Knowledge and its Place in Nature
by Hilary Kornblith

Chapter 1: Investigating Knowledge Itself
In this chapter Kornblith represents the naturalistic program- his at least- as that of shifting philosophical attention from the concept of knowledge to knowledge itself.

From Kornblith’s point of view, a lot of unproductive philosophy has occurred as a result of the view that philosophy is the study of concepts.

The basic naturalistic view is that the study of a concept should only be a means to the end of understanding the phenomenon that concept is used to represent.

So, just as the concept of motion is only interesting insofar as it may help us to understand the nature of motion itself. The concept of knowledge is interesting only insofar as it helps us to understand the nature of knowledge itself.
Kornblith represents his view as entailing the rejection of the traditional view that philosophical inquiry is, inherently, logical and conceptual analysis.

Note that this is put rather strongly. He could, for example, have stated that philosophy actually does consist largely in conceptual analysis, but that this is interesting only insofar as it contributes to the understanding of phenomena represented by these concepts. That would be a perfectly naturalistic position as well.
Appeals to intuition

- Kornblith begins by noting that epistemology and philosophy in general has traditionally been done by appeals to intuition.
- Gettier provides as good an example of this as any. Recall that Gettier provided a counterexample to the analysis of the concept of knowledge as justified true belief.
- Question: How do we know that this is a counterexample?
- Answer: We feel it. When we “reflect on the meaning of knowledge” we see intuitively that the Gettier example does not count as knowledge.
- But recall: Some of you did not have that intuition.
- And recall again: Some of you even asked: so what if my intuitions tell me that? Maybe my intuitions are wrong.
Appeals to intuition in ethics

- As always, there are interesting correlates in the study of ethics. Peter Singer, a leading ethical naturalist, has argued that appeals to intuition in ethics are bogus.

- Here’s the article if you want to read it: Ethics and Intuitions

- Basically Singer argues that our intuitions about ethics evolved under dramatically different social circumstances, and that in modern society they simply produce the wrong answers
You may be familiar with the trolley problem: a train heading down a track is going to hit a group of people unless you throw a switch to divert the train to another track. Unfortunately, doing this will cause one person to be killed. Most people will say that this is the right thing to do, which seems to vindicate a utilitarian outlook.

But here is an apparent counterexample: You witness the same situation from a bridge overhead. You have no switch, but you have a very large person standing next to you whom you could push onto the track, killing him, but preventing the deaths of the many. Most people say this would be wrong, and hence conclude there must be something wrong with the utilitarian calculus.

Singer says that what’s wrong is our intuitions. They are actually driven by things that have little if anything to do with ethics. For example, he thinks they are affected by the irrelevant fact that it is emotionally (not to mention physically) easier to throw a switch that kills a person, rather than throw the actual person.
George Bealer is a very smart anti-naturalist, and Kornblith begins with his account of philosophical method. Bealer argues directly against the rejection of intuitions by essentially pointing out that it’s self-referentially inconsistent to do so: people who reject intuitions predicate this rejection on their own intuitions.

More specifically, a naturalist who makes the empiricist claim that “a person’s experiences and/or observations comprise the person’s prima facie evidence” thereby rules out a priori intuitions as prima facie evidence. But on what basis does she actually do this?

If someone attempted to produce a counterexample to this principle, she would presumably defend it by consulting her intuitions about evidence, just like anyone else.
Bealer’s general rejection of naturalism

- Bealer thinks that naturalism is really a fundamentally incoherent outlook insofar as they attempt to have their cake and eat it.
- The cake is represented by the principle noted previously:
  - “a person’s experiences and/or observations comprise the person’s *prima facie* evidence”
- The eating is represented by two other principles of naturalism:
  - “The natural sciences constitute the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all or most of the person’s *prima facie* evidence”
  - “A theory is justified ... for a person if and only if it belongs to the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all or most of the person’s *prima facie* evidence.”
- Do you see the problem here?
The problem is that:

- The first of these principles:
  - “a person’s experiences and/or observations comprise the person’s *prima facie* evidence”

- Doesn’t permit one to consistently hold the others:
  - “The natural sciences constitute the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all or most of the person’s *prima facie* evidence”
  - “A theory is justified … for a person if and only if it belongs to the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all or most of the person’s *prima facie* evidence.”

- Since there is nothing in our experiences or observations to tell us when things are *justified*, *explained*, etc.
Kornblith’s response to Bealer

- Kornblith basically accepts that naturalists would be inconsistent to reject the use of intuitions, and consequently does not do so. For Kornblith, appeals to intuition are definitely part of the reasoning process. However, he does not accord them overriding significance.

- For example, he points out that if your intuitions are highly idiosyncratic, that is a reason for thinking they are incorrect, since disagreement with the majority is generally some evidence for error.
The proper use of intuitions

- On the traditional view defended by Bealer, philosophers use intuitions to get at the nature of our concepts.
- Recall that for people who think that this knowledge can be established a priori and that such a process generates either analytic or synthetic a priori truths, this assigns enormous power to intuition.
- Kornblith thinks this is wrong. He claims that we properly use our intuitions the way that any scientist uses them, not to tell us about the meaning of concepts, but to help us identify natural kinds.
- When a scientist attempts to determine, say, whether a newly discovered set of fossil remains is a human ancestor, he does not “need to be in a position to characterize the essential features of” homo sapiens. Similarly, when a philosopher attempts to determine whether something counts as knowledge, he does not need to be in position to, nor should he be seen as attempting to, characterize the essential features of knowledge. The aim is to understand the phenomenon.
Philosophy is like rock-collecting

- Kornblith compares philosophical inquiry to primitive rock-collecting. Specifically, a rock-collector who is engaged in identifying different natural kinds of rocks will use whatever intuitions she has about the nature of rocks. For example, she may have an intuition about whether the mass or shape of a rock is relevant to determining what sort of rock it is. Importantly:
  - The rock-collectors intuitions are malleable.
  - The rock-collectors intuitions aren’t particularly trustworthy (in other words are highly malleable) at early stages of inquiry.

- This latter point is especially important for epistemology: until we have a highly productive theory of the phenomenon of knowledge, our intuitions do not have anything like overriding significance.
Kornblith, then, is asking us to accept that our intuitions about the nature of knowledge can be just as wrong as our intuitions about the nature of fish. For those who think there is some strong disanalogy here, Kornblith reminds us that our intuitions about knowledge are historically conditioned.

For example, Descartes had the strong intuition that knowledge requires certainty. That’s because he did his work at the beginning of the scientific revolution. Today hardly anybody believes that knowledge requires certainty, and that’s largely because of the stupendous success of science in making new knowledge under conditions of uncertainty.
You may be familiar with the term “folk psychology”. Our folk psychological concepts are the ones we use in everyday explanations of behavior. For example:

- Mattie’s face turned beet red because she felt both ashamed and angry when she realized that her friends thought she was coming on to her mom’s new boyfriend.

Even though this is a functional ordinary explanation of why Mattie’s face turned red, it is questionable whether it has any scientific value at all. Specifically, it is questionable whether realizations, thoughts, feelings of anger and shame, etc. are natural kinds at all.

But even many naturalistically inclined philosophers (Kornblith identifies Alvin Goldman) believe that epistemology requires us to justify folk psychological explanations to some extent.

What he means by this is that even if folk psychology is wrong in certain important respects, it can’t be totally wrong, because the field of epistemology itself is formulated on the assumption that there is such a thing as, say, a justified belief. To deny this, is really just to dismiss the field itself.
But Kornblith points out that this view—the presumed continuity between folk-psychology and neuroscience—is actually based on the idea that continuity is, by definition, conceptual continuity.

If science required conceptual continuity, then what we call scientific progress would be impossible. For a great deal of scientific progress has depended on realizing that certain things we believed to be natural kinds do not even exist.
In summary…

- Kornblith holds that while we do ultimately appeal to intuition as part of the reasoning process, there is no reason to accord these intuitions a priori status. Rather, they must be both permitted and expected to change as our knowledge grows.
Bealer and others argue that naturalists can provide no coherent account of rules of inference.

The basic argument is that any reasoning naturalists provide in support of naturalism will ultimately presuppose an a priori stance on the soundness of the reasoning itself.

But, as Kornblith observes, naturalists simply do not subscribe to the view that rules of inference can only be justified a priori. Bealer is simply expressing the traditional foundationalist perspective here, according to which no inductive reasoning concerning empirical matters is justified unless it rests on inferential principles that can themselves be justified by reason alone.

Naturalists reject this view. For the naturalist, rules of inference are justified by reference to their actual (empirical) reliability, not by reason alone.
Recall that Bealer argues that naturalists make claims about epistemic justification such as:
- “A theory is justified … for a person if and only if it belongs to the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all or most of the person’s *prima facie* evidence.”

Bealer claims that any attempt to treat knowledge as a natural phenomenon is inconsistent with the use of epistemic terminology, which he regards as irreducibly normative.

Kornblith’s response to this is twofold:
- First, in presupposing that knowledge is a natural phenomenon, naturalists really do not presuppose that knowledge itself is about justification. What knowledge is depends on the causal/explanatory roll it turns out to play in the natural sciences.
- Second, naturalists are not committed to any irreducibly normative claims. They may owe some story about why knowledge is worth having in terms of how it positively effects the organism that possesses it, but this may be a completely naturalistic story.
The Autonomy of Philosophy

In this final section Kornblith addresses the concern of Bealer and others that naturalism amounts to giving up on philosophy as a distinct discipline.

Kornblith’s response is twofold.

- Philosophy simply is not an autonomous discipline from a methodological perspective.
- But this does not prevent it from being distinctive in its concerns. (Similarly, biology and chemistry are not methodologically autonomous, but they still have distinct interests.)