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Quine's Naturalism: Language, Theory, and the Knowing Subject

PAUL A. GREGORY

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This is a useful book. The author discusses common objections to Quine's naturalistic epistemology – i.e., that it is circular, that it is nonnormative, and that it involves a change of subject relative to traditional epistemology – and he argues that these objections are no good. He claims that “properly understood, the circular nature of Quine's naturalism is [...] unproblematic, and [...] his epistemology is normative” (p. 23). Moreover, “while Quine *has* radically changed the subject, the change is philosophically relevant and epistemologically illuminating” (p. 5), “Quine's conception of epistemology is a radical change for the better” (p. 132). This is so because traditional epistemology rests on certain presuppositions that are mistaken; when these are abandoned, Quine's naturalism is a plausible answer to the traditional worries about our knowledge of the external world.

Traditional epistemology attempts to improve the clarity and reliability of our scientific beliefs. In the case of natural knowledge, clarity may be improved if we could define our theoretical concepts in sensory terms; reliability or certainty might be achieved if we were able to derive our theories from sensory experience. However, Quine argues that such attempts cannot possibly succeed. This is so for several reasons. First, according to epistemic holism, theoretical sentences do not in general have any empirical content by themselves, but only together with many other theoretical sentences. Larger theories may have empirical content, but then they are underdetermined in the sense that radically different theories may have the very same content.

Second, Quine rejects the language/theory dichotomy that is presupposed by traditional epistemology. Epistemology needs a language, but a person cannot have a language without also having a number of more or less trivial beliefs about the world; hence, epistemology cannot start without any such beliefs, it must begin in the middle of things. (This is the message of Neurath's (1932) parable: “Like sailors we are, who must rebuild their ship upon the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry dock or reconstruct it there from the best materials”.) Gregory shows how, for Quine, “the meaningfulness of linguistic behavior is

seen as dependent upon coordinated patterns of response to environmental stimuli”, where “the resulting shared dispositions to response constitute a shared rudimentary theory”, so that “we can no longer view the subject as a pure and potentially isolated intellect. Instead, the knowing subject is viewed as an adaptive organism interacting with its environment” (p. 64).

Third, Quine accepts Hume’s thesis that theories cannot be derived from empirical data: “The Humean predicament is the human predicament” (Quine 1969, p. 72). He also agrees with Popper: “Traditional epistemology sought grounds in sensory experience capable of implying our theories about the world, or at least endowing those theories with some increment of probability. Sir Karl Popper has long stressed, to the contrary, that observation serves only to refute theory and not to support it” (1992, p. 12). “It is clearly true [...] that one continually reasons not only in refutation of hypotheses but in support of them. This, however, is a matter of arguing logically or probabilistically from other beliefs already held. [...] Some of those supporting beliefs may be observational, but they contribute support only in company with others that are theoretical. Pure observation lends only negative evidence [...]” (1992, p. 13). The upshot of this is that you cannot argue *for* a belief, unless you already have a number of beliefs. This too is in line with Neurath’s parable.

So epistemology, in the traditional sense, is impossible. But Quine argues that something similar *is* possible, namely a naturalized epistemology that attempts to “see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one’s theory of nature transcends any available evidence” (1969, p. 83), a “rational reconstruction of the individual’s and/or the race’s actual acquisition of a responsible theory of the external world” (1995, p. 16). This project would make use of whatever scientific findings that are relevant and available. From a traditional standpoint, this may seem circular, but for Quine “such scruples against circularity have little point once we have stopped dreaming of deducing science from observations” (1969, p. 76).

According to Gregory, this is an “unsatisfying dismissal” of the circularity objection (p. 19). He believes that Quine’s epistemology is circular. Perhaps he is led to this view by statements like the following: “Unlike the old epistemologists, we seek no firmer basis for science than science itself” (Quine 1995, p. 16). Such talk about a “basis” for science may invite the circularity objection that nothing can be a basis for itself. However, a coherentist about justification may reply that it is rather a matter of *some* ingredients of a system being justified by their coherence with *other* ingredients of the same system (Bergström 2008, p. 34). The epistemologist cannot justify his own system from outside; what he can do is to “scrutinize and improve the system from within, appealing to coherence and simplicity” (Quine 1960, p. 276). This is hardly circular, at least not in a vicious way. The objector may

perhaps insist that coherentism itself needs to be justified, and that coherentism cannot be justified by coherentist methods. But why not? It may not be justifiable in the externalist sense that would satisfy the objector, but then Quine would reply that such external justification is impossible anyway.

In any case, Gregory regards the circularity he attributes to Quine's naturalism as "unproblematic" (pp. 23, 122). He also claims that traditional epistemology "is equally caught in a sort of global circularity", since it relies upon (different) conceptions of language, theory, and the knowing subject (p. 131).

As mentioned above, Gregory believes that Quine's naturalism is normative. So does Quine: "A normative domain within epistemology survives the conversion to naturalism, contrary to widespread belief, and it is concerned with the art of guessing, or framing hypotheses" (1995, p. 49). Included here are norms recommending conservatism and simplicity, and various other means of "correcting and refining [...] our innate propensities to expectation by induction"; moreover, "statistical theory is part and parcel of normative epistemology" (1995, p. 50).

Gregory correctly takes the norms of Quine's epistemology to be purely instrumental: "normativity becomes a matter of describing which procedures best promote predictively successful theories" (p. 87). But Gregory also accepts the norm that "we should aim at predictive success" (p. 118). This seems to be a deviation from Quine, who says that predictions are not the main purpose or the only purpose of science, but rather "the checkpoints of science" (1992, p. 20), and that "when I cite predictions as the checkpoints of science, I do not see that as normative. I see it as defining a particular language game, in Wittgenstein's phrase; the game of science, in contrast to other good language games such as fiction and poetry" (1992, p. 20).

By contrast, Gregory believes that science should aim at predictive success because "developing theories which yield successful sensory prediction is conducive to successful interaction with the world, including (first and foremost) survival of the individual and the species" (p. 104). He does not tell us why science should serve the purpose of such survival.

Moreover, Gregory thinks that predictive success is a means to truth, that "the perfectly predicting theory must be true" (p. 110). This seems to be another deviation from Quine, even though Gregory argues that it is Quine's view. In support of his interpretation, Gregory cites Quine's statement that "[o]ur overall scientific theory demands of the world only that it be so structured as to assure the sequences of stimulation that our theory gives us to expect" (1981, p. 22). But Quine's thesis of underdetermination suggests that radically different theories may

be empirically equivalent, and his naturalism favors a sectarian position about this, according to which an alien theory that is empirically equivalent to ours would *not* be true (1992, p. 99). This is so because truth, for Quine, is immanent. So an alien theory may be conformable to every possible observation, and hence “perfectly predicting”, but it would not be true (see Bergström 2008, pp. 41-2).

Let us return to normativity. When Gregory and Quine argue that naturalistic epistemology is partly normative, they seem to use the term “normative” in a sense that is not what proponents of traditional epistemology have in mind. Traditional epistemologists may agree with Jaegwon Kim, e.g., who says that “[e]pistemology is a normative discipline as much as, and in the same sense as, normative ethics” (1994, p. 35). Surely, normative ethics is not merely concerned with instrumental norms that describe effective means to some given end; rather, it attempts to find out which end we *ought* to aim at.

In a passage from Kim (1994, p. 44) that is quoted by Gregory (p. 88), Kim suggests that the traditional epistemologist tries to assess whether, and to what degree, observation “justifies” the scientist’s theoretical output, “how a given irradiation of the subject’s retinas makes it “reasonable” or “rational” for the subject to emit certain representational output”; the naturalist’s interest, on the other hand, “is strictly causal and nomological: he wants us to look for patterns of lawlike dependencies characterizing the input-output relations”. Gregory objects to this, but presumably Kim is quite right. In fact, while there is *verbal* disagreement between Kim and Gregory concerning the normativity of Quine’s position, there seems to be no *real* disagreement between them. The only substantial question here is whether traditional epistemology is normative in a sense that Quine’s naturalism is not. Kim thinks so, but his view is questionable (see Bergström 2008, pp. 28-30, 38-9).

Even if Gregory’s account of Quine’s naturalism is not wholly convincing, it is very often quite correct and also illuminating. That is why the book is useful. However, the text is rather long-winded and repetitious, the main points are made again and again. This tends to make the exposition somewhat tedious.

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