**Why epistemic pluralism does not entail relativism: Collingwood’s hinge epistemology**

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**Introduction**

There is a widespread view according to which the denial that the conditions of knowledge are truth-evaluable inevitably leads to a form of epistemic pluralism that is *both* quietist *and* internally incoherent. It is quietist because it undermines the possibility of genuine epistemic disagreement. It is internally incoherent because it simultaneously denies the existence of universal knowledge claims and makes the universal claim that there is no such knowledge. The goal of this paper is to show that denying that the conditions of knowledge are truth-evaluable does not necessarily entail a commitment to a form of epistemic relativism that is both quietist and internally incoherent. To undermine the view that the denial that the conditions of knowledge have truth-values leads down the blind alley of epistemic relativism I mobilize a version of “hinge epistemology” which distinguishes between epistemic pluralism and epistemic relativism. This form of hinge epistemology is to be found in Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions (Collingwood 1940). By teasing apart epistemic pluralism from epistemic relativism, the paper exposes the view that the denial that the conditions of knowledge have truth-values inevitably leads to a malignant form of epistemic relativism as a form of philosophical scaremongering.

The paper begins, in **Section I**, by considering Boghossian’s characterization of epistemic pluralism in *Fear of Knowledge*. (Boghossian 2006) According to Boghossian, the descriptive claim that there are different belief systems, combined with the denial that the conditions of knowledge are truth-evaluable, leads to a questionable form of epistemic pluralism, one which is relativist in outlook. I consider Boghossian’s account of epistemic pluralism because it seems to capture the widespread view that pluralism and relativism must go hand in hand if one denies that the conditions of knowledge have truth-values. **Section II** outlines a form of epistemic pluralism that, I argue, is unfairly described as relativistic. This form of non-relativistic pluralism arises not in response to the descriptive claim that there is a plurality of belief systems, but to the normative claim that explanation should be fit for purpose. Once pluralism is conceived in this light it no longer has the quietist overtones that tend to be characteristic of epistemic relativism. The distinction between the relativistic pluralism that is the target of Boghossian’s critique and non-relativistic pluralism is illustrated through a reconstruction of Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions in *An Essay on Metaphysics,* a highly neglected but important contribution to hinge epistemology.[[1]](#endnote-1) This reconstruction is offered as an illustration of how hinge epistemology could be construed to avoid two standard objections that are often raised against epistemic relativistic, namely that it makes it impossible to criticise other cultures and that it is self-undermining. **Section III** considers these two standard objections and argues that they do not apply to the kind of epistemic pluralism that arises from the consideration that explanation must be fit for purpose and sensitive to the goals of inquiry. The decoupling of epistemic pluralism from epistemic relativism argued for in this paper rests on a reading of the role of absolute presuppositions as non truth-evaluable epistemic hinges that is only presented rather than defended here. I have defended this reading elsewhere (D’Oro 2002, 2010), but the argument of this paper does not depend on whether the ascription of this hinge epistemology to Collingwood is factually correct, but on whether, given the way it is presented here, it succeeds in decoupling epistemic pluralism from epistemic relativism and in defending the former from the charges that are levelled against the latter.

**1. Epistemic pluralism and the charge of relativism**

Boghossian defines epistemic pluralism as follows:

1. ‘there are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems’, but
2. no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others’ (Boghossian 2006: 73).

(i) is an uncontroversial descriptive claim about the existence of different belief systems; (ii) is a controversial claim that pluralists must be committed to if, unlike absolutists, they deny that belief systems have truth-values. When (ii) is taken in conjunction with (i) it turns the benign descriptive pluralism of (i) into a malignant form of relativistic pluralism. For if different belief systems cannot be assessed for truth and falsity, then what is true/false is relative to the method of justification which belongs to a particular belief system and it is therefore impossible “to speak of what is rational period, but only of what is rational relative to this or that accepted epistemic system” (Boghossian 2006: 63). Since hinge epistemologists deny that the notions of truth and falsity apply to the fundamental hinges on which knowledge rests, they are committed not only to (i) but also (ii) (Carter 2017). Boghossian illustrates the kind of epistemic relativism that follows from the endorsement of (i) in conjunction with (ii) by considering Rorty’s (1980) discussion of the dispute between Cardinal Bellarmine and Galileo over the truth of heliocentrism. Both justified their conclusions by appeal to evidence, Galileo to the evidence of the telescope, and Cardinal Bellarmine to the evidence of the Bible. The Copernican, heliocentric universe is justified by Galileo’s observations relative to the belief system of science. The Ptolemaic geocentric universe is justified by Bellarmine’s reading of the Bible, relative to the belief system of the Catholic faith. Rorty concludes that since there is no fact of the matter as to whether the universe is Ptolemaic or Copernican, then describing Cardinal Bellarmine’s view as unscientific is just a form of “sophisticated name calling” (Boghossian 2006: 62). Rorty’s discussion of the dispute between Bellarmine and Galileo, so Boghossian argues, echoes Wittgenstein’s handling of the conflict between the Azande’s pre-scientific culture, with its reliance on the oracle, and a scientific culture with its reliance on the propositions of physics. Just as Rorty regards any attempt critically to evaluate the epistemic claims of Bellarmine’s views as a form of sophisticated name calling, so (Boghossian continues) Wittgenstein claims that: “Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic” (Wittgenstein 1969: §611). If you are an epistemic pluralist, the moral of the story seems to be that your options are either to remain silent or to exchange insults. There is no such thing as respectful disagreement. For the purposes of this paper I shall take Boghossian’s reconstruction of Rorty’s relativism at face value and turn to the following question: is epistemic pluralism necessarily relativistic in outlook? In the next section I outline a kind of hinge epistemology which is epistemically pluralist and yet not relativist. I argue that this form of hinge epistemology denies that the conditions of knowledge are truth-evaluable but is not committed to the objectionable relativism which, according to Boghossian, entails that one cannot disagree with the epistemic claims of other cultures. This form of epistemic pluralism without the controversial relativism that is normally associated with it, is articulated in Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions in *An Essay on Metaphysics*, which I present as making an important, if neglected contribution to hinge epistemology (the view that the fundamental hinges on which knowledge turns are not truth-evaluable).

**2. Collingwood’s hinge epistemology**

The project of hinge epistemology has undergone a revival in the wake of the attention that has lately been given to Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*. (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, 2007; Hamilton 2014). While the affinities between Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions in *An Essay on Metaphysics* and Wittgenstein’s account of hinge propositions in *On Certainty* have not gone unnoticed (Festin 2009), the former has not received much attention in the recent and growing body of literature on hinge epistemology (Coliva 2010, 2015). This section introduces Collingwood’s version of hinge epistemology with a view to disentangling epistemic pluralism from epistemic relativism and showing that the denial that the conditions of knowledge have truth values does not necessarily undermine the possibility of epistemic disagreement.

**2.1 Absolute presuppositions as hinges**

In *An Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood argued that there are certain propositions to which the notion of truth and falsity does not apply. In fact, these so-called propositions are not genuine propositions at all precisely because, unlike ordinary propositions, the notion of truth and falsity does not apply to them. The principle of the uniformity of nature, for example, has the grammatical form of a proposition, but it should not be interpreted as one. (Collingwood 1940: 152) Collingwood gave these apparent propositions the technical name of “absolute presuppositions”. He denied that absolute presuppositions are propositions in the ordinary sense and claimed that metaphysics, properly understood, is concerned not with propositions but with absolute presuppositions. Since the notion of truth and falsity does not apply to absolute presuppositions, these are *beyond* verification, not in the sense in which, according to Ayer or Hume, metaphysical propositions such as “God exists” cannot be verified (either empirically or analytically), but because the notion of verifiability does not apply to them. Absolute presuppositions are therefore best described *not as being unverifiable* (lest this suggest that if they were to be put through the verificationist test they would fail it), *but as not being the sort of thing to which the notion of verification should be applied*. To bring to the fore the full force of the claim that the notion of verifiability does not apply to absolute presuppositions, one must say more about the distinction between propositions and presuppositions and how absolute presuppositions, which Collingwood takes to be the proper object of philosophical enquiry, differ from what he calls “relative presuppositions”.

**2.2 Propositions and presuppositions**

Propositions and presuppositions play very distinctive roles in what Collingwood called the logic of question and answer. A proposition’s role is to answer a question. A presupposition’s role is to give rise to questions. For example, “the salt is on the kitchen table” is a propositional answer to the question “where is the salt?” and this question relies on presupposition such as that there is salt, that there is a kitchen and so on. Collingwood’s claim is that the ability of presuppositions to give rise to questions (their logical efficacy) has nothing to do with their being true or even being believed to be true/being accepted as true.The presupposition “Santa exists”, for example, must be operative for a question such as “what did Santa leave in your Christmas stocking?” to be asked, even if the proposition “Santa exists” is false. Presuppositions, therefore, do not do their logical work *in virtue of being true* since they have logical efficacy even if they are false (as in the case of Santa’s existence). Nor do presuppositions do their logical work *in virtue of being believed to be true or being accepted as true*: the question “What did Santa bring you for Christmas?” entails the presupposition “Santa exists” whether it is asked by a child interrogating another child, or by an adult interrogating a child, even if the former believes in Santa and the latter does not. It is therefore not in virtue of *being accepted as true* or *believed* to be true that the presupposition “Santa exists” gives rise to the question “What did he bring for Christmas?” Presuppositions are therefore neither true propositions, nor propositions which are believed to be true or accepted as true.As Collingwood says the distinction between presuppositions and propositions is “a matter of common knowledge” since “it is possible and often profitable to argue from suppositions which we know to be false, or concerning which we have neither knowledge nor belief as to whether they are true or false” (Collingwood 1940: 28).

It is sometimes possible for one and the same statement (to use an admittedly inadequate neutral expression) to occupy more than one role, i.e. to operate either as a proposition or as a presupposition. In this case the notion of verifiability will apply to it in one context but not in another. For example, when surveying a property with a tape measure one will presuppose that the distance between two walls will be the one recorded by the measuring tape. In this case the accuracy of the tape will be presupposed. If one were to suspect that the measuring tape had stretched through time or wear and tear, one would treat the statement “the measuring tape is 66 foot long” (Collingwood 1940: 29) as one that could be found to be correct or incorrect and thus relate to it not as a presupposition but as a proposition. What determines whether a statement is a proposition or a presupposition is not what it states, but the role that it plays in what Collingwood calls the logic of question and answer. Propositions are statements whose role is to answer questions. Presuppositions are statements which give rise to questions. Attempting to verify a presupposition by asking whether it is true or false is therefore a self-stultifying exercise because in treating a presupposition as something that can be true or false one automatically relates to it as a proposition. It would be analogous to using a knight as a bishop in the game of chess: just as what defines the knight, or the bishop, is how they move on the chessboard, so likewise what determines whether something is a proposition or a presupposition, is the role it plays in the asking of questions and giving of answers. The fact that some statements can play different roles, however, says something significant about them, namely that when they play the role of presuppositions, they are only relatively presupposed. As Collingwood says:

“To question a presupposition is to demand that it should be ‘verified’; that is, to demand that a question should be asked to which the affirmative answer would be that presupposition itself, now in the form of a proposition. To verify the presupposition that my measuring-tape is accurate is to ask a question admitting of the alternative answers ‘the tape is accurate’, ‘the tape is not accurate’. Hence to speak of verifying a presupposition involves supposing that it is a relative presupposition (Collingwood, 1940: 30).

Statements which can be either presupposed or asserted as propositions Collingwood calls relative presuppositions and contrasts them with presuppositions which are absolute rather than relative.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**2.3 The absoluteness of absolute presuppositions**

Absolute presuppositions, Collingwood claims, have only one role in the logic of question and answer. “Everything that happens has a cause” is a presupposition that Collingwood regards as absolute rather than relative. He illustrates the absolute nature of this presupposition by considering how a pathologist might respond to an enquirer who asks questions concerning the cause of a disease and is given answers which appeal to a certain piece of research which has established what the cause of said disease is. If the enquirer were not content with the answers and continued by asking “But how do you know that everything that happens has a cause” the answer he would be likely to receive would be: “That is a thing we take for granted in my job. We don’t question it. We don’t try to verify it. It isn’t a thing anybody has discovered, like microbes or the circulation of the blood. It is a thing we just take for granted” (Collingwood 1940: 31)

The pathologist’s reply here (“That is a thing we take for granted in my job. We don’t question it”) might convey the misleading impression that absolute presuppositions are beliefs which are very entrenched and held dogmatically, and thus exempted from critical scrutiny. While Collingwood denies that absolute presuppositions are answers to questions, it is not their going unquestioned that accounts for their special logical status. The point is not so much that it does not occur to the pathologist to question whether everything which happens has a cause, but rather that since the specific questions asked by the pathologist (What is the cause of malaria? What is the cause of cancer?) presuppose “everything which happens has a cause”, such questions cannot be answered without invoking the presupposition which gives rise to those very questions. Since true as well as false answers to the question “What is the cause of cancer?” presuppose that everything, including cancer, has a cause, it makes no sense *both* to ask “what is the cause of this? What is the cause of that?” *and* to question whether everything which happens has a cause. As he says:

“any question involving the presupposition that an absolute presupposition is a proposition, such as the question ‘Is it true?’ ‘What evidence is there for it? ‘How can it be demonstrated?’ ‘What right have we to presuppose it if it can’t?’ is a nonsense question.” (Collingwood 1940: 33)

Absolute presuppositions are therefore not propositions which are accepted as true dogmatically or unreflectively. They are unlike “The Earth is flat”, which was widely believed to be true and went unquestioned for long periods of time. A presupposition is absolute, not if it goes unquestioned, but if it cannot be put in question without undermining the form of inquiry it undergirds. “The Earth is flat” is more like “water is H2O”, which nobody (now) questions and everybody believes to be true, but which could conceivably be discovered to be false without jeopardizing the method by which the claim is verified. Absolute presuppositions are therefore not beliefs which are dogmatically adhered to without question. The unwillingness critically to question a presupposition is not a test of its absolute nature. The critical test for deciding whether a presupposition is absolute is not whether it goes unchallenged, but whether it makes sense to ask for verification in the first place.

Another possible interpretation of the absoluteness of absolute presuppositions is that they are like Kantian postulates in the sense that they are propositions which are necessarily believed to be true, even if they may not be so. As presuppositions generally do not do their logical work in virtue of being *believed to be true*, likewise *absolute* presuppositions do not do their logical work in virtue of being *necessarily believed to be true*. Absolute presuppositions are therefore unlike Kantian postulates such as the freedom of the will or the immortality of the soul about which one can have no knowledge, but which one must hold as true in order to act morally. It is rather that it makes no sense to speak of knowing them to be either true or false because they are not propositions with true or false values. The term “absolute” may also misleadingly suggests that what makes presuppositions absolute is that they are necessary and universal in the manner of analytic truths. This is not the sense in which presuppositions are absolute. What makes the presupposition “everything which happens has a cause” absolute is that it is constitutive of the kind of investigative practice which the pathologist pursues. Without presupposing it the pathologist could not verify specific empirical correlations, such as those holding between smoking and lung cancer, or excessive drinking and liver disease. But a presupposition that is constitutive of one form of inquiry may not be constitutive of another. The principle of the uniformity of nature, for example, is a constitutive principle for the empirical investigation of reality. Without such a presupposition it would not be possible to predict that ice in the Arctic will melt if the temperature rises because the empirical law that ice melts above 0°C relies on the assumption that past regularities provide a guide to future ones. Nor would it be possible to retrodict that dinosaurs disappeared in the Earth’s geological past because they froze to death when the average temperature dropped very drastically. Such a presupposition, on the other hand, would be of no help in a different investigative context. For example, while the principle of the uniformity of nature plays an essential role in the scientific investigation of nature, it is not a principle that governs the historical concern with different cultures. It is appeal to variations rather than uniformity in epistemic norms that enables humanistically oriented historians to explain that Tutankhamun was born of out of an incestuous union because the Ancient Egyptians believed this was a way of preserving the purity of the blood. What makes a presupposition absolute is not its strict universality but its indispensability to a context of inquiry; the critical test for deciding whether a presupposition is absolute is *not* whether it is a strictly universal proposition whose denial generates a logical contradiction, but whether denying it entails a form of intellectual hypocrisy on behalf of those who invoke it in their explanatory practices. Absolute presuppositions are therefore not universal in the way in which necessary analytic truths such as “bachelors are unamarried” are universal. Analytic truths cannot be denied without contradiction, but there is no contradiction in asserting that the future does not resemble the past.

In sum, I have discarded three possible ways in which the absoluteness of absolute presuppositions might be construed. The first is the view that absolute presuppositions are beliefs which people unreflectively accept as true and exempt from critical scrutiny and thus that their “absoluteness” lies in their being dogmatically held. The presupposition “everything which happens has a cause” is *absolute* not because it goes questioned, but because it is necessarily presupposed by the pathologist’s explanatory practice. It is not the pathologist’s unquestioningly or dogmatically *believing* this presupposition to be true that makes the presupposition absolute: presuppositions do not do their logical work in virtue of being believed to be true. Second, I have rejected the view that a presupposition is absolute because it is necessary to believe it to be true (like a Kantian postulate) even if *ex hypothesi* it could turn out to be false. Finally, the absolute nature of presuppositions should not be conflated with the notion of strict universality because absolute presuppositions do their logical work not in so far as they are self-evident analytic truths, rather than, say, general empirical propositions, but in so far as they are invoked in the practices they undergird.

**2.4 Philosophy’s role**

In denying that the notion of truth and falsity applies to absolute presuppositions Collingwood signals his refusal to take part in the metaphysical dispute between ontological realists, who assert, for example, that propositions such as “nature is uniform” or “everything which happens has a cause” are true, and sceptical idealists who claim they are false. Traditional metaphysicians who state that causes are real in the context of a mind-independent reality or that they are ideal, treat absolute presuppositions as if they were propositions with a definite truth value. But the task of metaphysics in Collingwood’s view is not to expand knowledge by adding to the body of true propositions; it is to work backwards from the propositional answers which are produced in the sciences to the questions which they answer, and from these to the presuppositions which give rise to those questions, until one reaches presuppositions which are essential to that form of knowing: “The metaphysician’s business . . . is not to propound them [absolute presuppositions] but to propound the proposition that that this or that one of them is presupposed.” (Collingwood 1940: 33) Collingwood’s goal is not to settle metaphysical disputes, but to direct philosophical analysis away from such disputes and find a new focus for philosophical analysis: the study of absolute presuppositions. The task of philosophy is to uncover the presuppositions which give rise to the questions characteristic of different forms of inquiry, questions which receive propositional true or false answers in the special sciences. The uncovering of absolute presuppositions involves a logical regress from answers to the questions to which they are answers, and from these questions to the presuppositions which gave rise to them. Such a task is not a matter of describing what system of beliefs people accept; for just as logic is concerned not with how people think, but with how they ought to think, likewise the regress from answers to questions and from questions to presuppositions uncovers not what people believe or what they accept as true, but what they presuppose.

When tracing the entailment relations which lead from answers to questions, and to presuppositions, one may find a mismatch between the answers given and the questions asked. Collingwood illustrates this point by using the example of a person whose car has stopped as he was driving up a steep hill and who wonders what the cause of the stoppage is (Collingwood 1940: 302-03). This person’s question would not be answered by a theoretical physicist who pointed out that since the top of the hill is further removed from the centre of the Earth than the bottom of the hill the car requires more power to go uphill than downhill. It would be answered on the other hand by the AA person who discovered a loose cable and suggested that consideration as an explanation. The explanations of the theoretical physicist and of the car mechanic answer different kinds of why questions, questions which arise from different absolute presuppositions. The explanation of the theoretical physicist answers a question which presupposes an unconditional notion of causality; the explanation of the car mechanic answers a question which presupposes a conception of causes as handles. The point here is that these explanations are answers to different questions, which are entailed by different absolute presuppositions. The choice between these absolute presuppositions depends not on which one of them is true of an inquiry-independent fact, but on which one of them gives rise to the question that is satisfactorily answered by the car mechanic rather than the theoretical physicist.[[3]](#endnote-3) Such is the nature of Collingwood’s epistemic pluralism.

To illustrate this form of non-relativistic pluralism with a contemporary example we might consider the case of the Russian ex-spy Sergei Skripal who collapsed in Salisbury outside a supermarket. What happened? If the “fact” to be explained is a physiological one, the answer will be that it was caused by exposure to the nerve agent Novichok. But if the fact to be explained is of a political nature, then knowing that it was nerve agent smeared on the handle of his front door that was responsible for his collapse, and that the nerve agent was Novichok, will at best enable the investigative journalist to restrict the list of suspects to those who have access to this rare chemical compound; it will contribute little or nothing to understanding the political significance of this fact. Explanations which appeal to antecedent conditions and those which appeal to motives do not conflict because they explain different facts, facts which are verifiable in very different ways. If the relevant fact is a physiological phenomenon, then it will have a physiological explanation; but if the relevant fact is of a political nature, then it will not satisfy the curiosity of those who want to know what happened in Salisbury to be told in reply that Sergei Skripal had made physical contact with the nerve agent Novichok, which had been smeared on the handle of his front door. The evidence that the physiologist and the political historian will produce to support their respective explanations of what happened is relative to the context of inquiry, to what they are seeking to establish. But the *fact* to be explained here is “relative” to the goals of inquiry, not to the belief systems which agents assent to or accept as true. Since the political historian and the physiologists have different *explananda*, what counts as evidence for the political historian will not be the same kind of evidence that will be of interest to the physiologist. But to say that the evidence adduced to provide rational support for the explanations of the physiologist and for those of the historian depends on the context of their respective inquiries is not the same as saying that justification is relative to the different belief systems that individuals such a Galileo and Bellarmine accept. It is rather to make the point that the chain of entailments that lead from the presentation of a fact as political (as an action) means that the question “why did Sergei Skripal collapse?” is not answered by invoking the kind of (nomological) explanation which cites an antecedent condition (the physical contact with the nerve agent) together with the general law that contact with nerve agents leads to death unless treated. For once something is presented in our discourse as a (political) act it commands an explanation of a different (intentional/teleological) kind.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This form of explanatory pluralism is not the same relativistic pluralism that Boghossian (rightly or wrongly) attributes to Rorty and which constitutes the target of his critique in *Fear of Knowledge*.[[5]](#endnote-5) Rorty’s relativism holds that *rational justification is relative to the belief system an agent or a group accepts.* This claim is an inference from the following premises:

1. There are different belief systems (an uncontroversial factual or descriptive premise)
2. The conditions of knowledge are not truth-evaluable
3. Therefore: rational justification is relative to the belief system an agent or group accept.

Nonrelativistic pluralism on the other hand holds that rational justification is relative to the goals of inquiry. This claim is an inference from the following premises:

1. Explanatory inferences should be fit for purpose
2. The conditions of knowledge are not truth-evaluable
3. Therefore: rational justification is relative to the goals of inquiry

Can the hinge epistemology at work in Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions evade the most common objections levelled against the relativistic pluralism which Boghossian takes to be the inevitable result of denying that the conditions of knowledge are truth-evaluable? The standard objections raised against epistemic relativism are that a) it is not possible to criticise the epistemic judgments of other cultures or belief systems and b) that relativistic pluralism is self-undermining. I shall consider these objections in the next section.

**3. Epistemic pluralism is neither quietist nor self-undermining**

Let us rewind to Boghossian’s presentation of the dispute between Cardinal Bellarmine and Galileo over the truth of heliocentrism. On Boghossian’s reconstruction of Rorty, the relativist cannot say that heliocentrism is true and geocentrism is false. Since there is no fact of the matter that is independent of the belief system that Bellarmine or Galileo in each case accepts, Galileo and Bellarmine are justified in holding something as true only relative to the belief system that each one of them accepts. At best, according to the relativist, Galileo can say that heliocentrism is true and that one is justified in holding it to be true given the belief system that he, Galileo, accepts. Of course, Galileo could say “Bellarmine is wrong” but this would be nothing but shorthand for “according to the belief system that I (Galileo) accept Bellarmine is wrong”. Since rational justification is relative to the belief system that agents accept, there is no way of adjudicating the dispute between geocentrism and heliocentrism. Bellarmine and Galileo simply must agree to disagree or, as Rorty says, exchange insults. The denial that truth values can be legitimately predicated of the conditions of knowledge leads to a form of malignant pluralism which relativizes justification to the belief system agents accept, thereby undermining the possibility of disagreement with, and criticism of, views that the speaker does not accept (Boghossian, 2006: 58-68).

This conclusion is not one that the hinge epistemology developed by Collingwood as discussed above is committed to. The preceding discussion of the role of philosophical analysis in making explicit the absolute presuppositions at work in forms of inquiry gives us an insight into how the hinge epistemology that is implicit in Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions would handle cross cultural disagreements. Consider the case of a group of Egyptologists who enlist the help of a team of forensic archaeologists to establish whether the mummified remains of a pharaoh are genetically related to those of a mummy found in another sarcophagus. Using DNA analysis the forensic team discovers that Tutankhamun was the product of an incestuous union, and that is why he had a club foot and various genetic disorders that led to his early death. The DNA tests used by the forensic archaeologist presuppose the principle of the uniformity of nature. Just as palaeontologists who explain why dinosaurs became extinct when the Earth’s temperature dropped presuppose that cold-blooded creatures uniformly thrive in similar (warm) environmental conditions, so forensic archaeologists could not establish that Tutankhamun developed a club foot as a result of inbreeding without presupposing that DNA behaves in the same way in Ancient Egypt as it does in the present day. *Qua* historians, Egyptologists presuppose that the epistemic norms by which agents lead their lives change from time to time, and they explain the incestual relations which led to the birth of Tutankhamun by invoking the epistemic norm that inbreeding keeps the blood pure. When relying on the results of DNA testing, on the other hand, historians of ancient Egypt switch, as Carnap might say, from one explanatory framework to another, and presuppose the same thing as natural scientists do, namely that nature is uniform.[[6]](#endnote-6) If asked whether they agreed with the ancient Egyptian’s view that incest was good for the blood, they need not accept a quietist position for fear of being accused of anachronism in the following way: *but the Egyptians did not know about DNA, therefore you cannot invoke DNA as an explanation for Tutankhamun’s club foot by the Ancient Egyptians’ lights!* *As far as the Ancient Egyptians were concerned DNA did not exist and since what exists or is true depends on what is believed to be true you cannot judge the Ancient Egyptians for what they believed to be the case!* The Egyptologist who denies that incest keeps the blood line pure switches from the presuppositions which govern the study of past cultures to the presuppositions of natural science. This switch in presuppositions is justified by the fact that the explanatory goals of the Egyptologist and those of the forensic archaeologist are not the same. Their explanations answer different kinds of questions which require not different explanations but explanations of a different kind. *Qua* historians, Egyptologists are interested in why incest was common amongst the Royal family and explain it by invoking the norm that inbreeding keeps the blood pure. *Qua* natural scientists forensic archaeologists explain why Tutankhamun had a club foot by appealing to the generalization that inbreeding leads to genetically inherited diseases. Just as the political historian’s and the physiologist’s account of Sergei Skripal’s collapse are directed at different, inquiry-specific *explananda*, so Egyptologists and forensic archaeologists do not explain the same thing or fact. But, *and this is the crucial caveat,* while the facts which are explained by Egyptologists and forensic archaeologists are not the same facts (one explains why Ancient Egyptians engaged in incestual relations [to keep the blood line pure] and the other why Tutankhamun had a club foot [because he was the product of inbreeding]), these facts are not relative either to what the Ancient Egyptians believe (that engaging in incest keeps the blood pure) or to what contemporary historians of Ancient Egypt believe to be the case (that inbreeding leads to genetic disease). They are “relative” to the explanatory frameworks of natural science and humanistically oriented anthropology. By switching to the presuppositions of natural science twentieth-century historians can say that the Ancient Egyptians were wrong and that incest leads to genetic malformations rather than ensuring the purity of the blood, without committing the anachronism of explaining the behaviour of Ancient Egyptians by invoking epistemic norms which were alien to them. Let us transpose this to the Bellarmine/Galileo dispute. When taking the perspective of science (rather than identifying with what Galileo believes to be true/accepts as true), one can say that Bellarmine was wrong when stating that the universe is geocentric, just as the twentieth century historian would deny inbreeding keeps the blood pure. It is not necessary to assume that the presuppositions which are foundational for natural science (the principle of the uniformity of nature) are true of an inquiry-independent reality to be able to pass critical judgments on the epistemic claims of different cultures. What is crucial, on the other hand, is to disambiguate the explanatory goal of historians from those of forensic archaeologists and to take care to note what hat one is wearing when making the claim that Tutankhamun had a club foot as a result of inbreeding.

But (I hear a potential objector claim), *according to the epistemic pluralist* the perspective of science (with its reliance on the principle of the uniformity of nature as a condition of the possibility for providing empirical evidence) belongs to the belief system that Galileo accepted, and Bellarmine rejected. The claim that heliocentrism is justified by the inductive/scientific method with its reliance on the principle of the uniformity of nature, so the objection goes, is shorthand for “according to my post-Galilean epistemic system I am justified in believing that the universe is heliocentric”. Since the perspective of science is a belief system which Galileo accepted, and Bellarmine rejected, it is not possible to avoid quietism while rejecting the view that explanatory frameworks can be evaluated for truth and falsity. This is a conclusion that some postmodern philosophers of science have been all too ready to endorse. Famously or infamously Latour (2000) claimed that since the Koch bacillus was not discovered until 1882 it is not possible to say that Ramesses II died of tuberculosis because such claims would have made no sense within the belief system of the Ancient Egyptians. Indeed the Koch bacillus did not exist at the time. This is the sort of paradoxical conclusion to which the relativistic pluralism that Boghossian criticizes leads and which Boghossian (2006: 26 and 113) is (rightly) anxious to avoid. However, while some have indeed drawn these relativistic conclusions, merely denying that the conditions of knowledge are truth-evaluable does not mandate this conclusion. If the preceding analysis of the account of absolute presuppositions is correct, this is not a conclusion that the hinge epistemology implicit in Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions would have to accept. What makes the principle of the uniformity of nature operative in science is not that “I”, the subject, accept it, endorse it, or believe it to be true, or that “we”, my culture, accepts it, endorses it and largely holds it to be true, but that the principle of the uniformity of nature is entailed by the offering of a certain kind of (empirical) evidence in support for one’s claims. Whether the principle of the uniformity of nature is a principle which governs inductive inferences, therefore, does not depend on whether Galileo or any one accepts the scientific world view, nor does the answer to the question whether the Earth revolves around sun (or the other way around) depend upon what Bellarmine or Galileo believe to be the case. To say that Galileo accepts the principle of the uniformity of nature does not add anything to the claim that the principle of the uniformity of nature is logically entailed by the making of inductive inferences. Just as *Mary’s believing or accepting* that the concept of having three sides is entailed by the concept of a triangle does not do any logical work, so *Galileo’s believing or accepting* that the principle of the uniformity of nature is entailed by the making of inductive inferences adds nothing whatsoever to the claim that the principle of the uniformity of nature is entailed by the making of inductive inferences. As we have seen, it is the nature of presuppositions to do their logical work not in so far as they are believed to be true or false (as if they were propositions) but in so far as they are entailed by the propositional answers given to the questions asked. It is not Galileo’s acceptance of the principle of the uniformity of nature that justifies him in the making the inductive inferences which are characteristic of the belief system of science. It is rather that no one advancing empirical claims can deny the principle of the uniformity of nature at the cost of internal inconsistency. Collingwood would agree with Boghossian that we can appeal to the inductive method of natural science, with its reliance on the principle of the uniformity of nature, to correct the epistemic claims of other cultures. Boghossian, for example, argues that the belief system of Bellarmine and that of Galileo were not actually as different as they look. For ordinary propositions about medium-sized goods Bellarmine used exactly the same empirical method as Galileo and, when doing so, relied on the same principle underpinning the belief system of science. Where Bellarmine differed from Galileo was in assuming the Bible provided empirical evidence for the nature of the Earth’s rotation (Boghossian, 102 ff.). Thus one can correct the claim that the universe is geocentric by appealing to evidence of the same empirical kind, albeit of a more sophisticated nature. While Collingwood would agree that it is possible to use the principle of the uniformity of nature cross culturally, he would deny that it is necessary to hold that the principle of the uniformity of nature is true of an inquiry-independent reality in order to invoke it in a cross-cultural context. For the applicability of this principle is justified (even if only in a backhanded way) by the fact that it enables certain predictive claims through induction, not by its being true of an inquiry-independent reality or by its being believed (by someone such as, for example, Galileo) to be true. Collingwood accepts that absolute presuppositions cannot be justified in a non-circular way: since they are constitutive of the explanatory practices which they make possible, rather than being strictly universal, they derive their validity from the fact that they underpin certain explanatory practices. What he denies is that they play their logical role as enablers of knowledge in so far as they are believed by someone to be true. And this is the reason why his explanatory pluralism is ultimately not a form of relativism. For the relativist, a belief system derives its legitimacy from its being endorsed, accepted or believed as true. Explanatory pluralism, on the other hand, matches logical/explanatory form with the explanatory goal. This enables the pluralist to assess explanations on the basis of their fitness for purpose.

Denying that the conditions of knowledge are truth-evaluable does not lead to quietism if epistemic pluralism is understood as claiming that explanation is dependent on the context and goals of inquiry and if it is decoupled from the view that the true and false claims which arise within forms of inquiry are relative to the people who accept them. One need not, therefore, commit to the view that there are inquiry-independent truths, in order to engage critically with other cultures. There is an intermediary position between the realist’s adherence to the correspondence theory of truth and the extreme post-modernism which, according to Boghossian, is entailed by its rejection. Absolute presuppositions do not have any causal powers; they neither bring about the existence of the Koch bacillus nor do they have the power to make the sun revolve around the Earth. Invoking the threat of postmodernism to bolster the correspondence theory of truth is arguably a form of philosophical scaremongering.

Collingwood’s explanatory pluralism is thus not vulnerable to the first standard objection that is often raised against the relativism about belief systems, namely that it undermines the possibility of epistemic disagreement. But is it vulnerable to the second objection that is often raised against it, the charge of internal inconsistency? The charge runs as follows: the relativist claims knowledge to be relative to the belief system that the subject accepts or holds to be true. There are two ways in which such a claim can be understood. On the one hand it can be understood as stating an absolute truth, namely that all knowledge is relative to the belief system that the subject accepts; in this case the position of the relativist would be incoherent because, as Boghossian says, the relativist would be committed to at least *one* absolute truth, namely that all knowledge is relative to the belief system that the subjects accepts. On the other hand, it can be understood as stating what the moral relativist believes, namely that there are no facts which are true independently of the belief system that the subject accepts; in this case the relativist’s claim can be safely ignored because it would be simply a report about what the relativist finds it agreeable to believe (Boghossian 2006: 53). Relativists are therefore caught between two horns of a dilemma: if they exempt their claim from being subject to the relativist clause (I believe/my culture believes . . .) they become guilty of making an exception for their own position; if they act on the second horn of the dilemma then they makes their own relativist metaphilosophy contingent upon the belief system that a subject accepts.

Is the account of absolute presuppositions that lies at the core of Collingwood’s hinge epistemology vulnerable to this criticism? One might think that it is. The standard self-refutation objection that is levelled against belief-system relativism could be adapted and directed against Collingwood as follows: Collingwood claims that knowledge rests on absolute presuppositions. This claim entails that there is no presuppositionless knowledge, that all knowledge rests on presuppositions. But the claim “all knowledge rests on presuppositions” is a universal claim. QED: like standard forms of belief system relativism, Collingwood’s explanatory pluralism is self-refuting because it advances at least one universal knowledge claim, namely that all knowledge rests on presuppositions.

Can Collingwood’s hinge epistemology escape this charge? One might think that it cannot because the escape route out of the self-undermining objection that is open to the relativist is not available to his version of hinge epistemology. When accused of inconsistency relativists can respond to the self-undermining charge by saying that the apparently universal claim they appear to be making is not, appearances to the contrary, a universal claim because “all knowledge is relative to the belief system that a subject accepts” is shorthand for the genuinely relativist claim “I believe/my culture believes that all knowledge is relative to what the belief-system that the subject accepts”. As we have seen, this reply is one that is often found unsatisfactory because if relativists are simply describing what a subject or their culture believes, then they can safely be ignored since they are not advancing an argument. Be that as it may, this is not the kind of reply that Collingwood would or indeed could offer because presuppositions (as we have been at pains to argue) do not do their logical work in virtue of being accepted as true (remember: it is not the pathologists believing or accepting as true that events have causes that can be tampered with, that makes the presupposition operative). Unlike the relativist, therefore, Collingwood would/could not deflect the self-undermining objection by suggesting that “(all) knowledge requires presuppositions” can be re-written as “I believe/accept that knowledge requires presuppositions”, thereby making his metaphilosophical stance contingent on its being accepted as/believed to be true by someone. Collingwood’s metaphilosophical view (that knowledge rests on presuppositions) is not one on which he would be happy to agree to disagree with a realist, by proposing that whereas realists believe that there is presuppositionless knowledge he does not believe there is. Since the search for knowledge requires answering questions, and any questions we ask entail some presupposition or other, the notion of presuppositionless propositional knowledge is nonsensical. The appropriate response to the person who says, “I don’t believe all knowledge requires presuppositions”, therefore, would be *not* “you are entitled to your own belief as much as I am entitled to mine” *but* “you do not understand what knowledge is!”, just as the appropriate response to someone who said, “I don’t believe triangles have three sides” would be not “well everyone is entitled to their own opinion!” but “you do not understand what a triangle is!” Since the notion of presuppositionless knowledge is nonsensical the claim “there is no presuppositionless knowledge” is not the kind of claim that can be coherently believed to be true by one person and false by another, just as “triangles are three sided figures” is not the kind of claim which can be believed to be true by Jill and false by Jack. Just as it is not my believing that a triangle has three sides that makes it the case that a triangle has three sides, so it is not someone’s disbelieving that a triangle has three sides that makes it false that a triangle has three sides. But if the claim “knowledge requires presuppositions” is not relative to a belief system that one can chose to accept or reject, is Collingwood making the very universal knowledge claim that prompts the self-undermining objection in the first instance? Arguably not, because there is a distinction between claiming that all knowledge is relative to the belief system that the subject accepts and that all knowledge rests on presuppositions. What generates the self-undermining objection in the case of belief-system relativism is the fact that the relativist is making an exception for her own knowledge claim. The relativist claims a) that knowledge is relative to the belief system that the subject accepts and b) that her own claim “knowledge is relative to the belief system the subject accepts” is exempt from this requirement, at least if she chooses the first horn of the dilemma and does not seek to deflect the self-undermining objection by making her own (relativist) metaphilosophical stance contingent upon what someone believes. When making the claim that knowledge rests on presuppositions, on the other hand, Collingwood is not making an exception for the claim that “all knowledge rests on presuppositions”, thereby committing to the view that there is at least one knowledge claim that is presuppositionless. Philosophy, unlike the special sciences, does not advance any knowledge claims: philosophical analysis uncovers what presuppositions are operative whenever a knowledge claim is advanced. Since philosophy does not advance knowledge claims, it does not have presuppositions of its own; any presuppositions philosophy deals with are borrowed from the sciences, which are the laboratories of knowledge. Through presuppositional analysis we come to understand how knowledge in the sciences is produced, but this philosophical understanding is not a knowledge claim, like that of the historian, of the chemist, of the physicist, the mathematician and so on. The suspicion that there may be foul play and that Collingwood, like the relativist, must choose between either making his metaphilosophical stance contingent or risking internal incoherence, rests on conflating philosophical knowing with knowledge in the sciences. Philosophy as, he says,

does not, like exact or empirical science, bring us to know things of which we were simply ignorant, but brings us to know in a different way things which we already knew in some way… (Collingwood 1933: 161)

The claim “knowledge rests on presuppositions” is not itself a knowledge claim, but an analysis or explication of what knowledge is.

The worst accusation that can be raised against a philosophy is that it fails by its own standards. It would not seem too much to ask of a philosopher that their metaphilosophical views should be compatible with their first order claims since one might expect consistency to be a paradigmatic philosophical virtue. Yet examples of such inconsistencies between a philosopher’s first and second-order views are not uncommon. Take Ayer’s logical positivism, for example. It appeals to the principle of verifiability to launch a critique of metaphysical propositions about transcendent metaphysical entities. But, it is often asked, what kind of proposition is the principle of verifiability? If it is neither an empirically verifiable proposition, nor can be exempted from the verifiability requirement because that would make it merely tautological, then positivism’s criticism of metaphysics applies to its own metaphilosophical commitment to the view that propositions which are neither empirically verifiable nor mere tautologies are meaningless. The kind of hinge epistemology at work in Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions is not vulnerable to the charge of self-refutation.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Conclusion**

Let us recap what this paper has and has not established. First of all, it was not my purpose to establish whether Boghossian’s interpretation of the belief system relativism that he attributes to Rorty and Wittgenstein is correct. Nor was the goal of this paper either to assess or undermine Boghossian’s critique of belief system relativism. The goal of this paper was rather to decouple belief system relativism from explanatory pluralism by challenging the assumption that rejecting the claim that the conditions of knowledge have truth-makers inevitably leads to the sort of postmodern relativism Boghossian is keen to undermine. I have done so by presenting a reading of Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions as epistemic hinges which are entailed by the knowledge claims made in different contexts of inquiry, and by arguing that the validity of these hinges is not relative to their being accepted or believed to be true by individuals or cultures; such hinges are rather justified (in a backhanded way) by the kinds of explanations which they undergird. While presuppositions such as “Earth is flat” or “the universe is geocentric” are relative to the explanatory framework of natural science and can be dislodged by the scientific method, some presuppositions, such as the principle of the uniformity of nature, cannot be dislodged in that way because they can never be proved or disproved to be true or false inductively. The distinction between relative and absolute presuppositions supports the claim that there are “propositions” which have a special logical status and which lie beyond verification, not in the logical positivist’s sense that if subjected to this test they would fail it, but in the sense that one cannot conceive of a possible scenario in which they may be falsified without undermining our ability to reason. Understood in this way absolute presuppositions capture Coliva’s recent interpretation of Wittgenstein’s hinge propositions in *On Certainty* as supplying the conditions of epistemic rationality (Coliva 2015: 157 ff.). Just as Coliva’s reading of Wittgenstein’s hinge epistemology highlights certain aspects of the text at the expense of others, so my presentation of Collingwood’s account of absolute presuppositions has downplayed the historicist passages in *An Essay on Metaphysics* which have informed the standard reading of Collingwood’s metaphysics (Toulmin 1972, Rotenstreich 1972, Donagan 1972), a reading which would bring Collingwood’s epistemic pluralism closer to the belief system relativism that Boghossian ascribes to Rorty, but which would also make it vulnerable to the twin charges of quietism and internal incoherence that belief system relativism struggles to answer. There are always, inevitably, hermeneutic choices to be made. I have made mine fully cognizant of the fact that the interpretative choices one makes reflect the kind of philosopher one is.

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1. Hinge epistemology is often discussed in the context of Wittgenstein [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In this example of a relative presupposition Collingwood is referring to a measuring tape, not to the unit of measurement, the foot. The question “is the foot accurate as a unit of measurement?” is the kind of question which Collingwood would have most likely treated as one which cannot be answered by stating either “yes the foot is an accurate unit of measurement, or ‘no, the foot is not an accurate unit of measurement’. In other words, Collingwood would have treated the proposition “the foot is an accurate unit of measurement” not as an ordinary proposition that can be found to be true or false, but as a presupposition to which the notion of truth and falsity does not apply, and moreover as the kind of presupposition which cannot be restated as a proposition by changing its role. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On what is unfortunately a standard reading of Collingwood, this rejection of metaphysics allegedly leads to the dissolution of philosophy into a form of cultural anthropology. Since the task of the metaphysician is no longer to assess absolute presuppositions for truth or falsity and to discuss, for example, whether there are causes, or whether there is freedom of the will, the task of metaphysics is downgraded to that of establishing what people tended to believe at certain times and places. On this view metaphysics simply gets dissolved into history. While there are passages that lend support to the standard interpretation of what philosophy is supposed to do if not to discuss the truth or falsity of the most general propositions about reality, the standard interpretation is clearly at odds with Collingwood’s view that metaphysics (understood as the study of absolute presuppositions) is a logical enquiry and that the philosopher is a kind of detective who uncovers presuppositions by following the logical clues that they leave in the questions to which they give rise. Thus while the explanatory practices that metaphysics studies are historically instantiated, the logical regress from answers to questions, and from questions to presuppositions, is not a descriptive historical process. The standard interpretation of *An Essay on Metaphysics* as dissolving metaphysics into history brings Collingwood closer to the kind of relativistic pluralism of Rorty. But such an interpretation fails to acknowledge the full implications of Collingwood’s claim that presuppositions do not possess causal power, but logical efficacy, and therefore that they stand to the questions to which they give rise as their logical rather than causal ground. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Collingwood was interested in the form of inferences which govern the explanation of action and of events. These received extensive treatment by Dray (1963, 1967, 1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. My goal is not to evaluate whether Boghossian’s reconstruction of Rorty is correct. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a comparison of Collingwood and Carnap on this see D’Oro 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. There is a third objection against epistemic relativism which Boghossian deems to be even more powerful than the self-undermining objection. This is the claim that epistemic relativism advances incomplete propositions (Boghossian 2006: 87 ff.) which potentially generate a vicious regress (2006: 89). As Boghossian says, it is crucial to the relativist that a thinker *accepts* a belief system (Boghossian 2006: 86). This entails that propositions such as “Copernicanism is justified by Galileo’s observations” is incomplete and stands for “In relation to epistemic system C (which the subject accepts), Copernicanism is justified by Galileo’s observations”. I have not considered this objection in much detail because, although distinct from the self-undermining objection, it relies on a premise to which the hinge epistemology that I have ascribed to Collingwood is not wedded: Collingwood, as we have seen, denies that presuppositions do their work in virtue of being believed or accepted as true by the subject. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)