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Traditional Epistemology and Naturalism

Introduction

My overarching thesis – as I will henceforth refer to it – is that, to the extent we can make sense of naturalistic epistemic norms, there is no need for such norms in the process of rational belief-formation. To appreciate the significance of this claim, one of course needs to know something about NE (and how I understand this), and to do that, one also needs – since epistemology was originally conceived and pursued as a discipline that could only be described as anything but naturalistic – to look first at how epistemology is conceived on a more traditional model. In this chapter, I will present the outlines of what I call TE before showing how this, arguably, breaks down, paving the way for naturalism and NE.

The aims in this chapter are largely expositional, and the substance lays no great claims to originality (apart perhaps from the exact characterisation and defence of naturalism). The picture of TE I offer is simplified and to an extent, perhaps, a caricature; the discussion, at least, rides roughshod over a number of philosophical concepts and distinctions. A more thorough presentation would, however, bog us down in issues that are not relevant to my dialectical tack. The basic idea behind my characterisation of TE is both historically real and, at a certain basic level, intuitive, whilst the objections I raise to it are by any account strong ones, as well as being widely accepted, in some form or other, by most naturalistically inclined philosophers today.
In this way, the discussion serves its chief purpose of locating and motivating the ideas of naturalism and NE. It should be borne in mind that this book is centrally about the failings of naturalised, not TE (we are riding on the wave of naturalism!). Thus, if this chapter is at times written in the manner of an obituary, and a committed traditionalist is alarmed to see her favourite theory being buried (as she sees it) alive, she can console herself with the thought that this is not really the book for her.¹

To begin with, however, I should say a few words about the central concept which both traditional and NE (as I am understanding them) lay stress on, and which I will ultimately be arguing need have no application in our belief-forming practices.

1.1 Norms and epistemic norms

This book revolves around discussion of different conceptions of epistemic norms, so it is appropriate to begin by precisifying how I understand the basic concept *epistemic norm*. I am not going to go into great detail about this or discuss relevant literature, because I think the concept is clear enough at the outset, and that the relevant complexities will emerge in later discussions of the book. But a little to set the scene will be of help.

Firstly, then, I see a norm – in general, whether epistemic, more broadly rational or even moral – as a proposition, principle or statement with an essentially *general normative* content. A normative content is one which (in English) is canonically expressed by the use of the imperative mood, or by modal expressions like ‘should’, ‘must’, ‘it is permitted to’ and so on. By stressing the idea of generality, I mean to exclude, say, a command to do such and such on a particular occasion; I do not mean that norms must concern everyone (viz.: *Everyone must help to alleviate the present famine in Ethiopia* would not be a norm by this definition, whereas *People in the West should help alleviate famine wherever and whenever it occurs* would be). Thus, if the canonical forms of the norms we are concerned with are viewed as expressible by sentences like ‘Do X!’ or ‘Everyone shall do X!’ or ‘If situation Y obtains, do X!’ , X (and Y) must always be understood as referring to a *type* of action or inferential move.²