Chapter 9

SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

Jonathan Kvanvig
University of Missouri

Philosophical naturalism is, arguably, the dominant philosophical tradition in contemporary western philosophy. Naturalistic theories abound in nearly every area of philosophical investigation, and epistemology is no exception. Just what counts as a naturalistic theory in epistemology is not completely obvious, but the call for and interest in such is unquestionable.

When we begin to ask which theories count as naturalistic ones and which do not, things get more complicated, for it is far from obvious why any extant epistemological theory is anti-naturalistic. In the first section below, I will argue for a particular understanding of naturalism, situating the contemporary interest in it in a foundational attitude of respect for science. This motivation for the view constrains the kind of epistemological theory one can adopt, and my goal is to show how these constraints push inexorably toward a kind of attitudinalism or non-cognitivism in epistemology, an attitudinalism modeled on non-cognitivist approaches in ethics. The force doing the push is the need to account for the value of knowledge, which I will provisionally assume. My ultimate goal is to show how difficult it is for naturalistic views to account for the value of knowledge.

1. NATURALISM AND RESPECT FOR SCIENCE

Richard Feldman has argued recently that everyone, or nearly everyone, in epistemology can legitimately claim to be offering a version of naturalized epistemology (Feldman 2001b). The difficulty of classifying any view as non-naturalistic is, at bottom, the cost of allowing non-reductive versions of naturalism. Consider, for example, what Scott Sturgeon says about mountains:

I’m a realist about [mountains]. But I’m no reductionist. I do not think a tidy condition can be stated, in non-mountain terms, which coincides with being a mountain. So I deny mountainhood is identical with such a condition. Does that make for trouble? Does realism about mountains interact with non-reductionism to force spooky mountain metaphysics?

Surely not. Mountains are nothing over and above non-mountains. I do not say that, though, because I can reduce mountains to non-mountains. I say it because the best picture of the world says it; and I adopt that picture. I say it because the perspective which strikes the best balance of simplicity, strength and the need to resolve Sellars’ Problem [concerning the relationship between the manifest and scientific images] contains the claim that there are mountains which are irreducible yet not fundamental. The best picture of the world entails non-reductive naturalism about mountains. It says mountains are non-reductively made of non-mountains. So that is what I accept (Sturgeon 2002).

The difficulty for finding any non-naturalist theory of justification follows immediately:

And so it could be with justification. I’m a realist about it too. But I take seriously the possibility that justification does not align with a tidy descriptive condition. And if it doesn’t, justification isn’t identical to any such condition. Would that make for trouble? Would realism about justification plus non-reductionism force spooky normative metaphysics? I don’t see why. Perhaps the best picture of the world contains the claim that beliefs are justified in a metaphysically derivative but irreducible way. Perhaps the perspective which strikes the best balance of simplicity, strength and the need to resolve Sellars’ Problem endorses non-reductive naturalism about reason. In the event, we should too. We should accept reason as metaphysically derivative yet irreducible. We should accept non-reductive naturalism about reason (Sturgeon 2002).

The most popular way to articulate Sturgeon’s naturalistic vision for reason and justification is in the language of supervenience, allowing us to say that normativity depends on natural facts without being reducible to them. Once we recognize such a naturalistic possibility, however, it is exceedingly hard to find any epistemological theory that cannot legitimately claim to be a naturalistic one. Even theories formulated exclusively in normative terms can endorse non-reductive naturalism by appealing to supervenience relations.

Feldman argues an even stronger point. Since it is far from clear what counts as a naturalistic concept at all, it is far from clear why an appeal to the language of normativity itself is somehow incompatible with naturalism. Chisholm, for example, thinks that there are synthetic a priori truths linking experience with the rationality of certain beliefs (Chisholm 1977), and