

Kasavin on Social Epistemology and Naturalism: A Critical Reply
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In his richly detailed, incisive paper, Ilya Kasavin studies the compatibility between "social epistemology" and "naturalism" in asking: can there be a naturalized form of social epistemology? His answer seems to be that a weak form of social epistemology is independent of context.

Neither "social epistemology" nor "naturalism" is a natural kind nor cuts reality at the joints as it were. Each presents a proposed solution to the cognitive problem after the decline of Kant's transcendental maneuver. The latter approach is at least partly a reaction to Hume, or more precisely to Humean naturalism. Since Hume can be described as a naturalist, post-Kantian naturalism represents a qualified return to a form of an earlier position after Kant's intervention in the debate. In the case of social epistemology, we are confronted with the consequences of the post-Kantian German idealist transformation of the critical philosophy in a social and historical direction beginning as soon as Fichte.

Kasavin depicts philosophy as relying on science, hence as interdisciplinary. His approach is generally anti-Kantian in that Kant, in distantly following Plato, denies that the sciences are self-justifying in suggesting their cognitive claims are grounded in philosophy. Like Hegel and certain other post-Kantians. Kasavin reverses this perspective in suggesting that philosophy does not ground the sciences, which in turn grounds philosophy.

Kasavin asks: does interdisciplinarity present a "danger" for philosophy? He perceives two possible problems: the so-called naturalistic ideological temptation to substitute epistemology for a particular science, or again the danger of eclecticism. According to Kasavin, the proper role of philosophy lies in analyzing and in contextualizing. For Kasavin, philosophy has changed over time from a negative to a positive view of the relation of philosophy to context.

This claim obviously depends upon the authority consulted. Kant, for instance, adopts a resolutely anti-contextual approach to the philosophical subject, which functions as a mere placeholder invoked to complete the theory. He can be understood as foreseeing and attempting to counter psychologism, or the supposed conflation between psychological and logical approaches to cognition. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant several times objects to Locke's so-called physiologism. A similar concern is central for Husserl. Others, for instance Hegel, Fichte, or Heidegger, take a more contextual approach to the subject.

Kasavin advances four views of context. The hermeneutical approach is related to the so-called linguistic turn in Gadamer and others but not to Rorty. The analytic view of context is associated with the names of Hume, Moore and Wittgenstein, leading to

conflict between skepticism, commonsense and contextualism. Buehler discusses context and Gestaltism. There is also the problem of context in social anthropology and linguistics.

Kasavin, who reasonably points out that there are many types of context, infers that the so-called contextual becomes a secondary phenomenon. He holds there cannot be a general theory of context. He strives to undermine the importance of context on the grounds that, as he asserts, knowledge is undetermined by, hence independent of, context. In adopting a so-called weak, or non-classical view of social epistemology, he claims that the result, or so-called discourse, is not bounded, hence is not contextual in principle.

In my view, the two most important aspects of the paper are: (1) the claim that context or again contextualism is problematic, and (2) the further claim that there is a form of unbounded discourse that, hence, is not contextually limited. The two claims are related. It is because contextualism cannot be described in unproblematic fashion that it seems plausible to claim that cognitive claims can dispense with it.

We can start by trying to define our terms. "Naturalism" is understood in many ways. If it is understood against the background of the philosophical tradition, it will be useful to grasp it as a form of anti-Kantianism, hence, since Hume can be understood as a naturalist, as a return beyond Kant to a form of the Humean approach that Kant refutes and at least in principle supplants in the critical philosophy. For purposes of this paper I will understand Kantianism as an approach illustrated the critical philosophy, an approach that reaches its peak in the idea of a transcendental deduction. The transcendental deduction is intended as a justification of claims to know on, as the name suggests, transcendental grounds. At a minimum that means identifying the so-called single possible analysis of the claim to know, as Kant claims to identify the single possible approach to theory of knowledge in the critical philosophy.

Naturalism is an extreme form of contextualism in which nature or the whole of nature is the context. Naturalism differs from social epistemology in that there is in principle no social aspect. "Social" refers to the dimension that depends on the human in all its forms. A familiar instance is provided by various forms of "psychologism," or the view that claims to know are basically psychological. Husserl, following Kant, strongly rejects psychologism. In our time perhaps the most significant proponent of psychologism is Quine, who famously argues that epistemology is a branch of psychology.¹

Naturalized epistemology is not any single view but rather a collection of related views recommending various relations of epistemology to natural science. Naturalism is raised as a problem very early in the tradition. In the *Cratylus*, where a naturalist view of naming is opposed to a conventionalist view, Socrates is sometimes understood to argue

¹ See "Epistemology Naturalized," In W. V. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, 75.

against naturalism, which accords with the Platonic view of forms.² Later views of naturalism are very diverse, running, say, from Hume, who is sometimes understood as a naturalist, hence as a forerunner of later analytic naturalism, to Quine. In "Epistemology Naturalized," Quine recommends replacing normative epistemology with empirical psychology understood as a chapter of empirical science. According to Quine, epistemology concerns the foundations of science, but efforts to derive statements about the world from statements about sensation fail. He has in mind Carnap's rational reconstruction through his so-called protocol theory. Quine, who accepts Neurath's critique of the Carnapian protocol theory as decisive, agrees with the latter that claims to know cannot be founded in a Cartesian sense. In its place, he recommends absorbing epistemology into psychology. The result is to take knowledge to be instances of belief resulting from mere conventions.

One of the more prominent contemporary forms of naturalism is materialism, which is sometimes understood as a complete description of the world in physical terms. Kripke, for instance, defines this tendency as follows: "Materialism, I think, must hold that a physical description of the world is a complete description of it, that any mental facts are 'ontologically dependent' on physical facts in the straightforward sense of following from them by necessity. No [identity] theorist seems to me to have made a convincing argument against the intuitive view that this is not the case."³

Hume is a philosophical naturalist. Kant's answer to naturalism lies in transcendental constructivism. Kant responds to Hume's naturalism on the transcendental plane while inconsistently maintaining empirical causation. Post-Kantian German idealism transforms Kantian transcendentalism into social contextualism through a series of steps, which need not be described here, running through Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.

The relationship of Kant's position to Hume's position is instructive. Hume provides a phenomenological description of the contents of consciousness, but Kant analyzes the possibility of knowledge. The transcendental approach to philosophy seems now to be questionable. It is not clear if the critical philosophy in fact illustrates or correctly illustrates his transcendental approach. In Kant's wake it is likely that there has never been another transcendental philosophy. The transcendental approach was always controversial, including among Kant's initial readers. Hume nearly immediately objected that reason cannot sit in judgment on itself. Fichte, who claims transcendental philosophical status is, is not, as he pretends, a seamless Kantian, but rather someone who deeply revises the critical philosophy. Today it no longer seems plausible to argue on the transcendental plane. Yet naturalism, which is sometimes regarded as an alternative to transcendentalism, and which is very popular, especially in analytic circles, is also questionable. Thus it seems insufficient merely to describe nature or the natural in order to justify cognitive claims. Naturalism, which limits claims to know to the so-called natural world, leads to scientism, which is as problematic as what it rejects. Husserl, for instance, notes that in virtue of what he calls objectivism, science is unable to examine its

² See Francesco Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

³ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1980, 155.

own cognitive claims on the scientific plane. In other words, and despite its enormous achievements, science in at least that sense depends on philosophy.

The difficulty can be put in terms of Kant's distinction between questions of fact and right. In the term *quid juris*, he stresses the need to justify claims to know. Naturalism, which arises out of the revolt against the critical philosophy, lacks this concern with epistemological justification in relying on what Kant calls the *quid facti*. Yet this only postpones the difficulty since it needs to be shown how the latter approach can justify its claims to know. To take an example, the result of Kant's discussion, which begins with a representational approach, is to disqualify it.

The problem lies in claiming that cognitive claims are objective, for instance in grasping the mind-independent real. Kant, who distinguishes between representational and constructivist approaches to knowledge, formulates a representational approach as early as the Herz letter (1772), an approach he apparently later abandons in favor of constructivism. His reason, which lies at the heart of his Copernican revolution, is that we cannot reliably claim to know the mind-independent external world, since we can only reliably claim to know what we in some sense construct, make, or otherwise produce as a condition of knowledge.

The various forms of post-Kantian naturalism all rely on different ways of representing the world. Since they accept Kantian representationalism, they cannot avoid the difficulty of how to demonstrate the real conditions of knowing what they claim to know. Though in many ways naturalism is anti-Kantian, it remains Kantian in its reliance on the possibility of correctly representing the world. Yet since neither Kant nor anyone else has ever successfully shown how to represent the world as it is, I conclude that naturalism also fails in this task. Hence, whatever other virtues it may have, it fails as an approach to theory of knowledge.

Kant's difficulty helps us to understand the theme Kasavin takes up in his paper. Kant, who is a dualist, describes the choice as either freedom, which he depicts as a condition of morality or its opposite in strict determinism. In fact, neither alternative describes the human situation in which one is free only to the extent one is not determined. I agree with Kasavin that context is indeed problematic. Yet I would like to resist the effort either to free cognitive claims from context or, on the contrary, to absorb the former into the latter. I believe we are never wholly free, nor ever wholly determined. The proper relationship seems to me to be a kind of constitutive tension that can never be overcome and which must be construed not in general but rather on a case-by-case basis in order to understand the weight of the particular cognitive claim.

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