by Williamson (2000, 117; cf. Hawthorne 2005).

¹⁰ In particular, one might think that inferences of this general sort fall under a category of inferences where the epistemic support for the premises does not 'transmit' across the relevant competent deduction to be epistemic support for the conclusion. For a key recent discussion of this claim, see the exchange between Wright (2004) and Davies (2004). Since, as we will now see, the supposed dogmatic conclusion of this argument can be avoided even if one allows the inference from P1 to C1, I will let this point pass.

¹¹ Although I have not the space to explore this issue further here, I think that understanding why a dialectical epistemic relativism is such a benign epistemological thesis is key to recognising why the quite common reading of some of Wittgenstein's remarks in his later writings—especially those concerning "hinge" propositions in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969)—as expressing a rather radical form of relativism are misguided. Most recently, this claim has been made by Boghossian (2006, *passim*). For a spirited defence of Wittgenstein in this regard, see Williams (2007). For more on Wittgenstein's epistemology, see Pritchard (*forthcoming*).

¹² Thanks to Brit Brogaard, Adrian Haddock, Mark Eli Kalderon, Martin Kusch and Michael Williams. This paper was written, in part, while in receipt of an AHRC research leave award. It also forms part of the research output for the AHRC-funded project entitled 'The Value of Knowledge' which is based at the University of Stirling.