

AN EXAMINATION OF W.V.O. QUINE'S NATURALIZED EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

Before W.V.O. Quine came up with the idea of naturalizing epistemology, there were efforts by many philosophers to establish the fourth condition of knowledge. This search for a fourth condition was as a result of Gettier's thought experiment, which pointed out the flaws in the traditional account of knowledge. However, Quine's idea of naturalizing epistemology came after Rene Descartes and Rudolf Carnap were unable to succeed in their foundation program, a program that aimed to build a strong foundation in the search for the edifice of knowledge. So, when the Carnapian and the Cartesian foundational program failed, Quine called for epistemology to be naturalized. His point is since there is no notable success in the search for the fourth condition of knowledge and since the foundational program of Descartes and Carnap did not work out, and since there is some level of certainty and objectiveness in natural scientific methods, epistemology should be naturalized. He emphasized that the issues in the theory of knowledge can be solved if philosophers embrace the methods of the natural sciences. There are many questions surrounding Quine's idea, for instance: we have the question of how a normative discipline like epistemology will become part of natural science, and why philosophers should shift their problems to the natural sciences when there are also unresolved issues in natural science, and many other questions. This work, therefore, examines naturalized epistemology to see the possibility of naturalizing epistemology and what comes of epistemology if it is naturalized.

Keywords: Naturalized, Epistemology, Philosophy and Knowledge

Introduction

What is knowledge? How do I know that I know something? At what point can I conclude that I know something for certain? What are the conditions needed for one to know something? Is objective knowledge possible? Is universal truth attainable? These questions and hundreds of other questions have occupied my thoughts since childhood. The questions of knowledge are not new in philosophy, it has always been there, and even the early Philosophers were deeply interested in figuring out the ultimate element of the globe but could not come to an agreement as to what the ultimate element of the world is. Thereafter, there was also the era of the questions of the ability of the human mind to know any universal truth. This was the era of skepticism. The skeptics had doubt regarding the possibility of attaining any universal truth and this posed a

significant threat to the question of human knowledge. Thereafter knowledge was generally defined as justified true belief. For a long time, knowledge was defined as justified-true- belief until Gettier presented two thoughts experiments to show the problem in the traditional account of knowledge. Gettier discovered that justification, truth and belief are all necessary conditions for knowledge but they are not enough, for him, there is need for a fourth condition.

The discovery of flaws in the traditional account of knowledge birthed the search for the fourth condition of knowledge and there has been so many attempts by various philosophers to provide a suitable fourth condition of knowledge. For instance, we have the defeasibility theory, the causal theory, the reliability theory and so on. There was also the foundationalist program by Rene Descartes and Rudolf Carnap. Foundationalism is the belief that certain fundamental beliefs, known as basic propositions, can be known with certainty through immediate, direct experience and do not require justification through inference. It is the view that knowledge and epistemic justification have a structure. So, Willard Van Orman Quine therefore argued that there are some level of certainty and objectivity in natural science, so for him rather than continue the endless search for another condition of knowledge epistemology should rather be naturalized. So that a proposition can be proven using the method of the natural sciences and philosophers will be able to have sufficient prove about a proposition. But this means, epistemology will become part of natural science.

Biographical Sketch of W.V. O. Quine

Willard Van Orman Quine was born on June 25th, 1908 in Akron, Ohio. He attended the local high school where he pursued scientific courses, paying special attention to mathematics. In his autobiography, *The Time of My Life* (1985) he wrote that he had a passion for mathematics and philosophy but his problem was how to combine the two different fields. He later solved this problem as he advanced academically by focusing on the philosophy of mathematics.

Quine gained admission into Oberlin College in 1926 and started studying mathematics and he pays attention to mathematical philosophy. In 1929, Quine began working on his honors thesis. He applied to Harvard University to do his graduate work because their philosophy department was then the strongest in mathematical philosophy and logic in the country. Its faculty included Alfred North Whitehead one of the authors of *Principia Mathematica*. Quine won a scholarship and with the help of it, he was able to do his Masters's Degree, and later on, he did his Ph.D.

In 1931, Quine had what he described as his most dazzling exposure to greatness when Russell came to lecture at Harvard (2). Russell was one of the most influential figures in Quine's life, mainly through works like *Principia Mathematica*, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, and so on. Quine attended meetings of the Vienna Circle and he met some of the members of the Vienna Circle, members like Herbert Feigl, Neurath, Schlick, Godel, Hahn, and Menger. Quine describes his stay away from Harvard as “the intellectually most rewarding months he has known” (6). Quine returned to Harvard in 1933 and was made a Junior Fellow of Harvard's Society of Fellows and this freed him from teaching responsibilities for three years. B.F Skinner

was also a member of The Junior Fellow during that time. That's why many scholars believe Quine was influenced by Skinner's Behaviorism. During the Second World War, Quine served in the United States Navy for more than three years and rose to the rank of lieutenant commander (Orenstein, 7). After the Second World War Quine returned to Harvard and was made a full Professor in the department of philosophy, he thought there until 1978 when he retired from teaching work.

Quine wrote many works, some of his notable works are; *Mathematical Logic, From a Logical Point of View, Ontological Relativity, and Other Essays* just to mention a few. Quine is popularly known for his rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction and his advocacy for naturalism, physicalism, empiricism, holism, and extensions. Quine's thoughts and writings touch on several areas including logic, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of mind, epistemology, and so on. In 1969, he published his "Epistemology Naturalized" in which he advocated that epistemology should be studied along naturalistic lines. Quine died on 25th December 2000.

The Philosophical Background of Quine's Naturalized Epistemology

Philosophers rarely philosophize in a vacuum. It is either they are trying to solve a problem or they are trying to ask or answer a question. This implies that every philosophy has a philosophical background. If this is the case, then Quine's naturalized epistemology is not left out. By advocating for a naturalized version of epistemology Quine was trying to respond to the question of objectivity in knowledge and at the same time, he was interested in solving the problems in epistemology. These questions and problems which Quine was responding to form the philosophical backgrounds of naturalized epistemology. We shall now proceed to discuss the major ones. Which are as follows:

Traditional Epistemology

One of the major problems in philosophy is the problem of stating the proper characteristics of the nature of knowledge. This problem arises as a result of an attempt to prove to the skeptics that objective knowledge is possible. Plato in his dialogue titled *Theatetus* defines knowledge as justified true belief. This definition is generally regarded as the traditional account of knowledge. Thus, when we talk of traditional epistemology we are simply referring to the traditional account of knowledge. This "traditional account of knowledge was an account aimed at presenting a defense for the possibility of objective knowledge through the identification of the elements that constitute knowledge" (Ojong and Ibrahim, 126). The three major conditions in this account are; truth, belief, and justification. This implies that for us to know a given proposition that proposition must be true and we must believe in it then we must be justified in believing in it. Thus; for Mr. A to know a proposition (p), p must be true, Mr. A must believe in P and Mr. A must be justified in believing in P. let's use a thought experiment as an instance, assuming I am wondering if my friend is in his house then I meet John, John for no reason tells me that right now my friend is in his house and when I get to my friend's house he is truly in his house. Now, looking at the above illustration,

it is true that my friend is in the house, and John also believes that my friend is in the house but can John be said to know in this case? According to the traditional account of knowledge, John does not know. But when can John be said to have knowledge that my friend is in his house in this case? This is where justification comes in as the third condition of knowledge. For John to know he must have justifiable reasons to back up his true belief.

However, in 1963 Edmund Gettier observed that there is a problem with the traditional account of knowledge so he presented a thought experiment to prove the inadequacy of the traditional conception of epistemology. Gettier's aim "is to demonstrate the insufficiency of the conditions of knowledge provided by the traditional account" (Ibrahim, 132). We shall now proceed to examine Gettier's thought experiment against the traditional account of knowledge.

The Gettier Problem

For over 100 years, knowledge was seen as justified true belief until Edmund Gettier in 1963 published his famous essay titled "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" in which he presented two thought experiments to show there was a problem with the traditional account of knowledge. Commenting on this, Okeke writes that before Gettier's Essay "it was always taken for granted that knowledge is justified true belief...." (44). Dancy on his part also has something to say about Gettier's essay, for him, "it is important to note here that, Gettier is not quarreling with any of the three clauses, he allows that they are individually necessary and argued that they need supplementing" (25). Gettier's thought examples are as follows;

Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job.

And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:

(d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the President of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails: (e) the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true. (121). Gettier brings his thought experiment to the crucial point (that crumbles the traditional account) when he implores us to suppose further that: Unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true; though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false. (121-122).

Gettier goes ahead to conclude that;

In our examples, then, all of the following are true: (i), (e) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not know that (e) is true; for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith's pocket, and bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will get the job (122-123).

In Gettier's example above, Smith has a justified true belief yet he does not have knowledge because his knowledge of (e) seems to be a mere coincidence (Ibrahim, 23). Ozumba as quoted by Ibrahim highlights five lessons derivable from Gettier's thought experiments as follows:

- i. We can be mistaken about what we think we know
- ii. The most reliable source of information can deceive us
- iii. We may end up true in what we believe but not truly and procedurally in order, in our claim to have that knowledge.
- iv. Our knowledge or grounds for knowledge may be based on mere coincidence.
- v. Our claim to knowledge must be clear, certain and based on the proper reconditions (24).

Foundationalism is the belief that all knowledge or justified beliefs must be based on a solid foundation. This idea can be traced back to Parmenides, who believed that reality was unchanging and permanent. Foundationalism holds that there is a basic proposition whose truth can be directly experienced and is certain. This means that knowledge has a structure, with some beliefs being basic and others being inferred from these basic beliefs to be justified.

There are two main types of foundationalism: Cartesian and Carnapian. Cartesian foundationalism was proposed by Rene Descartes, who sought to find a secure foundation for knowledge by doubting all beliefs until he reached something indubitable. This led him to the belief that the thinking being, or "cogito," was the foundational belief. According to Descartes, knowledge has a foundational structure and these foundations include beliefs about the content and operations of the mind. These foundational beliefs must be used to justify other beliefs, such as the existence of a world outside the mind and the reliability of scientific methods.

Carnapian foundationalism, proposed by Carnap, is similar to Cartesian foundationalism in that it seeks to determine which beliefs are justified by reducing them to sensory terms. It also includes a doctrinal aspect, similar to the Cartesian program, which attempts to use the prescriptive part to justify beliefs about natural truths that have been reduced to sensory terms. Carnap's goal was to construct a system

that would include all knowable objects, which he called "methodological solipsism." This system would include "constitutional definitions" as rules, allowing concepts to be reduced to sets of basic concepts as long as they can be transformed into sentences containing sense data. However, like the Cartesian program, the Carnapian program was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its primary objectives.

Quine's Naturalized Epistemology

In 1969 Willard Van Orman Quine published an essay on naturalized epistemology in which he submits that there should be a new dimension in the study of epistemology. Quine begins by discussing the attempt to reduce mathematics to symbolic logic, an unsuccessful effort. He compares epistemology with the logical and set theory studies of the foundations of mathematics and bases his naturalized epistemology on its failure. According to him, "reduction in the foundation of mathematics remains mathematically and philosophically fascinating, but it does not do what the epistemologist would like of it; it does not reveal the ground of mathematical knowledge, it does not show how mathematical certainty is possible" (70). Epistemology does not come before science, it starts with how we understand the universe in our common sense. He opposes Descartes's view of all-knowing coming from certain foundation beliefs, he also disagrees with the idea that we can still know a proposition without experience to back up our truth. He breaks the Cartesian and the Carnapian program into two parts; that is, the conceptual part and the doctrinal part. In his words; "studies in the foundation divide symmetrically into two sorts, conceptual and doctrinal. The conceptual studies are concerned with meaning, the doctrinal with the truth" (70).

The conceptual part has to do with clarifying concepts, illuminating concepts, and showing the interrelation between concepts. In other words, the conceptual study of the foundation of mathematics seeks to find a set of rules which can be used to determine whether a given belief in question is justified or not, by reducing the belief to fundamental beliefs. Put differently, conceptual foundationalism is the view that all empirical knowledge can be derived from basic observable beliefs. The meaning of every empirical concept can be reduced to sense experience. The idea is that the meaning of every sentence is just a set of observable consequences. For instance, if I say, this diamond is hard, this means that if this diamond is scratched with tin or iron then we will observe no mark. In this case, Quine will say that not everything can be reduced to sense experience. The second part of Cartesian foundationalism which Quine pointed out is doctrinal. This is the view that a given belief is justified because it meets the condition. That is; it can be deduced from some foundational justified beliefs. Simply put, the doctrinal part of the bifurcation is the part that should be used to prove the conceptual part. Explaining the above, Quine notes that, "explaining the notion of body in sensory terms; here is the conceptual side. And ... justifying our knowledge of truths of nature in sensory terms, here is the doctrinal side of the bifurcation" (71).

The traditional project of epistemology has failed in both ways (conceptual and doctrinal), the doctrinal side fails because induction is not reliable, this was proven by Hume in his discussion on induction that there are no fundamental unquestionable

truths. The conceptual side fails because only a conjunction of sentences can correlate with experience. The scientific terms cannot be translated into sense data, since there aren't exact translation rules. Since the program earlier proposed just didn't work, Quine suggests we should turn attention to a new method, he argued that because these types of traditional epistemology have failed in their goals concerning justification, epistemology itself should be replaced with a naturalized version. He wrote;

But I think that at this point it may be more useful to say rather that epistemology still goes on, though in a new setting and a clarified status. Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. 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. The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology; namely, to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one's theory of nature transcends any available evidence (82-83).

Our body/brain is an instrument of knowledge; the body projects itself through the senses to get knowledge while the mind acts on the knowledge gotten. In naturalized epistemology “we are studying how the human subject of our study posits bodies and projects his physics from his data” (Quine, 83). Thus, the epistemology enterprise is a psychology chapter and it is part of the whole of natural science. It describes the relation between evidence (meager sensory out) and theory (torrential theoretical output). Among the three main issues in epistemology, the nature of knowledge, how we acquire it, and its extent, naturalized epistemology is mainly focused on how we acquire knowledge. Instead of looking at a person's belief and asking “are those beliefs justify”, we look at the person and ask; “what caused those beliefs” (Psychological question). Therefore, naturalizing epistemology means doing epistemology in the spirit of scientific methodology whereby we set our epistemology inquiry within the setting of making our construction or projection of making our construction or projection of the external world based on the interaction between inputs from stimulations on our sensory surfaces and inputs arising from our conceptual sovereignty (Ozumba, 119). Naturalized epistemology is a way of understanding how humans come to know about the natural world through their senses and experiences. According to Quine, it is not possible to separate philosophy from science and make judgments about the nature of reality from a detached perspective. Instead, he suggests that there is a close relationship between science and philosophy and that the philosopher's perspective is ultimately an extension of the scientific worldview. Quine believes that there is a fundamental continuity and unity between science and philosophy and that it is important to consider both to fully understand our place in the

world.

Quine's approach to naturalized epistemology seeks to solve the traditional puzzles of epistemology by focusing on how humans come to know about the world through their senses and experiences. In contrast to the "old" epistemology, which attempted to justify knowledge and sought to construct an understanding of the natural world from sense data, naturalized epistemology recognizes that our understanding of the world is shaped by the scientific theories and observations that we make. According to Quine, the old epistemology attempted to contain natural science, but the new epistemology is a part of natural science itself. In this new approach, the emphasis is on simply observing and gathering data rather than trying to justify our knowledge.

Evaluation

The study of epistemology has been dominated for nearly its entire lifetime from the point of view of the classical account of knowledge without recording any successful or notable progress. The best epistemologists could achieve was the program of Rene Descartes and Carnap which was not still able to achieve its primary objectives and this is one of the reasons we must give credit to Quine for coming up with a new method in epistemology. Of course, there is no much motivation to continue searching for the solution of a particular problem for over hundreds of years using the same method, the same method that has failed us. It is therefore a noble course to embark upon a new direction for epistemology as suggested by Quine. Moreover, if epistemology is naturalized it will serve as a solution to the unending search for an indubitable condition of knowledge. But it is pertinent to note that Quine is not introducing another condition that will serve as the fourth condition of knowledge, rather he is saying that instead of us to continue studying epistemology with methods that fails, it is better we try something new. Since there are some level of objectiveness in science, it is better we use the methods of the science in our study of epistemology. By this, epistemology becomes part of science.

While Quine's approach to naturalized epistemology has been influential and has contributed to our understanding of how humans come to know about the world, it is not without its criticisms. Some philosophers have argued that Quine's approach fails to adequately address certain key issues in epistemology, such as the nature of justification and the relationship between knowledge and belief. Others have pointed out that Quine's emphasis on observation and data gathering may not be sufficient to fully understand the complex and often subjective nature of human understanding. Ultimately, the strengths and limitations of Quine's naturalized epistemology will depend on the specific goals and priorities of the individual philosopher. Many philosophers have criticized Quine, the most popular of all his critiques is Jaegwon Kim. In his work titled *What is Naturalized Epistemology?* Kim presented one of the arguments which seem to hold ground the most against naturalized epistemology. Kim argues that the field of epistemology must be essentially normative; it must prescribe conditions for justification (or knowledge) and thereby determine which beliefs are justified (or can be considered knowledge). On this position Kim writes that: If justification drops out of epistemology, knowledge itself drops out of epistemology, for our concept of knowledge is inseparably tied to that of

justification. Quine's nonnormative, naturalized epistemology has no room for our concept of knowledge (389). What Kim is trying to point out is that to some extent, all of the epistemology programs to date have often concern with justification of some sort. In fact, the word epistemology itself is defined as the study of the nature of knowledge, in practice, epistemology is the study of a validation or justification of a body of knowledge claims.

Thus, Kim submits that naturalized epistemology has no bearing on the study of epistemology at all, it is only concern with causal relationships, not validation of knowledge claims (397). Kim's views here seem to be very correct because there seem to be no much rational reason for replacing epistemology with a naturalized version which not only has radically different methods of procedure but radical different goals as well. Unless naturalized epistemology and classical epistemology share some of their concerns, it will be difficult to see how an epistemology that has been purged of normativity, one that lacks an appropriate normative concept of justification or evidence can have anything to do with the concerns of traditional epistemology. And unless naturalized epistemology and classical epistemology share some of their central concerns, it's difficult to see how one could replace the other, or be a way (a better way) of doing the other (391). Naturalized epistemology means that epistemology becomes part of psychology; psychology is not introspective but behaviouristic or developmental.

The goal of the agent is dictated by self-interest, the agent being a species reduces epistemology to biology, he also belongs to a class that strives for survival and epistemology is further reduced to sociology and this reduction continues ad infinitum. This makes epistemology a field of study without a specific subject matter and scope. Aside that, there are still some unresolved problems in psychology, if psychologist were that good in solving problems why are there still some unresolved issues in their field? Quine's approach to naturalized epistemology has been influential in understanding how humans come to know about the world, but it is not without its criticisms. Some argue that Quine's approach doesn't truly replace epistemology with psychology, but rather eliminates it altogether. Others claim that the traditional questions of epistemology, such as the nature of justification and the relationship between knowledge and belief, cannot be eliminated and are inherent in any attempt to construct an epistemology. Some also argue that epistemology cannot be fully naturalized, as it deals with questions that are distinct from the practices of scientists and has its own unique set of questions to explore. Additionally, the question of how to incorporate normativity into a naturalistic framework is still a topic of debate. Finally, some criticize Quine's naturalized epistemology for sidestepping certain fundamental questions that are problematic in this field. Finally, some argue that Quine's naturalized epistemology does not actually solve any problems in epistemology, but rather tries to sidestep certain fundamental questions that are problematic in this field.

Conclusion

The essence of naturalizing epistemology as seen in the work of Quine lies in the fact man has cognitive limitations since he is subjected to space and time. Therefore, man does not live in a static or changeless world. That is why naturalized epistemology is also concerned with contextualism. Contextualism is a theory that holds that the meaning of something depends on the place and time. Man is constantly influenced by new developments in the world. If this is the case, naturalized epistemology advocates that we should study the mental processes of man concerning the objects of his experience and put aside the question of an indubitable foundation that cannot be realized. If this happens, epistemology becomes part of psychology and ultimately an inherent part of natural science.

Quine's contribution to epistemology cannot be taken for granted, he must be applauded for advocating for something new in epistemology. However, it is pertinent to point out that this paper has noticed the change that Quine tries to bring into epistemology but it does not completely support such change. Quine in trying to naturalize epistemology ignores some fundamental parts of the study of epistemology. For instance, the question of justification does not have a chance of being answered in Quine's "new epistemology". Quine did all he can to make sure that his naturalized epistemology eliminates the normative part of epistemology but the truth remains that the concept of knowledge has a connection with that of justification, at some point the two concepts seem inseparable. On this note, this paper recommends that, for naturalized epistemology to be upheld, it should be reconstructed in a way that gives room for justification, and normativity should be included in his "new epistemology". Naturalized epistemology should also shape its aims and objectives to fit in line with the basic concern of the old epistemology, for until this is done, it will be difficult to naturalize epistemology.

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