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Naturalism and its Opponents

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Ever since Descartes began his search for certainty in philosophy, many of the great philosophers have taken up this quest. One solution, proposed by WVO Quine in his 1969 essay, *Naturalized Epistemology*, claims that we must refrain from studying epistemology in philosophy. Quine claims that our study of knowledge must only occur in the field of psychology and that we should refrain from talking about these issues in philosophy. As one can imagine, Quine's essay was met with much criticism and anger among philosophers. Most notably, Hilary Putnam provides a devastating critique of naturalized epistemology in his essay, *Why Reason Can't be Naturalized*. In this paper, I present both men's views, and argue that Putnam's response, while not perfect, does demolish the bases for Quine's arguments about knowledge.

Naturalized epistemology has spawned one of the great debates among philosophers for almost half a century. Should we eliminate epistemology as a field of philosophy and, instead, look at it from the view of psychology? This problem stems from an even greater problem, the problem of skepticism, the rational doubt of what we can know and how much we can know it. Only recently has the debate encountered this new version: naturalized epistemology. In this paper, I explain naturalized epistemology and the problems that arise from it.

Throughout the history of epistemology, philosophers have debated about the ways to go about defining what knowledge is. Many, like Descartes, believed that knowledge consisted mainly in some form of justificatory belief. This idea later received the acronym, JTB, justified true belief. It was this tendency to search for justification, which the philosopher, W. V. Quine, spoke out against in his landmark essay, *Epistemology Naturalized*.

Quine decided that we needed to move epistemology away from its more "normative" aspects, and instead center it in the field of psychology. He believed that epistemology, as previously understood, could never lead us to the answer of the question epistemologists asked, "What is knowledge?" So, Quine took the route that he claims Hume suggested, that we link epistemology with a form of psychology, since science is verifiable by nature, while philosophy is not.

Now, as a brief explanation, the “normative” refers to the standard way of looking at epistemology. These normative claims rely on their stability as a basis for knowledge. What Quine proposes is that epistemology needs to be moved away from any accepted foundation. What this will effectively accomplish is to turn epistemology into an ambiguous science.

As one can expect, Quine’s notion of epistemology being naturalized and transformed into just another science, was met with much resistance. Many philosophers, most notably Hilary Putnam, argued that we should not undertake Quine’s challenge, since he abandoned philosophy and the nature of justification. Putnam argued that Quine’s puzzling resistance to Cartesian justification, echoing Hume’s skepticism of knowledge, would lead to a complete elimination of epistemology as it had been understood for centuries.

The debate between supporters of naturalism in epistemology and naturalism’s opponents has raged ever since Quine published his essay. Jaegwon Kim, in his recent essay, *What is Naturalized Epistemology?*, continues the opposition to Quine’s view. Kim specifically attacks Quine’s assertions about justification. Quine, for Kim, by losing justification, has taken all knowledge out of the field of epistemology, which defeats its original purpose. What follows in the wake of removing justification, for Quine, is a reliance on the connection between evidence and theory. However, Kim claims that evidence and justification are, in fact, one and the same. So, you cannot have one without the other.

Inherently, this debate is about justification and its meaning. If we are to abandon justification because it is difficult to define, then, as Quine has done, we must find a new means of looking at knowledge. However, if, as Putnam and Kim argue, we believe that it may be difficult to define justification, but the search for its true definition has not ended, then we must retain epistemology as a field of philosophy and not allow it to become another field of science.

W. V. Quine set off a firestorm when he published his essay, *Epistemology Naturalized*. He believed that he had found the solution to all the problems epistemologists had faced for centuries. He argued that epistemology must no longer be concerned with the justification of knowledge, since that had proved too difficult, and must instead become part of psychology.

Quine argued this point for a number of reasons. First, he believed that “epistemology is concerned with the foundations of science” (Quine, 528), so it seemed only natural to Quine that epistemology should be linked with a field of science. Secondly,

the appeal of science lies in the fact that it is intelligible, which epistemology had not been, Quine believed, until he linked epistemology with psychology. Another reason is that Quine believed, as Hume had, that if we brought fields of philosophy into fields of science, we would be able to come to know what, in this case, knowledge actually is.

Quine began his explanations of naturalized epistemology by pointing out all the problems with epistemology. By moving systematically through each of the options philosophers have offered to account for an understanding of knowledge, Quine believes that he has disproven them. By focusing on mathematics as an example, Quine points out how many people have trusted that they are on the right path, since math, is intelligible; however, Quine’s conclusion is that even though math has aspects that may be “philosophically fascinating, . . . it does not do what the epistemologist would like of it; it does not reveal the ground of mathematical knowledge, it does not show how mathematical certainty is possible” (Quine, 529). This shows that he believed that the quest for a firm foundation in math failed as well. It proved that there are limitations to what we can do and how we can use, formal logical proofs in relation to math, and conversely, the world around us.

Quine holds Rudolf Carnap’s work of proving a “rational reconstruction” in the utmost contempt. He does not believe that there is any worth in “this creative reconstruction, this make-believe” (Quine 530), since these concepts do not prove anything relating to knowledge itself. These “creative reconstructions,” according to Quine, will only lead to imperfect translations, which will not bring us any closer to knowledge. For Quine, these imperfect translations would be far worse than placing epistemology under the auspices of psychology.

What Quine claims led him to developing this new relationship for epistemology was the realization that “a statement about the world does not always or usually have a separate fund of empirical consequences that it can call its own” (Quine 533). So, he is suggesting that we no longer look for justification, and that we should only search for explanations for the origin of the event. In laying out his new program, Quine concedes that “philosophers have rightly despaired of translating everything into observational and mathematical terms...But [Quine] think[s] that at this point it may be more useful to say rather that epistemology still goes on, though in a new setting and a clarified status” (Quine 533). He is here claiming that the only way we can use epistemology is to use it as a psychologist would.

Part of Quine's reasoning for the marriage of epistemology and psychology is that "we can now make use of empirical psychology" (Quine 533). He claims that this is the best alternative, since he is "after an understanding of science as an institution or process in the world" (Quine 534), and with this new program we can make induction clearer than before. So, in effect, Quine has given us a new form of science. This new form is one in which ordinary, normative claims are thrown out and all we are left with is an ambiguous approach to scientific problems.

Towards the end of the essay, however, Quine returns to discuss "observation sentences," which he claims are sometimes able to assist in epistemology in its original form and the new naturalized form. The importance of these "observation sentences" rests on the fact that they point toward a physical object. It may seem somewhat strange that he raises this point late in his paper, but as we shall see later described by Hilary Putnam, these sentences are just one of the many important features of Quine's thought.

Many philosophers vociferously disagreed with Quine's viewpoints about epistemology and, even with his arguments against other philosophical endeavors. So, in the next section, we will examine Hilary Putnam's arguments against naturalism in epistemology.

With the firestorm raging around W. V. Quine's *Epistemology Naturalized*, one of the more articulate philosophers of the anti-naturalism crowd, Hilary Putnam, wrote his critique of Quine entitled, *Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized*. In the essay, Putnam took on each of Quine's arguments, point by point, to make the best case possible against naturalized epistemology. In presenting his arguments, Putnam takes on his opponents in a slightly more indirect manner than Quine did.

Putnam points out that "those who raise the slogan 'epistemology naturalized'...generally disparage the traditional enterprises of epistemology... [So] in this respect, moreover, they do not differ from philosophers of a less reductionist kind" (Putnam 314). What Putnam is doing is allowing the readers the opportunity to judge for themselves the difference, if any, between the proponents of naturalized epistemology, and those they condemn. By setting these comparisons, Putnam believes that we will come to the truth of whether a naturalized epistemology can work.

The first possible form of a naturalized epistemology Putnam observes is evolutionary epistemology. This, he claims, cannot work in the end, since the "approach assumes, at bottom, a metaphysically 'realist' notion of truth: truth as 'correspondence

to the facts' or something of that kind" (Putnam 314). The notion expressed does not work because, Putnam claims, we do not have the ability to judge the truth of any statements dealing with anything we do not take part in constructing, and if this is not bad enough, trying to come up with an idea of capacities would be even worse, for Putnam.

Putnam next goes after the Reliability Theory of Rationality and cultural relativism. When dispatching of the concept of a reliability theory, Putnam uses the same argument he used against evolutionary epistemology, namely that "it too presupposes a metaphysical notion of truth" (Putnam 316). In discussing cultural relativism, however, Putnam employs a more nuanced method of enquiry. Now, at first glance, it would seem that Putnam, with his view that

"Truth claims" are relative to the language in which they are uttered, would be in favor of a culturally relativistic approach to epistemology. He is not favoring this approach since he explains that his conception of truth as relative to language "does not mean that a claim is right *whenever* those who employ the language in question would accept it as right in its context" (Putnam 316). Putnam argues that there must be a balancing of two points. First, that "talk of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in any area only makes sense against the background of an *inherited tradition*" and, second, that "traditions themselves can be *criticized*" (Putnam 316). Therefore, what he is here claiming is that no matter what kind of moral standards a particular culture may hold, rationality is not determined by those standards; it is beyond human constructions. Cultural relativism is dangerous for Putnam because it does not rely on reason. A cultural imperialism follows directly from cultural relativism, in that it also does not rely on reason, and it relies solely on one's culture.

After touching upon all these points, Putnam finally directly attacks Quine's arguments. Putnam claims that he only begins discussing Quine after explaining away all these previous ideas "because Quine's views are much more subtle and much more elaborate than the disastrously simple views we have just reviewed, and it seemed desirable to get the simpler views out of the way first" (Putnam 320). He decides that it is best to discuss what he sees as the dichotomy of two dominant "strains" in Quine's thought separately: the positivistic strain and the 'epistemology naturalized' strain.

In Quine's positivistic writings, Putnam points out his attachment to "observation sentences," those sentences that, for Quine, define what is real in the world. Putnam finds this attachment strange, as "Quine's ideal systems of the world are *finitely axiomatizable theories*, and contain standard

mathematics” (Putnam 321). In this system everything could be justified, which, obviously, cannot be done in the real world, but Putnam believes that it cannot be done in an ideal material world, either. Since, for Quine, the structure of reality matters, Putnam posits that Quine’s views are extremely inconsistent, and this is the biggest problem with positivism in general. Now, the reason why this problem arises is that both Quine and Putnam are trying to find a foundation for epistemology. Quine seems to have abandoned the original foundation, whereas Putnam wants to keep it. Putnam then moves on to naturalized epistemology itself.

Putnam observes that in Quine’s essay, he has abandoned the search for justification through observation sentences, and, instead, has decided that epistemology cannot be understood merely as a field of philosophy; it must now become part of psychology, and thus, a science. The major claim, which Putnam makes, is that “Quine’s position is sheer epistemological eliminationism” (Putnam 322), since Quine removes any forms of justification from epistemology, which, for Putnam, is removing the whole purpose of the field from itself. Now, Putnam admits that Quine has publicly declared that he never meant to “rule out the normative” in his naturalized epistemology; Putnam asserts that the reason this claim makes sense is because Quine viewed the normative as “the search for methods that yield verdicts that one oneself would accept” (Putnam 322). If this is true, then Quine cannot be blamed for ruling out the normative. However, as we will see, this sentiment is either not true or only partially true.

Putnam explains that we cannot rule out the normative because “if one abandons the notions of justification, rational acceptability, warranted assertability, and the like, completely, then ‘true’ goes as well, except as a mere device for ‘semantic assent’” (Putnam 322). What he is warning us is that if we follow Quine’s logic of naturalized epistemology; we can do away with any idea of what can be true. For Putnam, there is more work to be done, and none of it can be done if we do not have a notion of ‘true’, and this is where the danger of naturalism lies.

The problem of normativity was one that both Quine and Putnam dealt with in their essays, and in later works. Putnam even concedes, in *Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized*, that Quine believed that he was not eliminating the normative in naturalized epistemology. Despite this acceptance of Quine’s personal belief, Putnam still had grave doubts about where naturalized epistemology would lead us, and of Quine’s, apparently, mistaken belief that he could retain the normative as part of naturalized epistemology. Clearly, even today, the contention remains that Quine did in fact eliminate the normative by naturalizing epistemology.

Naturalized epistemology leads to a loss of the normative since it is based on assumptions that allow for the thinker to shift the foundations he or she is basing his or her ideas upon in epistemology. This occurs since, as Putnam points out, “if one abandons the notions of justification, rational acceptability..., and the like, completely, then ‘true’ goes as well” (Putnam 322). His assertion is true, but it is important to note his emphasis on the word, completely. This danger occurs when we “completely” throw out the normative. Putnam clearly believes that *Naturalized Epistemology* rules out the normative, but at the same time, he is far more concerned with where the ideas of *Naturalized Epistemology* will lead others, rather than what Quine lays out exactly in his essay. Quine’s claim that he was not eliminating the normative is at best, misguided, and at worst, dishonest. There is no way I can see for Quine to defend himself from the claims that he is eliminating the normative.

An idea that Quine can eliminate the normative, yet still keep the importance and significance of knowledge for science, is something that has been debated ever since he first penned his essay. For most anti-naturalists, it is clear that there are grave problems once you have eliminated the normative in epistemology. First, if knowledge can be something that is merely relatively true, it cannot lead to an intelligible knowledge of the fact on the part of the observer. Relativity clouds the ability to know what it is that one is observing. Second, according to Putnam, all that happens to our understanding of “true” in this new sense, is that we look at it as “a mere mechanism for switching from one level of language to another” (Putnam 322). What he means is that all we are doing is changing the language of the debate, but not actually answering the question asked.

The question of normativity remains a major debate to this day. With naturalists and anti-naturalists going back and forth over its importance, it is no wonder so many people find the debate to be un-resolvable. Nevertheless, it is only through constant debate that either side can come closer to a sense of what is the truth about epistemology.

I do have a definite opinion of this debate, and it should be clear from my overview of the debate and the emphasis I placed on the normative where my allegiance lies. I am a convinced anti-naturalist. I have great reservations about *Epistemology Naturalized*. Just as it is the greatest problem for Putnam, I find it entirely irresponsible. I believe it has irreparably harmed philosophy by eliminating the normative in epistemology and removing epistemology itself from the field of philosophy. Not only has it harmed philosophy, though, it has also harmed science, since it has removed any notions of understandable foundations for science to rest upon.

Furthermore, I do not see how Quine can link his skepticism to that of Hume. David Hume was not only skeptical of what philosophy could tell us, as Quine points out. He was also skeptical of what scientific knowledge was. Linking epistemology to psychology, a field of science, does not appear to settle any of the epistemic problems Hume observed, despite Quine's protests to the contrary.

I do not entirely agree with Hilary Putnam, either. His ideas betray a lack of belief in a metaphysical reality, which I cannot accept, and he is much too conciliatory towards Quine. Putnam left many lines of thought unexplored in his essay. Nevertheless, his cautious approach is better than no opposition at all to Quine's idea. I have no doubt that naturalism can only bring about more confusion than knowledge. I only hope that with this ongoing debate, those who oppose naturalism can once again gain greater clarity in their defense of true philosophy.

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