

CHAPTER 3

NATURALISM AND NORMS OF REASON AND METHOD

The previous chapter dealt with the problem of how we are to distinguish knowledge from mere belief. In all epistemologies knowledge, along with justification, rationality, etc, are normative, evaluative notions that carry with them the idea that our critical canons have been applied to our beliefs. As we will see, a number of the theorists to be discussed in Parts II to IV deny that there is anything to the norms of knowledge and rationality other than what is found in local practices embedded in local cultural and political contexts. And the norms vary dependently on their varying context. Even though they understand such local contexts naturalistically, part of their blindness about the norms of epistemology and methodology is their belief that if there are such norms then they must transcend the natural – from which they conclude 'so much the worse for norms'. Even though there are "naturalistic" norms embodied in local practices, there is no role for the more robust norms of epistemology and methodology. So, before turning to these theorists in Part II to IV, it is necessary to investigate the ways in which the normative principles of method get their force and authority.

Section 3.1 introduces Quine's influential account of naturalised knowledge and norms. But it is unclear what status Quine assigns to the norms of method within naturalism. He initially claims that all such norms can be completely naturalised as a chapter of psychology (and perhaps other sciences), but later claims that there might be a more independent account of norms as a chapter of the technology of engineering. The 'chapter' metaphor Quine uses helps obscure the ways in which norms can be understood within naturalism. One of the central tasks of epistemology is critical; it provides norms whereby we are to assess our beliefs. It would be a defect of any theory of naturalised epistemology if it were to abandon the critical role that epistemology traditionally plays. Quine comes close to obscuring the critical role that our norms play in adjudicating our beliefs; but then he rescues his position by giving norms an independent role. As we will see the sociologists of science, Foucault and Nietzsche discussed in Parts II to IV have no residual Quinean qualms about jettisoning the norms of epistemology.

Section 3.2 gives a brief account of what is meant by naturalism while section 3.3 discusses a number of examples of norms of scientific method to be borne in mind in later more abstract discussions. Section 3.4 sets out four logically possible positions concerning the natural and the normative. Section

3.5 focuses on one of these positions – the view that norms are not to be understood objectively, thereby giving rise to positions such as scepticism or expressivism about norms. The final three sections show in what way both naturalism and objectivism about norms can be retained. In section 3.6 an account of “folk scientific rationality” is given which captures the particular practices of scientists through the particular normative judgements they have made about particular episodes in the history of the developing sciences. Using this as a basis, it is shown in section 3.7 how to “define” normative methodological notions in terms of the non-normative using the device of the Ramsey sentence. In section 3.8 it is argued that the normative in epistemology and methodology supervenes on the non-normative or descriptive. Both the “definition” of norms and their supervenience show how to locate the normative within naturalism without compromising either, in particular the objectivity of norms.

Reconciling the normative with naturalism is an important issue for this book. The dethroners of our critical tradition reject the idea that norms of reason can have any independent force and authority. For them there are just two alternatives: either such norms are transcendent or they are immanent in that they are simply more human belief that is subject to the vagaries of society, culture and history. For some the rejection of transcendence in favour of immanence is a defining feature of postmodernism.¹ With the completion of this chapter the central stance to be adopted towards the theories discussed in Parts II to IV will have been set out.

3.1 QUINE'S NATURALIZED EPISTEMOLOGY

Central to epistemology is the view that it is a normative, evaluative and critical discipline which tells us what beliefs may be rationally or irrationally held, what beliefs are justified or warranted, what are the proper and improper methods of inquiry, and so on. The central evaluative terms are ‘knowledge’, ‘rational’, ‘justified’, ‘proper’, etc. Some of these terms enter into many a definition of ‘knowledge’ (though as already noted they might be excluded from some naturalistic definitions of ‘knowledge’). Many philosophers, from Descartes onwards (if not before) have presented epistemology as a “first philosophy” underpinning all other branches of philosophy. However some have declared that there is no such thing as a first philosophy; there are just the various sciences of which epistemology is merely a small part. Such are the claims of Quine who used the phrase ‘naturalized epistemology’ to refer to a theory of knowledge which does not aspire to be a “first philosophy”, is not to be founded in some *a priori* fashion, and is not separate from, or above and beyond, the science but is “continuous” with science.

3.1.1 *Epistemology as a Chapter of Psychology*

The deflation of epistemology's pretensions is expressed in an often-cited passage from Quine's 'Epistemology Naturalized':

Epistemology ... simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input ... and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as output a description of the three-dimensional external world and its history. The relation between meagre 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 (1969), pp. 82-3)

Consider epistemology as narrowly concerned with the evidence relation only. Initially we might have naively assumed that the relation was, in part, a normative or evaluative relation of justification. But what has happened to it in Quine's remark? Talk of epistemology being a *chapter* of psychology is too metaphorical and lacks precision. But it is clear that any normative evidential relation between observation and theory has been replaced – by what? It has not been replaced by non-normative notions of logic such as implies, or degree of evidential support, etc, since these are not obviously notions investigated in any chapter of psychology.

What Quine offers is a descriptive account (perhaps referring to causal or law-like claims within several sciences from theories of perception to linguistics) of the chain of links between sensory input and linguistic outputs. Do norms play a role here, but lead a life in heavy disguise through definition in terms of the predicates of the psychological sciences? Or are they identical to, or supervenient upon, the properties denoted by such predicates? Or are the norms deemed to be non-existent because they have been eliminated from our talk, like our earlier talk of phlogiston or Zeus' thunderbolts? It is unclear, but elimination seems to be the most likely account of the above passage. Whatever the case, we lack an account (if there is one) of the special features of those causal links between sensory input and linguistic output that characterise the normativity of justified, or warranted, or rational belief in theory, and the special characteristics which produce unjustified, unwarranted or irrational belief. So far no difference has been indicated. Nor should we rely on a 'natural rationality' based on some innate propensity to reason; empirical investigation has shown how bad we are as natural reasoners.

Suppose some epistemologists take Quine's first sentence to heart and abandon their Philosophy Department for their university's Psychology Department. Despite the fact that there is much work being done on perception, cognitive functioning and language, they might well find that no one in psychology is doing any research on their particular epistemological notion, viz., the evidence relation. More likely they would find that while

Rescuing Reason

A Critique of Anti-Rationalist Views of Science and
Knowledge

Nola, R.

2003, XI, 559 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1042-2