

Beyond Description: Naturalism and Normativity

edited by

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and

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Contents

1.	<i>Naturalism Beyond Description</i>	1
	Konrad Talmont-Kaminski	
2.	<i>Is Normativity Natural?</i>	14
	Mark H. Bickhard	
3.	<i>Why We Don't Need Naturalistic Epistemic Norms</i>	31
	Jonathan Knowles	
4.	<i>Status of Naturalistic Epistemology</i>	
	– <i>Problem of Autonomy</i>	60
	Barbara Trybulec	
5.	<i>Making Naturalised Epistemology (Slightly) Normative</i>	72
	Marcin Miłkowski	
6.	<i>Naturalistic Epistemologies and A Priori Justification</i>	85
	Lisa Warenski	
7.	<i>The Proper Role of Intuitions in Epistemology</i>	101
	Adam Feltz & Michael Bishop	
8.	<i>Naturalism: Progress in Epistemology?</i>	123
	Timo Vuorio	
9.	<i>Naturalism without Representationalism</i>	136
	Huw Price	
10.	<i>Two kinds of Nonscientific Naturalism</i>	157
	Jonathan Knowles	
11.	<i>Postscript: Reply to Knowles</i>	176
	Huw Price	

12.	<i>A Dilemma for Naturalism?</i>	180
	Shane Oakley	
13.	<i>Understanding Quine in Terms of the Aufbau: Another Look at Naturalized Epistemology</i>	195
	Stefanie Rocknak	
14.	<i>Descriptive Epistemology and Normativity: A Humean Approach</i>	211
	Treasa Campbell	
15.	<i>Naturalising Logic. The inference-marker view</i>	226
	María J. Frápolli	
16.	<i>Naturalising Illocutionary Rules</i>	243
	Maciej Witek	
17.	<i>Naturalising the Design Process: Autonomy and Interaction as Core Features</i>	265
	Argyris Arnellos, Thomas Spyrou, John Darzentas	
18.	<i>Causality Naturalised?</i>	289
	Piotr Leśniak	
19.	<i>Can Mental Illness Be Naturalised?</i>	300
	Andrzej Kapusta	
20.	<i>Technologised Epistemology</i>	313
	Marek Hetmański	

have to touch on Hume's discussion of the is/ought distinction, Moore's formulation of the issues in terms of a naturalist fallacy, Dewey's instrumentalism, the rejection of 'metaphysics' by the Vienna Circle, and any of a number of current positions that are the intellectual inheritors of those earlier approaches. Such an approach would have the advantage of helping to show the historical roots to which most of today's versions of naturalism can be traced back; showing that, even though naturalism isn't necessarily a species, it is perhaps a clade – at least within analytical philosophy. However, such an historical approach to the question of why issues of normativity have continued to play a central role for naturalists would have two serious short-comings. The first is that it seeks numerous proximate explanations – the intellectual influence of one writer upon another, the development of a particular tradition at a certain university – where a single, ultimate explanation may turn out to be sufficient. One doesn't need to know how individual animals died to understand a species was driven to extinction by loss of habitat. Similarly, it may be that a more fundamental explanation would be sufficient in the case of the rise of naturalism. While appreciation for the historical details is valuable in and of itself, it would be a shame if it were to serve to hide the big picture. Particularly, if no attempt to look for that picture is made in the first place. The second short-coming with a historical review of naturalist philosophers is that, by discussing naturalism in what are – in truth – anti-naturalist terms, such philosophical history does not do justice to it. Naturalists, in so far as generalisations can be made about this disparate group, have tended to place great store upon the continuity of philosophy with the sciences. This was already the case with such philosophers as Peirce, who may have not used the term 'naturalist' but who would clearly fall within naturalism's ambit. As such, the influence of science upon philosophical thought is a naturalist's staple. To the degree that a hermetically philosophical history of naturalism were adequate it would, therefore, show the naturalists failing to be true to their word.

The solution may seem simple enough: The intellectual history that is to explain why naturalists have continued to concern themselves with issues of normativity needs to consider the significance of scientific developments and practices for this issue. It is clear, for example, that shifts in philosophical outlooks over the span of the twentieth century are connected to developments first in logic, then in physics and computer science, and most recently in biology. More fundamentally, even when philosophers became most suspicious of talk of norms, scientific practice remained very much full of references to normativity. This is clear when-

ever one reads a scientific paper or watches a scientific experiment being undertaken. To remain true to this scientific practice, naturalist philosophers have to consider normativity, even if it is with the aim of ultimately eliminating it from the picture – even a merely descriptive account of science must talk at length about how scientists frame and make use of claims that are, at face value, normative. Such focus upon actual scientific practices is, of course, no more than what Kuhn argued for. And, just like his arguments, it opens the way to the charge of scientistic tribalism. The charge is misplaced yet it does serve to clarify naturalists' commitments. Naturalists do not focus on scientific practices because of a fondness for lab coats but, ultimately, because science offers the very best epistemic methods that are currently available to us. This focus does not free naturalists from consideration of the limitations of the social institutions of science – the research institutes, the funding bodies or the informal culture of the scientific community. Indeed, it has forced naturalist philosophers in many cases to also become sociologists of science. However, this focus does underscore that the naturalist's commitment is conditional upon science holding up its end of the bargain. It also means that naturalists must, ultimately, be willing to look at effective epistemic methods regardless of whether they are scientific or not. As a result, naturalists have found themselves considering the evolutionary antecedents of human epistemic abilities, including of science, as well as the physiological – and especially neurological – mechanisms underlying these abilities. Very often, these investigations, also, have proved to call for consideration of the apparently normative aspects of the phenomena under investigation.

It is here, therefore, that we find the ultimate reason why naturalists continue to discuss normativity – epistemic practices, be they scientific or otherwise, are shot through with normativity. A non-naturalist account might perhaps hope to get away from all talk of normativity by positing the existence of a perfect form of reason that does not call upon norms. A naturalist, however, is not so free to range over the field of the imaginable but must hook their deliberations to the actual. By no means does this entail that the picture of norms the naturalists will end up putting together will be one familiar to philosophers of more traditional tenor. It is a rare naturalist that would not make fundamental changes in how we should understand normativity. Yet, the naturalist's contention must be that, no matter how surprising the ultimate product ends up being, it will be the 'best deserver' for the term due to the lack of anything to refer to that is less challenging to previous conceptions.

2 Articles

It is possible to identify three aspects of discussions of normativity within the context of naturalised philosophy: the ontological, the epistemic and the methodological. This tripartite grouping of issues is also to be met in this volume, although to a different degree in the various papers.

The ontological aspect of naturalist debates concerning normativity focuses upon finding the right balance between the need to do justice to the apparent ubiquity of calls to normativity while avoiding ontological claims that cannot be justified within a naturalist world-view. Not surprisingly, that balance is thought to lie in very different places depending upon just which naturalist is asked. The positions range from a minimalist position that denies that anything like norms needs to be considered as part of a naturalist ontology, all the way to full-blown dualism. A different sort of debate among naturalists that concerns normativity may be characterised as epistemic in nature. Accepting normativity in general, it focuses on the content of particular epistemic norms and how those norms are to be justified. Typically, the background for such discussions is constituted by the views presented by more traditional approaches to philosophy, with naturalists aiming to explain how it is that their views differ from those positions. Finally, methodological debates come to deal with concrete examples of how norms are applied within particular epistemic endeavours – the various sciences, foremost – and often concern issues that arise out of the nature of those disciplines. As such, these debates may be thought to fall within the scope of the philosophies of the individual sciences rather than within a general naturalised epistemology. Such a flow from philosophical to scientific discussions is only to be applauded from a naturalist point of view. Of course, the various levels of debate inform each other. This means that it would be impossible to divide the papers in this volume neatly into those that deal with only ontological or only methodological questions. None-the-less, an effort has been made to try to order the papers in such a way that the collection moves from the most general to the most specific of discussions.

The picture of normativity put forward by Mark Bickhard in chapter 2 is very much a realist one. Bickhard argues that entities such as norms only appear problematic due to a substance metaphysics being implicitly accepted. A substance metaphysics is forced to deny the essential reality of anything other than the most fundamental building blocks of the universe, while at the same time assuming that these are unchanging and that

all change is due to their rearrangement. The problem with normativity is therefore just one example of the problems this metaphysics has with emergent phenomena in general. While that result might be disappointing, disappointment is not necessarily a sufficient reason to abandon such metaphysics. However, substance metaphysics has a much more serious difficulty according to Bickhard – it runs counter to what modern physics tell us about the structure of the world. Taken together with the argument that incorrect assumptions regarding the introduction of new terms with the use of definitions led Hume to reject the possibility of obtaining norms from facts, this problem leads Bickhard to conclude that there are no good grounds for rejecting the possibility of the emergence of norms from facts. He bases his own positive account upon a process metaphysics according to which organisation, at all scales, becomes the locus of causality. According to Bickhard, normativity emerges through the operation of recursively self-maintenant far-from-equilibrium stable systems. The essential notion is that of the function different parts of such autonomous systems play in maintaining their stability. The normativity that emerges is relative to the systems and consists in how well their parts fulfil their functions.

If anyone should need further evidence of the differences between naturalist positions, the contrast with Jonathan Knowles' position presented in chapter 3 provides it in spades. Where Bickhard's account aimed to show how normativity can be included in a naturalist account, Knowles argues that norms are wholly superfluous: not just logically unnecessary but, more importantly, that people do not require them to effectively investigate the world. Also, where Bickhard's focus was ontological, Knowles sees epistemic issues as front and centre for evaluating norms. Interestingly, however, the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible as Knowles explicitly does not equate denying the significance of norms with expunging normativity from naturalism. In the process of arguing for his conclusion, Knowles carefully distinguishes several different versions of naturalism. The main distinction he uses is that between anti-apriorist and anti-foundationalist positions – the second being opposed to all foundations whereas the first allows for the possibility that some norms come to play a foundational role through a posteriori means. The first a posteriori option he considers is psychologistic, with our natural, evolved cognitive inclinations serving the foundational role – a naturalist interpretation of intuitions (unlike the other positions he does not discuss this version of naturalism at length within the article). The second a posteriori option is anti-psychologistic and depends upon reaching a

reflective equilibrium between, at minimum, the norms and assessments of individual cases. The point Knowles makes in relation to this approach for deriving norms is that it presumes people's ability to make judgments without recourse to such norms and, indeed, relies upon its reliability, thus undermining any significance of the role played by the norms. Knowles also discusses two varieties of anti-foundationalist naturalism that he considers particularly significant: instrumentalism, which sees norms as hypothetical imperatives, and inductivism, which holds that epistemic norms come to be justified and refined inductively. In the case of inductivism, Knowles argues that norms do not add anything to the shaping of hypotheses beyond what is achieved by observation and, possibly, general claims about the nature of the world. In the case of instrumentalism, Knowles reaches much the same conclusion on the grounds that, since hypothetical imperatives rely upon factual claims regarding connections between the desired aims and the means to reach them, the aims plus factual claims are sufficient to direct action.

Partly in response to Knowles, a different view is presented by Barbara Trybulec who attempts to deal with a question that has bothered many naturalised epistemologists since Quine, i.e. whether there is anything for the epistemologist to do over and above what the sciences of cognition achieve. She puts her question in terms of whether epistemology, once naturalised, can retain autonomy. Her conclusion is that while, of course, any attempt to carry on without the aid of the sciences is mistaken, this does not entail that epistemology as a separate discipline must disappear. Trybulec appears to agree with Knowles in so far as she claims that what had been thought to be independent norms are merely descriptions of reliable processes. Nonetheless, she sees the source of epistemology's autonomy in epistemology's concern with the meta-methodological task of picking the optimal set of processes. In effect, while no longer capable of being carried out independently of science, epistemology on this view retains its status of being a metascience and, in a very altered form, its focus remains on normative issues.

Marcin Miłkowski also tries to reconcile Knowles' critique with retaining some notion of epistemic norms while drawing upon Quine to do so. However, unlike Trybulec, Miłkowski expands upon Quine's talk of normativity as engineering. The resulting instrumentalist view of norms is meant to be humble enough to avoid Knowles' objections to this kind of approach. The problem identified by Miłkowski is that while rejecting claims to providing a priori justified methodology, naturalised epistemology has given up on methodology in general by handing it over wholesale

to scientists. Miłkowski examines what epistemology can do concerning methodology at three different roughly distinguished levels, that of cognitive system interactions as well as those of the personal and the subpersonal. In focussing upon the subpersonal, he draws out the similarities between the structures and processes studied by cognitive science and the categories and other mechanisms that Kant tried to show as structuring experience. While rejecting an apriorist attitude to efforts of this kind, he argues for their significance to a methodological naturalised epistemology. The essential point for Miłkowski's argument is that naturalised epistemology relies upon the notion of function, a normative notion that he, following Dennett, sees as vital to the design stance that epistemology shares with cognitive science and evolutionary theory. As such, his account is close to that developed by Bickhard, even though the concept of function he uses is somewhat different. The methodological epistemology Miłkowski sees this engineering approach leading to is focussed primarily on artificial cognitive systems – the investigation of their abilities being akin to an a posteriori version of what Kant had aimed at. Significantly, the norms that such interdisciplinary work leads to are not the typically general and vague philosophical norms that Knowles can be seen as railing against but will be limited heuristics.

The next paper in this volume is by Lisa Warenski and pursues an altogether different and prima facie unlikely path to naturalised normativity, that is by developing a naturalised account of the a priori. While surprising, the resultant divorce between naturalism and empiricism is not easy to ignore. The essential strategy pursued by Warenski is to strip the a priori of nonessential elements, leaving a core notion that most naturalists can swallow. The only ones who cannot, according to Warenski, are just those that reject all normativity. Warenski's first choice of what needs to be abandoned for the a priori to be acceptable is the idea that a priori justification is infallible – the difficulty being to reconcile empirical indefeasibility with fallibility. The point Warenski makes is that, given fallibilism, we can be justified to think a proposition a priori justified even if we merely fallibly but justifiably judge it to be empirical indefeasible. Thus, one can be a fallibilist about the truth of some a priori claim as well as about its warrant being a priori in nature. While infallibility is the most troubling aspect of the traditionally understood a priori to Warenski, she is also careful to reject its connections to notions of metaphysical necessity, abstract objects and rational intuition. This leaves her open to the objection that her notion of the a priori is compatible with naturalism only because it lacks a positive account of a priori justification. In response,