A CRITIQUE OF W.V.O. QUINE'S NATURALIZED EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper is a critical scrutiny of Quine's naturalized epistemology in order to determine whether it is a viable epistemological theory. They dissect Quine's naturalized epistemology with the philosophical tools of critical analysis and in the process discover that Quine's naturalized epistemology reduces epistemology to a purely descriptive science, a mere chapter of psychology. Owing to this reduction, the paper argues that Quine's naturalized epistemology purges epistemology of its distinctive feature as a normative science that is fundamentally concerned with the justification of human knowledge. And as a result of this, Quine's naturalized epistemology lacks an epistemological status. In addition to this, the paper maintains that Quine's attempt to reduce epistemology to psychology was not a successful project. This is evident in the fact that the major claim of Quine that "epistemology is a chapter in psychological" is not a psychological construct but a philosophical construct that cannot be derived from through the use of the descriptive and experimental methods of the empirical sciences. Base on this, the paper concludes that Quine's naturalized epistemology cannot be a viable replacement of traditional epistemology.

Keywords: Epistemology, Naturalized Epistemology, Quine, Traditional Epistemology

Introduction

The quest for human knowledge is a natural disposition of the human mind. The human mind necessary strives to know and its quest for knowledge is insatiable. This philosophy as the king of all sciences is fundamentally concerned with nature, source, scope, reliability and certainty of human knowledge. The branch of philosophy that is specifically concern with the issue of knowledge is known as epistemology. As a philosophical specialism, epistemology attempts to provide answers to questions such as: what is knowledge? Is it possible to have knowledge? How can we know that we know? What is the justification for our claims to knowledge?

Accordingly, different philosophers have proffer different answers to the above epistemological question. Dominant among these questions in the ancient era are those proffer by three different epistemological, nay philosophical schools of thoughts, namely, Scepticism, Rationalism and Empiricism. According to scepticism, knowledge is impossible because there is no absolutes knowledge that is indubitable. Rationalism maintains that knowledge is possible and that the source of certain and indubitable knowledge is reason. In line with the position of rationalism, empiricism argues that certain and indubitable knowledge is possible. However, empiricism goes further to argue that the source of certain and indubitable knowledge is not reason. For

empiricism it is sense experience. (Lawhead, 50 – 51). Owing to the controversy among these three traditional epistemological systems, different philosophers have come up with their own epistemological system. Among the most recent systems is Quine's naturalized epistemology.

Against this backdrop, we shall in this short essay take a critical look at Quine's naturalized epistemology in order to determine its validity and veracity as an epistemological school of thought. In doing this, our ultimate objective is to point out that Quine's naturalized epistemology is not as flawless as Quine thinks and as such should not be seen as sacrosanct. At this point, we shall now proceed to an expository analysis of Quine's naturalized epistemology.

An Exposition of Quine's Naturalized Epistemology

Naturalized epistemology is the epistemological position of one of the most influential American philosopher of all time, Willard Van Orman Quine. W. V. O. Quine as he is popularly called lived from June 25, 1908 to December 25, 2000. Out of the ninety-eight years he lived on earth, sixty-five years were spent in the academic work of research, writing and teaching. Thus, his contributions in philosophy is outstanding. Writing about the intellectual legacy of Quine, Gibson Jr. attests:

> During his Stellar sixty –five-years long he published twenty-some books and scores of articles, and he lectured in six languages on six continents. He made major contributions to large number of fields within philosophy, including epistemology, metaphysics, metaethics, logic, set theory, philosophy of logic, philosophy of language; philosophy of science, and philosophy of mind. In recognition of his many contributions, Quine was awarded eighteen honorary degrees and numerous other honors, prizes and medals.

Without doubt, Quine was one of the most gifted and influential analytic philosophers of the twentieth century and belongs squarely in the ranks of Carnap, Russell, and Wittgenstein (6). Good grasp of the forgoing shows that Quine is a philosophical giant. He was, an epistemologist, logician, and all round philosopher. This is why J.S. Ullian argues that: "No one since Russell has contributed so much to both philosophy and logic as Quine. No major philosopher has given anything much to logic, nor has any important figure in logic borne Quine's stature as a philosopher" (270). However, it important to note that our interest in this phenomenon nay philosophical iroko called W.V.O.Quine is specifically on his theory of naturalized epistemology. We shall in this section present a succinct expository analysis of Quine's theory of naturalized epistemology. In doing this, we shall begin with an analysis of the traditional conception of epistemology.

Etymologically the term epistemology comes from two Greek words "episteme" which means knowledge and "logos" which means "theory" or "rational discourse." Hence epistemology is simplest defined as the theory of knowledge a rational discourse about knowledge (Lawhead, 47). Seen in this perspective, epistemology is the traditional branch of philosophy that explores the nature, meaning, source and justifications of human knowledge. In this regard, the central questions of epistemology as a branch of philosophy include: The origin of knowledge; the place of experience in generating knowledge, the place of reason in doing so; the relationship between knowledge and certainty, and between knowledge and the impossibility of error; the possibility of universal skepticism; and the changing forms of knowledge that arises from new conceptualization of the world" (Blackburn, 123). The implication of this is that epistemology is in a fundamental sense of a critical search for an indubitable foundation for knowledge that is objective, certain and universal. In this connection, three traditional epistemological positions easily comes to mind.

1. Skepticism which argues that objective, certain and universal knowledge is impossible;
2. Rationalism which argues objective, certain and universal knowledge is possible and the source of objective, certain and universal knowledge is reason, and
3. Empiricism which agrees with rationalism that certain knowledge is possible but that its source is sense experience and not reason (Lawhead, 50). Underlining this traditional conception of epistemology is the view that epistemology is fundamentally normative, nay prescriptive discipline whose essential duty is to tell us how we ought to seek knowledge.

Consequently upon the above view, epistemology is traditionally a search for the foundation for objective knowledge and absolute truth. This is anchored on the view that inspite of the dynamic and seemingly illusory nature of things, the world is coherent, ordered and organize structure. Thus there must be an indubitable foundation upon which objective knowledge can and must be based. Explaining this position, Ozumba writes;

> This view that inspite of fleeting presentations of things, that there exists an independent and fundamental "matter of fact", inspired a fundamentalist 'epistemology". The foundationalist epistemology holds that there exist an irreducible stratum of reality which is the case come what may and whose truths is self-evident… epistemology in this old setting is therefore seen as the 'provide' of sure foundations for the cognitive interpretation of the external world. .. Epistemology is therefore seen as a normative discipline that is concerned, among other things, with questions about how reasoning ought to proceed. Traditional epistemology holds that such questions

> can be answered independently of investigation into the processes that in fact occur when reasoning takes places (sic) (Philosophy of W.V.O. Quine, 108, 109,110).

Against this backdrop, one will understand that epistemology is a philosophical response to the position of skepticism that certain and indubitable knowledge is not possible. Traditional epistemology response to this challenge of skepticism nature of sense experience, there is an indubitable foundation upon which certain knowledge can be based. And the only way through which we can arrive at this indubitable foundation is by subjecting all our pre-theoretical beliefs to the tribunal of systematic doubt until we arrive at an indubitable foundation. After arriving at a sure and certain foundation we can build our knowledge upon it using the principles of valid inference. This traditional or classical conception of epistemology reached its zenith in Rene Descartes' philosophy. Thus, Hilary Kornblith avers: "on Descartes's view, epistemology is "self – philosophy; our theory of knowledge is logically prior to any empirical knowledge" (159). The implication of this is that we should not have confidence in any of our "pretheoretical beliefs" and that our epistemological theory should be constructed only on a sure certain, and indubitable foundation. In line with this position, Kornblith further explains that for Descartes, "epistemology must….precede science, and indeed, precede any empirical belief whatsoever. No empirical belief may be rationally formed without our first having an epistemological theory to guide our belief formation" (159). This view is essentially in favour of rationalism to the detriment of empiricism.

However, following the failure of Descartes foundationalism due to the impossibility of the task of reconstructing our knowledge from a presuppositionless and indubitable foundation (Kornblith, 161), there was a recourse to empiricism. And unfortunately too, the logical conclusion of empiricism as shown by Hume's consisted in skepticism (Lawhead, 106). The inability of both rationalism and empiricism to validity provides us with the presuppositionless and indubitable foundation that will can base the epistemological theory that will serve as a guide and justification of all forms of knowledge claims including religious beliefs and scientific theories necessarily led to the emergence of a non-foundationalist epistemology. Thus the first fundamental thing to note here is that Quine's naturalized epistemology is a non-foundationalist school of epistemology. Although Quine's idea of naturalized epistemology implicit in most of his works, it came to maturation in his 1969 essay titled "Epistemology naturalized".

Surprisingly, Quine, begins his essay "epistemology naturalized" with a very misleading sentences "epistemology is concerned with the foundations of science" (69). The sentence is misleading because it tend to opine that Quine accepts this

classical conception to epistemology. One only has to read further before he discover that Quine's naturalized epistemology is in fact the opposite of the classical conception of "epistemology as the foundation of science". Quine's naturalized epistemology is a revolutionary up-turn of classical epistemology. A good grasp of the meaning of the concept of naturalism as used in philosophy will make the revolutionary nature of Quine's epistemology vivid. In philosophy, naturalism refers to the claim that everything is a part of the physical world and as such as be explained using the methodology of the natural sciences. It is a philosophical school that rejects any theoretical construct or entity or reality or processes that are inaccessible to inquiry as unnatural. Naturalism therefore praises empiricism, derogates rationalism, accepts physicalism, and contests the claim philosophy is prior to natural sciences. Specifically, epistemological naturalism, "holds that epistemological justification and explanation are continuous with natural science and argues that scientific method is the only way to secure our knowledge (Bunnin and Yu, 458 – 9).

Quine's naturalized makes science and not epistemology (philosophy) the necessary validator of knowledge. Joseph S. Ullian makes this point more vivid when succinctly writes:

> Quine is preeminently an epistemologist. His epistemology is wedded in interlocking ways to empiricism, naturalism, and physicalism, together they lead him to see science not only as the arbiter of what is to be believed about the world but also as providing the content in which we must take philosophy. Rather than pursue some first philosophy, we look to science for our bearings: "It is within science… that reality is to be identified and described" (270).

From the foregoing, one realize that Quine's naturalized epistemology refers to the position that epistemology is a branch of the natural sciences rather than their judge and overseer. Quine argues that the normative evaluation conception of epistemology has failed in its attempt refute skepticism through doctrinal rational reconstruction and reduction (Epistemology naturalized 74 – 5). And that the failure of rational reconstruction necessarily dethrones normative, 'doctrinaire' epistemology and enthrones descriptive, naturalized epistemology. It is a naturalized epistemology that apes the empirical bias of the natural sciences. As Quine states that it is "better to discover how science is in fact developed and learned than to fabricate a fictitious structure to a similar effect" (76).

In this regard, Quine argues that the failure of foundationalist normative epistemology of rational reconstruction does not entails the end of epistemology per se, rather it entails the end of epistemology as the overseer of science. Thus, calls for the naturalization of epistemology as a branch of science put in his words:

> But I think that it 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… such a study could still include, even something like the old rational reconstruction to whatever degree such reconstruction is practicable,… But a conspicuous different between old epistemology and the epistemological enterprise in this new, psychological setting is that we can now make free use of empirical psychology (82 – 3).

The point Quine is buttressing here is that naturalized epistemology is purely a factual, descriptive and natural inquiry concerning how knowledge is formed and developed. Naturalized epistemology it sees the concern of traditional epistemology with validation and justification as unrealistic and impossible. As Jaeqwon Kim rightly notes what is new in Quine's naturalized epistemology is that it asks us to "set aside the entire framework of justification – centred epistemology … (and) to put in its place a purely descriptive, casual nomological science of human cognition … epistemology is to get out of the business of epistemology" (271). This position is as noted earlier an off-shoot of empiricism. Be that as it may, it is pertinent to add that naturalized epistemology is the logical epistemological product of Quine's repudiation of traditional empiricism. It is in this sense, the consequence of "empiricism without the dogmas" – the dogma of demarcation between analytic and synthetic truth and the dogma of reductionism (Quine, Two Dogmas of Empiricism, 20). Indeed, the philosophical seed of Quine's naturalized epistemology can be seen in Quine's famous essay, "The Two Dogmas of Empiricism. When he explicitly posits:

> The totality of our so-Called knowledge or beliefs from the most causal matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edge. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience (42).

The obvious reduction of human knowledge to empirical knowledge explicit in the above citation, culminated into the reduction of epistemology to descriptive science that is only but a "chapter of psychology". Quine's naturalized epistemology is therefore a descriptive science of knowledge that study the actual formation of knowledge by human beings, without aspiring to certify those processes as rational, or refute skepticism, or even claim to discover the truth. It is kind of philosophical activity that apes and mimics natural sciences by blending into the psychology of learning and the study episodes in the history of science in order to understand and describes how human knowledge or beliefs are formed and developed (Blackburn, 255). In line with this view, the Nigerian Quinean scholar Godfrey O. Ozumba,

concludes that "Naturalized epistemology could therefore be seen as the scientific study of perception, learning, thought, language – acquisition, and the transmission and historical development of human knowledge" (120). Owing to this gross scientific biasness of naturalized epistemology, the question that readily comes to mind is: "How epistemology is naturalized epistemology?"

How Epistemological is Naturalized Epistemology?

Our major interest in this section is to examine the epistemological status of Quine's naturalized epistemology as an epistemological school of thought. Our ultimate duty here is to pin-point the strength and weakness in Quine's theory and in doing this explain whether epistemology can be totally naturalized and if Quine succeeded in naturalized epistemology. Having said this, we shall now proceed to examine the epistemological status of Quine's naturalized epistemology ignoring the question whether he actually succeeded in naturalizing epistemology.

According to Alvin Coldman, Quine's naturalized epistemology is a form of radical epistemological naturalism that could be appropriately called scientific naturalism. And the basic thesis of scientific naturalism is "Epistemology is a branch of science. The statements of epistemology are subset of the statements of science, and the proper method of doing epistemology is the empirical method of science 92). The basic implication of this position is that Quine sees epistemology as a descriptive science. In this sense, epistemology is not to be concern with evaluation, justification and prescription. Here in lies the fundamental problem in Quine's naturalized epistemology. The removal of evaluation, justification and prescription from the scope of epistemology by Quine's theory stripes epistemology of its distinctive features as a normative discipline. This is because no branch of the empirical sciences, including psychology, takes on the normative task of specifying the standards, conditions, or criteria for the justification of human knowledge and these tasks are part of the missions of epistemology as a philosophical specialism (Goldman, 2). The corollary of this is that Quine's naturalized epistemology lacks an epistemological status. This is because it stripes epistemology of its distinctive character as a normative discipline. Against this backdrop, Kim elucidates:

> It is 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. To be sure, they both investigate "how evidence relates to theory". But putting the matter this way can be misleading, and perhaps misled Quine: the two discipline do not investigate the same relation… Normative epistemology is concerned

> with the evidential relation properly so-called-that is, the relation of justification – and Quine's naturalized epistemology is meant to study the causal – nomological relation. For epistemology to go out of the business of justification is for it to go of business… Quine's naturalized epistemology, while it may be a legitimate scientific inquiry, is not a kind of epistemology, and therefore, that the question whether it is a better kind of epistemology cannot arise (273).

The point envisaged here is that Quine's naturalized epistemology is not an epistemological theory but a scientific theory. This is because it is not concerned with the justification with knowledge. And the distinctive character of epistemology as a discipline is the justification of knowledge. Owing to this, naturalized epistemology cannot be considered to be replacement to traditional epistemology as Quine intended. The reason for this is obvious. The subject matter of traditional epistemology is fundamentally different from the subject matter of naturalized epistemology. The former studies the scope, nature and justification of human knowledge as a whole using the philosophical method of critical reflection and logical analysis. The latter studies the nature of empirical knowledge using the scientific method of observation and description. Although, Quine attempt to shy away from the province of justification as started earlier is due to his view that traditional epistemology cannot refute skepticism. But Quine's theory did not recognize the fact that the logical conclusion of skepticism is that certain knowledge is possible. This is the case because while the skeptists argue that certain knowledge is impossible, they are at the same time telling us that certain knowledge is impossible.

Consequent upon the foregoing, it is obvious that the moment we withdraw from the business of justification evaluation and prescription which is the ideal criteria of human knowledge, the question of knowledge and truth disappears. This is because all forms of beliefs and knowledge claims will have the same status because without a criteria or standard for knowledge, the consequence as Paul Feyerabend would say, "anything goes". Thus, Quine's naturalized epistemology cannot be regarded as a theory of knowledge. This helps us to understand "how people actually know" without telling us "how people know that they have known". For though everybody claims to know but every claim to knowledge cannot be the case. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge has the mission of telling us how ought to know by prescribing the ideal criteria for the justification of human knowledge. Be that as it may, it is pertinent to ask whether Quine Actually succeeded in naturalized epistemology. In other words, is Quine's naturalized epistemology actually a purely empirical scientific theory discovered through the use of scientific methodology?

According to James Harris, Quine simply cannot develop the general theory of naturalize epistemology without doing "first philosophy" – exactly what naturalized epistemology is supposed to eliminate" (141). The point Harris is making here is very

important. Quine's call for the abandonment of traditional epistemology for naturalised epistemology is prescriptive. Secondly, Quine's position that "epistemology is only but a chapter of psychology" can only be arrived at through evaluation. But if knowledge is fundamentally descriptive, there will be no basis for us to evaluate two different ways of acquiring knowledge in such a way that we end up accepting one and rejecting the other. For Quine's rejection of traditional epistemology in preference of naturalized epistemology must base on a foundation, a rationale or criterion that enabled him to evaluate choose and prescribe naturalized epistemology as the best way to do epistemology. Hence Ozumba asks: "can we ever begin to build a house without foundations? (Mirroring Quine, 78). Since the answer to this question is an emphatic no, one therefore asks if the foundation of Quine's naturalized epistemology is psychology or any of the empirical sciences.

A critical look at the very nature of the empirical sciences, including psychology shows that their method of enquiring can never yield the conclusion that epistemology can be pursued within psychology. This is because while psychology is a descriptive science, epistemology is a prescriptive science. While prescription necessarily involves description, description does not involve prescription. A prescriptive science is therefore larger in shape than a descriptive science. In view of this fact Harris argues that naturalized epistemology (NE) is product of philosophical reflection and not a product of any empirical scientific experiment. Naturalized epistemology is therefore a "metascientific, meta-theoretical claim which cannot be reduced to or made a part of any scientific theory… indeed, naturalized epistemology is a philosophical theory of interest to philosopher – not scientists" (141). Put differently, Harris further elucidates:

> Quine offers a detailed rationale for (NE) which is supposed to constitute an argument or reason for our preferring (NE) to the old-styled epistemology… At the same time, Quine has explicitly denied that there is a "first philosophy" within which such questions such as … justification… can arise – this is the main point of naturalized epistemology. Either, it seems, (NE) must be completely unjustified or it is self-refuting…. If all epistemological matters of justification and warrant are supposed to be internal to the theory been put forth, it is impossible to justify or give any reasons or evidence – compelling or otherwise for the theory. Unless there are extra-scientific criteria for epistemologically evaluating (NE), there are no grounds which we could say that it is a good theory or that it is to be preferred to any competing theory, or that there is any reason at all for adopting it. Simply put, (NE) is not a claim of empirical psychology and if all evidence and reasons occur only within empirical psychology, then they can be no evidence or reasons for (NE), (141 – 42).

The major gist here is that Quine's naturalized epistemology confirms rather refutes the justifying nature of epistemology. Quine adduced reasons and evidence why we should abandon traditional epistemology. In doing this, Quine was involve in the traditional epistemological business of evaluation, justification and prescription. Hence, Quine's naturalized epistemology is a fundamentally a philosophic construct. It is not a construct of psychology or of any empirical sciences. Moreover Harris further affirms: "To the extent that (NE) is a justified, theory which commands considered assert, it is also inconsistent and self-defeating. So, paradoxically, for the advocates of naturalized epistemology good reasons for (NE) are also go reasons against it (142). This paradox is fundamentally inherent in every attempt to dismiss knowledge using a prior warrant Quine's naturalized epistemology is based on an a priori warrant. For no empirical scientific inquiry can validate or give rise to the conclusion that epistemology is possible only as psychology.

Conclusion

The point that can be deduced from our discussion so far is that any successful reduction of epistemology to psychology as Quine's naturalized epistemology tends to claim will stripe epistemology of its distinctive character as a normative discipline. Thus, any theory that is essentially descriptive and devoid of justification, evaluation and prescription lacks an epistemological status. In this connection, Quine's naturalized epistemology conceived as a chapter of empirical psychology is at best a scientific theory that informs us of how human beings form and develop their beliefs. It is fundamentally in this sense not an epistemological theory.

Consequently, the conclusion of this short essay is that Quine's attempt to naturalized epistemology by reducing it to a purely descriptive science that is only but a chapter of psychology is an unsuccessful project. Quine's naturalized epistemology is a philosophical construct and as such a scientific theory that is not derived nor reducible to science. This is evident in the fact that Quine's claim that epistemology is reducible to psychology cannot be derived using the descriptive and experimental methodology of the natural sciences.

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