Chapter 6
What Philosophy Might Be
Summary of the position

- This final chapter is largely a summary of the position that Kornblith has staked out in this book. Essentially it comes down to two major points, one metaphysical, the other methodological.
  1. The metaphysical claim is that knowledge is a natural kind.
  2. The methodological claim is that epistemology is not the study of the concept of knowledge, but the study of knowledge as an empirical phenomenon.
Knowledge as a natural kind redux

- Kornblith notes that his view that epistemology is inquiry into knowledge as a natural kind is no different than the view that ethics is inquiry into morality as a natural kind.
- In both cases, what have appeared for centuries to be irreducibly normative inquiries are best interpreted as empirical ones.
  - Ethics: What way of living reliably conduces to human thriving?
  - Epistemology: What way of thinking reliably conduces to knowing?
- Kornblith notes that in both areas there is a certain form of scientific realism at work, one which is captured by the following basic principle: *The best explanation of improved predictive success is that the theories we use to make these predictions provide us a more accurate representation of the natural world.*
Conceptophobia?

- Kornblith here reiterates his claim that epistemology is an inquiry into the phenomenon of knowledge, not the concept of knowledge.
- Here I would suggest that he is really overstating the point a bit in order to combat non-naturalism.
- You may recall that in the first chapter Kornblith pointed out that philosophers have a regrettable tendency to think that empirical matters can be decided simply by thinking about the concepts involved.
- Because empirical matters can not be decided a priori, it is tempting to conclude with Kornblith that philosophers who have think that philosophy is the study of concepts are deeply misguided.
- However, it is important to understand that to be a card-carrying naturalist you do not really have to agree with Kornblith that philosophy is not the study of concepts.
An alternative to Kornblith

- A naturalist is not someone who believes that philosophy is not the study of concepts. Rather, a naturalist is someone who believes that the point of studying concepts is to contribute to our understanding of the natural world.
- It is, after all, an empirical and highly falsifiable claim that, at least sometimes, the logical analysis of concepts can improve our scientific theories.
- It is plausible that sometimes our attempt to gain empirical knowledge is being undermined by the use of vague, confused, or contradictory notions, and that the best way to ameliorate this condition is to think about the concepts themselves.
- On this way of looking at things we avoid rejecting all philosophy that seems aimed at conceptual analysis (i.e., the vast majority of philosophy) while preserving Kornblith’s fundamental point that the analysis of concepts is not an end in itself, and that there is no a priori stance from which to judge whether a concept has been correctly analyzed, since that is ultimately a matter of it’s value for science.
The autonomy of philosophy redux

- Of course, Kornblith does not believe that philosophy is an absolutely autonomous discipline, but he is still inclined to think that there is something different about it.
- His view is just that philosophy is best characterized by its normative concerns. It is, in other words, the branch of science that is specifically dedicated to improving upon the way that human beings think and behave.
- This is really a very traditional view, absent the claim that these improvements can be established a priori.
- But Kornblith notes an embarrassing problem, pointed out by Fumerton (p.173). Once we deny that a priori methods are sufficient for the normative aims of philosophy, it turns out that philosophers are incompetent to achieve their professed aims. In other words, if these concerns really are empirical, then philosophers still need to be trained in the relevant scientific disciplines, and they typically are not.
- Kornblith notes that this has been true in the past, but it has been changing. Today, for example, you can not be a philosopher of mind without studying cognitive science, and Kornblith commends this realization to the rest of philosophy as well.