

Quine and Kim on Naturalized Epistemology

Quine's paper, "Epistemology Naturalized" ushered in contemporary discussions of naturalism in epistemology. The paper contains at least two separate strands, one negative and one positive. The negative strand criticizes the traditional epistemological project. The positive strand advocates his naturalistic vision for what epistemology could – and should – be.

1. Quine's Criticism of the Traditional Epistemological Project

1.1 Foundationalism

Traditional epistemological project (associated with Descartes): distinguish between foundational beliefs and non-foundational beliefs.

- *Foundational beliefs*: Beliefs that are justified, but not in virtue of their connections with any other beliefs.
- *Non-foundational beliefs*: Beliefs that are justified, but only in virtue of their connections with other beliefs.

What are the foundational beliefs?

- Standard answer: *Beliefs about our own conscious mental states*, e.g., *I'm in pain now, I'm seeing red now*, etc. (Next week we'll look at another candidate for what the foundational beliefs might be.)

Given this, the epistemological project becomes to explain how this meager foundation manages to justify the rest of our beliefs – for example, our beliefs about the external world.

1.2 Logical Positivism

Logical positivists kept alive the traditional foundationalist project – attempted to explain how our observations justify our beliefs about the world.

Also adds to this the project of *defining* or *analyzing* ordinary statements – including those about the external world – in terms of observations.

-Cf. Quine's distinction between *conceptual* reduction (analyzing the meaning of one sentence in terms of another) and *doctrinal* reduction (deriving certain statements from others).

Q: What is the relation between these two projects? Do they support each other? Would solving one furnish us a solution to the other?

1.3 Quine's Criticism of Conceptual Reduction

Quine's main criticism of the logical positivist's attempt at conceptual reduction is that no individual sentence corresponds to any specific observation.¹ A solitary sentence cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by observation all on its own. Only an entire theory can be confirmed or disconfirmed by observation. This position is often known as "holism."

Q: Is Quine's objection here convincing?

1.4 Quine's Criticism of Doctrinal Reduction

Quine's main criticism of doctrinal reduction – of the traditional epistemological project of justifying our beliefs about the world on the basis of our beliefs about our conscious experiences – is that no one has ever satisfactorily solved the problem of induction. Hence his quip, “The Humean predicament is the human predicament.”

Q: Is Quine basically capitulating to skepticism here? Is he right that no response to the problem of induction is forthcoming?

2. Quine's Positive Proposal

Quine proposes that we should give up the traditional epistemological project. But then what should we do all day long? Quine's answer: “psychology”!

Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input – certain patterns of irradiation in assorted frequencies, for instance – and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as outputs a description of the three-dimensional external world and its history. The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology; namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one's theory of nature transcends any available evidence.

– Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized”, 82-83

Idea seems to be that epistemology should focus on describing the causal process by which we go from having certain sensory experiences to holding certain beliefs.

Quine is thus typically interpreted as advocating a “Replacement Thesis”: *Psychology should replace epistemology*.

3. Critical Responses to Quine

Despite the influence of Quine's article, not many people were persuaded. Some common criticisms:

¹ This criticism is developed at more length in Quine's most famous article, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.”

First Objection: The Conclusion is a Non-Sequitur

Just because logical positivism and the Cartesian project proved to be failures doesn't mean we have to give up on the traditional epistemological project altogether.

Q: Do you find this convincing? How do you think Quine would respond?

Second Objection: Epistemology is essentially normative.

Perhaps the most common complaint, developed at length by Kim, is that epistemology isn't just concerned with how our beliefs are formed. It is primarily concerned with the justificatory status of these beliefs. But the whole notion of justification falls by the wayside on Quine's version of naturalized epistemology.

Q: Is Kim right that justification is essential to epistemology? Is there any way of allowing for justification on Quine's picture?

Third Objection: Even Quine can't get away from normativity, since belief attributions are themselves normative.

As Kim notes, Quine helps himself to the notion of "belief"; after all, he thinks epistemology should be the business of explaining the processes that produce our beliefs. But, Kim argues, the concept of belief is itself normative. Thus if Quine thought he could get away from normativity by switching to psychology, he's mistaken!

Why is belief normative? Kim says that when we go about attributing beliefs to others, we have to presuppose that they are rational: "Unless our cognizer is a 'rational being', a being whose cognitive 'output' is regulated and constrained by norms of rationality... we cannot intelligibly interpret his 'output' as consisting of beliefs."

Q: Is Kim right about this? Even if he is, does this establish that belief is normative?

Looking Forward

Big picture question:

Is there any way to give a naturalized epistemology without endorsing the replacement thesis – without, that is, making epistemology simply collapse into psychology? What would such an alternative naturalized epistemology look like?