

A Naturalistic Epistemology: Selected Papers

By Hilary Kornblith

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This volume will be a most welcome addition to the personal library of anyone interested in contemporary epistemology: the papers here collected provide a very comprehensive and clear defence of one of the most radical and widely discussed research programs, as offered by one of its fiercest and lucid advocates. Kornblith's naturalistic epistemology is discussed from a number of perspectives touching on an extensive range of topics, including what epistemology is about, the importance of its social dimension, the link between epistemology and metaphysics, epistemic normativity, the critique of internalism, the extent to which externalist theories offer satisfactory explanations, the relation between human knowledge and animal knowledge, the reliance on intuitions in philosophical methodology, and the broad theory of rationality. There is no doubt that the hope that 'collecting [the papers] in one place will serve to illuminate their interconnections and highlight the integrity of the vision that informs them' (1) has been fulfilled.

One way to describe Kornblith's naturalism is by contrasting it with rival approaches to epistemology. According to a popular reconstruction (Goldman and Pust 1998), epistemology engages in at least two substantial tasks: the descriptive one of identifying the properties that make a belief a case of knowledge, and the normative one of formulating norms to guide agents' epistemic activity so that they can acquire knowledge. For *traditional analytic epistemology*, both tasks can be achieved through the armchair method of advancing conceptual analyses and principles, and revising them in the light of counterexamples—all in splendid ignorance of the results of empirical research, as the saying goes. On the other hand, a brand of naturalism that we might dub *moderate* agrees with the traditional view that the descriptive task can be achieved from the armchair, but it insists that the normative part requires the identification of methods of belief-formation that are actually reliable, and thus it needs the contribution of empirical investigations: whether a method is reliable or not is an empirical question. By contrast, according to the kind of naturalism defended by Kornblith, which we may call *uncompromising*, traditional philosophical methods should play no role in epistemology: rather, we should appeal to the results of empirical investigation from the initial task of figuring out what knowledge is.

Kornblith argues that it is a mistake to try to analyse the concept of knowledge at all: what we really care about is what the category—knowledge itself—is (see especially chapters 10 and 12). While chapter 10 lists several pressing issues for the advocates of conceptual analysis, the argumentative weight in Kornblith's reasoning appears to be carried by the following claim: 'since our ultimate target is the extra-mental phenomenon [knowledge itself], we would do better to study those extra-mental phenomena directly rather than to study our own...concepts' (166-7). Kornblith further contends that in order to find out what knowledge itself is, we need to see how knowledge gets its purchase in science (e.g. 110, 120), and that once we do so, we see that knowledge is a natural kind. There would be a lot to say about the thesis that knowledge is a natural kind—and I take the chance to note that at p. 192 we find a helpful clarification of the often contested (e.g. Feldman 1999:179, Goldman 2005: 404) analogy between knowledge and water or aluminium—but in this short review I prefer to focus on the methodological proposal advanced by Kornblith.

One may agree that the target of epistemological investigation is knowledge itself rather than anyone's concept of it, and even agree that the advocates of conceptual analysis need to clarify what

exactly they are doing—for example, whether they wish to analyse the concept of the folk or the concept of the experts, or why psychological evidence suggesting that the contours of human concepts are not represented by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions does not diminish the importance of engaging in traditional conceptual analysis (see ch.10). Yet, one would be under no obvious pressure to conclude that conceptual analysis in epistemology should be altogether abandoned, as opposed to, say, being adequately reformed.

A rather naïve thought in defence of the importance of conceptual analysis in epistemology could go along lines similar to the following. If believing P is necessary for knowing P, and having the conceptual repertoire needed to grasp the content of P is necessary for believing P, then possession of the relevant concepts is necessary for knowing P. If so, possession of some concepts is necessary for knowledge—knowledge itself, that is. Then, one may think that the category of knowledge is, in part, a conceptual category. But if the category in question is at least in part a conceptual category, then it is not at all outlandish to suppose that an investigation into the concept of knowledge could help in understanding some features of the category itself.

Of course, the foregoing is rather generic, and it serves only to express some initial concern about the facility with which Kornblith seems to move from the claim “what we care about is the category of knowledge” to “conceptual analysis is of no real use in epistemology”. Indeed, it does not take into account something important about uncompromising naturalism. Kornblith maintains that animals have knowledge too, and he further contends that the knowledge of animals and the knowledge of humans are the same phenomenon and can be explained in a unified way. Indeed, Kornblith takes such characterization of knowledge to be the target of epistemological investigations (chapter 8).

Now it’s worth recalling that it is not clear whether animals have concepts at all, and that even if they do, their concepts are likely to be very different from ours (see, for example, Peacocke 2001). But if the notion of knowledge that we want to account for is one that concerns both animals and humans, it seems wrong to say that the possession of some concepts is necessary for it. If so, the sort of knowledge that is under investigation is not a conceptual category. Shall we then accept Kornblith’s claim that in order to find out about the category of knowledge we should drop conceptual analysis and see how knowledge enters the scientific theoretical picture?

By way of a reply, I’d like to offer two general considerations. First, when Kornblith claims that we should see how the notion of knowledge matters in science, he is thinking of the natural sciences—as opposed to human sciences. One may wonder why. If we think that to find out what the category of X is we need to find out how X gets in purchase in the sciences *tout court*, it does seem odd to set aside human sciences when the topic of investigation is knowledge. Arguably, human sciences have given way more attention to knowledge than natural sciences. One could suspect that Kornblith’s view is, at some level, motivated by a bias against human sciences.

Secondly, the importance that Kornblith gives to the knowledge of animals, and his *de facto* taking this as the paradigmatic case of knowledge for the purposes of epistemological investigations, brings us close to a sometimes heard objection against uncompromising naturalism. Namely, that it changes the subject by targeting something rather different than the notion of knowledge that philosophers have traditionally tried to explain. One way of formulating the complaint may be the following: Kornblith’s version of naturalism gives up on accounting for the kind of knowledge that is specifically human.

To conclude, one is left with the impression that if the naturalism defended by Kornblith is to meet all the explanatory demands that would seem to bear on an epistemology with wide ambitions, it has yet to meet this challenge: to provide an account of a (minimal) notion of knowledge that humans and animals alike can obtain, and show how that is linked with what is distinctive of human knowledge—which, for example, requires one to possess some concepts, and can be reinforced, or called into question, by examining one’s grounds, or through higher-order reasoning more generally.

To be fair, this is a challenge for *any* epistemology with wide ambitions, and it is a challenge that has entered the epistemological agenda largely thanks to Kornblith's work.

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