

## Handout # 7: Kim's Criticism of Quine

### 1. The Traditional Conception of Epistemology

Two questions: (a) What conditions must a belief meet if we are to be justified in holding it? (b) What propositions are we in fact justified in believing?

Kim's Requirement on an Adequate Answer to Question 1: "The criteria of justified belief must be formulated on the basis of descriptive or naturalistic terms alone, without the use of any evaluative or normative ones, whether epistemic or of another kind."

### 2. Justification is Normative

"If a belief is justified for us, then it is permissible and reasonable, from the epistemic point of view for us to hold it, and it would be epistemically irresponsible to hold beliefs that contradict it."

When this conception of justification is wedded to Kim's requirement described above, an adequate epistemology turns out to consist in giving non-normative conditions for the application of a normative concept. Is this ever possible?

The Autonomy of Normativity: Facts about what ought to be done or what ought to be believed cannot be reduced to non-normative or non-evaluative facts of any kind.

*Questions:* Does Kim think we can give non-normative "criteria" for the justification of belief even though we cannot reduce justification to any non-normative properties? How is this supposed to be done? What are criteria supposed to be if not definitions or sets of informative necessary and sufficient conditions? What does it mean to say that the normative facts "supervene on" the non-normative facts?

**Supervenience:** Facts about the As supervene on facts about the Bs if there can't be a change (or difference) in the A-facts without there being a change (or difference) in the B-facts.

Plausible examples of supervenience: Facts about your mind supervene on facts about your brain or nervous system insofar as there can be a change in your mind without a change in your brain or nervous system. Facts about the world economy supervene on facts about the movement of the fundamental particles that make-up the Earth and the plants and animals that live on it as there can't be change in the world economy without some change in the location of those particles that make up the Earth and its residents.

How would the supervenience of one sort or another of As on Bs allow us to develop *criteria* for judging that there is an A in terms of our judgments that there are Bs of various sorts? After all, we still can't make psychological judgments on purely neurological bases. You don't and probably can't say whether someone is perplexed or believes in Santa Claus just by studying an fMRI of her brain. Even more obviously, you can't tell whether a given nation's economy is expanding or retracting even if you have precise knowledge of the movement of all the electrons etc that constitute that nation and its economy. So even if the justification of your beliefs supervenes on descriptive or non-normative facts about how your beliefs were formed and regulated to date, this does not entail that we can determine whether your belief is justified if we limit our assessment to how your beliefs were formed and regulated to date.

### 3. Quine is Overreacting

Kim in effect says, “So what if we cannot accomplish all the aims of the traditional foundationalist. Why should this lead us to abandon the search for an alternative (non-Cartesian) account of justification and an evaluation of our beliefs in light of this (non-Cartesian) account? Why shouldn’t we look for this alternative account of justified or rational belief while also seeking to enrich our descriptions of human psychology?”

### 4. Two Further Arguments

Kim: Quine cannot talk of our trying to describe the causal processes leading from *evidence* to *belief* and still pretend to be excluding normativity from epistemology.

1<sup>st</sup> Argument Based on the Concept of Evidence: Something only counts as evidence if it entails or inductively confirms that for which it is evidence. But entailment and confirmation are defined in terms of truth.

p entails q iff it is logically impossible for p to be true and q not true.

p inductively supports q iff if p is true it is more likely that q is true than it would be were p not true.

Thus only representational entities (e.g. propositions) can stand in the appropriate relations and so constitute evidence.

2<sup>nd</sup> Argument Based on the Concept Belief: When attributing beliefs to a subject we must assume that she has a minimal amount of rationality. For example, if I learn from S that she wants nothing more than to drink a beer and I see that she is making her way over to the refrigerator, I can assume that she believes that the best way to get a beer is by walking to the refrigerator. My version of this assumption is what I’ll call the “Platitude of Effect.”

*The Platitude of Effect*: S typically believes that p if: (1) S wants  $q_1$ - $q_n$ , (2) p represents (or constitutes) the information that  $w_1$ - $w_n$  are available ways to satisfy S’s desires for  $q_1$ - $q_n$ , and (3) S is disposed to act in ways  $w_1$ - $w_n$

But to attribute belief in this way I must assume that S is at least minimally rational. For example, unless I assume that S is doing what she believes will satisfy her desires I might infer that S is making her way over to the refrigerator because she thinks that there is water in there even though what she wants most is a beer. That is, if what S wants most is a beer and she thinks the refrigerator is filled with bottles of water, she’ll go to the store instead of the refrigerator *if she’s instrumentally rational*. So when I assume that her going to the refrigerator shows that she believes there is beer in there (rather than say water) I assume that she is rational. And, Kim claims, our concept of rationality (even of this minimal instrumental sort) is a normative concept. Even if S asserts “There’s beer in the refrigerator,” I need to make a bunch of assumptions (including that she is at least minimally rational) if I am to infer that she actually believes that there’s beer in the refrigerator. Kim concludes from this that wholly non-normative epistemology is impossible. The epistemologist must at least develop a notion of rationality to have in

play when she assigns beliefs to subjects so as to come up with an accurate description of how sensory stimulation actually leads us to form those beliefs we actually possess.

*Questions:* How would Quine respond? Is “belief” really normative in a way that renders it unscientific? Might Quine replace the notions of “evidence” and “belief” with suitable non-normative replacements? Might he just talk of the stimulation of our nervous systems triggering linguistic or communicative behavior? More generally, can we link folk psychology to cognitive neuroscience without making “unscientific” normative assumptions?

## **5. Reflective Equilibrium**

The Cartesian Foundationalist Method: (1) Arrive at some indubitable certainties (e.g. I exist and am being appeared to redly). (2) Then reconstruct a substantive portion of science to believe in (e.g. contemporary physics) by reasoning on the basis of these certainties using self-evident modes or rules of inference (e.g. modus ponens). (3) Never going beyond this by believing things one cannot derive from certainties using self-evidently valid rules of reasoning.

Quine is right in his rejection of “the Cartesian Foundationalist method.” As he argues, the logicians (Frege, Russell and Whitehead) tried to do this for mathematical knowledge by deriving it from logic alone and even that failed. So the prospects of constructing Cartesian foundations for natural science are exceedingly dim and there are principled reasons for thinking it cannot be done. But what then? Most epistemologists, following Kim, reject Quine’s advice that we limit ourselves to psychology. Instead, most endorse the idea of epistemology as a drive toward something Nelson Goodman called *ideal reflective equilibrium*. The idea is that you try to use epistemological reflection to make your beliefs more coherent. If you achieve “ideal coherence,” then your beliefs have the most justification they can possess whether or not they are true or constitutive of knowledge.

The Method of Reflective Equilibrium (MRE): (1) Try your best to articulate your beliefs by saying what you do and don’t believe. (2) Try your best to articulate your evaluative beliefs about which beliefs are justified or rational or constitutive of knowledge and which are not. (These are called normative intuitions.) (3) Try your best to articulate, on the basis of these normative intuitions, various general principles as to when a belief is justified or rational or constitutive of knowledge. (This is what Gettier and Harman were doing when they articulated and evaluated various analyses of knowledge.) (4) Then go back and forth between your individual beliefs and the general principles you form, abandoning some of your prior intuitions as to which of your beliefs were justified or constitutive of knowledge because they conflict with the general principles of justification or analyses of knowledge you’ve framed, and in other cases altering your general principles of justification or analyses of knowledge to accommodate your prior commitment to the justifiability or knowledge-constituting status of various individual beliefs that conflict with these analyses. (5) Your analyses of knowledge and epistemic justification will be *justified* alongside your individual beliefs and intuitions

about justification to the degree that these will come to better cohere with one another as you engaged in this process.

Questions: (1) If we engage in MRE will we abandon Stroud's exclusion principles precisely because they fail to cohere with our ordinary attributions of perceptual knowledge? Does this show that adopting the MRE means begging the question against the Cartesian skeptic? (2) More generally: Does the adoption of MRE insure that our beliefs will remain pretty much unchanged by epistemological inquiry insofar as we will reject any analysis of justification or knowledge if its adoption would force us to abandon too many of the beliefs with which we begin epistemological inquiry? (The use of MRE to reject Cartesian skepticism might be said to be just one particular instance of this general phenomenon.) In other words, is use of the MRE overly conservative? If we use MRE, as Rawls did, to develop general theories of moral or political justification and justice, will we end up validating most of the moral beliefs with which we began inquiry even if these starting points were highly biased, prejudicial or in some other way objectionable? (This is a standard Marxist critique of Rawls.)