

# SUBJECTIVISM IS POINTLESS

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ABSTRACT: Epistemic objectivists and epistemic subjectivists might agree that inquiry pursues epistemic virtues (truth, knowledge, reason, or rationality) while disagreeing over their objectivity. Objectivists will evaluate this disagreement in terms of the epistemic virtues objectively construed, while subjectivists will not. This raises a rhetorical problem: objectivists will fault subjectivism for lacking some objective epistemic virtue, whereas subjectivists, by rejecting objectivity, won't see this as a fault. My goal is to end this impasse by offering a new solution to the rhetorical problem. My strategy is to identify a common-ground virtue valuable to objectivists and subjectivists but unavailable to subjectivism. The virtue is usefulness. Subjectivism can be useful only if it relies upon the very objective epistemic virtues it rejects; so it cannot be useful. Whether or not subjectivism has any objective epistemic virtues, it may be rejected as pointless.

KEYWORDS: subjectivism, objectivism, epistemic virtues, usefulness

Inquiry is often conceived as the pursuit of so-called *epistemic virtues*, such as *truth*, *knowledge*, *reason*, or *rationality*. Those accepting this conception can still dispute whether, or to what extent, these epistemic virtues are *objective*. I will present a new challenge for the global *subjectivist* view which fully dispenses with objectivity.

This might seem to be an easy target. After all, there have long been influential arguments purporting to show that global subjectivism is self-refuting or otherwise incoherent. But these arguments face a persistent rhetorical problem: the arguments usually claim that fully dispensing with objectivity violates some *objective* epistemic virtue, and so can merely preach to the choir.

My goal is to solve this rhetorical problem by offering a new challenge for subjectivism which avoids it. Subjectivism is often motivated by its promise to be especially useful for some valuable intellectual, philosophical, political, social, or ethical goal. As Boghossian<sup>1</sup> approvingly reports Hacking:<sup>2, 3</sup>

According to Hacking, the interest [to expose social construction wherever it exists] derives from the following simple thought. If some fact belongs to a species of natural fact, then we are simply stuck with facts of that kind.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> To be fair, Boghossian qualifies his endorsement of Hacking. But the qualifications are, in the present context, irrelevant.

However, if facts of the relevant kind are in fact social constructions, then they need not have obtained had we not wished them to obtain. Thus, exposure of social construction is potentially liberating: a kind of fact that had come to seem inevitable would have been unmasked (in Hacking's apt term) as a contingent social development.

But the new challenge is that subjectivism cannot deliver on its promised usefulness because it is useful only if it relies upon the very objective epistemic virtues it rejects. Even those unmoved by subjectivism's lack of objective epistemic virtue should reject it as pointless.

This paper proceeds as follows. I first clarify subjectivism and its dispute with objectivism (§1). Then I lay out the rhetorical problem, focusing on Kalderon's<sup>4</sup> application of it to Boghossian's<sup>5</sup> critiques of subjectivism (§2). Next, I outline my solution: I propose that subjectivism be evaluated in terms of its usefulness as a tool for advancing some purpose; but I show that subjectivism is pointless because it cannot achieve any such purpose (§3). I then apply this strategy to a case study (§4) and argue that no serious obstacle prevents generalizing it (§5). I conclude that subjectivism should be rejected as pointless (§6).

## 1. Subjectivism vs. objectivism

Recently, there has been great interest in whether subjectivity can or should be localized to specific domains. This usually takes the form of construing epistemic virtues, when localized to a specific domain, as somehow relative or socially constructed. A few examples of such applications include: *future contingents*<sup>6</sup>; *epistemic modality*<sup>7</sup>; *matters of taste* and *faultless disagreement*<sup>8</sup>; and *moral relativism*.<sup>9, 10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Eli Kalderon, "Epistemic Relativism," *The Philosophical Review* 118, 2 (2009): 225-40.

<sup>5</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*.

<sup>6</sup> John MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003): 321-36 and "Truth in the Garden of Forking Paths," in *Relative Truth*, ed. Max Kölbel and Manuel García-Carpintero (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81-102.

<sup>7</sup> John MacFarlane, "Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive," in *Epistemic Modality*, ed. Brian Weatherson and Andy Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Max Kölbel, "Faultless Disagreement," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003): 53-73.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert Harman, *Explaining Value: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The literature on relativism is voluminous: see Max Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 2002), John MacFarlane, "Making Sense of Relative Truth," *Proceedings of*

*Local* applications of relativism needn't entail *global* relativism. Indeed, almost none of the current discussion on relativism is focused on its global form. In any case, my focus will not be on these localized relativisms.

Nevertheless, there is a venerable tradition which appears to endorse global relativism. *Subjectivism*, as I'll call it, rejects the objectivity of any epistemic virtue. Thus, truth or knowledge is merely subjective: relative to a perspective or socially constructed to serve certain interests, with no perspective or set of interests objectively better than the rest. While subjectivism can be traced back to Protagoras, its recent forms owe more to either Nietzsche<sup>11</sup> and his intellectual descendants or pragmatists like Goodman,<sup>12</sup> Putnam,<sup>13</sup> and Rorty.<sup>14</sup>

Opposed to subjectivism is *objectivism*, which allows for the objectivity of some epistemic virtues. Thus, while objectivists might disagree over which truths or knowledge is objective, they agree that some are. Because such truth or knowledge is *objective*, its being epistemically virtuous is strictly independent of any perspective or set of interests. Objectivism appears to be the standard view within analytic philosophy and is even accepted by most of the localized relativists mentioned above.

The dispute over objectivism and subjectivism is not the same as the dispute over whether epistemic virtues are merely instrumental.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it may be supposed that subjectivists and objectivists alike agree that our interest in epistemic virtues is instrumental in that it depends on our having the goal of proportioning our beliefs to the evidence. But even then subjectivists and objectivists will still disagree, given such a goal, over whether the correct proportioning depends on *other* goals. On the one hand, subjectivism will assert that the proportioning always depends on other goals: even if you and I share the goal of proportioning our beliefs to the evidence, which way I ought to do it might differ from which way you ought to do it because of some difference in our perspectives or interests. On the other hand, objectivists will deny that the proportioning always depends on other goals: even if you and I share the goal of

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*the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 321-39, and Crispin Wright, "Relativism about Truth Itself: Haphazard Thoughts about the Very Idea," in *Relative Truth*, ed. García-Carpintero and Kölbel, 157-186, as well as the papers in *Relative Truth*, ed. García-Carpintero and Kölbel and Steven D. Hales, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (1873).

<sup>12</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Thomas Kelly, "Epistemic Rationality as Instrumental Rationality: A Critique," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66, 3 (2003): 612-40.

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proportioning our beliefs to the evidence, at least sometimes there will be a way both of us ought to do it regardless of any difference in our perspectives or interests.

Nor is the dispute between subjectivists and objectivists over whether *there are* epistemic virtues. Instead, it is a dispute over whether there are *objective* epistemic virtues. Fidelity to this suggests that unqualified epistemic virtue terms, such as 'truth' or 'knowledge,' are ambiguous between objective and subjective readings. Disambiguating explicitly would, however, bloat the prose. So I adopt the convention of using 'truth,' 'knowledge,' etc., to mean, respectively, *objective* truth, *objective* knowledge, etc. This might misleadingly suggest that the dispute between objectivism and subjectivism is over whether there are any epistemic virtues. So I hereby explicitly disavow this suggestion.

## 2. The rhetorical problem

The rhetorical problem emerges by considering how objectivists and subjectivists disagree about how to resolve their dispute. The problem is perhaps best illustrated by focusing on one of its particular manifestations.

Boghossian's *Fear of Knowledge* is a prominent sustained criticism of subjectivism and related views. Boghossian's criticisms are primarily concerned with showing subjectivism to be objectively false or irrational (if even intelligible). These criticisms tend to rely upon a distinction and an assumption. The distinction is between the (*causal*) *sources* of one's conviction in a view and the view's *status* as *true* or *false*, or *rational* or *irrational*. The assumption is that, however important the sources of one's conviction in a view might be, it is only in special cases that they bear on whether the view itself is true or false, or rational or irrational.<sup>16</sup>

Relying on the distinction and the assumption invites the rhetorical problem. Kalderon neatly captures how, in particular, it confronts objectivist criticisms of subjectivism (such as Boghossian's):

... [T]he source of relativistic conviction is relevant to the rhetorical effectiveness of undermining the arguments advanced in its favor. If the source of relativistic conviction does not lie with the cogency of these arguments, then undermining them would leave relativistic conviction untouched.<sup>17</sup>

Kalderon goes on to speculate about this source:

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<sup>16</sup> One example of such a case is the family of views which take the reliability of the (*causal*) *methods* by which a belief is formed to be relevant to whether that belief is knowledge.

<sup>17</sup> Kalderon, "Epistemic Relativism," 238.

Let me dogmatically register my belief that a lot of relativist conviction is animated by the thought that the authority of reason, and its attendant rhetoric of objectivity, is a mask for the interests of power.<sup>18</sup>

To be clear, Kalderon's speculated source of subjectivist conviction is almost certainly not the source of recent interest in the localized relativisms mentioned earlier. But committed subjectivists often write as if they are motivated by Kalderon's speculated reasons.<sup>19</sup> As Kalderon suggests, insensitivity to the source of conviction in subjectivism partly explains why subjectivists are unlikely to be persuaded by objectivist critiques:

Suppose, then, that relativism is a reaction to the thought that the authority of reason, and the attendant rhetoric of objectivity, is a mask for the interests of power. How might such a relativist react to *Fear of Knowledge*? Even if Boghossian's arguments succeeded perfectly on their own terms, the ambitions of *Fear of Knowledge* could not be met. A relativist motivated by the thought that the authority of reason is a mask for the interests of power will not be moved by the case put forward in *Fear of Knowledge* – *Fear of Knowledge* simply does not address that fear. Even if *Fear of Knowledge* did indeed address this relativist's arguments, since these arguments aren't the source of relativistic conviction but their expression, demonstrating their failure would fail to persuade. Indeed, in the grips of the hermeneutics of suspicion, rational counterargument could only seem like power's illicit attempt to resist its subversion by relativistic countermeasures.<sup>20</sup>

Here we have a particular instance of a general rhetorical problem:

Objectivists will evaluate the dispute in terms of epistemic virtues *objectively* construed. The dispute is resolved if one of the views is shown to have the right *objective* epistemic virtues. For example, objectivists often argue that subjectivism cannot be rationally believed since it is self-refuting.<sup>21</sup>

While subjectivists needn't reject the appeal to epistemic virtue itself, they will reject the appeal to *objectivity*. For them, the dispute is resolved if one of the

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<sup>18</sup> Kalderon, "Epistemic Relativism," 238.

<sup>19</sup> Ample first- and second-hand anecdotal evidence supports Kalderon's claim. Subjectivists often say things like "Objectivity and reason are used to subjugate the disenfranchised!" Also, they often point out that deductively valid arguments can be given for conclusions which either might explicitly disenfranchise some group (e.g. by stating their moral inferiority) or else might somehow be used as a license to subjugate others.

<sup>20</sup> Kalderon, "Epistemic Relativism," 238-39.

<sup>21</sup> There are many versions of this self-refutation objection, including Nagel's and Boghossian's (Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*). Despite its infamy, its efficacy has been challenged: c.f. Max Kölbel, "Global Relativism and Self-Refutation," in *The Blackwell Companion to Relativism*, 11-30.

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views is shown to have the right *subjective* virtues. For example, they might argue that subjectivism has the right epistemic virtues *relative to* some perspective or interests, or that it is *useful* for furthering some special goal.

This raises the general rhetorical problem. Objectivists and subjectivists do not merely disagree over objectivity; they disagree over how to resolve their disagreement. So even if a disputant might resolve the dispute to her own satisfaction, she will be unable to persuade her opponent.

In particular, this renders objectivist critiques ineffective because they invoke objectivity which subjectivists reject. These critiques, far from exposing problems with subjectivism, only reinforce subjectivist suspicions of objectivity.

One might pessimistically conclude that the rhetorical problem shows that the debate between subjectivists and objectivists ends in impasse. For how could there be a sensible debate, if one side rejects what the other side regards as the only possible terms in which such a debate can be carried out?

### 3. A new solution

Some might be willing to live with this impasse. After all, some claim that even if we cannot refute the external world skeptic to her satisfaction, we can refute her to our own satisfaction. Even if an analogous strategy applies here, it is merely a way to cope with impasse, not to avoid it.

But the impasse is avoidable by challenging subjectivism in a way immune to the rhetorical problem. The new challenge I will present is that subjectivism itself lacks a virtue valuable to subjectivists and objectivists alike: it lacks *usefulness*. Subjectivism is *pointless* because it can be useful only if it relies upon the very objective epistemic virtues it rejects.

This can be construed as arguing directly that subjectivism lacks some objective epistemic virtue: from the premises that subjectivism is pointless and that pointless views lack some objective epistemic virtue, infer that subjectivism itself lacks that same virtue. On this construal, my criticism is perhaps a new twist on the old self-refutation objection.

While I have no complaints with this construal *per se*, it is not the only construal possible, nor is it the construal I wish to emphasize here. This construal, after all, succumbs to the rhetorical problem.

The novel construal I wish to emphasize avoids the rhetorical problem. On it, the challenge for subjectivism is to vindicate its promised virtue of usefulness without relying on the objective epistemic virtues it rejects. This, I claim, cannot be done. The criticism, then, is *not* that subjectivism lacks the objective epistemic virtues it rejects, but that it is pointless. That solves the rhetorical problem I set

out to solve, as long as objectivists and subjectivists alike can agree that pointlessness is a vice.

The new challenge assumes that usefulness, or *utility*, is a virtue *both* subjectivists and objectivists alike might use to evaluate subjectivism. But ‘utility’ is a loaded term with many connotations. I do not assume any view about what utility is (e.g. I do not assume, with the hedonist, that utility is pleasure). Nor do I suggest that there is one notion of utility common to many or all people or purposes. Instead, utility is best understood by analogy with *tools*.<sup>22</sup> For a tool is precisely the sort of thing that can have a use, and so can be evaluated in terms of how well it achieves that use, whatever it might be.

Tools are often *designed* to achieve some use. Hammers are designed to hammer nails into wood. But something designed for another purpose can serve the same use: a screwdriver’s handle can hammer nails. Even something (presumably) not designed at all can hammer nails: I once used a rock to do so.

Tools can be more or less *effective* for achieving their use. A hammer’s effectiveness can depend upon how well it is made or maintained: a broken hammer is useless for hammering. But also a hammer’s effectiveness can depend upon the skill of its wielder: a well-made, well-maintained hammer is useless in the hands of the unskilled. And it can matter who evaluates its effectiveness: a master carpenter has stricter standards than others.

Tools can also be *abused* or *misused*. One might abuse a hammer by using it violently to assault someone. This abuse can, but needn’t, be a misuse: the assault might be to hammer a nail into a person. One might also misuse a hammer without abusing it: the novice might hammer a nail by holding the head of the hammer and hammering the nail with the handle.

Ideas, beliefs, or entire belief systems can also be tools. For example, some terminally ill patients use ideas or beliefs as tools to help them cope with their mortality. Or, one might be persuaded to shoot the one to save the ten, if one becomes convinced that it is a consequence of her implicit utilitarian ideals. And ideas and beliefs, like hammers, can be abused or misused: followers of one religion might (ab- or mis-)use their beliefs to justify harming followers of another.

A tool’s usefulness is proportional to how well or poorly it advances its purpose. Subjectivists should agree that a chair can be useful for sitting (even if they doubt the chair objectively exists) and that the concept *addition* is useful for paying rent (even if they doubt that mathematics is objective). And subjectivists should agree that (usually) a trombone (but not a chair) is useless, or pointless, vis-

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<sup>22</sup> C.f. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xxiii.

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à-vis the goal of sitting and that the concept *bachelor* (but not *addition*) is useless, or pointless, vis-à-vis the goal of calculating one's taxes.

What's more, a tool is valuable in accord with how well or poorly it advances its purpose. We value a chair (but not a trombone) for sitting, but value a trombone (but not a chair) for playing music. And we value the concept *addition* (but not *bachelor*) for calculating taxes, but value the concept *bachelor* (but not *addition*) for its associated lifestyle.

Subjectivists and objectivists alike should acknowledge that, relative to a given purpose: (i) a tool (whether an object, belief, or idea) can be more or less useful, or pointless, for furthering it; (ii) that a tool's utility can be evaluated as such; and (iii) that the tool is valued or devalued accordingly.

My proposed strategy for replying to the rhetorical problem is to treat subjectivism itself as a tool. Thus, we may evaluate whether subjectivism is a useful or pointless tool for achieving some goal, and value or devalue it according to how well or poorly it serves that goal.

This strategy provides common-ground between objectivists and subjectivists. For tools are not directly evaluated in terms of objective epistemic virtues. A hammer cannot be true or false, rational or irrational (even if its *uses* can). But a hammer can be evaluated by how well or poorly it achieves its purpose. So it is doubly beneficial to treat subjectivism as a tool: (i) it discourages evaluating subjectivism in terms usually inappropriate for tools (viz. truth and rationality) while (ii) encourages evaluating it in terms appropriate for tools (viz. utility).

One might object that the evaluation of a tool is not an objective matter (e.g. that it is relative to this or that).

But that is to reject the *objectivity* of evaluating a tool, not the mere *possibility* of doing so. My strategy needs only the possibility, not its objectivity.

This possibility, I believe, should be unobjectionable not merely to objectivists, but also to many (if not all) subjectivists – especially those who associate their subjectivism with some sort of *pragmatism*.<sup>23</sup> After all, unless subjectivism itself is treated as a tool, it wouldn't make sense defending it for being useful, or somehow pragmatically virtuous.

Here, then, is an outline of my criticism of subjectivism. Treat subjectivism like a tool. Then it ought to be possible to evaluate its usefulness, when it is not abused or misused. But I will show how subjectivism cannot deliver on any goal it promises to serve without invoking objectivity. Because subjectivists reject objectivity, subjectivism is rendered useless. Just as a broken hammer is pointless

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<sup>23</sup> C.f. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, for one.



vis-à-vis the goal of hammering nails, so too subjectivism is pointless vis-à-vis any goal it promises to serve.

#### 4. A case study

If subjectivism is like a tool, what use might it serve? The answer seems to be that subjectivism can be useful for supporting *coups* against objective epistemic virtues: it can be used to *debunk* truth or rationality.

But it is unobvious what use there is in debunking objective epistemic virtues. There appears to be no *intrinsic* disvalue in them. On the contrary, objective epistemic virtues, such as truth and rationality, strike us as valuable: at first glance, we sometimes do value having *true* beliefs, or beliefs *justified* by the available *evidence*.

This suggests that subjectivism is useful only if the usefulness of debunking objective epistemic virtues derives from *other* useful purposes.

One such purpose, if Kalderon is right, is to prevent the use of objective epistemic virtues to subjugate others. Kalderon plausibly speculates “that [subjectivism] is a reaction to the thought that the authority of reason, and the attendant rhetoric of objectivity, is a mask for the interests of power.”<sup>24</sup> To elaborate, some have claimed that truth and rationality can be tools used to subjugate others. Often subjugation is shameful or horrific. So it is useful to guard against it. Subjectivism offers a way: it supports coups against the authority of the objective epistemic virtues the subjugator invokes by denying that they are any more objectively valid than those of the subjugated.<sup>25</sup>

But there is an intuitive (but perhaps quasi-technical) sense in which it is pathological to take there to be intrinsic value in a coup. This is because not all subjugation is oppressive. For example, a parent might subjugate a child by preventing her from recklessly running on the sidewalk, lowering the risk of getting hit by a car. Even subjectivists should doubt the utility of overthrowing this parent as the child’s tyrannical oppressor.

We must therefore distinguish *principled* coups, which are directed toward some point or purpose, from *pathological* coups, which are not. The value of a coup derives from the value of the point (if any) to which it is directed. A pathological coup is pointless, hence not valuable. A principled coup can be valuable, if its purpose is useful (e.g. protecting the child). Thus, subjectivism itself can be useful if it supports a valuable, principled coup.

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<sup>24</sup> Kalderon, “Epistemic Relativism,” 238.

<sup>25</sup> A nice question is what could possibly ground the usefulness of mitigating this oppression, if not objective moral facts of the very sort rejected by subjectivists.

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Natural examples of principled coups target “racist sciences” (e.g. phrenology). But I won’t focus on them since their targets are pseudoscience. They are bad science by scientific standards. Invoking subjectivism to discredit them is gratuitous, and so does not provide subjectivism with a distinctive use.

A better example is discussed by Johnson:<sup>26</sup> a conflict between archeologists and Native American tribes over whether to allow scientific analysis of human remains found in tribal lands. Archeologists motivate the research by saying it would illuminate how humans evolved. But this motivation conflicts with the tribes’ creationist beliefs about their origins.

As Boghossian notes, the tribal/archeological conflict can seem to engender subjectivist sentiments:<sup>27</sup>

The [*New York Times*] went on to note that many archeologists, torn between their commitment to scientific method and their appreciation for native culture, “have been driven close to a postmodern relativism in which science is just one more belief system.” Roger Anyon, a British archeologist who has worked for the Zuni people, was quoted as saying:

Science is just one of many ways of knowing the world. [The Zunis’ world view is] just as valid as the archeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about.<sup>28</sup>

But finding subjectivist sentiments here requires care. After all, there is an anemic reading of “just as valid” which has Anyon claiming merely that the Zunis’ world view is no less deserving of respect than the archeological viewpoint. Objectivists can, of course, agree with this.

Even so, the anemic reading is not pointless: acknowledging it explicitly can help motivate corrective policies in response to the oppression of Native Americans, whether the point of these policies is: *remunerative* (to compensate tribes for past oppression); *retributive* (to punish the tribes’ oppressors); *empowering* (to respect or tolerate the tribes’ oppressed beliefs); or *preventative* (to forestall future oppression).

But, presumably, subjectivists see objectivity as an obstacle to these corrective policies. They often speak as if objective epistemic virtues were wielded as “imperialistic” tools either to help cause the oppression or to stall attempts to

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<sup>26</sup> George Johnson, “Indian Tribes’ Creationists Thwart Archeologists,” *The New York Times* (1996).

<sup>27</sup> Some believe, controversially, that creationism is apart from science and has a different epistemology than it. This view is particularly amenable to subjectivism.

<sup>28</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 2.

rectify it. Pursuing corrective policies while clinging to objectivity is to undermine them by clinging to what caused or sustained the oppression.

Here subjectivism purports to show its distinctive use. Were the archeological viewpoint no more *objectively* epistemically virtuous than the Zunis' world view, then it could not be wielded against the corrective policies. Subjectivism's distinctive use is to remove this (alleged) objectivist obstacle to our corrective policies by underwriting a coup against objectivity itself.

Since it is uncontroversial that Native Americans were oppressed, one might overlook the general need to substantiate the claims of oppression on which a coup is based.

But that would be a profound mistake. After all, the mere *allegation* of oppression is insufficient to make a coup principled. I might allege that the Obama administration oppressed me by orchestrating a vast conspiracy to stunt my career. Were my allegation sincere, it would be baseless slander. The allegation is pathological, and so does not sustain a principled coup. To reject the general need to substantiate allegations of oppression would be to treat allegations of Native American oppression on a par with my slanderous allegations of oppression by the Obama administration.

Avoiding this intolerable result requires, once again, a distinction between pathological and principled allegations. Specifically, avoiding it requires saying more about why allegations of my oppression pale in comparison to those of Native Americans' than merely reiterating that they do.

Objectivists can do so. They can say that my allegation is pathological because it is false, or unsupported by the evidence, and that a principled coup cannot be based upon pathological allegations.

But subjectivists cannot say this. Since they reject objectivity, they cannot invoke the facts or the evidence to evaluate allegations. So they cannot distinguish between pathological or principled allegations. This deprives them of any corresponding distinction between pathological and principled coups.

To elaborate, consider how my point applies to each of three variants of subjectivism.<sup>29</sup> First, *fact constructivism* or *fact relativism* denies that there are any absolute facts (either because all facts are constructed or relative). There is no absolute fact of the matter as to whether the tribes were oppressed. But then (allegations of) oppression, however sincere, cannot provide for a principled coup.

Second, *epistemic relativism* denies that there are any absolute epistemic facts (i.e. facts of the form: *E* is evidence for belief *P*). There is no absolute fact of

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<sup>29</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, discusses these three variants of subjectivism in chapters 3 and 4, chapters 5-7, and chapter 8, respectively.

the matter as to whether the evidence supports or discredits the belief that the tribes were oppressed. So the evidence pertaining to the belief in the oppression cannot make for a principled coup.

Third, *explanatory relativism* denies that the evidence alone ever causes our beliefs. Non-evidential causes (e.g. background beliefs, LSD, dice) must help cause the belief that the tribes were oppressed, or cause its disbelief (i.e. belief in its negation). Presumably, a coup based upon the belief is principled only if the causes of the belief are privileged over the causes of disbelief. But by precluding any evidential basis on which to privilege the former over the latter, the explanatory relativist makes it obscure how any coup could be principled.

In contrast, objectivists can vindicate principled coups. *Pace* fact constructivism and fact relativism, objectivists say that it is an absolute fact that the tribes were oppressed. *Pace* epistemic relativism, objectivists say that the evidence supports allegations of oppression. *Pace* explanatory relativism, objectivists say that the causes of the allegations can be privileged evidentially.

Thus, not only does subjectivism fail to serve its intended use, objectivism (ironically) serves it better. Objectivists may follow a recipe for adjudicating the tribal/archeological conflict: (i) gather (scientific, religious) evidence; (ii) evaluate the evidence to see which side of the conflict it rationally supports; and (iii) settle on a policy accordingly.<sup>30</sup> This recipe, whatever its merits, is unavailable to subjectivists because it invokes objectivity.

## 5. Generalizing

This case study suggests a more systematic, general criticism of subjectivism. Subjectivism is supposed to be useful for underwriting coups. The value of a coup rests on distinguishing between pathological and principled coups. But that distinction requires objectivity which subjectivism rejects. So subjectivism cannot find value in any coup. So subjectivism is useless.

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<sup>30</sup> To be clear: objectivism itself does *not* entail that the evidence favors (say) archeological science and evolutionary theory, or that reason (and perhaps truth) are therefore on the archeologist's side, or that policy should favor them. Objectivism merely holds that the evidence can favor *some or other side* as opposed to all the rest; it takes no stand whatsoever on *which side that is* (it might very well turn out that the evidence ultimately favors the tribal creationist beliefs!). I speculate that confusing objectivism with objectivism+scientism is one of the main causal sources of dissatisfaction with objectivism. But this dissatisfaction is based upon a common but profound confusion, and is baseless once the confusion is resisted.

One might object to my attempt to generalize on the grounds that I've overlooked other points subjectivism might serve which avoid the difficulties I've raised.

I doubt there is such an overlooked panacea. But I cannot defend this by surveying all the possible points subjectivism might serve. So, instead, I will briefly consider several representative points and suggest that each faces problems analogous to those arising in the case study. This will remove any serious obstacle to generalizing and will challenge subjectivists to explain why generalization fails in any given case.

First, subjectivism might serve the point of *illuminating* various episodes in history, our conviction in certain ideas, or the nature of various conflicts (such as the tribal/archeological conflict). In particular, it might illuminate the "genealogy" of various concepts (e.g. gender), social groups (e.g. races), and methods of inquiry (e.g. science) by exposing unexpected (e.g. social and political influences upon them).

But subjectivists are constrained not to regard such illumination as providing a more *useful* understanding, on pain of circularity. Nor can illumination reveal what is *true* or *better supported by the evidence*. But then it is obscure what recommends one genealogy over any other, if neither usefulness, nor the truth, nor the evidence.

Second, subjectivism might serve the point of *making sense of disagreements* between different groups, each deserving to have their voices heard. Thus, perhaps it might explain how it is that two groups, each deserving of respect, may disagree about human origins.

But subjectivism cannot say apparent disagreement is disagreement about the *facts* or what the *evidence supports*. It is then obscure in what sense there is a genuine disagreement at all, let alone why it is useful to make sense of it. Furthermore, the explanation of the disagreement must be *at least as useful* as any objectivist explanation, if subjectivism is to be *no less useful* than objectivism. But we have already seen how objectivists may explain disagreement in ways which seem no worse off than subjectivist explanations.

Third, subjectivism might serve the point of *tolerance*. For suppose the Zuni's are wrong about their origins and that the archeologists are right. Some might conclude that we needn't tolerate the Zuni's beliefs because those beliefs are *false*. But subjectivism can resist this unpalatable intolerance by taking the Zuni's way of knowing the world to be no less valid than archeologist's.

But there is a more straightforward way of resisting this unpalatable intolerance available to subjectivists and objectivists alike: tolerate false beliefs

when doing so is not too harmful. What's more, subjectivism's way of avoiding unpalatable intolerance ends up tolerating everything, including the harmful. Subjectivists can allow for principled intolerance to the actions and views of the Nazi Dr. Mengele only by invoking a distinction between principled and pathological tolerance. But the natural way to draw this distinction invokes objectivity: presumably, tolerance is pathological precisely when it conflicts with *objective* truth or knowledge about the harmful (e.g. the *fact* that Dr. Mengele's actions were harmful, or *knowledge* that they were harmful).<sup>31</sup>

Fourth, subjectivism might serve the point of *protecting against abuses* of objectivity. Some say that appealing to truth or rationality made it easier for imperialist powers to oppress others. But such appeals are illegitimate, by subjectivists' lights. That might protect against future imperialist oppression.

But it is difficult to see how subjectivism is a more effective protector than objectivism. Subjectivism rejects the most natural way of recognizing, diagnosing, condemning, and preventing acts of oppression: by rejecting as false or irrational the premises on which oppression is based (e.g. that some ethnic group is inferior). But objectivism easily accommodates such rejections (however difficult it might be to *persuade* some to agree with them).

Fifth, subjectivism might serve the point of encouraging a kind of *humility*. Objectivism is often associated with a crude picture according to which various beliefs or concepts are taken to be foundational, upon which all the others rest, and that objective, exceptionless principles may be deduced by rational reflection upon them alone.<sup>32</sup> Allegedly, this "foundationalist picture" has scarcely settled

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<sup>31</sup> In response, Barbara Herrnstein Smith ("Making (Up) the Truth: Constructivist Contributions," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61 (1992): 427) writes:

What *can* counter the plausibility of denials of the Holocaust ... are ... counter-activities such as the public exhibition and analysis of documents and photographs, the development of narratives incorporating vivid descriptions of circumstantial details, the citation and credentialing of survivors and other authorities, and so forth: the production, in effect, of a sense of virtual witnessing; the construction, in short, of knowledge ... to which must be added, as the necessary and inevitable other side of such activities, the destabilization and *deconstruction* of *other* knowledge.

But it is left obscure in what sense documents, photographs, narratives, citations, and so forth, are of any use in countering Holocaust denials, if not that the documents *say what happened*, or that the photographs *depict what happened*, or that the narratives *are true*, or that the citations *are supported by the evidence*.

<sup>32</sup> This foundationalist picture is often associated with Plato and Descartes, although subjectivists tend vastly to oversimplify their respective views. Subjectivists also often misattribute the picture to objectivists, failing to realize that objectivism is in no way committed to identifying

any philosophical disputes, nor provided us with much substantive knowledge. So a modest sense of humility is in order, and is best achieved by rejecting objectivism.

But humility is compatible with objectivism: many objectivists openly question, criticize, and explore foundational topics, including truth and rationality. For example, many objectivists are engaged in the thriving research program concerning whether we should lower confidence in our beliefs when our “epistemic peers” disagree with them.<sup>33</sup> Even if humility is sometimes in order, other times confidence is too. Even when arguing with the skeptic, we may (it seems) retain our default confidence in our belief that here is a hand and here is another, or that the tribes were oppressed, or that their oppressors acted immorally. Objectivism can justify our confidence: it allows that these claims are true and are supported by the evidence. Subjectivism cannot justify our confidence in this way, and it is obscure how else it could.

While I have not surveyed all the possible points subjectivism might serve, I have considered the most common. Each faces the same general problem: it is difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of how subjectivism might achieve the particular point to which it is directed without relying on the objectivity it rejects. Generalizing, subjectivism is useless because its usefulness requires the objectivity it rejects.

One might object that I have begged the question by illicitly smuggling objectivity into my criticisms. In particular, one might object that my criticism presupposes the *objectivity* of the principled/pathological distinction, but subjectivism rejects this objectivity.

But my criticism does not presuppose that the principled/pathological distinction be objective. Suppose that this distinction is (say) relative to a perspective. Then, choose some such perspective and say *relative to it* how subjectivism is useful. The problems I have already raised will then arise again.

Even so, I grant that some of the notions I invoked (e.g. utility and value) can be given objectivist construals. But there are two reasons why granting this is not illicitly to smuggle in objectivity. First, the roles these notions played in my criticism do not require such objectivist construals. Second, my criticism does not *presuppose* objectivity and then claim that it is only by invoking it that

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*which* way of knowing the world (whether “foundationalist” or otherwise) is best (indeed, many objectivists explicitly reject such a foundationalist picture).

<sup>33</sup> For illustrations, see the papers collected in Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield, eds., *Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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subjectivism can be useful; rather, I claim that subjectivism *precludes* the best explanation of its usefulness by precluding objectivity.

Finally, one might object that by leaving the principled/pathological distinction undefined, my criticism is too vague to gain any traction.

But this misconstrues my criticism. Subjectivism's usefulness depends upon there being a *recognizable* distinction between the principled and pathological, however it is ultimately drawn. My criticism is that subjectivism cannot provide for *any* distinction recognizable as such.

## 6. Conclusion

My goal was to solve a rhetorical problem between objectivists and subjectivists. My strategy was to focus on a virtue valued by objectivists and subjectivists alike: usefulness. Subjectivism aims to be useful: to shed some light on thorny conflicts (e.g. by being remunerative, retributive, empowering, or protective). However well-intended subjectivism might be, it faces the challenge of explaining how it can deliver on this promised utility without relying on the very objectivist epistemic virtues it rejects. I doubt that this challenge can be met. What's more, it often (and ironically) turns out that objectivism can deliver where subjectivists cannot. This, I believe, breaks the impasse between objectivists and subjectivists. Those who were unwilling to reject subjectivism as objectively false or irrational should now reject it as pointless.<sup>34</sup>

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