Chapter 3
Knowledge and Social Practices
Animal knowledge vs. Human knowledge

- Within the naturalist camp there remain significant divisions. In this chapter Kornblith addresses the following attempt to preserve the non naturalist intuition that human knowledge is special in naturalistic terms:
  - Even though animals are properly said to have knowledge, the fact remains that the knowledge of which animals are capable is vastly inferior to the knowledge of which humans are capable.
  - Specifically, what makes human knowledge superior and philosophically interesting is that it is the product of reasoning.
Knowledge sans belief

- Recently we discussed the question whether one can know without believing. If you’ve been successfully indoctrinated into the JTB tradition, then you have strong intuitions that this is not possible.

- But consider the views of Colin McGinn (KPN, p. 71)
  - …many animals that can be said to hear, smell, etc. what is going on around them could not literally be credited with beliefs. Such animals can, it is true, be credited with informational states that are, if you like, analogous to genuine belief; but processing information about the environment is not the same thing as reasoning about it. So both perception and knowledge are, in a clear sense, more primitive than belief; they require less cognitive sophistication than belief.

- So here we have an example of a very naturalistic position, one in which knowledge is acknowledged to occur in the absence of belief, but which also sees human knowledge as significantly different.
Do non human animals have beliefs?

- The argument that animals are incapable of belief is based on the intuition that to have a belief is to accept the truth of a statement or proposition. Statements and propositions are linguistic entities. So, if you don’t speak a language, you don’t have beliefs.

- Here are some specific expressions of this intuition:
  - “A creature can not have thoughts unless it is an interpreter of the speech of another.” (Donald Davidson)
  - “An assertion, even if true, is not taken to express knowledge unless the one making it understands the claim being made.” (Robert Brandom)
How Kornblith responds.

- Kornblith’s basic response to this kind of view is that it invariably sets the bar too high; i.e., humans turn out not to have beliefs in situations where we normally assume that they do.

- An analogy may help: Many people think abortion is wrong because the strongest arguments in favor of it end up justifying infanticide as well.

- Relevant homily: Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater.
Response to Brandom

- Brandom’s view is that knowledge is the result of reasoning, so we can not properly attribute knowledge states to creatures that can not give or grasp reasons.
- Kornblith notes that this is the sort of view that one would expect from a philosopher, since philosophers place a great deal of value on the reasoning process, and of course the Socratic tradition attributed knowledge only to those who had perfected it. (According to Socrates, this was nobody.)
- Once we take seriously the task of developing a theory of knowledge that credits the vast majority of human beings as possessing at least some of it, it isn’t at all clear that the variable of interest is the degree to which one can participate in reasoning.
- Kornblith spends several pages discussing the variation we find in the reasoning process. Some people do a lot of it. Others find it to be a rather annoying and intrusive activity. But his main point seems to be that while people do often formulate beliefs on the basis of reasoning, it is very far from a necessary condition.
Although Brandom has naturalistic sensibilities, his intuitions about belief and knowledge still seem to be driven by the is/ought dichotomy.

It is one thing to say that our beliefs are not justified if they aren’t formed as a result of a reasoning process. It’s another to say that they don’t even exist.

Kornblith claims that to determine whether an individual or species is capable of belief we should not inhabit the justificatory point of view, but the explanatory one.

Whether a person is capable of forming belief is not about whether she is justified in behaving in some way, but behaving that way is best explained in terms of the capacity for having beliefs.
Kornblith says something on p.81 that may seem to run counter to his dismissal of Brandom’s view that belief, and hence knowledge, depend on a capacity for reasoning.

- “Now it is one thing to claim that knowledge requires the having of reasons; I certainly would not want to disagree with that.”

Since Kornblith believes in animal knowledge, it seems to follow from this that animals not only have beliefs, but reasons as well. So we should wonder what it means, and if it is at all plausible to say that a creature has reasons, though it can not actually perform reasoning.
Reasons vs. causes

- Though he does not address this question explicitly, it’s pretty clear in the context that Kornblith has no problem attributing reasons to animals.
- For example, we can say non anthropomorphically that the plover has a very good reason for dragging it’s wing on the ground as if it were broken, namely to distract the fox from it’s nest.
- The plover has the reason, not in the sense that it can employ it in the reasoning process, but in the sense that the information of which it is composed causes the plover’s behavior.
- This point helps to bring out another longstanding and highly relevant intuitional clash between non naturalists and naturalists. The traditional non naturalist intuition is that reasons are not physical causes at all. They do not operate in the brain, which is physical, but the mind, which is not.
- Of course, few serious thinkers subscribe any longer to Cartesian dualism. However, the Cartesian intuitions are still with us all.
Davidson’s argument

- Like many philosophers, Donald Davidson believes that to have a belief one must be able to use a language.
- This implies that neither non-human animals nor human infants have beliefs.
- Donaldson provides a couple of different arguments we should be familiar with:
  - The underdetermination argument.
  - The metacognition argument.
The underdetermination argument

- Davidson claims that observed animal behavior vastly underdetermines the theory that animals have beliefs.
- What does Davidson mean by this?
- First, recall that one of the fundamental truths of empirical science is that observation, by its very nature, underdetermines theory. This is the point made of Hume’s problem of induction, and it is the basis of Quinean holism as well.
- Davidson’s point is not an attack on the structure of empirical science; rather, he is just saying that the evidence for attributing beliefs to animals is very weak, whereas the evidence for attributing beliefs for humans is very compelling.
- For Davidson, the evidence that humans have beliefs is linguistic in nature. If a dog is barking up the wrong tree for a squirrel, we might infer that the dog believes that the squirrel is in that tree. But if Jimbo is looking in the refrigerator we don’t have to simply infer that he thinks last night’s pizza is there. We can just ask him.
Kornblith’s main reply to this argument is that Jimbo’s linguistic response still underdetermines the question whether he believes there to be pizza in the fridge. It certainly does not follow logically from the fact that he says he believes this that he does believe this, or even that he is capable of beliefs at all.

Computers are capable of linguistic behavior, for example, but we are reluctant to attribute beliefs or an understanding of language to them.

Of course, this slightly missess Davidson’s point. He presumably understands that underdetermination is endemic to science. His claim is simply that we have very strong evidence for attributing it to humans and very weak evidence for attributing it to animals.
Kornblith’s real reply to Davidson, then, is that the evidence for attributing beliefs to animals is quite strong. Folk psychological explanations of animal behavior are just as predictive as folk psychological explanations of human behavior.

Note that Kornblith needn’t deny here that many highly inappropriate folk psychological explanations are given of animal behavior. All of these tend to overestimate the sophistication of animal beliefs. But Kornblith is in no way committed to the claim that animal beliefs are as sophisticated as human beliefs.

The ability to make distinctions of degree is very important here. There is another long standing non naturalistic intuition that sees belief as an all or nothing affair; i.e., one either believes something or one doesn’t. But if belief is to be taken seriously as a natural kind, then this is not a legitimate assumption.
The metacognition argument

- In order to motivate his higher standard for belief, Davidson claims that to have a belief one must actually grasp the concept of a belief.
- This view is not patently absurd, but it puts belief into a very weird class of properties. It’s worth looking at what Davidson says:
  - “Someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken, and this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error– true belief, and false belief. But this contrast… can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public, truth.”
- Kornblith’s reply here is essentially that Davidson gives us no reason to believe that understanding the possibility of error is necessary for belief. It is certainly an admirable cognitive state, but not required in order for belief to perform a significant explanatory role.
Knowledge and social practices

- Kornblith considers an alternative analysis proposed by Michael Williams that allows for animal belief, but denies the existence of animal knowledge on the basis of the fact that animals are incapable of the epistemic practices required for justification.

- Although Kornblith does not put it this way, Williams theory is more interesting than standard JTB theories because it is a certain kind of attempt to naturalize the concept of justification.

- Naturalists may simply dismiss standard JTB accounts that see the justification requirement as enforcing a categorical is/ought distinction or some a priori approach to epistemic practice. But it’s not reasonable to dismiss JTB accounts that provide a naturalistic reading of justification.
Cultural relativism

- The easiest way to understand Williams view as well as Kornblith’s response to it is to think about cultural relativism. According to this view, a person’s behavior can only be evaluated in relation to a set of culturally accepted norms or practices.
- Because of the multiplicity of cultures, this view is normally understood to involve the denial of any universal morality; i.e., of any culturally neutral standpoint from which to morally evaluate the cultural practices themselves.
- One simple way of defeating cultural relativism is just to adopt a consequentialist perspective on morality. This is a naturalistic move that parallels the move from justification to reliability in epistemology. The utilitarian, for example, may be understood to be claiming that morality is not a matter of whether one is justified in behaving in a certain way, but whether the rule being followed reliably promotes welfare or happiness.
- But cultural relativism is not so easily defeated. Most people have a strong intuition that our moral evaluations serve the primary purpose of holding people responsible for their actions. But it does not makes sense to hold people responsible for the failure to behave according to rules that are alien to their culture.
Williams’ epistemic relativism

- Williams’ view is that while animals may be said to have beliefs, they do not have knowledge because they can not be held responsible for their beliefs.

- His idea, roughly speaking, is to substitute the notion of responsibility for justification: knowledge is responsible, true, belief. Humans can be held responsible for their beliefs only because they are capable of understanding and accepting a set of epistemic practices. Animals and young children can not.

- The analogy with cultural relativism is not complete here because Williams’ analysis of knowledge still contains a non relativistic notion of truth. But Kornblith’s response to his analysis still roughly parallels the standard response to cultural relativism.
Kornblith’s response to Williams

- Kornblith’s response is simply that the normative standards of any particular epistemic community are themselves subject to criticism on the grounds of reliability.

- Just as we may be reasonably critical of cultural practices like slavery, the subjugation of women, plutocracy, etc. on the grounds that they do not conduce to the general welfare, so may we be critical of epistemic practices that do not reliably produce true belief.

- So while it may not be reasonable to hold individual members of a society responsible for the failure to engage in epistemic practices they’ve never heard of, it is not unreasonable to claim that a culture itself lacks knowledge insofar as its epistemic practices are unreliable.

- If you are having trouble getting your mind around culturally sanctioned unreliable epistemic practices it might be worth revisiting this.
A mild defense of Williams

- Before moving on it’s worth emphasizing that Williams’ view is highly naturalistic, and it appeals more to the anthropological perspective than the ethological one.
- Korblith need not deny that is an interesting empirical question how different cultures go about justifying and holding individuals responsible for their beliefs.
- The epistemic practices of a culture may be studied simply as an interesting empirical phenomenon without any particular interest in judging them as reliable or unreliable.
- Anthropologists who do this speak just as easily of cultural knowledge as ethologists speak of animal knowledge.
- So, if we pushed Kornblith a little here we might conclude that his view is predicated on the claim that ethology is a more fundamental discipline in scientific and epistemic term than anthropology.
A stronger defense of Kornblith

- But while Kornblith can acknowledge that cultural epistemic practices are interesting in their own right, he could also insist that hardly anybody really takes that position.

- The fact is that we typically study phenomena because we think knowledge of such will be useful to us. What’s useful about studying the epistemic practices of other cultures is that it can help us to understand how and why people come to believe what they do.

- But, as Kornblith points out, cultures whose epistemic practices are guided by consulting ancients texts like the Bible, the Qur’an, or the I Ching, or by consulting people with special powers like palm readers, phrenologists, and non naturalist philosophers are not merely interesting, but deeply misguided as well. None of these sources are remotely reliable means of producing our beliefs, and the members of the cultures that do so suffer from it in quite palpable ways.

- Kornblith’s view that knowledge, like the structure of the atom, crosses cultural boundaries, then is at least as easily defended as the more culturally relativistic view of those who see knowledge in terms of social practice.