

# *naturalism and rationality*

ent Greeks referred to as rational animals, and so, they identified a part of the human condition that curious and frustrated naturalists in a world of facts and figures can be described and analyzed using the methods of science; yet, as rationalists, we appear to contradict the empirical when we hold certain beliefs or when we make choices, judgments, and decisions. These features of our nature in addition open the door to a discussion about the content, focus, and the criteria for using the natural to describe persons and things. How does our understanding of what it means to be rational affect our knowledge of the world around us? And what special problems arise as we make our efforts to analyze the natural within a naturalistic framework?

a distinguished group was met at the State University of New York at Buffalo for their thoughts on some absorbing questions. Is this exciting collec-

Duncan MacIntosh

## Rationalizing Naturalism On Hilary Kornblith's "Naturalizing Rationality"

Peoples' fallibility seemingly allows Kornblith to counterexample the view that "one's own lights" are some of one's beliefs or self-aware procedures for belief formation; similarly, that they involve one's beliefs having certain properties, like coherence, or reliability. One can lack sufficient awareness of and control over these beliefs, procedures, and properties for them to constitute belief-formation's subjectively rational element. Thus neither the reliability, the coherence, nor the desired reliability or coherence of one's beliefs are unconditional features of subjective epistemic rationality. They belong to the external perspective on doxastic aptness. Instead, subjective rationality merely involves having one's beliefs regulated by the desire for truth. One need not actually have any true beliefs or make any licit inferences.

Some objections:

1. If fallibility respecting some condition falsifies any theory

This is a reconstruction of a partly extemporized talk. While I think it reproduces the spirit of my comments, it has benefited from subsequent thinking, and I hope, then, that it is clearer than it was when presented. I am grateful to Victoria McGeeer, Douglas Butler and Professor Kornblith himself for discussion of these issues, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the doctoral fellowship support I enjoyed during preparation of this commentary.

of the internal perspective featuring it, then likewise, surely, for Kornblith's. My beliefs can be regulated by desires I do not know I have—among them Kornblith's favorite, the desire for truth—and would not countenance if I did. How, then, would such beliefs have issued from my subjective sense of justification? Moreover, since I might not be authoritative on what desires I have, on whether I act accordingly, or on what conduct would serve them; and since I might be unable to get myself to act on them even if I do know them, how does my internal perspective essentially involve me intentionally acting in a way that is successfully regulated by a desire for truth?

Is it rational to desire the true? Internal or subjective rationality will be explained by relating it to that desire only if that question is an internal matter. It may not be. For how is it subjectively irresponsible or irrational to fail to value truth or regulate one's beliefs by the desire for it?

Other counterexamples (effectively externalizing the desire for truth): Suppose you believe I will give you all the truths if you will desire only the false. If you then desire the false, you are not epistemically rational according to Kornblith; but if you desire the true, your beliefs will not here be motivated by a desire for the true (at least not after your initial desire modification). Indeed, surely one can be a subjectively rational believer without having desires at all, and even desiring *not* to know—as when wanting to avoid acquiring information useful to an enemy in the event of capture. While busily guarding one's ignorance, through a slip-up in the telephone lines at the CIA office, one overhears the very information one was trying to avoid. Surely, in spite of this, it might be (epistemically) rational by one's lights to believe that information. So the desire requirement seems not unconditional.

2. I think subjective rationality requires greater epistemic competence than Kornblith requires. He requires beliefs to be regulated by a desire for the truth, but not necessarily for coherence (even though coherence is a necessary property of truth). Now, while one can desire something without knowing all its properties, I do not think one is *regulated* by it unless *sufficiently* informed on the object for it to be *identified* as the object of one's desire. If I believe that the truth is the *incoherent*, for instance, and then seek it out, how does a desire for the true operate here at all? My beliefs would effectively be regulated by a desire for the

false, though not obviously irrationally. Yet without *some* beliefs, desires have no effect at all: they cannot guide, because they are inert as motivators except in belief-desire complexes. Thus, perhaps one cannot desire truth or be regulated by that desire until one knows enough about it that desiring it could be distinguished from desiring anything else.

Moreover, in evaluating someone's credal rationality and epistemic responsibility, it must first make sense to attribute beliefs to him; and while I cannot defend this here, many people (e.g., Donald Davidson) see no sense in ascribing beliefs systematically false, incoherent, or unjustified. Thus from the conditions on the felicity of belief-imputations derive the constraints of general doxastic soundness and inferential licitness that Kornblith eschews as constitutive of subjective rationality.

Another problem: Responsibility entails awareness and approval. Generally, we cannot hold you responsible, epistemically or otherwise, for beliefs you merely think you have. Apparently, then, a minimal epistemic competence (a requirement of some true beliefs and licit inferences) is needed for epistemic responsibility and subjective rationality.

3. By (1) above, even desires would have to be external matters in the limit of Kornblith's standard. But then, perhaps *nothing* remains as the internal perspective. To some, this may not be an unwelcome conclusion. The skeptics hold that there is no justification for any belief, while ultra-naturalists would take the failure of the internal as part of the happy and overdue fall of folk psychology, epistemology, and semantics. There are no propositions, so no beliefs as attitudes toward them, so *nothing* to be justified (or not).

Moderates might say that only the external remains to epistemology. We can ask what inferences are objectively licit, but knowers may never have subjective justification, though they may form beliefs by reliable processes, and though objectively speaking, various inferences are mandated.

This I think is premature and a seriously faulted doctrine, for I think "ought" locutions make sense only when conceived as subject-directed and executable in acts with subjective antecedents as reasons. An argument may be sound, a proposition well-warranted, but to say that objectively one ought to believe accordingly is presumably to assert more. What work is "ought" doing in these

cases? It is *enjoining* beliefs or asserting their *aptness*.

Now, in ethics (the source of Kornblith's analogy), there are constraints on what it can be true that one ought to do. It must be both doable ("ought" implies "can"), and something that would be an act by the concept of act in the circumstances. Acts are behaviors issuing from reasons. Complete reasons for acting are belief-desire complexes. One is only acting if one is aware of and has some pro-attitude to one's behavior and if the behavior would not have happened except given the former two conditions. Similarly, in epistemology, if I ought to believe something, I must be able to believe it in result of the right antecedent beliefs and desires. A desire is rationally acquired if it follows by a practical syllogism from one's antecedent desires plus background beliefs, or plus appropriately acquired new beliefs. A belief is rationally acquired if arrived at by a deduction from one's antecedent beliefs and/or by its seeming true in the situation given one's background beliefs. Does this not limit enjoynable acts and beliefs by conditions too contingent and subjective to have analyzed the objective and ideal nature of the enjoynment? No. Rather, the objective sense of ought pertains to what *ideal* agents ought to do under ideal conditions, and to what *ideal* knowers ought to believe under ideal conditions for knowledge. Thus, were I so powerful as to be able to cure cancer, then I ought to, and were I so good at finding things out that I would find a certain truth obvious while in a certain evidential predicament, then I ought to believe it when in that predicament. Indeed, these principles may hold objectively. (Though, if so, I do not think anyone yet knows why.)

Perhaps an ideal epistemic agent is one who can milk a situation of all its absolute informational content (Fred Dretske's notion); who can appreciate all its nomic and deductive associations. Similarly, epistemically ideal conditions for a fact might be ones from which an ideal epistemic agent could get knowledge of it. But real people may be in less favorable conditions, or have less efficient (but perhaps no less rational) epistemic faculties, and what *they* ought to believe is commensurately diminished.

This leaves the so-called objective ought still contingent on conditions varying with the agent and his circumstances, but the situation is no worse, surely, than in ethics, even if there are objective, universal moral principles categorically enjoynable. No moral principle holds in all cases—only where there is no excuse

for not meeting its standard. One need only cure the world of cancer if one can. Likewise, one must believe *p* only if one can.

Well, if the objective ought is just that holding of ideal agents and epistemic subjects in ideal evidential circumstances, strictly speaking, there is no external ought. Someone who cannot believe the truth (because lacking the subjective justifications needed to make acquiring the belief an act) need not, likewise, even the ideal epistemic agent need not believe the truth without motivating reasons for him to believe it given his informational predicament. For even were he somehow to acquire the enjoined belief, his believing would not properly constitute a responsible act; would not be a belief acquired as a result of his being an epistemically responsible agent. To enjoin having it would be to enjoin one not to be an agent—to prescribe a contradiction.

So it remains, then, to give an account of epistemic subjectivity—of the internal—even in the so-called objective case, since it proves simply a more ideal instance of the subjective case for ordinary epistemic agents.

If (per Davidson) beliefs must generally be accounted reliable to be attributed at all, and if (per me) some degree of epistemic competence is needed for epistemic agency and felicitous doxastic advising, the subjective or internal may just be the faculty of belief-formation itself. It would consist of brute capacities to get truths by perception and make appropriate inferences, and of yet other beliefs and belief-formation processes generated in conjectures over those perceptions and testable in subsequent ones. Thus, one's subjective perspective is the view on truth afforded one by one's brute capacities augmented by one's evolving theories.

What, then, is the status of Kornblith's counterexamples? They are not, as he thinks, proofs of the doxastic contentlessness of the internal perspective on truth. They simply illustrate occasional (i.e., nonsystematic) *failures* of doxastic faculties and processes. They do not locate the features of which they are failures in the exclusively external.

This is especially welcome when we think to what we were driven by Kornblith's arguments. Their unshining application left no subjectivity in epistemology. What, then, of that quotidian phenomenon of things *seeming* thus and so to people? Perhaps the very existence of opinion is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Kornblith's line.