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NORMATIVITY AND TRUTH IN NATURALIZED EPISTEMOLOGY

Abstract: In his famous article “Epistemology Naturalized” (1969), Quine established a novel take on the position of epistemology in philosophical and scientific discourse. According to his views, epistemological questions are a subset of psychological questions, and psychology in itself is a branch of natural science. Thus, epistemology, as understood in the Quinean sense, threatens the very idea of its normative aspects, as natural science is empiristic and, as a result, relies on purely descriptive claims. Hence, the following question arises: Does the naturalized account of epistemology entail the rejection of epistemic norms? In this research, we explore the three possible answers to this question and argue there is a sense of normativity in Quine’s naturalized epistemology, but only insofar as we are willing to accept his imperfect notion of the truth.

Keywords: naturalized epistemology, normativity, truth, Quine.

1. Traditional vs. Naturalized Epistemology

Ever since Ancient Greece, up to Descartes’ distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, or – perhaps most importantly Kantian distinctions between analytic and synthetic propositions and *apriori* and *a posteriori* knowledge – philosophers have approached the concept of human knowledge in a rather peculiar way. While some were strong proponents of a scientific approach and others had more of a “soft spot” for metaphysics, one thing remained the same. Throughout its various incarnations across multiple centuries and philosophical schools, traditional epistemology has maintained its central position as a discipline independent of any other scientific enterprise. As a result, it always relied on metaphysical grounds.

Even Carnap, famous for his strong physicalist inclinations, had fallen into the trap of a never-ending metaphysical loop. While trying to separate philosophical questions from the rest of the inquiries concerned with human knowledge of scientific facts (Carnap, 1950, pp. 22–23), he unintentionally “admitted” that philosophy belonged to a domain other than physics and the rest of natural science. Quine did not appreciate Carnap’s reductionism, nor did he believe that we have sufficient epistemic reasons to justify the separate class of philosophical questions (Quine, [1960] 2013, p. 217); thus, he proclaimed the entirety of Carnap’s project redundant and based on metaphysical grounds (Quine, 1968, p. 203).

Apart from abandoning Carnap’s reductionism, Quine has, in his most cited paper to this day – “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, rejected the established distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions by claiming that such a duality could not be justified through reliance on any other more fundamental conceptual category (Quine, [1951] 2000). First published in 1951, “Two Dogmas” not only challenged the distinction that was considered a holy grail of Western philosophy but paved the way for the wholly novel outlook on epistemological questions and their position in the holistic web of knowledge¹. Nearly two decades later, in 1969, Quine published the essay titled “Epistemology Naturalized” which took an even more radical approach to the old philosophical question of knowledge.

According to this new approach, as Quine argues, epistemological questions ought to be understood as part of psychology, which, furthermore, should be understood as a branch of natural science (Quine, 1969, p. 83). Such a classification of epistemology as a mere chapter of a chapter in a major “book” of knowledge has roots in Quine’s life-long endorsement of naturalism – a philosophical stance according to which, if there is such a thing as the truth, then we should look for it within (natural) science.

Although naturalism in itself has various forms – from a comprehensive ontological theory that postulates only those entities that are recognized in natural science, to a mere methodological stance that proclaims we should follow the methods of natural science (Forrest, 2023; Spiegel, 2023) and although the debate between proponents of the two types of naturalistic doctrine is still ongoing – this research hypothesizes that Quine endorses its former (and stronger) kind. Quine’s acceptance of ontological naturalism²

1 The thesis on *holism*, according to which *all* our beliefs and knowledge propositions are consistently interconnected, was also first introduced in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”.

2 In one of my previous works, I have provided a more elaborate explanation of *methodological* reasons behind Quine’s loyalty to naturalism (Vučković, 2016).

arises from his firm rejection of the first philosophy and, as such, serves as an ontological basis for his defense of physicalism. This brings us to the second hypothesis of this research according to which, Quine's ontology is, in its essence, physicalistic and minimalistic in the sense that he does not posit more entities than are necessary for theoretical consistency.

Let us now return to the distinction between traditional and naturalized epistemology. We can notice that these two approaches differ not only in their ontological background (that is, philosophy as a unique kind of knowledge, as opposed to philosophy based on natural science) but also in their understanding of normativity. While traditional forms of epistemology face no trouble establishing epistemic norms as they are generally accepted as *apriori* knowledge that requires no further justification, the specification of these norms seems more of a challenge for Quine's naturalized epistemology. The reason for this difficulty is, of course, Quine's rejection of the concept of *apriori* knowledge, which means that his epistemology either has to deny normativity or base its existence somewhere other than *apriorism*.

Quine was reluctant to accept the absence of normativity, possibly out of fear that it would leave his epistemology hollow. The lack of epistemic normativity could, after all, lead to the lack of reliable epistemic methodology, which would result in his epistemology turning into quite a messy study field. In "Reply to Morton White", he writes:

"[N]ormative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-seeking [...] There is no question here of ultimate value, as in morals; it is a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction."

(Quine, 1986, pp. 664–665)

These excerpts provide two valuable insights into his understanding of the relation between naturalized epistemology and the concept of normativity. First, there is a branch of philosophy he refers to as *normative epistemology*, and, second, it is concerned with leading us to the truth. So, the question is: *Do we agree that there is normativity in naturalized epistemology?* And if we do, *where do we seek the source of this normativity?*

2. The Zero or Low Normativity Cluster

The *zero or low normativity cluster*, as we shall call it in this research, includes the solutions that claim that Quine's naturalized epistemology either:

- a) entails no normativity, and, thus, it is questionable whether we should classify it as epistemology at all (zero normativity), or
- b) uses the term “normativity” very loosely, so it does not cover all the usual meanings and uses of the notion (low normativity).

What both of these types of criticism have in common is that they claim that Quine’s understanding of normativity is vastly different from the traditional understanding of the notion. As a result, his epistemic norms –or so they claim – fail to serve their primary purpose and, as such, jeopardize the entire project of naturalized epistemology.

One of the most famous proponents of the *zero* normativity solution is Jaegwon Kim, who claims that naturalized epistemology does not deserve its recognition as an epistemological theory, as it excludes the very concept of knowledge, which is the central focus of *any* epistemology. Following the traditional definition of knowledge as “justified true belief”, Kim argues that the very essence of the concept of “justification” lies in its normativity. Or more precisely, the standard request for justification is essentially nothing short of normative (Kim, 1988, pp. 382–383). The idea behind Kim’s reasoning – the one which will become even more prominent in Kornblith’s criticism of Quine – is that naturalized epistemology cannot offer normativity because it is as descriptive as any other branch of natural science.

Hilary Kornblith addresses the very same concern regarding the naturalized epistemology’s claim on normativity – if epistemology is a part of psychology and psychology is nothing more than a chapter of natural science, epistemology is, then, descriptive by its definition. However, analyzing the aforementioned Quine’s response to Morton White, Kornblith recognizes that the abandonment of normativity was never the intention behind the naturalization of epistemology. Nevertheless, we should not take Quine’s alleged acceptance of normativity at face value, Kornblith claims, as he has to justify the source of that normativity. Furthermore, Quine needs to explain why we should believe that the pursuit of truth is the only purpose of epistemology (Kornblith, 1993, p. 358).

Kornblith’s resolution falls into the *low* normativity cluster insofar as he accepts that the quest for truth as an ultimate goal of naturalized epistemology does warrant this doctrine at least some type of claim on normativity. He writes:

“Since many people do clearly care about the truth of their beliefs, Quinean epistemic norms, construed as imperatives contingent upon valuing truth, will carry normative force for a great many people.”

(Kornblith, 1993, p. 365)

The implication behind the use of the words “many” and “a great many” is more than intentional in this case; Quine’s naturalized epistemology fails what may be described as a *universality test*. While the naturalized approach to the knowledge issue may fit the expectations that some or even *many* people have of epistemology, there is nothing inherently non-disputable about this project. If we circle back to Kim’s criticism, then it would seem that naturalized epistemology has nothing to offer to those who are more interested in the *justified* than the *true* part of “justified true belief.” Thus, Quine has offered little support for the claim that naturalized epistemology is superior or at least more convincing than the traditional.

However, these solutions tend to overlook the full meaning behind Quine’s ontological naturalism. The ontological claim in his naturalism is that there is *no* truth besides the one found in science. The reason for that is the absence of the first philosophy or any other metaphysical doctrine. Metaphysical doctrines, in their essence, have very little to do with knowledge and everything to do with our belief in them. Beliefs also fail the universality test since they vary among people and across cultures. As a result, naturalism, in the Quinean sense, is not only the source of the truth but also the source of justification. That is, anything that requires justification can only be justified through the scientific method.

3. The Medium Normativity Claim

The *medium* normativity claim entails that there is normativity in naturalized epistemology, although not in such a strong sense as is the case in traditional epistemology. According to this cluster of solutions, there *are* norms in naturalized epistemology, but instead of being unique to Quinean theory, they are borrowed from natural science. Epistemic norms are, thus, the same as scientific norms, and natural science is the source of them all.

One of the proponents of the medium normativity claim is Paul Roth, who argues that Kornblith’s solution to Quine’s issue with normativity is not satisfactory, as he fails to provide the answer to Quine’s original question of what is so special about epistemology that makes it deserving of different treatment than any other scientific theory. As Roth argues, Kornblith failed to prove there is a “special method” to epistemology, and thus, he cannot explain why it should not be naturalized like the rest of the science (Roth, 1999, p. 90).

Inspired by Maffie's (1990) and Kitcher's (1992) take on naturalism, Roth focuses on the methodological aspect of this doctrine and claims there is a methodological continuum between epistemology and natural science (Roth, 1999, p. 91). This continuity in methods warrants the same kind of normativity claims in epistemology and scientific theories, as they are all rooted in the same approach. Methodological naturalism is a weaker claim than its ontological version that Quine accepts, and Roth acknowledges, as he speaks of Quine as a "radical naturalist" (Roth, 1999, p. 94). If one adheres to the radical version of naturalism, then there is no harm in saying he also follows its less extreme consequences; in this case, it is naturalistic methodology.

However, Roth interprets Quine's project of naturalized epistemology as less revolutionary than the other philosophers make it out to be. He argues that the essay "Epistemology Naturalized" is not to provide a unique grounding of epistemic norms but only to remind us that we need to work from within. If there is justification for epistemic normativity, then we should seek it intra-theoretically, that is, within the domain of empirical knowledge (Roth, 1999, pp. 95–96). Since empirical knowledge is a matter of natural science, we should seek normativity too in natural science.

Another proponent of the "middle ground" solution is WyboHoukes, although he could also fall into the *zero normativity cluster*, depending on which of his two interpretations we choose to follow. Nevertheless, both of his interpretations are focused on Quine's comparison of epistemology to "engineering" and "technology of truth-seeking", as we have seen in the excerpts from his "Reply to Morton White".

Houkes argues that such comparisons are either to be taken literally or metaphorically. If we interpret the word *engineering* in its literal sense, then we also need to acknowledge that the main purpose of engineering is to design artifacts. But what *is* the artifact of epistemology? Artifacts are, after all, physical objects that we create, and we do so with certain intentions in mind (Houkes, 2002, p. 261). We build houses and bridges with a clear purpose on how we will use them, so this intentionality is the source of normativity when it comes to artifacts.

A literal interpretation of the word *engineering* will not suffice in explaining the roots of normativity in naturalized epistemology for two reasons. First, it is hard to see what knowledge, truth, or whatever else may be the topic of naturalized epistemology has in common with physical objects. Second, if we are to understand knowledge as an artifact, it would require intentionality, and Quine's view on that matter is pretty straightforward – natural science is devoid of any intentionality whatsoever (Houkes, 2002, pp. 262–263).

It means that if we are to interpret the words of *engineering* and *truth-seeking technology* in any favorable way, then, Houkes argues, we need to understand them as metaphors. These metaphors serve a purpose to signal the continuity between natural science and epistemology and remind us that epistemic and scientific norms are the same. Truth-seeking technology is a metaphor for scientific methodology, and the source of normativity in naturalized epistemology is reliance on these methods (Houkes, 2002, p. 259).

Therefore, one of the solutions to Quine's problem of normativity is to accept natural science as the primary and *only* source of epistemic norms. It is certainly a step forward from zero and low normativity claims that do not seem to amount to what Quine was trying to explain in his discussion with Morton White. However, one can still wonder if there is more to his idea of epistemic normativity. Perhaps the question we need to ask is this: Can we agree with the Quinean notion of continuity between natural science and epistemology and *still* believe some *purely epistemological questions* exist and require its unique type of approach and source of normativity?

4. The High Normativity Claim

The high normativity claim – as we shall call it in this research – entails not only that there *are* norms in naturalized epistemology but also that they are, at least in some aspect, different from the rest of the scientific norms. For this solution to work, we need to prove that the continuity between natural science and epistemology does not obligate us to the claim that epistemic norms are identical to scientific ones. The best course of action would be to try to show that there are at least some purely epistemological questions that can be answered without relying on scientific methodology.

Such a solution would work in this case, as we could claim that in the *ontological* sense, natural epistemology is still grounded in science insofar as its ultimate purpose is to discover the truth, and the only reliable source of truth is science. Nevertheless, this ontological commitment does not entail that we should follow the methodology of natural science, as we could argue that the answers to epistemological questions require their own methods. What we will find at the end of the road will be the truth in the naturalist sense, but we could argue that it is not the same road for a scientist and a philosopher.

One of the interpretations of normativity in naturalized epistemology that aligns with our idea of a high normativity claim is offered by Richard Foley in his essay “Quine and Naturalized Philosophy” from 1994. Foley argues that Quine, in his work “The Web of Belief” which he had co-written with Joseph Ullian (1970), not only does not claim that epistemology is the same as psychology but quite clearly makes the distinction between the two. While psychologists focus on thought processes, epistemologists are concerned with evidence, which shows that these two are entirely *different* disciplines. Foley also believes that the claims in “Epistemology Naturalized” are exaggerated on purpose to underline the importance of understanding that epistemic knowledge is inseparable from knowledge of science (Foley, 1994, pp. 248–249). However, it does not mean that we need to follow the same methodology in psychology and epistemology, nor even that they explore the same part of the experience. Psychology is, thus, natural science in the full sense of it, while epistemology is concerned with evidence that supports claims from natural science.

Foley also argues that his view is supported in Quine’s later works, such as *Pursuit of Truth* (1990), where Quine claims that we can tackle the knowledge questions even if we are not familiar with the physicalist ontology of nerve endings (Foley, 1994, p. 250). Finally, Foley offers a new *holistic* explanation of epistemic norms, according to which they cannot be known *apriori* – as Quine himself claimed – nor are they the same as scientific ones – as we have seen that the topics of psychology and epistemology are rather different – but are an essential part of the holistic web of knowledge and, as such, can be revised when necessary (Foley, 1994, pp. 256–257).

What are we to make from this solution? In Section 1, we claimed that Quine’s ontology was physicalist, as there was no first philosophy that could serve as the basis for ontological commitment. We also claimed that Quine’s ontology is minimalistic in the sense that it does not presuppose more entities than necessary. It means that if physicalist ontology offers just enough entities to provide sufficiently good predictions about the world around us, then we should refrain from positing any other type of entities. Quine’s allegiance to physicalism is inseparable from his claim on naturalism, and we do not need to know physicalist ontology to be naturalists and interested in epistemological questions.

In an *ontological* sense, epistemology is based on natural science no less than any other field of research. However, in the *methodological* sense, epistemologists are free to establish any kind of norms, as long as they contribute to the pursuit of truth, which is the final goal of this project. The purely epistemological questions exist, and they are concerned with

the evidence for natural science. There is no *apriorism* in naturalized epistemology, though, insofar as it is ontologically grounded in natural science. Nevertheless, epistemic norms are not equal to scientific norms, as they are directly determined by the questions that epistemology explores.

5. The Feasibility of Truth Pursuit

The high normativity claim is – as we have seen – inseparable from the idea that the pursuit of truth is the main quest of the philosophical and scientific enterprise. However, this idea is, perhaps, of even greater importance to Quine’s naturalism in general – whether he is talking about normativity or any other philosophical project; to the point that even his last big piece of writing – first published in 1990 – was appropriately titled *Pursuit of Truth*. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the notion of normativity, in the context of Quine’s naturalized epistemology, cannot be evaluated independently of his take on truth. But what if his concept of truth is not feasible within the scope of naturalized epistemology? Perhaps, since the beginning of this debate, we have been asking the wrong question of whether naturalized epistemology can withstand the concept of normativity. What if we should turn to the notion of truth instead and assess whether it can retain its usual meaning in this new naturalized environment?

Putnam’s 1982 essay “Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized” seems like a good starting point for this assessment³ for several reasons. First, Putnam – not unlike Quinean high normativity claim – believes that normativity is an essential aspect of human thought. To eliminate normativity, according to him, would be to attempt “mental suicide” (Putnam, 1982, p. 20). Second – and perhaps this is Putnam’s most obvious similarity to Quine – the concept of *normativity* is inseparable from the notion of *truth* (Putnam, 1982, p. 21). Finally, Putnam was the one who challenged the feasibility of Quine’s take on truth within his naturalism. Nevertheless, we shall argue that Quinean and Putnam’s understanding of the truth – at least when it comes to the practical use of this concept – have more in common than it seems at first glance.

As the title of Putnam’s essay suggests, the central notion behind his analysis is the *reason*, which he uses as a starting point for the evaluation of many different philosophical standpoints – from the very modest project of evolutionary epistemology (Putnam, 1982, p. 4) to more complex theories like Quinean positivism (Putnam, 1982, p. 15) and finally natu-

3 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this recommendation.

ralized epistemology (Putnam, 1982, p. 19). And it is precisely our ability or virtue of reason which makes the concept of human thinking inseparable from the notion of truth and the pursuit for it (Putnam, 1982, p. 21). The truth is, furthermore, essential to any discussion regarding normativity, hence, normativity claim of any level is inseparable from the tendency to claim truthfulness. So, what is the issue with the Quinean concept of the truth that it does not align with Putnam's thoughts on the matter?

According to Putnam, the main problem behind Quine's loyalty to the pursuit of truth lies in the disbalance between how he interprets the notion of truth as opposed to the other concepts of a similar ontological background. Quine famously rejects concepts of justification, rational acceptability, warranted assertability, etc., on the grounds of them being based on metaphysical realism, and yet he proceeds to use the notion of the truth in the very same metaphysically realist sense (Putnam, 1982, p. 20). The only concept of truth Quine can coherently adhere to within the context of his naturalism needs to be defined in Tarskian sense, that is to be understood as a syncategorematic concept that allows for "semantic ascent" (Putnam, 1982, pp. 19–20). In more colloquial terms, the truly naturalist notion of truth would entail nothing more than a semantic device that allows switching from one linguistic level to another.

Putnam, therefore, believes that the Quinean notion of the truth goes beyond what Tarski had in mind for that concept, and seems rightfully so. While Quine's epistemology and even ontology (or the lack of it) focus on the truth, he is skeptical regarding the idea of a language fully grounded on syncategorematic terms. Such a language – according to Quine's earlier paper "A Logistical Approach to the Ontological Problem" – would lack reference (Quine, 1966, pp. 66–67). He is even more wary when it comes to the conception of "semantic ascent" – a strategy he famously criticized Carnap and logical positivism for to the degree that he dedicated the entire chapter of *Word and Object* to disparage the idea that we can semantically ascent from scientific to philosophical questions (Quine, [1960] 2013, pp. 249–254). But if Quine's notion of truth should not be understood as a semantic and syncategorematic device *and* if Putnam is right to claim that its metaphysical and realist version does not suit a naturalist environment, where does it leave us on the Quinean interpretation of this concept?

One route would entail not taking Quine's words at face value but in a more metaphorical sense – starting from his rejection of the traditional epistemological tools to even his use of the word *truth*. The latter, in particular, fits his later writings on anomalous monism, a type of token physicalism he borrows from Donald Davidson and which allows him to mix physicalist ontology with non-physicalist vocabulary when it is neces-

sary (Quine, 1992, pp. 71–73). This tokenism hints at his original reasoning behind physicalist ontology that proliferates in the absence of the first philosophy while simultaneously permitting the use of the realist notion of the truth. Furthermore, even if we accept that the concept of the truth is an exception to the rule of non-metaphysical vocabulary, it should be noted that it is not *the only* exception Quine makes. While he famously excluded most of the universals from the domain of existing things, he still needed to allow the existence of the sets to preserve a meaningful talk of the properties.

Naturalist epistemologists can, however, take a simpler route, as proposed by Putnam's liberal and anti-reductionist take. According to him, normativity – despite being an essential aspect of human thought – cannot be grounded in physics, biology, or any other particular field of scientific research. The quest for epistemic normativity can be understood as a general long-term goal that, due to the various challenges, we cannot achieve for the time being (Putnam, 1982, p. 21). This limitation, however, does not mean that we need to subscribe to a reductionist approach nor that we are unable to tackle the philosophical questions until the whole system is complete. It only means that, for now, we have to work with what we have and make the most of it.

Nevertheless, if we adhere to the aforementioned (and more relaxed) interpretation of Quine's physicalism, we can see that it does not presuppose more than Putnam's view, at least when it comes to its practical implementation. In that case, a naturalist epistemologist does not need to believe in the ultimate truth of any particular scientific theory as long as she understands that the truth, *in general*, needs to be concerned with what we can know based *only* on evidence. This interpretation allows us to understand Quine in a non-reductionist sense – physicalism is a token theory that serves as a source of an ontological commitment in the absence of the first philosophy.

6. Conclusion

The question of normativity in naturalized epistemology is inseparable from one's takes on ontology, methodology, and the general understanding of the role of naturalism. While the high normativity claim does seem to fit within the context of Quine's entire ontology, it may not be as efficient without the background idea of the truth as the main quest in science. And even Quine's notion of the truth is imperfect in its own sense. We can either understand it as a metaphysical and realist addition

to otherwise non-metaphysical ontology, or we can subscribe to a weaker type of (token) physicalism. Finally, we can take Putnam's route and maintain that epistemic normativity is a goal we should strive to achieve and keep the high normativity claim.

Most naturalists – that is, anyone who does not have as developed an ontological system as Quine nor as liberal take on the idea of naturalism as Putnam – would probably fit in the medium normativity cluster, as they would not be willing to give up on normativity in its entirety but would possibly still refrain from ontological statements. Zero and low normativity solutions do not seem to fare as well, given the criticism they have received over time from the proponents of both medium and high normativity claims. However, just like many other interpretations of Quine's philosophy, they serve their purpose as a thought experiment or, more precisely, a reminder of why the normativity question needs to be taken seriously.

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