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Naturalized Epistemology Considered

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In order for a naturalized account of epistemology to be taken seriously by the philosophic community, it must address questions raised by the skeptic. Since W.V. Quine's essay in 1969 entitled "Epistemology Naturalized," the naturalized project has been marked both by bold claims that the traditional project has failed and that the problems a naturalized project potentially faces are not problems of concern. Instead of addressing these potential problems head on, attempts to advance the naturalized project since Quine have largely masked their language, consequently disguising the boldness of their separation. In an essay entitled "Against Naturalized Epistemology," Laurence Bonjour brings to light the shortcomings of the naturalized project while heavily criticizing Quine. Further, Bonjour criticizes the contemporary naturalist Philip Kitcher. Bonjour persuasively argues that Quine has failed to offer cogent reasons for abandoning the traditional project in favor of a naturalized project, while maintaining that Quine has also failed to offer a viable alternative. Further, Bonjour argues that Kitcher's reasons for psychologizing epistemology are innocuous. Finally, Bonjour outlines an argument that concludes that the abandonment of a priori justification leads to epistemological "disaster." While Bonjour's arguments are at times convincing, they are not wholly successful. It shall be the purpose of this paper to refute the crux of Bonjour's arguments, while at the same time attempting to resolve the problems he claims a naturalized project faces. It is only after these problems have been addressed directly that a complete naturalized epistemology can be developed.

The distinction between internalism and externalism is a simple but decisive one, which hinges on what epistemic principle can serve as the appropriate connection to truth. For the internalist, all of the epistemic weight lays with rationality. Conversely, the externalist claims that rational justification does not constitute knowledge, and therefore, success ought to replace it as an epistemic principle. To make the distinction clear, consider the following scenario. Suppose, for instance, that aliens were to beam information about the outcome of football games into a man's head. Come Sunday morning, and without knowing exactly how or why, he suddenly has a host of beliefs about which teams will win every game. Several weeks pass, and without exception, his predictions are correct. Can his beliefs about which teams will win next Sunday be considered knowledge? For the internalist, the answer is an obvious no. Again, the internalist is concerned with rationality and thus demands reasons for the belief at hand. Externalists have, however, failed to offer a compelling argument in favor of success as an epistemic principle. Rather, they have only provided a scenario in which success serves as the epistemic principle. On the other hand, the internalists hold that no empirical claim can serve as an epistemic principle, in that claims of reliability are contingent. For the internalist, epistemic principles are a priori, and contingent claims are obviously not a priori.

This is precisely the point that Bonjour makes. He writes, "What naturalism needs, then, is a direct objection to rationalism—or, more or less equivalently, an argument that the idea of a priori justification is untenable, even when not construed in a moderate empiricist way" (Bonjour).¹ Further, the externalist has failed to consider the ramifications of arguing against a priori knowledge, as any appeal to such knowledge would be a concession to internalism. Specifically, Bonjour claims that it is the renouncement of a priori knowledge that renders the concept of naturalism a disaster. And so, if the externalist is to succeed s/he must not only offer evidence that shows that his stance has the theoretical capacity to answer questions raised by the skeptic, but s/he must also show that the position taken by the traditional epistemologist is an unfruitful one. Further, the problem of circularity that emerges as a result of taking an external position must be resolved. The problem of circularity was recognized by Quine in 1969; however, it is widely held that a satisfactory response has not yet been offered.

Internalism, though, is not without problems of its own. Specifically, internalism faces Hume's problem of induction as well as all Cartesian type problems. While it has been argued that these problems are fatal to the traditional project, the internalist has offered adequate responses. To Cartesian problems such as illusion and evil deceivers, the internalist is not invulnerable. However, certainty is not a requirement for knowledge. Rather, only rationality is required. Internalists offer no guarantee but merely elucidate what is logically possible. If agents are unknowingly deceived, it is through no fault of their own that the world has failed to cooperate. In regard to Hume's problem of induction, it seems apparent that Hume has misconstrued the requirements for knowledge. Further, today's epistemologist has a variety of tools at hand that were unknown to Hume. Using incremental probabilities and Bayesian Theorem, Dr. Timothy McGrew has offered a compelling response to the problem of induction in his essay "Direct Inference and the Problem of Induction." And so it seems that the externalist is left with two primary options: (i) knowingly offer what can only be an alternative theory of knowledge to the traditional project while ignoring all of the standards it has established, or (ii) provide a new argument against a rational connection to truth, rendering it untenable. Option (i) has, since Quine, been the most common tactic employed by the naturalist. Option (ii), on the other hand, can only be pursued via an attack on a priori knowledge.

BonJour, however, delineates an argument against externalism and in favor of a priori justification that, if true, would render the naturalistic project a "disaster." BonJour writes:

If we are to have any reason for thinking these latter beliefs to be true, such a reason must apparently either (i) depend on an inference of some sort from some of the directly observational beliefs or (ii) be entirely independent of direct observation. A reason of sort (ii) is plainly a priori. And a reason of sort (i) can only be cogent if its corresponding conditional, a conditional statement having the conjunction of the directly observational premises as antecedent and the proposition that is the content of the non-observational belief as the consequent, is something that we in turn have a reason to think to be true. But the reason for thinking that this latter, conditional statement is true can again only be a priori: if, as we may assume, all relevant observations are already included in the antecedent, they can offer no support to the claim that if that antecedent is true, then something further is true (BonJour 11).

In other words, if one is justified in believing premise one, premise two, and all the way down to premise x, in that they are known empirically, then one's justification for believing the conclusion (not known through observation) can only be a priori. BonJour claims this to be an epistemic principle. This certainly seems to be a damaging argument against the naturalist, as all of the empirical information is packed into the antecedent. Thus, no way exists to reach the conclusion without an appeal to knowledge known independent of experience.

Though BonJour concedes that empirical evidence may indeed do most of the epistemic workⁱⁱ, he maintains that a priori knowledge serves as the link between a collection of observations (the antecedent) and the conclusion (the consequent). But, is it obvious that such a link must be a priori? Further, how does one come to have a priori knowledge? A priori knowledge in the form of an inference is used when one's knowledge is incomplete, such that a conclusion not observed in experience can be reached. This is synthetic a priori knowledge, which BonJour argues in favor of, as opposed to analytic a priori knowledge in the form of tautologies, which are true of all possible worlds. The latter seems undeniable, though trivial, while the former is precisely what is in contention. That inferences can be demonstrated to be likely to a degree via probability also seems undeniable. We are able to delineate a set of logically possible conclusions, as well as to give each possible conclusion a probability of likelihood. Whether this sort of method should count as knowledge is the heart of the question. While it is common for naturalists to argue that a probability cannot serve as knowledge, the objection this paper makes runs much deeper. The objection is that this sort of demonstration amounts to nothing more than reflection upon experience. It is not that it should be disregarded. Further, BonJour's assertions allow for the possibilities of such an objection.

In responding to an argument advanced by Philip Kitcher, BonJour offers an alternative conclusion to the possible conclusions outlined by Kitcher. BonJour's alternative, though, seems to put him in a precarious position. In the following passage, BonJour quotes Kitcher in response to a Kuhn-inspired argument:

Either they can continue to insist that philosophers know a priori the principles of confirmation and evidence, concluding that the actual reasoning of scientists is cognitively deficient, or they can abandon the a priori status of methodological claims and use the performances of past and present scientists as a guide to formulating a fallible theory of confirmation and evidence. Since the first option has an uncomfortable air of arrogance, it is hardly surprising that most responses to Kuhn have followed the latter course (BonJour 9-10).

In response, BonJour claims that the first two alternatives: “(i) sticking stubbornly and perhaps dogmatically to one’s initial allegedly a priori precepts” and “(ii) adopting what may seem to amount to an abandonment of philosophy altogether in favor of a kind of psychology or sociology of scientific practice” are not exhaustive. As a third option, BonJour purposes that:

...reconsidering one’s initial a priori assessment in light of what scientists seem to be doing, while still insisting that any acceptable mode of scientific reasoning must ultimately be able to be seen or shown to be rationally cogent in an a priori way that transcends the mere fact that it is employed in practice (BonJour 10).

But, can this third option still be construed as a priori? Is it not based on observation? This seems to beg the question. If a priori knowledge is defined as being independent of experience, then BonJour’s sort of a priori knowledge seems to be dependent upon experience and thus fails to be a priori. On one hand, he claims that a priori knowledge is necessary to reach a consequent from an antecedent packed with observation, and on the other, he concedes that a priori knowledge must be shaped by what is observed. This seems to be an obvious contradiction. In fact, BonJour admits as much, even going so far as to refer to a priori knowledge as both “fallible and corrigible.”

BonJour writes:

If this third alternative is indeed available, then Kuhn’s historical argument fails to establish the strong thesis that the ideas of a priori justification and a priori epistemology should be abandoned, as opposed to the much weaker thesis that an apparent conflict with scientific practice can and should provoke a reconsideration of the specific a priori results in question, possibly but certainly not inevitably leading to their correction or abandonment. All this assumes, of course, that it makes sense to speak of correcting or abandoning a priori claims, i.e., that a priori justification need not be construed as incorrigible or infallible (BonJour 10).

To hold a priori knowledge as both fallible and correctable seems equivalent to labeling it a priori as a necessity and in order to maintain a philosophical view, rather than because it is indeed a priori. However, if a priori knowledge is in fact dogmatic, then Kuhn’s objection remains and BonJour has failed to offer a viable alternative.

For the externalist, however, success can serve as an adequate connection to truth. But, until a sufficient track record of trial and error has been established, the externalist is left only with a true belief. With a proven history of success in hand though, the externalist is armed with justification on an objective level. It is just this sort of trial and error process by which BonJour seemingly admits that “a priori” knowledge is manipulated around changing scientific methods such that a sufficient track record is established. In other words, BonJour seems to want a priori knowledge to be correctable in light of mistakes and in accordance with scientific findings. If it works, then use it, but refer to it as a priori. Here, the traditional epistemologist has fuzzy word definitions and may even be guilty of changing the subject in order to achieve desirable results. This clearly demonstrates that what has traditionally been referred to as a priori knowledge is nothing more than a reflection upon experience. This is defined as concept empiricism. BonJour is guilty of using a loose and flexible definition of a priori that can be stretched to yield the desired results.

If a priori knowledge as an epistemic principle is untenable in any meaningful way, then the externalist is in need of a viable alternative. The obvious alternative to a priori knowledge is empiricism. Arguing in favor of empiricism is certainly nothing new and would put one in the company of philosophical giants such as Locke and Hume. However, there are numerous forms of empiricism, each with problems. First, though, one must have an adequate understanding of the concepts at hand, as well as an agreed upon set of working definitions so as to not be accused of changing the subject. Victory by way of definition would be a hollow one, and this seems to be the

only progress made by naturalism thus far. A priori knowledge is commonly defined as being independent of any justification from experience. However, experience from which the concept at hand is derived may be presupposed. For example, most philosophers consider mathematical knowledge to be a priori, though children cannot acquire such knowledge until experience of the world is first gained. Knowledge, however, which can only be justified by at least some appeal to experience, i.e. the five senses, is referred to as empirical knowledge (a posteriori). BonJour is a judgment rationalist, claiming that there are synthetic truths knowable a priori. Concept empiricism, on the other hand, states that every concept is either given in experience or is generated by reflection on experience. This is the position held by Locke and Hume, and in light of BonJour's concessions, it seems to leave the door open for the naturalist to hijack what has historically been referred to as synthetic a priori knowledge. If it can be shown that knowledge historically considered to be a priori is generated by reflection on experience rather than being known independently of it, then the internalist's position is weakened, and room is left for a form of externalism.

In his essay "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," David Hume undermines the notion of a priori knowledge. Hume writes:

In a word, then, every effect is a distinct even from its cause. It could not, therefore, be discovered in the cause, and the first invention or conception of it, a priori, must be entirely arbitrary. And even after it is suggested, the conjunction of it with the cause must appear equally arbitrary; since there are always many other effects, which, to reason, must seem fully as consistent and natural. In vain, therefore, should we pretend to determine any single event, or infer any cause or effect, without the assistance of observation and experience... (Hume 436).

Concept empiricism, however, is not without problems of its own. Hume conceded that this view was not entirely correct, as was demonstrated by the missing shade of blue. Imagine a spectrum of various shades of blue such that each patch of blue in the spectrum gradually and progressively becomes darker. Is it possible to imagine a missing link in the spectrum even though that exact shade is not presented to us in experience? The answer seems to be an obvious yes, and consequently concept empiricism needs to be revised. However, the missing shade of blue, though a concept not given to us in experience, is derived from experience. Though it seems obvious that it is indeed possible to imagine the missing link, the imagination provides only the missing link and not the spectrum in its entirety. What the would-be naturalist is in need of is an argument that clearly demonstrates that what has traditionally been referred to as a priori knowledge is generated by reflection upon experience. Adopting such a position would allow for the naturalist to incorporate what is generally held to be a priori knowledge by arguing that a priori knowledge is not independent of experience after all but is, rather, dependent upon it and is thus, by definition, not a priori.

However, given BonJour's concession that a priori knowledge is fallible, is it conceptually plausible for the role that a priori knowledge has traditionally played to be replaced by a form of emergentism? Further, what are the consequences of abandoning a priori knowledge? If analytic a priori knowledge is trivial, and even if synthetic a priori knowledge is not truly a priori, then it still does not seem as though the externalist is equipped with the necessary tools to solve BonJour's problem and bridge the gap between antecedent and consequent.

There is, however, a third type of "a priori" knowledge in addition to analytic and synthetic knowledge. Kant talks of a priori knowledge as knowledge that cannot be taken from experience in that, without such knowledge, we would not be able to make sense of the world.ⁱⁱⁱ He asks what it is possible for any human-like-mind to know, concluding that we must first critique our "faculties." This is perhaps the only way in which it makes sense to speak of knowledge as being truly a priori. Clearly, a mind void of certain abilities, i.e. the ability to pattern match, would not be able to function in the world. While it is well beyond the scope of this paper to enumerate such capabilities, their existence seems undeniable. Though Kant's classification of a prior knowledge would appear favorable to the internalist in that it is a form of knowledge independent of experience, I believe that it has no bearing on the traditional project whatsoever. It says nothing about reasons for holding a belief but, rather, elucidates how it is possible for beliefs to be formed. And so, a priori knowledge in a Kantian sense can only strengthen the externalist's position.

BonJour's critique of naturalized epistemology is that, given a set of empirical premises packed into the antecedent, there is no way that is not a priori to reach a consequent observed in experience. But, it seems that Kant's definition of a priori knowledge has left open a possibility for the externalist to argue his way out the backdoor. While many naturalists have attempted to argue that the ability to reach true beliefs a high percentage of the time has been hard-wired into the brain in an attempt to circumnavigate the problem of circularity, all such attempts have failed thus far. However, given a Kantian view of a priori knowledge, no such appeal is necessary. In fact, it seems plausible that given a small number of a priori "categories," to again borrow Kant's terminology, that a logically ordered world-view will begin to emerge given sufficient empirical input. This does not directly refute our previous definition of a priori knowledge, which hardly seems to be controversial. Even mathematical knowledge, widely held to be a priori, is dependent upon experience of the world. Further, it is not at odds with BonJour's admission that a priori knowledge is fallible. In fact, it insists upon it. What is significant, however, is that given such a view, a priori knowledge is by and large shaped by experience, with the only exception being a priori knowledge in the Kantian sense. Further, such knowledge gives the externalist an a priori foundation by which to bridge the gap between antecedent and consequent. It is also consistent with concept empiricism.

The need to construct a consistent world in which cause and effect relationships hold true seems to be a psychological necessity of survival.^{iv} Try to imagine a world in which such relationships do not exist. Information received via the five senses must be organized in a logical manner in order to make sense of the world. Even if the cause and effect relationships that we project onto the world are not an accurate representation of it, they seem to function within it. And so, if the ability to pattern match, etc. paired with memory yields a consistent, logical domain as empirical knowledge of the world is gained, then the emergence of the missing shade of blue as a reflection upon experience does not seem to be particularly mysterious when given the rest of the spectrum. Determining what specifically constitutes Kantian a priori knowledge, however, is a job for cognitive science, psychology, artificial intelligence, and perhaps transcendental arguments.

However, another objection remains. While the internalist may not particularly disagree with this view, he would, I believe, object on the grounds that none of it addresses the questions raised by the skeptic. Thus, it fails to count as epistemology and is therefore in no way philosophically interesting. Rather, the only accomplishment, if anything at all has indeed been accomplished, is an understanding of how beliefs are formed. Remember, the argument at hand is one of metaepistemology. That is, what are the correct standards for justification in a Knowledge = True Justified Belief format? The internalist is entitled to only what an agent is directly aware of and can "know" from within, while the externalist throws consciousness out the window and is left only with stimulus and response. Success, however, is not necessarily a result of being rational, and being rational does not guarantee success, objects the traditionalist. However, if the only thing that separates the internalist from the externalist is a priori knowledge as an epistemic principle, and this epistemic principle has not only been shown to be fallible, but is dependent upon experience to even be formed, then the traditional project must by definition collapse into the naturalized project. In regard to skeptical questions, the externalist is no better off. Certainty remains impossible. However, success can be demonstrated and can knowingly be achieved in that we are able to survive and navigate in a matrix of uncertainty.

A final problem arises for the naturalist as a result of an external account of justification. BonJour writes:

...one thing that it is important to bear in mind about the issue of a priori justification is how easy it is to rely on a priori insights without explicitly acknowledging them, even to oneself. This is particularly easy where such insights to fundamental patterns of reasoning and argument (BonJour 13).

Using success as the epistemic principle, which connects us to truth, generates a problem of circularity. If the goal is to sort true from false beliefs, then we are in need of a reliable process capable of doing the sorting. The question then becomes which method, or process, shall we use. The answer is obviously one that yields true beliefs, and by examining the results of the process, we can determine if they are true. But how do we know that they are indeed true? After all, this was the purpose of the reliable process in the first place. And so it seems that we have entered into a hopeless problem of circularity.

Quine offers a possible, though problematic solution:

Such a surrender of the epistemological burden to psychology is a move that was disallowed in earlier times as circular reasoning. If the epistemologist's goal is validation of the grounds of empirical science, he defeats his purpose by using psychology or other empirical science in the validation. However, such scruples against circularity have little point once we have stopped dreaming of deducing science from observations (Quine 290).

In other words, Quine argues that the problem of circularity really is no longer a problem, at least not one worth addressing. Ignoring the problem, however, does not make it go away, and until it has been adequately addressed, the traditional epistemologist will have grounds from which to object to a naturalistic project and reasonably so. The problem of circularity is a problem of criterion. How does one deem a process a successful one? How does one know that a process is a reliable one? However, the needed criterion is a simple and obvious one.

The naturalist is in need of an established track record by way of trial and error that confirms the process as a reliable one. This seems to be an accurate representation of what we experience, as well as a matter of survival. My senses must correlate with the external world to a sufficient degree such that I am successfully able to navigate within it. As Allan Gibbard put it in his book *Thinking How to Live*, "Clearly those who were hopeless at getting everyday, surrounding facts right would tend not to reproduce. They would bump into things; they would fall over cliffs and get killed" (Gibbard 255). While I agree with Gibbard's claim, it is this sort of reasoning that the traditional epistemologist objects to. It must be noted that the epistemological question of how our claims to knowledge can be justified is different from the psychological question of how we come to hold these beliefs. However, if the epistemological question, as has been defined by the traditionalist, is untenable, then the latter alternative may be all with which we are left.

Unfortunately, this line of reasoning only leads to further objections. First, it is unclear that given this sort of criterion, any interesting results may be achieved. Second, it does not seem to answer questions raised by the skeptic but, rather, answers questions about how beliefs are actually formed. Third, it results in justification across a period of time rather than at a particular moment. The traditional epistemologist is concerned only with the justification of beliefs at a particular time *t*. The problem for the naturalist thus becomes: belief *X* for person *A* can be justified by the process by which person *A* arrived at belief *X*, while it is possible that the same belief *X* for person *B* is not justified in that it was not formed as the result of a reliable process. On this account, a naturalized justification of knowledge yields a nonsensical result. Either belief *X* is justified for both person *A* and person *B*, or it is not justified for both person *A* and person *B*. Finally, a host of objections specific to a Darwinian evolutionary process have been raised and must be addressed individually.

However, if a priori knowledge is both fallible and correctable, as BonJour concedes that it is, then by what means does one know when a priori knowledge is infallible? This seems to put the internalist in the same position as the externalist in regards to circularity. If a priori justification is reliant upon empirical evidence to determine its validity and empirical evidence is justified by success via some sort of reliable process, then circularity is problematic for both accounts of justification.

There are a number of levels on which this paper can potentially make progress: (i) by showing that BonJour's attack on the very possibility of externalism has been refuted, (ii) by showing that the hopes of a naturalized project have not been rendered a disaster, and (iii) by laying the foundation for a complete naturalized project by delineating how it might be possible to refute internalism as well as addressing the problem of circularity. If, however, this sort of attack employed against a priori knowledge is conceptually invalid, then the project of naturalized epistemology does not seem to be valid. But if it is successful, there are still significant problems that remain for a naturalized epistemology to overcome. These problems though are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I hope only that a potential line of reasoning for a naturalized project has been established.

Notes

ⁱ BonJour defines moderate empiricism as “The thesis that the only claims or propositions that can be justified a priori are those which are analytic” (BonJour 8). Further, BonJour notes that, at most, it is this reduction to analyticity that Quine has argued against successfully. He writes, “...Quine’s arguments against the idea of a priori justification tend to assume what amounts to a hypothetical version of moderate empiricism: the view that if there were any a priori justified claims, they would have to be analytic...It is, I suggest, this moderate empiricist argument, and not the idea of a priori justification itself, that is defeated by Quine’s arguments (assuming that they are otherwise successful)” (BonJour 8).

ⁱⁱ Speaking of a priori epistemic principles, BonJour writes, “Nothing about the argument advanced here excludes the possibility that such principles might be few in number and very general in character, perhaps even limited to logic (including probability theory) and general principles of inductive and explanatory reasoning. Thus it might be that such principles do not take us very far-and in particular that much of the job of ‘meliorative epistemology’ must be done empirically” (BonJour 13).

ⁱⁱⁱ Though much of Kant’s philosophy concerns his defense of synthetic a priori propositions, I wish to not only make a distinction between synthetic and analytic a priori knowledge but to also treat Kant’s conception of “faculties” as a third a priori category, however controversial this distinction may be.

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