

Two Husserlian Objections to Quine's Naturalized Epistemology

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*I have neither recieved nor given any unauthorized aid on this paper.

1 Introduction

Should we adopt Quine's naturalized epistemology? In "Philosophy as Rigorous Science", Husserl raises two objections to naturalism: (1) its lack of normative power and (2) its circular nature. In this paper, I first try to get straight on what Quine's naturalism amounts to. I agree with the views purposed by David Smith and Sonja Rinofner that Quine could be taken to be advancing two distinct forms of naturalism, ontological or methodological. Husserl's objections put into question the foundations of naturalized epistemology but do not seem entirely fatal. Instead, it seems as if the debate between epistemic naturalists and epistemic anti-naturalists has unavoidable ontological dependencies, turning on the paradox of intentionality, which concerns the nature-status attributed to the field of intentionality, i.e. whether we understand consciousness itself as part of the natural world. If we take Quine to be asserting the irreducibility of intentional consciousness, then the epistemic gap between Husserl and Quine can be radically reduced.

2 What is naturalized epistemology?

What is meant by naturalism in the context of epistemology? Feldman characterizes naturalism as an objection to the traditional epistemological methodology and not an objection to the standard view, i.e. the types and sources of knowledge we ordinarily take to know. Naturalism, as Feldman understands it, asserts that science ought to play a larger role in epistemology, somehow essential to the task at hand (Feldman pp.157). Other philosophers have also interpreted naturalism as primarily a shift in the values of epistemic theory¹. For both Quine and Husserl, these accounts of naturalism are too weak. Quine argues for a philosophical reduction of epistemology, as he understands it, into psychology and so natural science. Traditional epistemic work should be given up in favor of the empirical study of human cognition. Rinofner interprets Quine's project to be a radical naturalism, endeavoring an "elimination of conceptual distinctions which

¹For example, the so called scientific epistemologists who assert that results from empirical studies should dominate epistemological discourse (see Feldman's "Naturalized Epistemology" entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

were of central importance to traditional epistemologies, e.g. formal/material, empirical/*a priori*, analytic/synthetic, descriptive/normative” (Rinofner pp.43). The radical property of Quine’s naturalism not the quantitative degree to which it values natural science and empiricism in epistemology but rather its qualitative reconsideration of what problems are relevant to epistemology: “[its] thoroughgoing shift of those problems which are deemed to be philosophically or theoretically worth investigating” (Rinofner pp.43). Rinofner’s reading of Quine’s position highlights its methodological component, an interpretation that I will support in the next section.

If, for the time being, we take it that Quine’s methodological naturalized epistemology is a shifting-of-relevance for problems in the epistemic domain, then we can see what is at stake in naturalized epistemology for Husserl: the concept of epistemology itself. By avoiding questions of epistemic support and normative epistemology, and thus avoiding our traditional conceptual distinctions, there is no talk of truly epistemic problems. The reciprocal containment of “epistemology in natural science and natural science in epistemology” is, for Husserl, just natural science. Husserl asserts that human knowledge of this traditional sort is inherently tied up and constituted in subjective consciousness, which cannot be reduced to studies of natural science or empiricism. The methodological shift purposed by Quine thus misses out on the field of understanding provided to us by a proper epistemology². It turns out, however, that the later Quine accepts the irreducibility of the study of consciousness to natural science, allowing him to respond to Husserl and save his naturalized methodology at the cost of an adjustment to his ontology. This adaptation is the focus of the final section of the paper.

3 Two interpretations of Quine’s naturalized epistemology

As mentioned, I agree with the views of David Smith and Sonja Rinofner that there are two distinct positions put forth in Quine’s “Epistemology Naturalized.” There is ontological naturalism (*ON*),

²Husserl sees naturalized epistemology as relativistic and contrasts his transcendental phenomenology to it in this respect. Husserl instead begins his philosophical investigation from our indubitable conscious awareness and its necessary directedness towards objects of consciousness, independent of their actual existence. Husserl’s positive account of epistemology does not play a central role in his objections to naturalism.

which asserts that the human subject and human knowledge are phenomena in nature. Then there is methodological naturalism (*MN*), which asserts that we should study the human subject and human knowledge in the same way we study other phenomena in nature, namely empirically and through natural science; all knowledge of phenomena in nature is empirical knowledge.

Ontological naturalism in Quine's words:

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 [emphasis mine] (Quine pp.82).

Epistemology falls into place as chapter of psychology simply because it studies human knowledge, which is a natural, physical phenomenon. That is to say, there is no part of epistemology that studies anything non-natural or non-physical because there is no part of human knowledge that is non-natural or non-physical; both the object and subject of human knowledge are solely in nature as natural phenomena. It is this latter assertion, that human knowledge is a phenomena in nature, that constitutes the essence of Quine's ontological naturalism³

It is entirely fair to call this an ontological position. Quine is making a claim about the fundamental or essential being of both the human subject and human knowledge, namely their situation as solely natural entities. This is a claim about the nature-status of the objects of epistemic investigation.

Methodological naturalism, then, makes the connection between the assertion that *X* is a natural phenomena and the assertion that we ought to study *X* empirically and in the same way that science studies other phenomena in nature; it is a claim about the proper method for investigating human knowledge. For Quine, it is a demystification of the study of human knowledge: "If *X* is a natural phenomena, investigate *X* like a natural phenomena!" In his own words:

...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 output a description of the three-dimensional external world and its history.

³Here, I take it that epistemology is uncontroversially understood as primarily concerning itself with human knowledge.

...We are studying how the human subject of our study posits bodies and projects his physics from his data, and we appreciate that our position in the world is just like his... There is thus a reciprocal containment, though containment in different senses: epistemology in natural science and natural science in epistemology (Quine pp.83).

The concept of reciprocal containment mentioned here is, at first pass, a seemingly circular idea. Rather than seeing it as merely circular, I take it that, by talking of reciprocal containment, Quine is speaking to the purposed singular identification of natural science and epistemology on the one hand, and their distinction and hierarchical relationship on the other. Reciprocal containment is the description we mean when we speak of biology or chemistry and natural science, where biology and chemistry exist as distinguishable components of natural science (biology in natural science) yet are also instantiations of natural science itself, i.e. contain in them some part of natural science (natural science in biology).

All natural science, for Quine, includes with it the giving up of foundational approaches to their object domain. Knowledge found in natural science is represented in a web of belief. The Cartesian project of deducing all knowledge is discarded. Naturalized epistemology, as a natural science, is not supposed to give us an understanding of human knowledge superior to the limitations implicit in the method itself:

...[W]e have stopped dreaming of deducing science from sense data. We are after an understanding of science as an institution of process in the world, and we do not intend that understanding to be any better than the science which is its object (Quine pp.84).

The two types of Quinean naturalism, *ON* and *MN*, are not an attempt to logically partition all naturalist positions⁴. Rather, they are intended to help categorize an otherwise vague notion. Any naturalist in practice would most likely hold views that fall within both categories, but not necessarily so.

⁴For example, some philosophers talk of semantic naturalism, which is not directly taken up by Quine. It asserts that any analysis of knowledge must ground its key concepts (intentionality, truth, justification, etc.) in terms with approved naturalistic standing, i.e. strong ties to a physical and causal process.

What, then, is the claim against them? First, there is the question of the correct relationship between *ON* and *MN*. While this idea will not be taken up any further, there is the apparent possibility that *MN* is somehow entailed by *ON*, putting into question their independence. Then, there are the two Husserlian objections: that naturalized epistemology lacks its requisite normative power and that naturalized epistemology is too circular, too imposing, and too self-absolute in such a way as to be self-defeating. I will spend the majority of my time with this latter objection, if only because the normative problems associated with naturalized epistemology have been thoroughly thought out in the academic literature.

Finally, there is, of course, the lingering objection that I have in some way misinterpreted Quine. For example, Quine could be taken as only asserting *ME*, making no metaphysical claims. This, on my analysis, seems unlikely. If Quine doesn't hold *ON*, then *MN* seems to come into question. If human knowledge is not necessarily a phenomena in nature, we might then ask, why not investigate knowledge using non-empirical methods? Or, why should facts about the world such as "it is drizzling" be studied and understood with the same method as facts such as "I know that *p*?" I have presented reasonable evidence from the text that my interpretation is correct, but I have certainly not conducted an exhaustive review of Quine's entire work, nor consulted a Quinean scholar⁵. What follows in my paper, however, will rest upon the reasonableness of this bifurcation of Quine's naturalized epistemology.

4 Theories of justification

In the background of the Quine/Husserl naturalism debate is what I take to be a relatively similar understanding of justification. The theory of justification at play in both Quine and Husserl will be taken as Coherentist. For the purposes of this paper, a Coherentist theory of justification will be taken as asserting that a belief, or set of beliefs, is justified if and only if the belief coheres with a coherent system of beliefs. What it means exactly for a belief to cohere to a system of

⁵If you are one, we should talk.

beliefs will be left here in its ambiguity, but I have in mind something similar to the coherence criteria of Bonjour as described by Olsson (2014).⁶ As outlined in “naturalized epistemology”, Quine rejects foundationalist approaches to justification, Cartesian or otherwise, in virtue of the impossibility of an absolutely certain foundation for justified belief. Additionally, Quine appears to hold a Coherentist view towards truth, in which the holistic body of scientific knowledge, in virtue of its consistency and extensiveness, constitutes truth, such that any sentence within it is true by its coherence to the whole.

Similarly, Husserl seems to hold a Coherentist theory of justification in virtue of his rejection of absolutely certain, irreversible beliefs. For Husserl, there is no foundational, justified basic belief that we could use to derive all of our justified beliefs. While it is the case that Husserl builds a foundation into his methodology, namely the indubitable existence of consciousness and its directedness towards objects, this does not necessarily imply that his epistemic justification must be foundational⁷.

It is also important to note that both of these two thinkers deny skeptical conclusions regarding justification. We can and do hold justified beliefs. More can be said to specify Quine’s epistemology. As we’ve seen already, for Quine there is no “deducing of science from observations” and instead we have a web of belief, tied to the external world yet not derivable from it. Scientific theory, which sits towards the middle of the web, serves to systematically unite and explain our observations of the world. These observations in turn sit on the contours of the web and empirically test our theoretical beliefs. There is also a linguistic component for Quine, which is not central to the task at hand.

⁶The basic idea of Bonjour’s coherence criteria is that a system of beliefs is coherent if it is logically and probabilistically consistent as well as precise and able to explain observation. A belief coheres with the system if it meets these criteria.

⁷Some philosophers do insist that Husserl is a foundationalist with respect to justification, pointing to his connection with Descartes. This seems to be an argument by association and is not consistent with his work in “Philosophy as Rigorous Science.” A full treatment of this issue is outside the scope of this paper.

5 The normative objection

The normative objection concerns the inability of naturalized epistemology to account for the essential normative character of epistemic discourse. If naturalized epistemology intends to replace traditional epistemology, it must give a criterion of justified belief formulated on the basis of naturalistic terms, which seems to require an inherently evaluative and thus normative vocabulary. In Husserl's words, naturalism "is not calculated to lay the foundations of those philosophical disciplines that have to do with the pure principles for the establishing of norms." Applied to theory of knowledge, Husserl is asserting the impossibility of establishing any ability to speak about valuable or good knowledge, which seems essential to a theory of knowledge.

The argument Husserl has in mind is closely approximated by the argument taken up by Jaegwon Kim in "What is 'naturalized epistemology'?" If Quine intends for naturalized epistemology to only speak of the causal relationship between cognitive input and our beliefs about the world, then his project is entirely descriptive. Yet epistemology seems to be characteristic of a normative inquiry: when we talk of justification and of epistemic support we are, it seems, inherently talking in normative or evaluative terms. When we make statements of the kind *S* is justified in believing that *p*, we are asserting that it is reasonable or good that *S* believes that *p*. We are not just making observations about the causal relationship between *S*'s belief and the natural state of affairs, we are evaluating this relationship in terms not reducible to, or at least essentially different from, those terms that describe the casual chain. Epistemic support and the concepts of justification and belief require a normative and thus anti-naturalist epistemic inquiry. Insofar as naturalists intend to speak of belief and belief-forming processes (Quine pp.83), they risk equivocating their descriptive epistemic support with the normative sense. For naturalist critics, the argument works as a *reductio ad absurdum*: there is no talk of epistemic support without normativity.

This is a problem for Quine, as he wishes to give a description of justification in naturalistic terms. As I've shown, so long as naturalistic terms exclude evaluative talk, it will fail to capture what it is for a belief to be justified. Epistemology studies the conditions under which a belief is justified, and so seems incompatible with Quine's naturalizing project.

How, then, would Quine respond to the normativity objection? He seems to have two moves, either reject that his position entails an elimination of normativity or attempt to naturalize epistemic normativity itself. It turns out, however, that the later Quine does both. By naturalizing epistemic normativity itself, Quine argues that his naturalized epistemology does indeed retain epistemic normativity:

Naturalization of epistemology does not jettison the normative and settle for the indiscriminate description of ongoing procedures. For me normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth seeking, or, in a more cautiously epistemic term, prediction... There is no question here of ultimate value, as in morality; it is a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction. The normative here... becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter has been expressed (Hahn and Schilpp pp. 664-5)

The normativity for naturalized epistemology is the technology of truth-seeking, taking the form: “If you want outcome *O*, follow rule *R*”. But can this vocabulary properly describe what it is for a belief to be justified? The justificatory conditions for a belief seem to be the very “terminal parameters” that we are interested in. Quine is asserting that a theory of justification is a means to an end, with no evaluative weight outside of its prediction utility. I am not arguing that such an understanding of justification is incorrect. Instead, what is problematic is that Quine’s naturalized normativity is not normative at all, or at least not in the relevant sense; Quine is equivocating on the word normative. Quine cannot have his cake and eat it too: naturalized epistemology does ultimately result in indiscriminate descriptions of nature, i.e. descriptions of human knowledge⁸.

5.1 The circularity objection

The circularity concern arises in an examination of methodological naturalism, which asserts that all knowledge of natural phenomena is empirical, that there is no *a priori*, non-fallible knowledge of nature. If we grant Quine *ON*, then all knowledge is empirical and *a posteriori*. Then *MN* itself must be an empirical, fallible claim. That is, the claim that “all knowledge is empirical”

⁸Here I am speaking of Quine’s naturalism as the combination of *ON* and *MN*.

must itself be an empirical claim, lest it be self-defeating. This is where Husserl's circularity and self-absolutism objection fits in. It asks, "why not allow for non-empirical knowledge?" and puts into question the absolute, limiting spirit of naturalized epistemology by asking on what grounds do we accept both *ON* and *MN*.

Something similar can be said for Quine's ontological naturalism. *ON* understands the human subject and human knowledge as phenomena in nature, excluding talk of intentional consciousness insofar as it posits non-empirical, non-natural phenomena. But is there a line of naturalistic reasoning to justify such an understanding of human knowledge and the human subject? How would one undertake a naturalized investigation of what is?

Husserl argues that naturalism is circular in a sense not entailed by a mere Coherentist rejection of justified basic beliefs. On the one hand, Quinean epistemology is admittedly circular, i.e. Coherentist, in the sense that its web of belief is not deducible from any given foundation; it is self-supporting. The charge by Husserl is that the naturalist method is circular in a fundamentally different sense than merely Coherentist justification, which, as we've seen, Husserl himself more-or-less accepts.

We can begin by formulating a simple circularity argument against naturalized epistemology (*NE*):

(C.1) *NE* includes the questioning of the possibility and character of knowledge.

(C.2) *NE* presupposes the possibility and character of knowledge.

(C.3) *NE* is circular, i.e. assumes part of what it is trying to understand.

(C.1) assumes that Quine's naturalized epistemology is still concerned with answering the same traditional epistemic questions, including the possibility of knowledge and a corresponding analysis, e.g. knowledge is justified true belief. This argument assumes that naturalized epistemology isn't just a shifting-of-domain as discussed earlier. (C.2), on the other hand, results from *ON* and *MN*. *ON* presupposes the character of human knowledge as in nature, as reducible to nature, as without anything non-natural. *MN* presupposes the possibility of knowledge in virtue of its

reliance on empiricism, which in turn must presuppose the existence of its object of study.

Proposition (C.2) is put by Husserl as the assertion that “natural science accepts nature as given (pp.87)”. Interpreted by Rinofner, “empirical investigations presuppose the reality of both the things investigated and the investigators (pp.44)”. Both of these quotes logically imply (C.2). Natural science can say nothing about the character or possibility of what it studies. You cannot have a natural science of something without reality, or a natural science conducted by non-existing entities. Natural science comes with an answer to the knowledge-of-the-external-world-skeptic: My hands exist because I empirically study my hands existence. Naturalized epistemology, as natural science, necessarily presuppose that we can have valid knowledge.

Now we can get to proposition (C.3). (C.1) tells us that it is the task of epistemology to address questions regarding the possibility and character of valid knowledge. (C.2) tells us that naturalized epistemology already has answers to questions regarding the possibility and character of valid knowledge. Therefore (C.3) concludes that naturalized epistemology cannot tell us about the possibility and character of knowledge that it doesn't already presuppose, i.e. cannot tell us about epistemology. This relationship is reciprocal uncontainment: natural science cannot be epistemology and epistemology cannot be natural science.

I do not think this is the exact circularity argument Husserl has in mind, as there is an obvious problem: it seems to apply equally well to traditional, non-naturalized epistemology. That is, traditional epistemology also presupposes the possibility and character of knowledge; we could replace 'naturalized epistemology' with 'traditional epistemology' at every instance. By claiming to study knowledge, it seems to say that knowledge exists. By giving an analysis of knowledge, it seems to say that knowledge is intelligible in conceptual terms. The entire study of epistemology seems to carry with it the odor of this sort of circularity: “to know about knowing presupposes the know!” This, of course, is even before considering the Coherentist circularity in the justification of beliefs.

Husserl needs to make a distinction between this kind of mundane circularity and the 'vicious circularity' that he attributes to naturalized epistemology, which he attempts to do using the *para-*

dox of intentionality. Husserl sees intentionality, what he calls pure consciousness, as an essentially extra-natural phenomena. Smith states that the “paradox lies in the fact that intentionality seems to be part of the natural world yet is not reducible to physical properties such as causal relations to objects (pp.156)”⁹ A completely delimited picture of Husserl’s intentionality isn’t necessary here; all that is necessary for understanding Husserl is that intentionality is a sort of extra-natural black box, something of which we can come to know only through a non-empirical method.

Quine, on the other hand, has held two relevant positions towards intentionality: the physicalist rejection of intentionality of which he traditionally associated with, found in *Word and Object*, and the strong non-reductionist position, found in *Pursuit of Truth*. These two views are incompatible. If it is the case that Husserl’s circularity objection turns on the status of intentionality, then Quine’s view of intentionality within his naturalized epistemology will determine the effectiveness of the objection.

The rejection of intentionality found in *World and Object*:

One may accept the Brentano thesis either as showing the indispensability of intentional idioms and the importance of an autonomous science of intention, or as showing the baselessness of intentional idioms and the emptiness of a science of intention. My attitude, unlike Brentano’s, is the second... (Smith pp.160).

For early Quine, intentionality is a product of physical properties, entirely reducible to an empirical understanding of human psychology. The later Quine, in *Pursuit of Truth*, takes an entirely opposed view:

Perceptions are neural realities, and so are the individual instances of beliefs and other propositional attitudes. ...What are irreducibly mental are ways of grouping them. ...[T]here are irreducibly mental ways of grouping physical states and events. ...Brentano was right about the irreducibility of intentional discourse (Smith pp.160).

In his later view, Quine sees intentionality as mental groupings of physical states and, as such,

⁹The extra-natural status of intentionality is argued from Husserl’s ontology and mereology, whose description lies outside the scope of this paper.

are wholly irreducible to these physical states. Talk of intentionality cannot be translated into talk of empirical facts about the world. It is important to note, however, that Quine considers this sort of irreducible intentionality as explicitly external from natural science. For now I will assume that Quine holds the reductionist position towards intentionality in his naturalized epistemology, but will explore later his understanding of intentionality in the final section.

How, then, does Quine's earlier understanding of intentionality lead to Husserl's 'vicious circularity' in naturalized epistemology? By attempting to naturalize intentionality, assumed here to be a prerequisite for naturalized epistemology, Quine is unable to explain the existence of our consciousness with its directedness. Husserl writes:

How can experience as consciousness give or contact an object? How can the play of a consciousness whose logic is empirical make objectively valid statements, valid for things that are in and for themselves? Why are the playing rules, so to speak, of consciousness not irrelevant for things?

...If certain riddles [i.e. the paradox of intentionality] are, generally speaking, inherent in principle to natural science, then it is self-evident that the solution of these riddles according to premises and conclusions in principle transcends natural science. To expect from natural science itself the solution of any one of the problems inherent in it as such... is to be involved in a vicious circle (pp.87)

Early Quine and naturalized epistemology cannot make sense of consciousness. Its attempts to understand consciousness through natural science presuppose what consciousness is. An empirical study of the essence of consciousness can tell you nothing you didn't already presuppose, namely that it is a natural phenomena with a physical constitution. Consciousness is a natural phenomena by *ON*, and you study it because of *MN*, but you fail in the epistemic project of obtaining new knowledge about the essence of consciousness.

Just as traditional epistemology was found to be circular (in the mundane sense) in the same way as naturalized epistemology, Husserl must and does admit that the anti-naturalist epistemological project makes its own assumptions about knowledge and is therefore subject to circularity

concerns. It is in this sense that I disagree with Husserl that early Quine's naturalized epistemology is viciously circular, lest Husserl's project suffer the same categorization. Epistemology unnaturalized must assume that at least some of the problems regarding the possibility of valid knowledge can be analyzed in unnaturalized terms, e.g. without taking notice of the empirical cognitive processes.

It seems to me that any grounding of knowledge must presuppose the possibility of knowledge. Epistemology carries with it a weak circularity, similar to the kind understood by Coherentism. This is not, on my analysis, a 'vicious circle' à la Husserl. What, then, falls out from Husserl's shaking up of naturalized epistemology? Should we adopt Quine's naturalized epistemology? Although he fails to refute Quine entirely, Husserl makes a good case, via his consideration of the paradox of intentionality, that a naturalized epistemology obscures possible sources of valid knowledge such as phenomenology. Additionally, Husserl's objections show that the debate between epistemic naturalists and epistemic anti-naturalists runs deeper than just epistemic disagreement and seems to have ontological dependencies that cannot be bracketed in the discussion. Finally, given the success of Husserl's normative objection and Quine's poor response, we should be careful of accepting a naturalized epistemology if we want to talk about the connections between knowledge and value.

6 How to Husserl a Quine

Perhaps Husserl's circularity objection is to be understood as a response to ontological naturalism's insistence on the sole existence of natural entities and natural phenomena, i.e. its implicit ontological principles. Using the later Quine's irreducible approach to intentionality, we can briefly see how one might Husserl a Quine, i.e. how one might fit a Husserlian transcendental phenomenology within a Quinean naturalized epistemology. If intentionality really is irreducible and external to natural science, then phenomenology can be understood just as the study of this irreducible intentionality. It can be allowed its full independence from empirical science. Such a modification to

Quine's view would allow him to escape Husserl's paradox of intentionality objection while still allowing for some semblance of a naturalized epistemology. The normative objection, however, still holds.

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