

12 Epistemic Relativism and the Naturalistic Fallacy

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I Introduction

G. E. Moore (1993) famously argued against a certain way of reasoning which he took to be typical of moral naturalism¹ – viz., reasoning (for example) to the conclusion that “*X* is good” from a premise or premises that specify some fact or facts about *X*’s natural properties.² Abstracting from the particular term “good,” the intuitive lesson was supposed to be that evaluative conclusions do not follow from non-evaluative premises.

The naturalistic fallacy, and Moore’s associated “Open Question Argument”³ more or less set the agenda for twentieth century ethics.⁴ In one respect, this is unsurprising, as moral philosophers are in the business of reaching evaluative conclusions, and typically moral naturalists attempt to reach these conclusion by, as Blackburn (1998: 49) puts it, locating ethics

¹ See Ridge 2014 for an overview of the distinction between moral naturalism and non-naturalism. Defining moral properties in terms of non-moral properties is an instance of reasoning to the evaluative from the non-evaluative, and this particular instance of the fallacy was what Moore attributed to the project he was calling naturalism (e.g., Moore 1993: §10) – viz., represented by philosophers who in naming various non-moral properties they thought “they were actually defining good.” However, Moore also regarded certain non-naturalists as guilty of the same fallacy.

² Moore’s objection is often regarded as closely related to a similar point raised by Hume (1739) in *A Treatise on Human Nature*, according to which one should not infer an “ought” from an “is.” However, see Flock (2015) for a recent criticism of traditional comparisons between Moore and Hume on these matters.

³ In Moore’s own words, in his 1993 (§13), he puts the Open Question Argument thus: “. . . if it is not the case that ‘good’ denotes something simple and indefinable, only two alternatives are possible: either it is a complex, a given whole, about the correct analysis of which there may be disagreement; or else it means nothing at all . . . The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may always be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.”

⁴ For an overview of Moore’s moral philosophy and its influence on twentieth-century ethics, see Hurka 2015.

“within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part.”⁵

Evaluative conclusions such as that Moore thought can't be derived from descriptive premises are increasingly derived in mainstream *epistemology*, where epistemic normativity and epistemic value are central research areas.⁶ Also, unsurprisingly, some epistemologists (e.g., Kornblith 2002, *passim*) have responded to normative and value-laden projects in epistemology by embracing their own forms of naturalism – viz., by more or less following Quine's call to treat epistemology as a branch of natural science. As Quine had put it, in his essay “Epistemology Naturalized”:

Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. (1969: 82).

It's tempting to suppose, in light of the fact that ethics and epistemology both (i) traffic in evaluative conclusions, and (ii) host their own (domain-specific) forms of naturalism, respectively, that what's at issue between moral naturalists and proponents of the naturalistic fallacy will be *mutatis mutandis* what's (analogously) at issue between *epistemic* naturalists and proponents of a structurally similar kind of naturalistic fallacy in epistemology. Furthermore, on this “two sides of the same coin” reading, one might conclude that the most interesting application of Moore's naturalistic fallacy to epistemology will be to simply explore whether and to what extent epistemic naturalism succumbs to the epistemic analogue of the naturalistic fallacy as it's been traditionally levelled against moral naturalism. However, these assumptions are, on closer inspection, problematic.

The first problem is that it's not clear whom, exactly, should be charged with such a fallacy, in epistemology. As Rysiew (2016) has noted, many contemporary epistemologists who regard themselves as “epistemic naturalists” do so not because they're attempting to define evaluative properties in terms of non-evaluative properties as Moore's moral naturalists did, but because – much more weakly – they advocate, in epistemology, “the use of empirical *methods*, or insist upon the relevance of [epistemological] *results* of

⁵ For an overview of ethical naturalism, see Lenman 2014.

⁶ For some representative recent work on epistemic normativity, see for example, Greco 2010; Littlejohn forthcoming; Sosa 2009; Wedgwood 2007; Benton 2015; Smith 2014. See also, for some representative recent discussions of epistemic value (including the value of knowledge), see Haddock, Millar, & Pritchard 2009; 2010; Riggs 2009; Carter, Jarvis, & Rubin 2013b; 2013a; Kvanvig 2003; 2004; Pritchard 2009; 2008; 2011; Pritchard & Turri 2014.

certain areas of empirical study.”⁷ This kind of “methodological” naturalism in epistemology is not committed to anything like the fallacy Moore was contesting. That it is not would seem to limit the interest of the charge of a naturalistic fallacy in epistemology to the comparatively more “hard-core” epistemic naturalists – viz., those who actually do attempt to define key epistemological terms in purely non-evaluative language. But even *these* naturalists do not obviously succumb to the charge.

Consider that the form of moral naturalism Moore objected to concedes that moral terms are evaluative terms, and then insists that these evaluative terms can be defined in non-evaluative language. But “hard core” epistemic naturalists deny that properly epistemic terms, as such, *are* evaluative to begin with. Consider, for instance, Bernecker and Dretske’s description of Quinean epistemic naturalism as committed to thinking that epistemology

... should not concern itself with how we *should* form beliefs but with how we *do in fact* form them. (2000: 233)

Conceived this way, epistemic conclusions, as such, are *non-evaluative* conclusions, and there is nothing objectionable about reaching a non-evaluative conclusion on the basis of non-evaluative premises.

In sum, to the extent that Moore’s naturalistic fallacy or some variation on it is of philosophical interest in epistemology, it won’t be in as straightforward a sense as we’d initially expect. Both weak (methodological) forms of epistemic naturalism as well as strong (Quinean) forms of epistemic naturalism are arguably not susceptible to what would be an epistemologically analogous objection to the one which Moore raised against moral naturalism.⁸ Perhaps other forms of epistemic naturalism are susceptible to the charge. At any rate, this is not the issue I will pursue here.

In what follows, I want to show that one very interesting, and hitherto unnoticed example of the naturalistic fallacy in epistemology features prominently in arguments that are generally thought of as entirely orthogonal to epistemic naturalism. In particular, what I want to show is that to find an

⁷ These weak forms of epistemic naturalism stand more naturally opposed to the methodology of armchair or “a priori” epistemology, rather than meta-epistemological non-naturalism or intuitionism.

⁸ Neither kind of epistemic naturalist is by their own lights insisting that an evaluative conclusion should follow purely non-evaluative premises. To be clear, for weak (methodological) epistemic naturalists, this is because their naturalism involves only an injunction to use empirical methods in epistemology and an insistence on the relevance of the epistemological results to certain areas of empirical science; for strong (Quinean) epistemic naturalists, this is because they simply deny that epistemology is in the business of reaching evaluative conclusions.

instance of the naturalistic fallacy in epistemology, we needn't look further than various high-profile arguments for epistemic *relativism*.

Here is the plan. In §II I will distinguish between several forms of epistemic relativism, with a focus on a simple and comparatively popular version of the thesis – what I call *epistemic norm localism*, according to which the only sense in which beliefs aspire to epistemic justification is with respect to local epistemic norms. §III surveys two prominent argument strategies for epistemic relativism *cum* epistemic norm localism; one strategy appeals to the Pyrrhonian problematic and the other to considerations about epistemic circularity. §IV shows how both of these strategy types rely indispensably on a form of the naturalistic fallacy; or more carefully, these strategies *must* commit the naturalistic fallacy or cede an important advantage to the skeptic.

II Epistemic Relativism and Epistemic Norms

Epistemic relativism is notoriously difficult to define.⁹ The problem is compounded by the fact that self-described epistemic relativists often take for granted very different and sometimes incompatible conceptions of what distinguishes a philosophical position as “relativistic” whilst nonetheless operating under the common banner that (for example) justification, knowledge, and the like are always “relative to some parameter.”

Over the past decade, the two most influential articulations of epistemic relativism are due to Boghossian (2006) and MacFarlane (2005; 2010; 2014: Ch. 7) respectively, and these characterizations are in conflict with one another.¹⁰ As Boghossian sees it, the epistemic relativist's core insight is that a given unrelativized epistemic claim (e.g., “Information E justifies belief B”) should not be construed as expressing the claim *E justifies belief B* (given that by the relativist's lights all unrelativized epistemic judgments are absolutely false¹¹), but rather as expressing the explicitly relational claim: *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, information E justifies belief B* – an explicitly relational claim which the relativist can accept as absolutely true.

MacFarlane, by contrast, thinks that any philosophically interesting form of epistemic relativism will deny that attributions of epistemic properties (e.g., “Keith *knows* that the bank is open”) get their truth values absolutely. For

⁹ See Baghramian & Carter 2015 for an overview of characteristic features of relativist positions, including varieties of epistemic relativism. See also Baghramian 2004, Carter 2016: Ch. 2.

¹⁰ See Carter 2016: Ch. 6; 2017.

¹¹ See, however, Carter 2017 for the criticism that this is a misleading characterization of the relativist's position.

example, on MacFarlane's semantic framework for knowledge attributions, whether my claim that Keith knows the bank is open is true depends on the epistemic standards that are at play in the context in which my knowledge ascription is being *assessed* for truth or falsity. But, given that my ascription of knowledge to Keith can be potentially assessed for truth or falsity from indefinitely many perspectives, there is no "once-and-for-all" answer to whether my knowledge-attribution is true. It is always only true (when it is) relative to a context in which it is being assessed.¹²

Here is not the place to take a stand on which perspective captures what is at the heart of a position worthy of the term "epistemic relativism." Rather, what I want to register against this background dispute is that one specific position that has been variously defended under the description of epistemic relativism, a position framed in terms of *epistemic norms*, is at least in principle compatible with either of the aforementioned ways of unpacking the core relativist insight. And it will be this particular form of epistemic relativism, what I call – *epistemic norm localism* – that will be the focus in what follows.

First, some terminological clarification. As Sankey (2010: 10) – a contemporary critic of epistemic relativism – defines it, an epistemic norm is a "rule or criterion used to justify a belief." Sankey then characterizes epistemic relativism as accepting the following localist thesis about epistemic norms: that (i) "there is no one set of correct epistemic norms" (2010: 10) and that (ii) there "are no epistemic norms over and above the variable epistemic norms operative in different (local) cultural settings or contexts" (2012: 187).

A potential ambiguity should be quickly snuffed out. Epistemic norms are ordinarily conceived of as prescriptive epistemic rules and as such cannot be "correct" or "incorrect," *in the sense of being true or false* (relatively or otherwise). So we'll need to clarify in what sense epistemic norms can be correct when they are.

Here it will be helpful to take a cue from Boghossian (2001: 2) who distinguishes between epistemic principles and epistemic rules, and elucidates how the two related to one another. Epistemic rules prescribe certain ways of belief forming, in certain conditions (e.g., *if conditions C obtain, believe X*.) Epistemic *principles*, by contrast, are, to follow Boghossian's distinction, "general normative propositions" which specify conditions under which

¹² From MacFarlane's perspective, the position that Boghossian calls "epistemic relativism" is more akin to epistemic contextualism (e.g., 2014: 33 fn. 5) of the structure defended by Harman (1975) in the case of moral evaluations.

a particular type of belief is justified (Boghossian: 2006: 85). For example, *if a belief B has property F, then B is epistemically justified/unjustified*.

Epistemic principles, unlike rules, can be correct or incorrect in so far as they are candidates for truth or falsity. Epistemic principles correspond with associated epistemic rules in the following way. If the epistemic principle *Beliefs based on wishful thinking are unjustified* is true, then (*ceteris paribus*) rules such as *Don't base beliefs on wishful thinking* or *If your only basis for p is a wish, don't believe p* should guide one's belief-forming. Epistemic principles, so described are (as Boghossian puts it) "normative propositions" not because they themselves *are* norms (i.e., rules), but because they give rise to (epistemic) prescriptions, which are themselves epistemic rules.¹³

Thus, epistemic norms, in so far as they are understood as rules that are supposed to guide our belief forming, should be understood as "correct" only when implied by correct (i.e., true) epistemic principles, where the latter (but not the former) can potentially be true or false. Accordingly, a restatement of Sankey's characterization of epistemic relativism in terms of epistemic principles will go as follows – let's call this *epistemic norm localism*:

Epistemic Norm Localism (ENL): (i*) there is no one set of true epistemic principles; (ii*) there are no correct epistemic norms (and thus no corresponding true epistemic principles) over and above the variable norms operative in different (local) cultural settings or contexts.

ENL, articulated as the conjunction of (i*) and (ii*), is a basic form¹⁴ of epistemic relativism that's been embraced by most philosophers associated with epistemic relativism, including Rorty (1980; 1989), Ian Hacking (1982), Feyerabend (1975), Kuhn (1962), and the latter Wittgenstein (1969), among others. There are, unsurprisingly, a range of very different (some deeply theory-laden) ways that philosophers have arrived at this position. It's beyond the present scope to consider them all here.

Rather, in what follows, the focus will turn to two very prominent strategy types that have been historically used to advance ENL. These strategy types appeal at crucial junctures to the Pyrrhonian problematic and to

¹³ Of course, provided one is a cognitivist about terms of epistemic appraisal, prescriptive epistemic ought claims (e.g., If conditions C obtain, then you *ought* to believe p) can potentially be true or false, even though the corresponding prescriptive rule (If conditions C obtain, believe p) is not truth-apt. However, prescriptive epistemic ought claims, when they are true or false, will be so only if there are corresponding true epistemic principles (i.e., true general normative propositions, in the sense Boghossian describes) that give rise to these prescriptive "ought" claims.

¹⁴ Note that ENL could be filled out on either Boghossian's or MacFarlane's preferred templates for formulating relativism.

considerations about epistemic circularity, respectively. After considering each strategy in §III, it will be shown in §IV how these two strategy types feature instances of the naturalistic fallacy. I conclude by situating this result within the context of wider debates about epistemic relativism.

III Epistemic Norm Localism: Two Argument Strategies

According to Sankey, the Pyrrhonian problematic – typically associated in epistemology with Pyrrhonian skepticism¹⁵ – can be used to motivate epistemic relativism (in the sense of ENL), and indeed, Sankey (2010, 2011, 2012) takes the Pyrrhonian-style argument he envisions to be the strongest case the relativist can make for her position.

The argument can be condensed to two key steps. The first step involves arguing for the interim conclusion that all epistemic norms are equally epistemically unjustified. Given that (as we noted in §II) *rules*, understood as imperatives, aren't truth-apt and so aren't candidates for epistemic justification, the interim conclusion that Sankey attributes to the relativist that all epistemic norms are equally epistemically unjustified should not be interpreted as the claim that all epistemic *rules* are equally epistemically justified. To the extent that Sankey's relativist wants to insist that all epistemic *norms* are equally epistemically unjustified, we should read this as the claim that *all epistemic norms are such that the (truth-apt) epistemic principles that imply them are equally unjustified*. In short: all epistemic principles are equally unjustified.

How, then, is appealing to the Pyrrhonian problematic supposed to generate the result that all epistemic principles are epistemically unjustified? As Sankey's relativist reasons, any attempt to justify an epistemic principle will be epistemically unsatisfactory. Suppose, for example, in an attempt to justify epistemic principle EP₁, one appeals to some different epistemic principle EP₂. But what justifies EP₂? Now the Pyrrhonian trap is set: one can either say nothing, in which case one adopts EP₂ arbitrarily. Or, one can justify EP₂ on the basis of some further epistemic principle, EP₃. This other epistemic principle, if it is to not itself be arbitrarily adopted, must be justified via some further principle. If that further principle is the original principle, EP₁, the justification for EP₁ is viciously circular. If the chain never returns to EP₁, and never stops arbitrarily, then one embarks on an infinite regress of

¹⁵ The matter of how to interpret the Pyrrhonian skeptic's epistemic injunction (especially as concerns the attitude of belief) is controversial; see for example the essays in Burnyeat & Frede 1997 for an overview.

justification. In short, one's initial attempt to justify the original epistemic principle will inevitably be either unacceptably arbitrary, circular, or generate an infinite regress. As the argument goes, none of these furnishes one with epistemic justification for the initial epistemic principle.¹⁶ Given that this process can be repeated for *any* epistemic principle, all epistemic principles are on an equal epistemic standing, in the sense that they are equally (un)justified.¹⁷ This is the interim conclusion.

From here, Sankey's relativist reasons as follows:

If no norm is better justified than any other, all norms have equal standing. Since it is not possible to provide an ultimate grounding for any set of norms, the only possible form of justification is justification on the basis of a set of operative norms. Thus, the norms operative within a belief system provide justification within that belief system. Those who adopt a different belief system are justified by the norms operative within their belief system . . . The relativist is now in a position to claim that epistemic justification is relative to [locally operative] norms . . . (Sankey 2010: 6)

Given that the only sense that norms *qua* rules are candidates for epistemic justification is if the epistemic principles (i.e., general normative propositions) that imply these norms are epistemically justified, we can restate Sankey's relativist's reasoning as follows. If (from the intermediate conclusion) all norms have equal standing, and thus, if all epistemic principles that would imply such norms are of equal standing, then if epistemic norms are possibly justified at all – viz., by being implied by justified epistemic principles – then the only possible form of such justification is on the basis of operant epistemic norms – viz., rules that are implied by epistemic principles that are held (i.e., believed) to be true locally.

Sankey (2012) has suggested that the above kind of reasoning is in fact a “fundamental” argument for epistemic relativism. Williams (2007), who himself does not self-describe as a relativist but rather as a kind of

¹⁶ This claim is controversial. After all, foundationalists, coherentists, and infinitists typically distinguish themselves with reference to which premise of the Pyrrhonian problematic is to be rejected (see, e.g., Turri & Klein 2014). However, for the purpose of the argument pursued here, this point is by the by. For some discussion of how the argument Sankey attributes to the relativist is affected by the fact that there are traditional ways of “escaping” the Pyrrhonian problematic, see for example Carter 2016: Ch. 3.

¹⁷ Sankey, and also Williams, is happy to move seamlessly from the claim that all norms (and their associated epistemic principles) are equally unjustified to the related claim that they are equally justified. I will argue in the next section that this seemingly innocuous transition turns out to be important.

Wittgenstenian contextualist¹⁸, also locates as what he takes to be the core argument for epistemic relativism a piece of reasoning with a similar structure: an argument that proceeds first to an interim conclusion according to which all epistemic principles are claimed to be on an equal epistemic footing, and then which moves from this interim conclusion to the thesis that epistemic relativism is true. Here is how Williams sums up what he calls the “fundamental argument for epistemic relativism”:

In determining whether a belief – any belief – is justified, we always rely, implicitly or explicitly, on an epistemic framework: some standards or procedures that separate justified from unjustified convictions. But what about the claims embodied in the framework itself: are they justified? In answering this question, we inevitably apply our own epistemic framework. So, assuming that our framework is coherent and does not undermine itself, the best we can hope for is a justification that is epistemically circular, employing our epistemic framework in support of itself. Since this procedure can be followed by anyone, whatever his epistemic framework, all such frameworks, provided they are coherent, are equally defensible (or indefensible). (2007: 94–95)

Given that an epistemic framework (or, alternatively, as Boghossian puts it, an “epistemic system”) is comprised of a set of epistemic principles and associated epistemic norms (in the sense articulated in §II), Williams, just as Sankey does, understands the relativist as deriving her conclusion (according to which justification is always only a local affair) from a premise to the effect that no suitable justification for one’s own epistemic principles is possible. The primary difference between the way Sankey and Williams understand the relativist’s rationale has not to do with the move *from* the interim conclusion to relativism, but to do with the epistemological considerations which are taken to support the premise. Sankey’s envisioned relativist holds that the epistemic hurdle which prevents us from epistemically justifying our own epistemic principles in a satisfying way is best articulated in terms of the Pyrrhonian problematic. Williams’ envisioned relativist by contrast proceeds to the interim conclusion (that all epistemic principles are on an equal epistemic footing) by adverting to an epistemic circularity – viz., that any attempt to justify one’s own epistemic principles will inevitably be on the

¹⁸ For the most sustained presentation of this position by Williams 1996.

basis of these very principles.¹⁹ Both, however, envision the epistemic relativist as taking the interim conclusion – once it is reached – as a stepping stone to relativism.

IV Epistemic Relativism and the Naturalistic Fallacy

Consider again the interim conclusion reached by the style of argument considered in §III: all epistemic principles are equally unjustified, a claim the relativist from §III adverts to on the grounds that any attempt to epistemically justify our epistemic principles will be doomed to failure (either via the Pyrrhonian problematic, or epistemic circularity).

I've argued elsewhere that the relativist's epistemological arguments to the effect that we cannot satisfactorily justify our own epistemic principles are problematic.²⁰ But let's set this aside and suppose for the sake of argument that this interim conclusion is correct. Thus, let's assume that all epistemic principles are equally *unjustified*. Correlatively, it follows that all epistemic norms are equally unjustified in the qualified sense that all epistemic norms are entailed by equally unjustified epistemic principles.

It seems very natural to say that if all epistemic principles are equally unjustified, then all principles are equally justified. So natural, in fact, that both Sankey and Williams use the justified/unjustified cognates as though this is the right way to capture the result of the epistemological argument that epistemic principles are equally unjustifiable. *Prima facie*, moving seamlessly from “equally unjustified” to “equally justified” seems entirely harmless, and perhaps even trivial (e.g., if unjustified epistemic principles are equally justified, they would be equally justified by being equally justified *not at all*).

However, there is a serious problem lurking here. The problem looks merely grammatical at first, but it makes a big difference downstream. The grammatical point is that the seemingly trivial entailment from “all principles are equally *unjustified*” to “all principles are equally *justified*” is valid only on an *attributive* reading of the predicate “justified” but not on a *predicative* reading. As Ridge (2013) summarizes this distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives, originally due to Geach (1956):

¹⁹ See, however, Boghossian 2001 for an influential argument to the effect that such a circular justification needn't be vicious. For related discussion, see Carter & Pritchard (Forthcoming) and Carter 2016: Ch. 5.

²⁰ In particular, in Carter 2016: Chs. 3–5.

... sometimes a locution of the form “is an F G” entails both “is F” and “is a G”, whereas in other cases this entailment does not hold. Geach calls uses in which this entailment does hold “predicative” and uses in which the entailment does not hold “attributive.” The locution “is a dead fly” is predicative, since it entails both “is dead” and “is a fly.” By contrast, the locution “is a big fly” is typically attributive, as it does not entail “is big.” Something can be a big fly without being big, full stop. (Ridge 2013: 188)

While the entailment from “equally unjustified” to “equally justified” is trivial on an attributive reading of “justified” – a reading on which the claim that epistemic principles are equally “justified” doesn’t entail that justification is ever actually instantiated – it is not trivial on a predicative reading of “justified.” The predicative (but not the attributive) reading actually assumes that the property of being justified is instantiated, since this reading of “all epistemic principles are equally justified” entails (for any given epistemic principle) both “is justified” and “is an epistemic principle.” This is not trivial because the skeptic *denies* that the property of being justified is ever instantiated for any epistemic principle.²¹

What this means is that the skeptic can agree with the relativist’s argument strategy canvassed in §III all the way to the claim that all epistemic principles are equally unjustified. However, insofar as the entailment from “equally unjustified” to “equally justified” is understood as predicative (*vis-à-vis* “justified”) rather than merely attributive, the skeptic is within her rights right to object that this seemingly harmless transition is a substantive move that would have to be argued for and not simply advanced as a consequence of something the skeptic is happy to accept.

To sharpen the relevance of this point, just consider that it is only against a background predicative reading of “justified” (with respect to epistemic principles) that the relativist could plausibly transition from “all epistemic principles are equally unjustified” to the relativist’s own conclusion – viz., that epistemic justification is a local affair. Here it is crucial to keep in mind the following conditional claim which Sankey attributes to the relativist: “Since it is not possible to provide an ultimate grounding for any set of norms [a claim the skeptic accepts], the *only possible form of justification is justification on the basis of a set of operative norms.*” From the claim that the only possible form of justification is on the basis of a set of operative norms (and the associated

²¹ Note that the skeptic is not committed to denying that there are true epistemic principles, perhaps principles in Plato’s heaven which are inaccessible to us. The commitment is just that no such principles have the property of being justified for creatures like us.

epistemic principles that entail them), the epistemic norm localist's thesis follows *provided epistemic justification is something that's actually instantiated* but *not* provided epistemic justification is not instantiated. (Compare: from the fact that the only possible form of beauty is God-given beauty it doesn't follow that there is something beautiful made by God unless there is actually something beautiful.)

Question: Is there any good, non-question-begging reason, then, to move from "all norms are equally unjustified" to "all norms are equally justified" (on a predicative reading of "justified")? There certainly is if the fact that epistemic norms are followed variously in the local context where they're followed can be shown to favor the thesis the epistemic justification is actually instantiated ever (at all) to the competing skeptical thesis that it is not.

But at this point, it looks like a trap is set for the relativist. For if the challenge can't be met, the relativist is in no position to claim any advantage over the skeptic. But if it can be met, it can be met only by reasoning *to an evaluative conclusion via a descriptive premise* – the naturalistic fallacy. After all, facts about what norms are locally *followed* (and what corresponding principles are accepted) are entirely descriptive facts. But the claim that justification is instantiated at all – a claim that again the relativist requires in order to motivate transitioning from the claim that all epistemic principles are equally unjustified to the relativist's *rather* than the skeptic's conclusion – is itself an *evaluative* claim, viz., an epistemic evaluation.

Putting this all together, the dialectical situation for the relativist – in connection with the naturalistic fallacy – can be summed up as follows. Two prominent arguments for a basic form of epistemic relativism – epistemic norm localism – betray a similar transition in reasoning. A condensed version of the reasoning is as follows: (i) All epistemic norms and their associated principles are equally unjustified, at least by traditional standards of epistemic justification (i.e., as illustrated by the Pyrrhonian problematic and the argument from circularity); (ii) if (i), then the *only possible form of justification* is justification on the basis of a set of locally operative norms and their associated principles; (iii) therefore, justification is on the basis of locally operative norms and their associated principles. Premises (i) and (ii) entail the relativist's conclusion (iii) only if "equally unjustified" in (i) entails "equally justified" in a predicative (rather than attributive) sense. However, this entailment holds trivially only on an attributive reading. On a predicative reading, it is actually non-trivial and furthermore begs the question against the skeptic. This is because the predicative but not the attributive reading of "justified" entails that justification is actually *instantiated* (something the skeptic denies).

Thus, for the relativist to transition from (i) and (ii) to (iii) without begging the question against the skeptic, the relativist must provide some non-question-begging reason for moving from “all epistemic principles are equally unjustified” to “all epistemic principles are equally justified” (on a predicative, rather than merely attributive, reading of “justified”) in (i). If the relativist cannot do this, the relativist cedes any advantage she has over the skeptic, because then premise (i) would in conjunction with (ii) fail to point to relativism over skepticism. But if she can, this will require some way of showing that the mere fact that epistemic norms are variously followed in practice in local contexts favors the thesis that epistemic justification is instantiated over the competing skeptical thesis that it is not. The former claim (that norms are followed) is descriptive, the latter (that for some principles epistemic justification is instantiated) is evaluative: the very mark of the naturalistic fallacy. Thus: the relativist avoids ceding any advantage she can claim over the skeptic only by committing this fallacy, by deriving an evaluative conclusion from a descriptive premise.

The would-be epistemic relativist, in this position, has two principal options. One option will be to maintain that the best way to motivate epistemic relativism is by way of a premise that epistemic principles are unjustifiable with reference to traditional epistemic criteria, and then to show that the naturalistic fallacy is not as problematic as one might think.²²

Another strategy, however, involves attempting to motivate epistemic relativism in a fashion that does not rely on any such an epistemological premise in the first place. I'll conclude by briefly noting one such strategy, pursued by Richard (2004) and most notably MacFarlane (2009; 2014, *passim*). MacFarlane's semantic strategy for epistemic relativism, in the case of knowledge attributions, is based almost exclusively on considerations to do with our practice of attributing “knows,” and not on traditional epistemological considerations. In particular, MacFarlane argues that a relativist semantics for “knows” (according to which “knows” is assessment sensitive in the sense articulated in §I) best explains – by comparison with other competitor semantics for “knows,” such as contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism – our practice of attributing knowledge.²³ As I've argued elsewhere, this strategy, though it does not rely on the naturalistic fallacy or for that matter require any straightforward engagement with the skeptic, faces its own peculiar difficulty. For it's not at all clear that, even if MacFarlane is right that

²² Such a strategy might, for example, involve drawing from attempts (e.g., Curry 2006) to legitimize the naturalistic fallacy in moral philosophy.

²³ See Carter 2016: ch. 7 for critical discussion.

a relativist treatment of “knows” is assessment-sensitive, that the same holds for the concept of knowledge of interest in epistemology. But this is an topic for another occasion.²⁴

V Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I’ve argued that the most natural extension of the naturalistic fallacy from moral philosophy to epistemology is not the obvious one – viz., the naturalistic fallacy *vis-à-vis* moral naturalism transposed to target positions under the description of “epistemic naturalism” in epistemology. It was shown that neither weak (methodological) nor strong (Quinean) forms of epistemological naturalism are clearly subject to the charge in a way that is relevantly analogous to the charge Moore levelled against moral naturalism. Rather, I’ve explored an entirely different point of connection between epistemology and the naturalistic fallacy by drawing attention to a familiar pattern of argument that has been advanced in support of epistemic relativism. If the argument I’ve advanced here is correct, epistemic relativists who attempt to reach the relativistic conclusion that justification is on the basis of norms (and their associated principles) operant in local contexts, face a dilemma: either commit the naturalistic fallacy, or cede any would-be advantage over the skeptic. In conclusion, I suggested two escape routes for the relativist in the face of this dilemma. Either argue that the naturalistic fallacy is a pill that can be swallowed, or alternatively, attempt to motivate epistemic relativism in a way that does not rely on the premise that, with respect to traditionally accepted standards of epistemic justification, all epistemic principles are equally unjustified.

²⁴ This topic is raised and addressed in Carter 2016: Chs. 8–9.