NATURALISM AND INTUITIONS

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Summary
This paper examines the relationship between methodological naturalism and the standard practice within philosophy of constructing theories on the basis of our intuitions about imaginary cases, especially in the work of Alvin Goldman. It is argued that current work in cognitive science presents serious problems for Goldman’s approach.

In an important series of papers (Goldman 1992a; 1992b; 2005; this volume; Goldman and Pust 1998), Alvin Goldman has sought to defend the philosophical practice of constructing theories on the basis of appeals to intuition. This philosophical method is certainly not lacking for adherents; indeed, George Bealer (1993) refers to it as the “standard justificatory procedure” in philosophy. More than this, the practice of appealing to intuitions is not some unexamined aspect of philosophical practice: quite the contrary, this particular feature of philosophical methodology has recently been the focus of a good deal of attention1, with quite a number of philosophers offering detailed defenses for their preferred method of theory construction. Many of these philosophers, however, are deeply opposed to naturalism, and their defense of the method of appeals to intuition is a crucial component of their anti-naturalistic worldview. Goldman stands out in this company as a committed methodological naturalist, someone who has regularly argued for the relevance of empirical work to philosophical theory construction. And this, of course, raises a question about the relationship between naturalism and the method of appealing to intuitions: to what extent are these truly compatible?

The term “naturalism” is used in a very wide range of different ways, and I will not attempt to legislate here that the term be used in some particular, and inevitably controversial, manner. Instead, I want to examine Goldman’s view on philosophical method in some detail, and I will argue that there are important tensions to be found there, both internal to the view itself, and also between Goldman’s view about philosophical method and his actual philosophical practice. Since these tensions all turn on recognizably naturalistic features of Goldman’s larger philosophical commitments, the problems raised here should be of broad philosophical concern. What is at issue is how we ought to proceed in the project of theory construction in philosophy.

I have a positive proposal to make as well, and I will offer a sketch of a naturalistic approach to philosophical method which avoids the problems I see in Goldman’s view. It should be pointed out at the beginning, however, that Goldman’s approach to methodological issues fits far better than my own with a great deal of recent philosophical practice. For that very reason, the case for my preferred view depends quite strongly on ruling out the possibility of the kind of detente Goldman offers between methodological naturalism and the method of appeals to intuition. If I am right, we are all faced with a starker set of choices among philosophical methods than may have initially seemed to be the case.

I.

Appeals to intuition play a foundational role in a good deal of philosophical theory construction. Consider, for example, one of Gettier’s famous cases (Gettier 1963). A hypothetical case is described in which an individual arrives at a belief that p or q on the basis of extremely good evidence that p, but no evidence at all about q. It is stipulated that the belief that p or q is true, but not for the reason the individual in question believes. As it turns out, p is false, although q is true. The individual’s belief that p or q is thus a justified, true belief. Nevertheless, as almost everyone who hears this case allows, we have the very strong intuition that this individual does not know that p or q. We thus seem to have a case in which there is

3. I have articulated and defended this proposal at greater length in my (2002).