ABSTRACT. A common objection raised against naturalism is that a naturalized epistemology cannot account for the essential normative character of epistemology. Following an analysis of different ways in which this charge could be understood, it will be argued that either epistemology is not normative in the relevant sense, or if it is, then in a way which a naturalized epistemology can account for with an instrumental and hypothetical model of normativity. Naturalism is here captured by the two doctrines of empiricism and gradualism. Epistemology is a descriptive discipline about what knowledge is and under what conditions a knowledge-claim is justified. However, we can choose to adopt a standard of justification and by doing so be evaluated by it. In this sense our epistemic practices have a normative character, but this is a form of normativity a naturalized epistemology can make room for. The normativity objection thus fails. However, in the course of this discussion, as yet another attempt to clarify the normativity objection, such a naturalistic model will be contrasted with Donald Davidson’s theory of interpretation. Even though this comparison will not improve upon the negative verdict upon the original objection, it will be argued that naturalism cannot accept Davidson’s theory since it contains at least one constitutive principle – the principle of charity – whose epistemic status is incompatible with the naturalistic doctrine of gradualism. So, if this principle has this role, then epistemology cannot be naturalized.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I shall examine and criticize a common objection raised against naturalism: that a naturalized epistemology cannot accommodate the essentially normative character of epistemology. My conclusion will be that this objection does not hold. However, we shall in the course of the discussion find that naturalists might run into another kind of problem which thus constitutes a more promising line of objection for critics of naturalism.

First, something needs to be said about what epistemology is. Epistemology is often divided into two domains. The domain of explication which consists of an analysis of those terms that are of relevance for knowledge, including that term itself. Special attention has been directed towards formulating criteria of justification. The second is the domain of validation within which we seek to answer the question: given these
explications, and especially these criteria of justification, what can we know according to them? Most often, epistemological inquiries consist of a constructive effort, to establish that most of our knowledge-claims are validated. Philosophers have tried to show that we really do know a great deal of what we think we know. This constructive ambition could then be called the project of validation. The corresponding distinction between domain and project can be drawn with respect to the case of explication as well where the constructive effort may then be called the project of clarification. I am aware that this characterization is by no means neutral, but as we shall see interesting versions of naturalism agree with it and even claim to have a greater success in carrying out the two projects than traditional epistemology has had.

Second, we need to define what is meant by naturalism here. I stipulate that epistemological naturalism is captured by two theses: empiricism and gradualism. In brief, the doctrine of empiricism states that our knowledge-claims about the external world, including those within natural science, are validated by experience. The doctrine of gradualism states that there are no differences of kind in epistemic status between knowledge-claims, only differences of degree. In particular, the boundary naturalists of course primarily want to dissolve is the one between philosophy and natural science. If that boundary is dissolved then philosophy has the same epistemic status as natural science. Following these two doctrines, philosophy is then not a priori as the tradition claimed, but instead a posteriori (even though philosophy may differ in level of abstraction and generality from natural science.) This is what I take the naturalistic slogan “There is no first philosophy” to amount to.

2. THE NORMATIVITY OBJECTION

Now, critics often charge naturalists of omitting an essential part of epistemology by naturalizing it, its normative character. Simply put, their argument runs something like this:

(i) Epistemology is essentially normative in character.
(ii) By contrast, science is descriptive.
(iii) The point of naturalization is that epistemology should join with natural science and accordingly adopt its method(s).
(iv) Lemma: Thus, naturalization deprives epistemology of an essential ingredient.
(v) Conclusion: Hence, epistemology cannot be naturalized.