EPISTEMOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Kristoffer AHLSTROM
UMass Amherst

Summary
Recently, Hilary Kornblith has argued that epistemological investigation is substantially empirical. In the present paper, I will first show that his claim is not contingent upon the further and, admittedly, controversial assumption that all objects of epistemological investigation are natural kinds. Then, I will argue that, contrary to what Kornblith seems to assume, this methodological contention does not imply that there is no need for attending to our epistemic concepts in epistemology. Understanding the make-up of our concepts and, in particular, the purposes they fill, is necessary for a proper acknowledgement of epistemology’s role in conceptual improvement.

1. Introduction

In his book *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature* (2002), Hilary Kornblith makes an intriguing case for the re-conceptualization of epistemological analysis from a largely non-empirical to a substantially empirical investigation, arguing that knowledge—one of the main targets of epistemological investigation—is a natural kind, open to straightforward empirical scrutiny. Assuming that knowledge is not unique in this respect, which is an assumption that Kornblith, indeed, seems to make, we may generate the following argument:

The Argument.
(A) All objects of epistemological investigation are natural kinds.

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1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the University of Massachusetts Amherst as well as at the 2007 meeting of the Danish Epistemology Network in Copenhagen, May 2007. I would like to thank both audiences for valuable discussions and comments, and am particularly indebted to Hilary Kornblith, Klemens Kappel, Joseph Levine, Åsa Wikforss, Helge Malmgren, Radha Vij, Alex Sarch, and Kelly Trogdon.
(B) If (A), epistemological investigation is substantially empirical.

(C) Hence, epistemological investigation is substantially empirical (A, B, MP).

(D) If (C), a thorough understanding of our epistemic concepts, over and above the phenomena that they pick out, is irrelevant to epistemological investigation.

(E) Hence, a thorough understanding of our epistemic concepts, over and above the phenomena that they pick out, is irrelevant to epistemological investigation (C, D, MP).

Kornblith has never explicitly stated this argument. Still, I take it that it provides one of the most reasonable rationales for his more general claims about the implications of his results concerning knowledge to epistemological analysis at large. The plausibility of this interpretive claim should become more obvious as we go along.

That being said, I will, in the following, scrutinize, qualify, and criticize the Argument in two steps. More specifically, §§ 2 through 4 will serve to contest (A) but defend (C), by showing that the latter premise is plausible even given that all objects of epistemological investigations are artifactual (or “socially constructed”) rather than natural kinds. However, §§ 5 through 7 will show that (E), nevertheless, does not follow from (C), since (D) is false and the claim that epistemological investigation is substantially empirical hence, does not imply that an understanding of our epistemic concepts is irrelevant to epistemology.

2. On the implausibility of premise (A)

It should be beyond doubt that the Argument is valid. Indeed, it consists in two modus ponens arguments, where the conclusion of the first, i.e., (C), makes up the first premise of the second. However, I would like to contest its soundness. For one thing, it hinges on (A), i.e., the controversial assumption that all objects of epistemological investigation are natural kinds. As already mentioned, Kornblith (2002) has, indeed, argued that knowledge, as it is being studied by cognitive ethologists (cognitive ethology being the study of animal cognition), is a natural kind. However, the crucial question here is whether this claim may be