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Preserving normativity in epistemology: Quine's thesis revisited

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Abstract

Quine's epistemology amounts to what has been called the replacement thesis, according to which epistemology becomes a part of science by being replaced by the latter. The most forceful criticism of the thesis asserts that this sort of replacement is not successful due to the fact that an essential element of any epistemological endeavour has been eliminated, namely, normativity. The normativity charge claims that due to the descriptive nature of Quine's thesis normativity cannot be said to feature in his account. To begin with, the notion of normativity will be clarified, and it will be seen that normativity is not a simple notion as it admits of various formulations. In speaking of normativity one could be speaking of empiricist norms, the norms of rationality, prescriptive normativity within the context of practical reasoning as well as descriptive normativity. Also, in developing a theory of knowledge it becomes apparent that one is engaging with various sorts of beliefs, all of which must be accommodated and which I will articulate. The possible defenses presented by proponents of the Quinean project aim to meet the normativity charge by demonstrating that the replacement thesis is indeed normative, and the success of these defenses will be assessed. It will be argued that the most important sort of normativity that must be preserved in a theory of knowledge is the prescriptive normativity within the domain of practical reasoning successfully developed by one of the proponents of the Quinean project, Bishop and Trout. However, despite the success that naturalized epistemology achieves regarding prescriptive normativity of this sort, it will be argued that a naturalized epistemology will ultimately fail as a result of its purely a posteriori approach. Consideration of the rationality norm will make it apparent that a theory of knowledge must include an a priori component. It does seem, though, that science should feature in some capacity in a theory of knowledge. To this effect, the transformational thesis presents an alternative way in which science may be integrated with epistemology. It asserts that there are philosophical questions that capture traditional epistemological concerns in terms of conceptual analyses but that what is known is an empirical matter to be established by psychologists and cognitive scientists. The appeal of the thesis is that it allows for an a priori component while also implementing scientific findings. My specific concern, however, is whether it preserves prescriptive normativity within the context of practical reasoning which I will show to be essential to a theory of knowledge. It will be argued that though the replacement thesis and the transformational thesis do justice to prescriptive normativity of this sort they both fail to accommodate each kind of belief that must be considered due to the externalistic nature of both of these accounts. Ultimately I will argue that traditional epistemology, and more specifically an internalistic approach to epistemology, has a particular role to play in a theory of knowledge and cannot be dismissed.