

Yuichi Minemura

Critiques of Naturalistic Epistemology:

Is Our Knowledge Descriptive and/or Normative?

Traditional epistemologists consider that we get knowledge when we justify our beliefs. On their view, knowledge is gained through our internal states of mind. We need to evaluate our beliefs under a justificational condition. Historically, traditional epistemologists are interested in normative questions such as “What should we believe?”, “Under what conditions are our beliefs justified?” On the other hand, in general, naturalistic epistemologists do not concern themselves with such normative questions. According to them, our beliefs are gained by a naturalistic relationship to the external world. Our knowledge is confirmed by an empirical procedure such as a description of the mechanisms by which our beliefs are produced. We do not have to have justification and internal awareness in acquiring knowledge. My aim, first of all, is to show naturalistic accounts of epistemology such that “knowledge is gained through the empirical way like science” are not enough to explain our knowledge, and secondly, to contend that we need to evaluate our beliefs according to certain norms in order to obtain knowledge.

Naturalistic Epistemology

On Quine’s naturalistic view, epistemology is a chapter of psychology. Psychology provides a description of the mechanisms by which our beliefs are produced. So, Quine is not concerned with normative questions which traditional epistemologists are interested in. On his view, our knowledge is a natural phenomenon, and so we gain knowledge through a process that takes sensory stimulation as input and provides theories as output. Thus, empirical procedure is used by naturalistic epistemologists for studying the process of getting knowledge.

“Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a

chapter of psychology and hence natural science”(Quine, 82).

According to Quine, there is the rejection of a priori concepts. Thus, he rejects the conception of epistemology as first philosophy. First philosophy comes from Descartes' view such that we are certain that we exist as thinking things. First philosophy is the foundation of Descartes' epistemology. According to Descartes' s foundationalism, our own conscious states of our being are foundational beliefs. Other beliefs are derived from such foundational beliefs which are indubitable and non-inferential. Quine claims that the account from the foundational beliefs that are certain and infallible is not clearly demonstrated, and criticizes any a priori infallible reason by rejecting the analytic-synthetic distinction from the viewpoint of his holism such as the view that “No statement is immune to rational revision.”

All our beliefs change, and even if beliefs seem to be independent of an empirical status, they change because there is no a priori truth and analytic-synthetic distinction. So, Descartes' foundationalism as first philosophy must be rejected according to Quine. Descartes considers that epistemology is logically prior to science from the view of his first philosophy, and thus precedes science. However, according to Quine, we are not sure whether there are a priori truths. So, epistemology cannot precede science. We should consider that epistemology is continuous with science.

According to Goldman, we get knowledge of something when our beliefs of something are caused by certain facts about it. On his view, when I know that there is a table in front of me, my belief that there is such a table is caused by the fact that there is a table. This view is further improved by the account of a justified belief. Goldman describes, “A belief is justified just in case it is reliably produced, just in case it is the product of a psychological process which tends to produce true beliefs” (Kornblith, 241). Goldman analyzes the concept of knowledge, but his

way is different from the traditional one. According to traditional accounts, “a person is justified in holding a belief just in case a good argument for the belief is available to that person” (Kornblith, 242). On the other hand, according to Goldman, “a person is justified in holding a belief just in case the belief is produced in the right sort of way; the person in question has no idea at all about how the belief is produced, not need any sort of argument for the belief be available to the person”(Kornblith, 242). That is, on Goldman’s view, our beliefs are justified in terms of not our grasp of the justificatory argument but the causal history of our beliefs.

On the view of Goldman’s reliabilism, our beliefs are justified according to the psychological processes that make the belief true. Our justified beliefs are produced by appropriate psychological processes, whereas unjustified beliefs are produced by inappropriate ones. That is, a belief’s justificational status depends on the psychological process which has high reliability to make the belief true. Quine and Goldman have important common sense in that epistemology becomes an empirical discipline and is continuous with the sciences. That is, epistemology is an empirical epistemology. They are not concerned with any a priori reason in epistemology.

According to Kornblith, naturalistic epistemologists try to explain how the psychological mechanisms by which beliefs are produced are conducive to the production of true beliefs because there is no good reason to show that every psychological belief production must be reliable. It might be that such mechanisms produce false beliefs.

On the view of naturalistic epistemology, various presuppositions of our mechanisms of belief production fit with certain various pervasive features of the world so that the resulting beliefs tend to get things right. Kornblith gives an explanation of the account. He takes an example of the familiar illusion in which a series of lights are turned on and off in succession so as to give the impression of motion. Actually, there is no motion, but we have an impression of motion.

That is, our visual system works by assuming a world populated by three-dimensional objects when we get a series of impressions which might be caused by such objects. That is, we have the assumption that our world is mostly made up of three-dimensional objects, and our visual system works according to the assumption. In other words, the assumption of our visual system corresponds to pervasive features of the world, that is, reliably gained information of the world. So, we tend to discover reliable processes such as the visual system which is adjusted to pervasive features of our world.

On Kornblith's view, our native inference also works similarly. Our inference works well according to the reliable environments to which we belong. We have a feature of the human concept that we assume that natural kinds have real essence, and our psychology pursues pervasive features of the world. So, the natural phenomenon that our psychology fits the pervasive features of the world makes our knowledge possible. Thus, naturalistic epistemology becomes an empirical discipline and works in psychology.

“It is for this reason that epistemology becomes an empirical discipline, continuous with the sciences, and it is for this reason that epistemology must draw so heavily on work in psychology”

(Kornblith, 248)

Critiques of Naturalistic Epistemology

On the view of naturalistic epistemology, we depend on processes or properties other than the internal states when our beliefs are justified. That is, we have some relationship to the external world for the account of our justified beliefs, and get knowledge without internal awareness of getting knowledge. In other words, we get knowledge through our relationship to the external world regardless of our internal sense. Lehrer critically considers externalism and

naturalistic epistemology from the view of his coherence theory. On his view, naturalistic accounts just show that to have knowledge is to possess information rather than to attain knowledge. That is, to have knowledge is just to record information according to external and naturalistic accounts. On Lehrer's view, just to possess or record information does not mean to have knowledge.

“All externalist theories share a common defect, to wit, that they provide accounts of the possession of information rather than of the attainment of knowledge”(Lehrer, 162)

Let me criticize some points of naturalistic epistemology. First of all, naturalistic epistemology lacks the necessary account of our knowledge such that we need the supplementation of background information in acquiring knowledge. My view is that background information involves concepts and environment to which our beliefs belong. That is, our beliefs are converted into knowledge when the beliefs are justified by cognizers with the concepts and environment underlying them. In other words, a necessary condition of our knowledge is coherence with the system to which our beliefs belong. Lehrer describes, “To convert the specified relationships into knowledge, we need the additional information of the existence of those relationships”(Lehrer, 162).

Naturalistic epistemology is based on factual and descriptive characteristics while traditional epistemology is not concerned with them. On naturalistic epistemology, epistemology is a continuous with science, and we just follow the process of getting knowledge by observing input of information and output of theories according to information in the same way as scientists study a natural phenomenon and deliver theories according to the phenomenon. Quine describes, “This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input...and in the fullness of

time the subject delivers as output a description of three dimensional external world and its history”(Quine, 82)

Naturalistic epistemologists are concerned with the process of making theories from observation. They follow the process in which we get information and provide theories according to empirical facts in order to obtain knowledge. However, when we just follow the process, we cannot understand what something gained by the process is because we just deal with something in a mechanical way, and do not concern the meaning of it. To understand what our beliefs are, we need background (additional) information underlying them because such information gives us standards under which we understand what our beliefs are.

Second, naturalistic epistemologists mostly do not concern themselves with normativity of knowledge which traditional epistemologists carefully consider. Normativity of knowledge is concerned with questions such as “Why we ought to have knowledge?”, “What does it mean that we have knowledge?”, and so on. On the view of naturalistic epistemology, normativity of knowledge should be replaced by descriptive science. However, in my view, it is dubious that our beliefs are justified by only a descriptive way without any normativity. I think that unless our beliefs are exposed to the reason and justificational condition, beliefs will stay as beliefs, and not turn into knowledge. My view is that there is a difference between knowledge and a belief about the degree of certainty, and our beliefs change into knowledge when they are justificationaly evaluated by our reason. We need the reason or justification to confirm our beliefs for increasing the likelihood that the beliefs are true, and our beliefs change into knowledge through such a justificational process.

As we justify our beliefs, we need normativity of knowledge because we necessarily make evaluation of the concepts of them. That is, when we know something, we need to normatively

evaluate our beliefs with the concepts under our interpretation. In other words, we attribute our beliefs to ourselves with their concepts under our normative interpretation to identify the beliefs as knowledge. Something gained through the causal relation without an interpretation is not qualified as knowledge, and it is just an object which does not have the meaning to be understood by us.

According to Kim, we consider our concepts of knowledge when we justify our knowledge. That is, justification of knowledge means analysis of its concept. Through analyzing the concept of knowledge, knowledge is a normative notion. Quine's naturalistic epistemology does not concern the concept of knowledge. On Quine's view, from the third person perspective, we study the process how our sensory input information from the external world changes into the output of beliefs about the world. So, Quine does not concern the justificational process such that we attain knowledge by recognizing our beliefs with our internal states under our own interpretation.

“Quine seldom talks about knowledge; instead, he talks about ‘science’ and ‘theories’ and ‘representations’. Quine would have us investigate how sensory stimulation ‘leads’ to ‘theories’ and ‘representations’ of the world” (Kim, 224).

On naturalistic epistemology, we do not have to evaluate whether we justify our beliefs gained through the process to input information and output theories. For Quine, knowledge is attained through the causal relation between input and output. Thus, his naturalistic epistemology is causal. However, in my view, if naturalistic epistemologists do not concern the normative concept of a belief, they do not understand the content of something gained through the causal relation. We need the concept or presupposition of our beliefs even if we depend on something gained through the reliable causal relation in a naturalistic or empirical way so that we

understand what it is. That is, to change our beliefs into knowledge, we not only investigate the process of the input and output of cognizers, deal with something gained through the process as knowledge like a machinery, but evaluate something gained through the process of a reliable causal relation with the concepts underlying it.

When we see an object, it means that we see the object with its concepts and presupposition underlying it. In other words, the concepts and presupposition underlying the object give us its meaning. We need to understand the object with our own interpretation based on its concepts. Kim describes, "...that is, we must construct an 'interpretative theory' that simultaneously assigns meanings to his utterances and attributes to him beliefs and other propositional attitudes"(Kim, 228). Our knowledge is not free from our interpretation, but gained under certain norms such as concepts. Our activity to know something is taken by observation with our own interpretation. That is, through the process to have knowledge of something, we naturally use the concepts and presupposition underlying its knowledge because a given belief of something is placed in a network of other beliefs.

Traditional epistemologists contend that normativity is not taken by naturalists as far as naturalistic epistemology is a kind of science and becomes merely descriptive. However, according to Kornblith, naturalistic epistemology does not rob itself of its normative force, and epistemic advice is empirically informed. If we try to give epistemic advice to agents, we can give it by telling where agents tend to error, what kinds of psychological process of agents tend to be reliable, and so on according to empirical facts.

“As I have already indicated, the project of providing useful epistemic advice must be empirically informed, for we need to know what kinds of errors human beings are most liable to make if we are to give advice

where it is most needed” (Kornblith, 250)

Kornblith tries to contend that we can depend on empirical facts and theories which have normative implication such as epistemic advice in order to obtain knowledge. I agree with his view in that we usually get much epistemic advice from empirical facts and theories such as past experience and empirical data, but my argument point is not to criticize that empirical facts has epistemic advice but to argue how to interpret empirical facts. In general, according to naturalistic epistemology, our psychology tends to capture the empirical facts, and we gain knowledge through the process to take sensory stimulation as input and to provide theories as output according to empirical facts, but my view is that we do not just accept information according to empirical facts without any norms, but gain knowledge by interpreting information according to the facts under concepts underlying it.

Let me clarify my view again. I do not criticize Kornblith’s view that empirical facts has normative implication because we usually get epistemic advice from empirical facts. My point is that we need fundamental norms such as concepts to interpret empirical facts. That is, there is a difference between my and Kornblith’s claims about the kinds of normativity. I claim that it is necessary for us to have fundamental norms and categories such as concepts to interpret empirical facts. When we see the facts, we see them with norms such as concepts and presupposition underlying them. In other words, we can understand what empirical facts are according to the norms underlying them. On the one hand, Kornblith contends that there are practical norms such as epistemic advice to provide agents guidelines for getting knowledge. According to Kornblith, epistemic advice is empirically informed, and we can give agents epistemic advice according to empirical facts. I do not criticize that practical normative tasks

such as epistemic advice are included within naturalistic epistemology, although I doubt that our knowledge is gained through only a descriptive way because we need fundamental norms such as concepts to get knowledge. Also, I appreciate some naturalistic epistemologists' claim such that our knowledge is not only descriptive but normative. I support Kornblith's view such that, "Even if there is a natural category that plays a certain important causal role, ... , the kind of knowledge philosophers are interested in is not rightly thought of as such a kind. In a word, philosophical talk of knowledge is not merely descriptive, it is prescriptive" (Kornblith, 159).

Finally, I do not tend to support the rejection of a priori reason. According to naturalistic epistemologists, we get knowledge by observing evidence such as the process to relate certain information as input into some theory as output. They believe this because direct observation has enough reason to let us consider it to be true on their views. However, when we try to know an object that transcends direct observation, that is, non-observational or non-experiential one, we surely cannot understand such an transcendent object only by direct observation. Our reason to have non-observational or non-experiential beliefs comes from either (1) the inference of some direct observation, or (2) just a priori notions. Even if we depend on the inference of some direct observation, it means that we need a priori ways of justification because the inference is one of a priori ones. If we have no a priori reason, we would not know that non-observational or non-experiential beliefs beyond direct observation are true because we cannot depend on a priori justification such as the inference. It is difficult for us to have a good account to contend that non-observational or non-experiential beliefs are true from the view of naturalistic epistemology that there is no a priori reason.

“Thus if, as the naturalist claims, there are no a priori reasons for thinking anything to be true... the inevitable result is that we have no

reason for thinking that any of our beliefs whose content transcends direct observation are true”(Bonjour, 252).

If we deny that there is a priori reason, we would also have to deny that there are non-observable or non-experiential beliefs because we have no justificational way to get them. It seems to me that it is difficult to deny all a-priori reason. I believe this because we have a lot of non-observable or non-experiential beliefs such as mathematical and metaphysical beliefs, and depend on deductive reasoning and a priori justificational ways such as the inference to recognize those beliefs. Also, in my view, fundamental concepts which we have such as extension, form, and so on are kinds of non-observable entities gained through a priori reason (I believe most of other concepts are gained a posteriori, though).

In conclusion, we recognize information which comes from an external world under norms of rationality such as concepts. In other words, we, rational beings, interpret information as our knowledge with its concepts. Without our rational evaluation of information, we cannot recognize what it is. It is just an object which has no meaning to be understood by us, and does not satisfy the epistemological status to be understood as our knowledge. Kim supports my view by describing, “...the only point that matters is that unless the output of our cognizer is subject to evaluation in accordance with norms of rationality, that output cannot be considered as consisting of beliefs, and hence cannot be the object of an epistemological inquiry” (Kim, 228)

According to naturalistic epistemology, how evidence relates theory from the view of the third person perspective is defined in a descriptive way. They do not consider evidence from the normative and evaluative concept of evidence. However, if we do not have any norms, we cannot understand what it is even if we have evidence gained by a reliable process for a certain claim because it does not have normative and evaluative standards. The empirical way just describes

evidence between information as input and theory as output in an objective way, but does not give us the standards of evaluation.

“Psychology can describe ways in which beliefs of various sorts are caused by sensory experience..., but it is not within the province of psychology to offer any assessment of the rational acceptability of those beliefs on that bases” (Bonjour, 242).

Kornblith contends that naturalistic epistemology does not rob itself of its normative force in that epistemic advice is empirically informed. We can give epistemic advice to agents from empirical facts and theories which have normative implication. I agree with the view because empirical facts certainly have normative implication, and our behavior is normative according to epistemic advice taken from empirical facts. However, my point is to argue how to interpret the empirical facts. According to naturalistic epistemology, it seems to me that our psychology captures the empirical facts without any norms in a mechanical way. My view is that we do not accept empirical facts in a mechanical way. We obtain knowledge by evaluating empirical facts under normative concepts underlying them. That we have knowledge is a rational and intelligible activity. Our knowledge is gained not in a mechanical way, but through the evaluation process. That is, knowledge is gained under certain norms. Also, we should not deny the existence of a priori reason since we depend on a priori ways of justification from which non-observable or non-experiential beliefs are deduced.

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