Chapter 5
Normativity and Natural Knowledge
Quine’s view of epistemic normativity

- We know that Quine called for epistemology to be subsumed within psychology. To those who insist that philosophy and science are distinct disciplines, this amounted to a death sentence.
- We also know that one of the primary challenges to Quinean naturalization is that it amounts to giving up on the normative dimension of epistemology.
- Kornblith notes that Quine actually does not dismiss normativity, he simply naturalizes it.
  - “For me normative epistemology is a branch of engineering…There is no question of ultimate value…it is a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction. The normative here, as elsewhere in engineering, becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter is expressed.
Quine’s account of normativity

- From the preceding passage you can infer Quine’s view of the function of normative language.
- Specifically, anytime we say (at least in epistemic contexts) that one is justified in believing X, this is just a shorthand way of saying something more complicated, namely: Believing X conduces to the attainment of epistemic goal Y.
- Kornblith notes that Quine still owes us an account of the significance of goal Y. How is it established? Is it universal? How do we know this?
The source of epistemic normativity: a semantic approach.

- Kornblith begins by considering Goldman’s semantic approach. Although Goldman is a naturalistic epistemologist, his approach to the source of normativity is decidedly a priori in nature.

- Goldman’s semantic approach- indeed any semantic approach- ultimately comes down to the claim that something just means something else.

- In this case, Goldman’s claim is that to say that for a belief to be justified just means that is formed by a truth-conducive process.
Critique of Goldman

- Goldman’s response to this is Quinean. You may recall from Kitcher’s essay Quine’s response to any attempt to end a discussion in semantic terms. Essentially he said that at any point in science we could simply decide that all the laws we currently hold are just true by definition. For example, we could just claim that to say that a creature is a human just means that it has a common ancestor with all other primates.

- But the semantic gambit doesn’t make our science better, it just makes it impervious to criticism.

- Kornblith identifies Steven Stich, a radical naturalist, as a person who does not agree with Goldman’s account of justification. Stich does not think the fact that belief has been formulated as a result of truth-conducive processes counts in its favor at all.

- More generally, however, Stich thinks the semantic move is bogus for much the same reason that Quine does. Stich puts the point in terms of cultural relativism. (Which he actually embraces.) Imagine another culture whose epistemic norms are very different than ours. They could make the semantic move just as easily as we could. This would suggest that there is simply no general account of justification to be had at all.
Epistemic norms and desire

- Stich’s view is that epistemic normativity is ultimately about the satisfaction of desire. Basically, then, our beliefs are justified to the extent that they are formulated on the basis of processes that conduce to the satisfaction of desire.
- Stich cashes out the concept of desire in terms of what people find intrinsically valuable, and he is happy to allow that different cultures may find different things intrinsically valuable.
- So while Stich’s theory of justification is general, it permits diversity with respect to the conditions under which one is justified. Given different intrinsic values, Marge and Mable may not be equally justified in believing X even if they are in otherwise identical cognitive states.
Debating epistemic goals

- Kornblith does not accept Stichean or Quinean relativism. He does not think that epistemic goals are simply stipulated. He thinks that it is possible to criticize epistemic goals.

- In other words, Kornblith thinks that we can and do have legitimate, meaningful debates concerning whether we should employ epistemic norms that are fundamentally truth-conducive, simplicity-conducive, survival-conducive, or whatever other value we might entertain.
Korblith’s critique of Stich

- Although Kornblith doesn’t approve of Stich’s relativism, his primary criticism of Stich’s view is that it does not provide a basis for distinguishing epistemic goals from others.

- The reason for this is just that Stich does not characterize justification in terms of the satisfaction of specific types of desire, but of desire generally. For Kornblith, to say that something is epistemically unjustified (rather than, say, morally unjustified) is to be committed to values that are epistemic in nature rather than moral in nature.

- So, for example, Kornblith thinks it is a failing of Stich’s perspective that it does not permit the possibility that there are things that one may be justified in believing on epistemic grounds, but which one is not justified in believing on moral grounds.

- Stich identifies basic intrinsic values like health, happiness, and the welfare of our children. But for Kornblith it seems that one might have, say, very good epistemic justification for believing that one of our children is uglier and stupider than the rest, but very good moral reasons for not believing that.

- The point here is just that any theory of normativity should be able to make sense of the distinction between epistemic, moral, and instrumental norms.
Hypothetical vs. categorical Imperatives

- From Kant’s ethics you may be familiar with the distinction between a hypothetical and a categorical imperative.
- A hypothetical imperative has the form:
  - If you desire x, then do y.
- A categorical imperative has the form:
  - Always do y.
- Kant argued that ethics has a categorical nature. Ethical theory should supply us with an absolute imperative and, moreover, that imperative should supply us with the means of selecting which hypothetical imperatives to live by.
- (For Kant, you may recall, the categorical imperative is to act only on those hypothetical imperatives that may be willed universal laws of nature.)
Hypothetical vs. categorical imperatives in epistemology

- Quine suggests that there are no categorical imperatives in naturalistic epistemology.
- In other words, we have no ultimate basis for claiming that one always ought to reason on the basis of truth conducive imperatives vs. survival conducive imperatives. All we can do is produce the most reliable methods of satisfying these given that is what we want to achieve.
- Kornblith is not satisfied with this way of looking at things, mostly because it does not capture the fact that philosophers really do seem to have substantial debates about what sort of epistemic values our reliabilist epistemologies ought to be aimed at.
- To his credit, Kornblith realizes that this is an appeal to intuition and should not be given a lot of weight. Philosophers may simply be confused about this. But he doesn’t think this is the case.
Section 5.4 may be a little hard to follow, so I’m going to try to sneak up on it from a different perspective.

In this section Kornblith is arguing against Stich, and anyone else who thinks that a functioning cognitive system might be based on something other than truth conduciveness. Perhaps, for example, a functioning cognitive system could be based on survival-conduciveness or happiness-conduciveness.

You may recall the following point that arises in Mill’s Utilitarianism. It is often objected to the theory of utility that people who use utilitarianism as a kind of moral calculus may thereby undermine their utilitarian goals.

For example, a jury is supposed to decide whether a defendant is innocent or guilty. In other words, it is charged with a determination of truth. But a jury might decide to base its decisions on considerations of utility instead. So, for example, it might decide that while the evidence is compelling that the cop fired without provocation, utility is not served by undermining our faith in the police. So they find the cop not guilty and a riot ensues.

Mill’s response to this sort of objection is that the theory of utility should not be used as a calculus for deciding what to do, but of evaluating outcomes. It actually maximizes utility to pursue truth, even when truth appears to be at odds with utility.
The same kind of argument may be made from an evolutionary perspective. Why should a creature pursue truth, or accurate representation of its environment, if the ultimate evolutionary criterion is reproductive fitness? Why not just pursue reproductive fitness itself?

As with utility, the answer may be that we are just a lot better at figuring out what is true than what it would be best (in terms of other criteria like utility or reproductive fitness) to believe is true. That is just a much more difficult calculation, one for which our likely error rate is going to overwhelm any potential benefit we may get from thinking in that way.

Better, in other words, to make truth calculations that are fairly reliable with respect to servicing other more fundamental values like utility or reproductive fitness, then to make very unreliable calculations concerning those values themselves.
You can take this argument a step further. Even though this way of looking at things literally identifies truth as something whose value may lie in the fact that it serves other more fundamental values, it may be that serving these other more fundamental values is best achieved if we think of truth as an intrinsic value, not an instrumental one.

An analogy: From a crass egoistic perspective, your own happiness is all that really matters, and it only rational to care about others if caring about others tends to be good for you. But it may be that what conduces most to your own happiness is to value the happiness of others intrinsically.

Of course, this could occasionally have some disastrous effects, but it still may be that for most people, most of the time, focusing on their own personal happiness is the single best way of preventing it.
So this is pretty much Kornblith’s argument with Stich, who claims that there is no objective basis for preferring a truth-conducive system to a happiness-conducive system. Stich, like Quine, would say that epistemologists are just scientists trying to help society achieve the things it cares about. It’s not for philosophers to prescribe one value over the other.

But Kornblith argues that we actually have more to say than that. We can show that cognitive systems that make happiness calculations actually tend to fare worse than cognitive systems that make truth calculations. So we can recommend truth-conducive systems universally, even to those who really only value truth as a means of producing happiness.