**Conclusion**

There are two ways to try to implement the thought that all facts are constructed: cookie-cutter constructivism and relativistic constructivism. Both versions face decisive difficulties. The cookie-cutter version succumbs to the problems with causation, conceptual competence and disagreement. And the relativistic version faces a decisive dilemma: either it isn’t intelligible or it isn’t relativism. We have no choice but to recognize that there must be some objective, mind-independent facts. This argument, of course, doesn’t tell us all by itself which facts obtain and which ones don’t; nor does it tell us, of the facts that do obtain, which ones are mind-independent and which ones aren’t. But once we see that there is no general philosophical obstacle to acknowledging mind-independent facts, we also see that we have been given no reason for supposing that those facts aren’t just the ones we always took them to be—facts about dinosaurs, giraffes, mountains, and so forth.

Boghossian, Paul A. (2006-04-27). Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism (p. 57). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

**Rejecting Global Relativism: The Traditional Argument**

Philosophers have long suspected that a global relativism about facts is a fundamentally incoherent position. A local relativism about a specific domain—moral relativism, for example—may not be particularly plausible; but it seems coherent. In contrast, many philosophers have held that a relativism gone global makes no sense. Why not? The rough idea behind this oft-repeated traditional objection is that any relativistic thesis needs to commit itself to there being at least some absolute truths; yet what a global relativism asserts is that there are no absolute truths. Hence, a global relativism is bound to be incoherent. I agree with this traditional objection—though I do not agree with the traditional argument by which it is defended. The traditional argument is elegantly rendered by Thomas Nagel (Nagel uses the words “subjective” and “objective” in place of my “relative” and absolute,” respectively):

... the claim “Everything is subjective” must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either subjective or objective. But it can’t be objective, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be subjective, because then it would not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false. There may be some subjectivists, perhaps styling themselves as pragmatists, who present subjectivism as applying even to itself. But then it does not call for a reply, since it is a report of what the subjectivist finds it agreeable to say. If he also invites us to join him, we need not offer any reason for declining since he has offered us no reason to accept.36 According to this traditional argument, then, the global relativist is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Either he intends his own view to be absolutely true, or he intends it to be only relatively true, true relative to some theory or other. If the former, he refutes himself, for he would then have admitted at least one absolute truth. If the latter, we may just ignore him, for then it is just a report of what the relativist finds it agreeable to say. Relativists are prone to dismissing self-refutation arguments of this sort as clever bits of logical trickery that have no real bearing on the issues at hand. That attitude, I think, is a mistake. It is always a good idea to ask how some very general view about truth, knowledge, or meaning applies to itself; and few things could be more damaging to a view than to discover that it is false by its own lights. Having said that, however, it has to be noted that it is not clear that this particular self-refutation argument is sound, for it is not clear that it follows from the concession that relativism is itself to be true only relative to a theory, that it is just a report of what the relativist “finds it agreeable to say.” Perhaps relativism is true relative to a theory that it pays for us all to accept, relativists and non-relativists alike. For this reason, then, I am not impressed with the traditional argument for the claim that global relativism is self-refuting. There is, however, a stronger argument to the same effect. Rejecting Global Relativism: A Different Argument The global relativist maintains that there could be no facts of the form 12. There have been dinosaurs but only facts of the form 13. According to a theory that we accept, there have been dinosaurs. Well and good. But are we now supposed to think that there are absolute facts of this latter form, facts about which theories we accept? There are three problems for the relativist who answers “yes” to this question. First, and most decisively, he would be abandoning any hope of expressing the argument is sound, for it is not clear that it follows from the concession that relativism is itself to be true only relative to a theory, that it is just a report of what the relativist “finds it agreeable to say.” Perhaps relativism is true relative to a theory that it pays for us all to accept, relativists and non-relativists alike. For this reason, then, I am not impressed with the traditional argument for the claim that global relativism is self-refuting. There is, however, a stronger argument to the same effect.

**Rejecting Global Relativism: A Different Argument**

The global relativist maintains that there could be no facts of the form 12. There have been dinosaurs but only facts of the form 13. According to a theory that we accept, there have been dinosaurs. Well and good. But are we now supposed to think that there are absolute facts of this latter form, facts about which theories we accept? There are three problems for the relativist who answers “yes” to this question. First, and most decisively, he would be abandoning any hope of expressing the view he wanted to express, namely that there are no absolute facts of any kind, but only relative facts. Instead, he would end up expressing the view that the only absolute facts there are, are facts about what theories different communities accept. He would be proposing, in other words, that the only absolute facts there are, are facts about our beliefs. And this would no longer be a global relativism.

Second, this would be a very peculiar view in its own right, for it’s hard to believe that there is a difficulty about absolute facts concerning mountains and giraffes, but none concerning what beliefs people have. This seems to get things exactly the wrong way round. It is the mental that has always seemed most puzzling to philosophers, not the physical—so much so, indeed, that many of them have been driven to rejecting facts about the mental outright, eliminating them from their conception of what the world contains. Philosophers who advocate doing this are called “eliminativists,” and it is perhaps just a little ironic that one of the most influential early eliminativists was Richard Rorty himself.37 Finally, the relativist is not driven to his position by the peculiar thought that facts about the mental are somehow in better shape than facts about the physical; if that were his motivation, he would owe us a very different sort of argument from the one to which he typically appeals. It would have to be an argument not about the mysteriousness of absolute facts as such, but about the mysteriousness of absolute facts about the physical in particular, in contrast with those concerning the mental. But that is not at all what the global relativist has in mind. His initial thought, rather, is that there is something incoherent about the very possibility of an absolute fact, whether this concerns physical facts or mental facts or normative facts. It is, therefore, not really a viable option for the relativist to answer “yes” to the question we posed: are there absolute facts of the kind described in (13)? But what would it mean to answer “no”? If it isn’t simply true that we accept a theory according to which there have been dinosaurs, then that must be because that fact itself obtains only relative to a theory that we accept. So, the thought must be that the only facts there are, are of the form: According to a theory that we accept, there is a theory that we accept and according to this latter theory, there have been dinosaurs. And, now, of course, the dialectic repeats itself. At each stage of the looming regress, the relativist will have to deny that the claim at that stage can be simply true and will have to insist that it itself is true only relative to a theory that we accept. The upshot is that the fact-relativist is committed to the view that the only facts there are, are infinitary facts of the form: According to a theory that we accept, there is a theory that we accept and according to this latter theory, there is a theory that we accept and ... there have been dinosaurs. But it is absurd to propose that, in order for our utterances to have any prospect of being true, what we must mean by them are infinitary propositions that we could neither express nor understand. The real dilemma facing the global relativist, then, is this: either the formulation that he offers us does not succeed in expressing the view that there are only relative facts; or it consists in the claim that we should so reinterpret our utterances that they express infinitary propositions that we can neither express nor understand.

**Conclusion**

There are two ways to try to implement the thought that all facts are constructed: cookie-cutter constructivism and relativistic constructivism. Both versions face decisive difficulties. The cookie-cutter version succumbs to the problems with causation, conceptual competence and disagreement. And the relativistic version faces a decisive dilemma: either it isn’t intelligible or it isn’t relativism. We have no choice but to recognize that there must be some objective, mind-independent facts. This argument, of course, doesn’t tell us all by itself which facts obtain and which ones don’t; nor does it tell us, of the facts that do obtain, which ones are mind-independent and which ones aren’t. But once we see that there is no general philosophical obstacle to acknowledging mind-independent facts, we also see that we have been given no reason for supposing that those facts aren’t just the ones we always took them to be—facts about dinosaurs, giraffes, mountains, and so forth.

Boghossian, Paul A. (2006-04-27). Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism (p. 57). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Conclusion There are two ways to try to implement the thought that all facts are constructed: cookie-cutter constructivism and relativistic constructivism. Both versions face decisive difficulties. The cookie-cutter version succumbs to the problems with causation, conceptual competence and disagreement. And the relativistic version faces a decisive dilemma: either it isn’t intelligible or it isn’t relativism. We have no choice but to recognize that there must be some objective, mind-independent facts. This argument, of course, doesn’t tell us all by itself which facts obtain and which ones don’t; nor does it tell us, of the facts that do obtain, which ones are mind-independent and which ones aren’t. But once we see that there is no general philosophical obstacle to acknowledging mind-independent facts, we also see that we have been given no reason for supposing that those facts aren’t just the ones we always took them to be—facts about dinosaurs, giraffes, mountains, and so forth.

Boghossian, Paul A. (2006-04-27). Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism (pp. 52-57). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.