

Natural Authority

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Since this entry is my first formal participation within the SERRC, I thought it would be a good opportunity to present a more in depth explanation of my PhD research. As a starting standpoint I would like to draw from the previous entries of the section at hand, particularly Adam Riggo's account of the tendency within the discipline of philosophy to reject "naturalist" understandings of knowledge in favour of views that posit "knowledge as absolute" and "reason as pure". Being first and foremost a lawyer (or at least a student of norms) my interest in social epistemology stems from an interest in social metaphysics, specifically the metaphysics of social norms.

I understand social epistemology, at least the naturalist version developed by Steve Fuller, as revolving around the underlying conflict pointed out by Riggo's account; namely, what seems to be a unassailable incompatibility between the metaphysical commitments of naturalism and normativity. Commonly labelled the "naturalistic fallacy", the incompatibility would seem to be more obvious than the way in which is normally treated: in a normative relationship, that which norms would seem to be necessarily above that which is subject to the norm at hand. In other words, the source of authority would seem to be necessarily located at a meta-domain. Normativity understood thusly, as supra-subordination, would seem to be incompatible with naturalism's commitment to metaphysical monism.

My research, which draws directly from Fuller's negative account as well as many aspects of his positive position, is an ambitious attempt to propose a new manner of understanding normativity, one compatible and continuous with naturalism. The problem I identify with all previous attempts (including Fuller's), is the use of what could be described as the standard "logic of identity" (and its consequent "Being" on account of "characteristics" proper to themselves, in opposition to a "logic of difference"¹, in which everything "Is" in opposition to that which it "Is Not".

A normative philosophy developed through the use of a logic (or a metaphysics) of identity cannot but insist in the identification of stable, objective and/or universal source of authority that inevitably transcends that which it will norm (including the account from whence it stems). This is then as the normative standpoint to value, judge or prescribe "nature". For example, in the case in which the source of authority is an objective and cognitively independent "external" environment all sorts of realisms follow; when it is internal, this is characteristics of the "observer", "cognizer", etc, one may find different types of normative idealism or transcendental phenomenologies. Finally, one may also find ethical or socio-ethical transcendentalisms, which commonly serve as the sources for all political theories and philosophies as well as Fuller and Joseph Rouse's political epistemologies.

The only set of research programs that pursue a stance continuous with G. Spencer Brown's logic of difference is that which is collectively labelled as Radical

¹ As described by George Spencer Brown (1969) in "Laws of Form".

Constructivism and includes Heinz Von Foester's (2003) "second order cybernetics", Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's (1980, 1992) "autopoietic biology", "radical embodied cognition" (Varela et al. 1991, Chemero 2009, Gallaguer 2005) and Ernst Von Glasserfeld's "constructivist theory of knowing".

Within all this research cognition and all cognitive phenomena, including "knowledge" is understood to be a product of a cognitive agent's experience of the difference between itself and the "environment". For all practical purposes "reality" is understood as the specific relationship between an observer and an environment, in the sense that the both parts of the equation "specify each other".

Interestingly so, this leads to a view of "knowledge" that is relativistic, but not arbitrary. This is, the situational dependence of cognition both determines and constrains the agent's cognition. An agent can, therefore, only influence but not determine his cognitive situatedness at will. And so, cognitive agents may experience different realities, different "phenomenologies", but they do not directly control them: they are all equally constrained by their situation.

Drawing on the above my research attempts to bring forth three innovative theoretical proposals.

1) The first of these is the concept of "horizontal normativity", which is an extended application of what Von Glasserfeld (1994) calls the principle of hermeneutics, or the notion that the cognitive authority of a determined statement stems from the receiver. In other words, the assumption that cognitive agents are incapable of directly altering their cognitive situatedness at will leads to doxastic involuntarism ², which means that cognitive agents neither choose their beliefs nor the cognitive authority they award to the plethora of "information" they come across with. This doesn't mean however, that cognitive agents are not capable of being dishonest, and so even though after reading an article a determined academic might be involuntarily drawn into doubt in regards to his own positions, he is capable of not acknowledging this, and furthermore, arguing in the contrary.

2) The second proposal is that of naturalist knowledge, which is an application of "horizontal normativity". The main problematic of horizontal normativity when proposed as the principle of hermeneutics is that it leads to widespread relativism that doesn't provide much ground for a normative social epistemology or political theory. As a result, any and all (honest) cognitive positions are equally valid. This leaves all deontological or social epistemological prescriptions futile. Furthermore "knowledge" is not differentiated from any other cognitive phenomena since it is equated to mere cognitive situatedness. For example, within the bounds of radical constructivism one might argue that an ant's "knowledge" of his environment allows it to distinguish sustenance from threat, and that

² The position that "[cognitive agents] lack direct voluntary control over beliefs· and that they "have only a rather weak degree of 'long range' voluntary control over (only) some of [their] beliefs" (Alston 1988: 260). As an example, William Alston (1988) request the reader to attempt to voluntarily believe that the USA is still a colony of Great Britain (Ibidem).

a scientist's "knowledge" of physics and engineering allows him to design a rocket, and it would seem that we are speaking of the same phenomenon. I argue, however, that we are not, and that in the first case we are speaking of mere cognitive situatedness or "knowledge in *latu sensu*", whilst in the second case we are speaking of "cultural knowledge" or "knowledge in *strictu sensu*". This is, in the second case, we are also speaking of cognitive situatedness, but differently than in the first case, the necessary cognitive conditions that allowed for the pragmatic affordances of the situatedness at hand (namely the capacity of action or description that it provides) were not, in any way, genetically determined: the agent in question had to necessarily acquire them through communication with his biological peers. In other words, the second use of the term "knowledge" assumes what is commonly termed as "culture".

Radical constructivism argues that all cognitive phenomena are the result of change (specifically structural change within an organism). In order to maintain oneself within the boundaries of radical constructivism, one could say then that the distinguishing characteristic of "knowledge" in *strictu sensu*, is that the change from whence these specific types of cognitive situations resulted was necessarily brought upon through communication. "*Knowledge in this sense is any communication that has the capacity to (involuntarily) alter cognitive situatedness.*"

As long as human's reproduce and the cognitive structure of new generations requires to be altered through communication, all "culture" can be equated with "knowledge". "Knowledge" however, is dependant on the receiver and therefore if a determined receiver is incapable of "believing" his interpretation of a determined communication (such as there is a dragon in the ceiling), this communication will not constitute knowledge. Similarly, if within a community of scientists a determined concept is considered to be "known" by every member, its communication is redundant, and therefore for that community this would also not count as "knowledge". Finally, in the same community those cognitive agents whose have the capacity to alter more limits of certainty are the ones whose limits of certainty are the least altered by others. In other words these are the people who "know" more: to "know" means to have the capacity to alter cognitive situatedness in others.

Through the use of horizontal normativity, my definition of "knowledge" (and of authority for that matter) could be considered valid. This is, because since "knowledge" is communication that has the capacity to change cognitive situatedness, I do not need to assume a source of authority that transcends the communication between my reader (you) and myself. If this communication, has, in any way changed the reader's (your) relationship between certainty and doubt (what I call the "limit of certainty") he (you) has (have) already provided my account with cognitive authority and all I can do is ask him (you) to acknowledge this.

3) The third proposal is a normative social theory that has the consequences of both a social epistemology and a political theory. These consequences take place from the premises that necessarily obtain from understanding knowledge as proposed.

- The first of these is the concept of natural authority, or the capacity of a determined individual to change limits of certainty.

- The second is that all normative prescriptions that dictate that certain types of communication that may lead to change are invalid, are invalid themselves.
- The premises also lead to an “ideal” organization for society based on its capacity to produce knowledge and innovation (in other words, “progress”): this is a society in which all communication that has the capacity to change limits of certainty is able to do so without interference.

- Finally, the source of this possible interference can also be identified. If one considers that a determined agent has “come up with an idea”, or in other words has acquired natural authority, or the capacity to change limits of certainty, and wishes to benefit socially from this acquired capacity one can then assume that the agent in question will have two incentives:
 - a) Communicate, since this is the only way he will be able to benefit. Communication would be in the form of “code” or by producing and distributing his “invention”.

 - b) Maintain the benefits once communication has eliminated his capacity to change limits of certainty in others. As limits in certainty are changed in others his communication begins to acquire redundancy and as soon as others are able to replicate the benefits of his “knowledge” his “natural authority” is lost. He therefore also has the incentive to maintain authority, or power over others once this has occurred, and use the initial advantage provided by his “discovery” to do so.

If organized community (the “state” or its successor) wishes to pursue policy conducive toward “progress” (understood as the proliferation of new ways to solve and transform reality), it will implement policies that seek to promote the unbounded communication of all positions capable of changing limits of certainty, whilst attempting to eliminate all attempts by individuals to maintain their intermediation positions once this is redundant. This can also be seen as a struggle between the market and property in capitalist societies. Interestingly, all of these proposals that obtain directly from the premises of my definitions of “authority” and “knowledge” are similar and continuous with other attempts at naturalist epistemology, especially Steve Fuller’s.

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