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A HUMEAN INSIGHT INTO THE EPISTEMIC NORMATIVITY OF THE BELIEF IN THE SELF

abstract

Baker (2013) showcases the complexity of responses on both sides of the debate concerning the ontological status of the first-person perspective. This paper seeks to orientate the debate about the first person perspective away from an existence problem and back to a justified belief problem. It is argued that the account of our belief in the self, which emerges from Hume's descriptive epistemology, opens up the possibility of attributing a form of non-evidential justification to belief in selves.

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In her book *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* Lynne Rudder Baker (2013) surveys both reductive and non-reductive versions of naturalism concluding that none of these versions of naturalism recognises first-person properties in their ontological inventory of what exists. Furthermore, she argues that the attempts to naturalise these properties through reduction or elimination fail. A first-person perspective is a conceptual capacity to attribute first-person references to ourselves. For Baker it is this capacity to think of ourselves in this first-personal way that distinguishes us persons from other beings. Baker argues that this capacity to form complex first-person thoughts has implications for a naturalistic ontology. For example, in reducing cognitive first-person perspective to a complex phenomenal first-person perspective naturalist thinkers such as Metzinger (2004) find no place for the subjects of experience in their ontology. On this view, the belief that a self carries out the act of cognitive self-reference is not epistemically justified. Baker's book showcases the ingenuity and the complexity of responses on both sides of the debate concerning the ontological status of the first-person perspective. While recognising the value of such debates, this paper seeks to advance a different approach to the understanding of the human capacity of generating self-concept beliefs. Instead of approaching the problem through the confines of ontological naturalism, it will be argued that naturalism within epistemology provides the resources to facilitate the affirmation of belief in the self.

In Section One, drawing on elements of Hume's descriptive account of belief formation, it will be demonstrated that belief in the self belongs to a class of beliefs called 'natural beliefs'. This class of beliefs contains beliefs that are universal and unavoidable features of how we engage in the world. Descriptive accounts, which explain our capacity to think of ourselves in this first-personal way, can provide us with explanation, even with instrumental justification, but have widely been thought to fall far short of anything resembling epistemic justification[1]. Baker, for example, sees no philosophical relevance in appealing to descriptive accounts of the mechanisms underlying the first-person perspective. Even if the sub-personal sciences can provide us with knowledge about the mechanisms

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1 The kind of epistemic justification appropriate within a naturalised epistemological landscape is an issue of considerable contention. Given the difficulties in merging the descriptive with the prescriptive, many contemporary naturalists are willing to abandon the idea that there are any epistemic norms (See Papineau 1993; Churchland 1995; Knowles 2003).

underlying the first-person perspective, Baker strongly rejects the idea that knowledge of such mechanisms can supplant or replace knowledge of the phenomena that they make possible. Section Two seeks to show that in connecting mechanisms to justification, the descriptive account provided in Section One opens up new paths to re-evaluate the claim that the belief that a self/person carries out the act of cognitive self-reference is not epistemically justified. Specifically, it will be argued that the account of our belief in the self, which emerges from Hume's descriptive epistemology, opens up the possibility of attributing a form of non-evidential justification to this belief. This sets aside the ontological question and settles instead for a naturalised epistemic justification of our belief in the self.

1. Hume's Descriptive Insight into Belief in the Self

Since for many an ontological worldview lies at the heart of naturalism's philosophical project, it is not surprising that the debate concerning the first-person perspective is played out in terms of naturalistic ontology. Yet the stated goal of this paper is to orientate the debate about the first-person perspective and its implications away from the existence problem and back to a justified belief problem. Kornblith (1985) emphasises that the naturalistic approach to epistemology marks itself out from the traditional view by insisting that the question 'How ought we to arrive at our beliefs?' cannot be answered independently of the question 'How do we arrive at our beliefs?'[2]. If we place this commitment at the heart of our investigations into the first-person perspective we will see that it is possible to open up new pathways for justifying our belief in the self. In turning away from ontology we can still contribute to discussions about the first-person perspective. The prize is no longer the ontological trophy of an affirmative existence claim but rather an epistemological award of the status of justified belief. As we will see, some elements of Hume's descriptive account of belief formation provide insights into the nature of belief in the self. In opening the floodgates to naturalist readings of Hume, Kemp Smith argued that the traditional sceptical interpretation of Hume overlooked what was basic to Hume's positive philosophical achievement, namely a new doctrine of 'Natural Belief'. Though Hume never used the expression 'natural belief', there is general agreement that such a class of entities exists for Hume, and discussion of them has become central to those who consider Hume's main concern to be the revelation of non-intellectual resources, located within our human nature, which enable us to interpret and respond to our experience (Garrett 1997; Kemp Smith 1983; Stroud 1977; Strawson 1989).

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2 For example the requirement of total evidence cannot be implemented given our capacities for information processing (see Baç 2007).

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Natural belief in Kemp Smiths' strict sense is a belief which is not supported by evidence or philosophical argument, is determined by psychological propensities of human nature, and is irresistible. Kemp Smith gives the following set of natural beliefs: belief in the body, in causal action, in the identity or unity of the self and in the external world. These phenomena exposed by Hume, are not the product of reasoning, they are unavoidable, universally held, and necessary as a precondition of action (McCormick 1993, p. 106). They cannot be justified rationally but are impossible to give up; no amount of reasoning can eliminate them.

It is not simply that they are beliefs which are immediate and unreflective, since this would only mark them out from those beliefs that are based on reflection. We have many unreflective beliefs that are best classed as irrational beliefs. What marks out 'natural beliefs' is that they are unavoidable and universal. But in what sense are natural beliefs unavoidable and universal? Gaskin explains what it means for a belief to be unavoidable in terms of the belief being "a necessary per-condition of action" (Gaskin 1974, p. 286). Emphasising Hume's claim that such beliefs are "inseparable from the species", McCormick (1993) characterised the universality criterion in terms of those beliefs "which *necessarily* arise given the kind of creatures we are" (McCormick 1993, p. 107). It is clear that the vast majority of beliefs will fail to satisfy these stringent criteria. Indeed, most would not satisfy one of them, and as a result the set of beliefs which satisfies the criteria for being 'natural' is extremely small. Although this small group of beliefs is not the result of a conscious rational assessment of evidence, common experience reveals that they cannot be dislodged except in brief moments of "philosophical melancholy and delirium" (T 175; T1.4.7.9; SBN 269)[3]. But Hume explains that this is not enough to discount them as universal and unavoidable. Hume's work famously demonstrated that it is possible to doubt the existence of the external world when one is engaged in deep reflection. However, Hume argues that it is impossible for this doubt to last and that this is why no amount of philosophy can entirely eradicate the belief. He calls for us to see these phenomena as instinctual features of our being which are "inseparable from human nature, and inherent in our frame and constitution" (T 371; T 3.3.1.17; SBN 583) and as such they are indispensable despite their lack of rational grounds.

Hume himself never used the term 'natural beliefs' to refer to the small

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3   Abbreviations used for works by David Hume:
   - T   *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2011), D. Fate Norton, M.J. Norton (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford.
   - EHU   *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (2006),T.L. Beauchamp (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford.

number of unavoidable, indispensable and irresistible mental features which he discusses. However, at key points in his texts, when he deals with the phenomena which commentators have termed 'natural beliefs', Hume chooses to use the term 'natural instincts'[4].

> It seems evident, that men are carried, by a *natural instinct* or prepossession, to repose faith in their senses [...] (EHU 113; EHU 12.1.7; SBN 151; my italics).
> There is a great difference betwixt such opinions as we form after a calm and profound reflection, and such as we embrace by a kind of *instinct or natural* impulse, on account of their suitableness and conformity to the mind. (T 142; T1.4.2.51; SBN 214; my italics).

In regularly referring to 'natural instincts', Hume continually highlights the innate primacy of the phenomena to which he is referring. We are asked to let go off the idea that these phenomena are beliefs and accept them in their true form as "a species of natural instinct, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able either to produce or prevent" (EHU 39; EHU 5.1.8; SBN 47).

What Hume has revealed are universal, unavoidable instincts in accordance with which all experience is processed. That I operate in the world as if I am a continuous and distinct person, is not the consequence of any belief which I affirm. Rather, it is a result of universal, unavoidable capacities to which my humanity binds me. It is a fundamental component of how we operate in the world and of how we form beliefs. We have the instinctual capacity of forming beliefs about the self, and this capacity is constitutive and regulative of the way in which we think about ourselves and about the world. Although the findings of Hume's descriptive account identify natural beliefs to be non-rational, to call these beliefs either irrational or unreasonable is problematic given that they are indispensable for human action.

The descriptive account of mechanism which Hume is engaged with would today be the remit of the cognitive scientist; indeed Fodor describes Hume's *Treatise* as "the foundational document of cognitive science" (Fodor 2003, p. 134). Such descriptive accounts are seen as having no bearing on the philosophical discussions of the first-person perspective. The reason for this is clearly stated by Baker (2013) when she characterises the interest of the cognitive scientists in the first-person perspective as consisting not in eliminating or reducing it but in ascertaining its reliability as a

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4   I have discussed this shift from belief to instinct in relation to causal belief in Campbell 2006.

cognitive faculty. Regardless of the outcome of such an assessment these investigations cannot show how impersonal science can accommodate it. Baker has indicated that her concern is upstream from such psychological and epistemological matters. But Hume's descriptive account here is not concerned with the contents of our inner lives, or with how reliable we are in reporting our reasons for thinking as we do. We will see in Section Two how the descriptive findings impact on the normative options we can appeal to. In identifying universal and unavoidable aspects of how we engage in the world, Hume's descriptive account of belief formation points to psychological and epistemological matters which are central to the question of 'Under what condition can we have beliefs about our beliefs at all?'. However, Hume's main concern is not what is required for us to have self-concept beliefs, but rather, given that we universally and unavoidably do have them, what are the implications for epistemic norm building? How are we to get from the descriptive findings of an investigation into belief generation to normative recommendations? This will be explored in the following section.

2. Normative Recommendations

In order to carry any kind of force, a normative philosophy needs to be based on the realities of how human beings do in fact operate in the world. That I universally and unavoidably operate in the world as if I was a self has implications for the normative status of the belief in the self. There is a real sense in which a description of our cognitive abilities is essential to establish any genuine epistemic norm. Harold I. Brown, in his article "Psychology, Naturalized Epistemology and Rationality", characterised the danger of discarding such descriptive findings as follows:

> If we attempt to proceed *a priori* we may well end up with norms that have no legitimate force for human beings because they make demands on us that we cannot possibly fulfill. In other words, we need an account of the *appropriate epistemic norms* for human beings; an account of what is normatively rational, requires a prior account of what is rational in the descriptive sense – an account of what cognitive abilities human beings have available (Brown 1996, p. 20).

According to Hume, natural beliefs are universal unavoidable features of how we operate in the world; as such, any account of appropriate epistemic norms must incorporate them. As a specific feature of human beings, these natural beliefs determine how we pursue the epistemologist's tasks. If we attempt to construct norms in a vacuum, disregarding such permanent

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and irresistible aspects of how we engage in the world, then the norms we establish will have no import for human beings. Goldman also makes it clear that cognitive science is relevant to certain epistemological questions, stating that "to the extent that human epistemic attainments critically depend on human cognitive endowments, those endowments are relevant to epistemology" (Goldman 2002, p. 146). In the introduction to the *Treatise* Hume goes further, emphasising the importance of providing a 'science of man', since there is no question of any importance which "can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science" (T 4; T Intro; SBN xvi). We cannot insulate our understanding of the justification of our belief in selves from the implications of answers to the question 'How do we arrive at our beliefs?'. The effect of identifying universal and unavoidable features of how we engage in the world must ripple out into how we form normative theories in this area. As Brown states, "epistemic norms that are based on a particular account of our cognitive abilities become suspect if that account is rejected, and norms that require us to do what is beyond our capabilities are surely unacceptable" (Brown 1996, p. 31).

The natural beliefs themselves and many of the content specific beliefs they give rise to are often cited by Hume as having a clear instrumental value. For example, he states that if we jettison our customary transition from causes to effects, a foundation of all our thoughts and actions, we would immediately "perish and go to ruin" (T 148; T 1.4.4.1; SBN 225). In doing so, he has provided a clear end for any chain of means-end reasoning seeking for instrumental normativity for this natural belief[5]. Indeed, Audi (2002) suggests that "broadly Humean versions of instrumentalism are among the most plausible contenders to represent instrumentalism as a contemporary naturalistic position in the theory of practical reason" (Audi 2002, p. 235). Contemporary advocates of naturalised epistemology frequently commit themselves to instrumental teleological theories of normativity[6]. But is such instrumental reasoning trivial and inadequate as a normative theory? There is a difference between forming and retaining beliefs for epistemic reasons and forming and retaining beliefs for instrumental or pragmatic reasons. Even if normativity can be retained by appealing to instrumental norms contingent upon our aims, the instrumentalist still requires an account of the normative force of those aims. Thomas Kelly has argued that "one cannot immunize oneself against the possibility of acquiring

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5 Instrumental approaches to the problem of induction such as Reichenbach's (1963) bestow our faith in induction with a kind of practical rationality.
6   For example the following thinkers all adhere to some variant of the idea that the normativity of epistemology is simply the normativity of instrumental reason: Kitcher 1992, Kornblith 1993, Laudan 1990.

reasons for belief by not caring about the relevant subject matter" (Kelly 2003, p. 628). The realms of epistemic and pragmatic justification operate in accordance with different requirements. While pragmatic responses may establish that our natural beliefs have a kind of practical rationality or instrumental justification, it cannot establish grounds in an epistemic sense. On the pragmatic side, it is clear that we do form beliefs, but without epistemological justification it remains unclear if we should form beliefs in this way. If, as Hume describes it, we are absolutely and necessarily determined to follow our natural beliefs, then there seems to be little grounds for the substitution of 'do form beliefs' with 'should form beliefs'. Hume's difficulty is with epistemic justification, not with instrumental justification.

Given that our descriptive account has revealed that these natural beliefs are unavoidable there might be a temptation to appeal to some form of 'ought implies can' justification for such beliefs. While noting the application of the principle of 'ought implies can' in ethics, Weintraub (2003) questions the validity of its use in epistemological assessments, arguing that, when it comes to epistemic criticisms, 'ought implies can' is not a plausible precept. Although the language of blame (with terms like responsibility, culpability and reproach) is present in many formulations for epistemic justification[7], Weintraub argues that there is no reason to equate 'epistemically unjustified' with 'morally blameworthy'. On this reading, one can be epistemically unjustified without being morally blameworthy. As Weintraub states

> A person who is psychologically bound to believe is absolved from (moral) guilt as is a person who is compelled to perform some action. But if he believes 'compulsively', and cannot be swayed by reason, he is deemed irrational, the more so the stronger the grip of his compulsion (Weintraub 2003, p. 371).

In those cases in which I am compelled to believe without the required evidence, I may not be morally blameworthy but I still remain epistemically unjustified.

In emphasising our inability to sustain doubt in natural beliefs, Hume's account opens up a more promising approach to the justification of natural beliefs. According to the descriptive account Hume provides, natural beliefs are placed beyond doubt. In the case of the capacity to attribute first-person references to ourselves this capacity delineates the scope of any engagement

7 See BonJour (1985, p. 8) and Kornblith (1982, p. 243).

in the world. This understanding of the belief in the self as universal and unavoidable opens up the possibility of assigning to it a form of non-evidential justification. In the contemporary epistemological landscape we can find advocates of the Wittgensteinian notion of a "hinge proposition" also marking out propositions that are neither true nor false but cannot be coherently doubted. Drawing on a line of thought extracted from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969, §§ 341-343) hinge epistemology has sought to address sceptical challenges to the epistemic credentials of our beliefs of hinge propositions. Wittgenstein wrote that:

> The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were hinges [die Angeln] on which those turn (OC 341).

Teasing out such fragments has led to many different readings of how we are to understand the nature, role and justification of hinge propositions. One prominent approach accepts that hinge propositions cannot be evidentially justified but appeals to non-evidential warrants. In this context Crispin Wright (2004) has distinguished between ordinary evidential justification and non-evidential justification which he calls 'entitlement'. This approach expands the narrow notion of epistemic rationality, which confines it only to evidentially warranted propositions. It would require another paper to fully trace the various formulations of hinge propositions and I do not have the space here to provide a detailed account of this debate. The goal of the paper is to demonstrate that if we accept Hume's descriptive account of belief in the self as a natural belief then this vein of normative argumentation is opened up. We then have the prospect of developing a non-evidential justification for our belief in the self. While much work remains to be done in advancing this line of argument, it nevertheless holds out the prospect of not just insulating belief in the self from scepticism but also of placing it on a knowledge footing. This can be achieved circumventing the issue of ontology.

3. Conclusion

The empirical findings of Hume's investigation into our belief-forming mechanisms conclude that the belief in the self is a natural belief. Regardless of which ontological story we tell about the first-person perspective, if human beings universally and unavoidably function as persons, as exemplified by their capacity to form individual content specific self-concept beliefs, than our epistemology must take this into account in assessing the validity of self-concept beliefs. This is a case in

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which empirical findings about our constitutive psychological mechanisms demonstrate how natural beliefs may be warranted even if not supported by justificatory arguments. As we have seen, descriptive explorations can open up new paths for assessing the normative status of belief in selves. Such natural beliefs cannot be justified in the sense that they are not supported by positive discursive argument. Nevertheless, given their status as natural beliefs they can appeal to non-propositional justification similar to that of Wittgenstein's hinge propositions. This approach opens up the prospect of developing warrant for our belief in the self even if we have no ontological assurance of the existence of something like 'the self'.

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