

The Revenge of Berkeley, Kant and Husserl: An assessment of R. Scott Smith's *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*

Angus J. L. Menuge
Department of Theology and Philosophy
Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon

Abstract: Naturalism presents itself as a world view founded on scientific knowledge which seeks to reduce or eliminate various recalcitrant phenomena such as consciousness and moral values. Most critiques of naturalism focus on its inability to do justice to these phenomena. By contrast, in *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality* (Ashgate, 2012), R. Scott Smith argues that naturalism fails to account for our ability to know reality, thereby undercutting its alleged scientific foundation. Michael Rea and Robert Koons have argued that, on naturalism, there are no well-defined objects of knowledge. Smith complements this critique by showing that, even if such objects exist, subjects will be unable to know them as they are. His threefold argument can be understood as the intellectual revenge of Berkeley, Kant and Husserl on naturalism. At the end of the paper, I suggest a couple of ways proponents of naturalized epistemology would likely respond.

How is knowledge possible? For example, how is it possible for a subject S to know that there is an apple on the counter? One can distinguish four fundamental requirements for knowledge, one concerning the object known, the other three concerning the knowing subject: (1) there is a well-defined *object* of knowledge (an apple); (2) S can access this object (the apple, and not sense data or brain states, is an object of experience); (3) S can form a valid concept of the object (of an apple); (4) S can match the concept (of an apple) with the object (the apple given in experience). Concerning (1), Michael Rea¹ and Robert Koons² have shown that due to its

¹ See Michael Rea, *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2002), especially chapter 4, and his “Naturalism and material

denial of essences, naturalism makes it impossible to know physical objects. This is because, without essences, naturalism is unable to define the identity and persistence conditions of physical aggregates: “If there are no facts at all about what sorts of changes a putative thing X can and cannot survive, then there is no such thing as X.”³ So there simply are no apples that can be known, and as a result, there is nothing which could cause a valid concept of an apple in us.

This may be called an “outside-in” objection to naturalism: if naturalism is true, there is nothing out there in the world that could produce knowledge in us. By contrast, R. Scott Smith focuses his critique of naturalism on requirements (2), (3) and (4). Smith’s is an “inside-out objection”: even if there is a potential object of knowledge in the world (an apple), on naturalism, there is no way for the subject to access that object (he cannot experience an apple as it is), to acquire a valid concept of it (of an apple) or to determine whether that object matches his concept (of an apple).

To demonstrate the inadequacy of naturalistic epistemology, Smith adopts an exemplary approach. He first argues inductively, examining the work of a wide variety of the best naturalistic philosophers in the area and looks for recurring problems. He then tries to show that this pattern of failure is (most likely) not a coincidence, but stems from the endemic deficiencies of naturalism’s underlying ontology. We will first examine how Smith argues that naturalism fails to account for each of conditions (2), (3) and (4) for knowledge. Then we will consider the merits of his proposed alternative ontology for knowledge. Finally, we will reflect on the overall significance of his thesis.

1. Berkeley’s revenge: the inaccessibility of the object of knowledge.

The most fundamental problem Smith identifies for naturalistic theories of epistemology is that they make it difficult to see how the subject could possibly contact a real-world object.

objects,” in eds. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: RKP, 2000).

² Robert C. Koons, “Epistemological Objections to Materialism” in eds. Robert Koons and George Bealer, *The Waning of Materialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 281-306.

³ Michael Rea, “Naturalism and material objects,” in eds. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: RKP, 2000), 112.

Following David Armstrong, reliabilists like Fred Dretske, Mike Tye, Bill Lycan and David Papineau reject internalist accounts of knowledge (like the old sense data theory), because they invite skepticism as to whether the experiences with which we are inwardly acquainted correspond to the real world. Instead, they argue that so long as the causal chain between the object and our representation of it is a reliable one (regardless of whether we can *show* that it is reliable), we can know that object.

A classic problem for reliabilist accounts is the “causal chain argument” which points out that our mental representation of an object is the last link of a causal chain, and it is hard to see on naturalistic grounds how we could “traverse, or transcend, the causal chain...and have *epistemic* access to the originating, physical object itself in the world.”⁴

Reliabilists typically dismiss this, claiming that so long as it is the properties of the object which cause the corresponding properties of our representation of it, we can know the object directly. But Smith makes several important objections to this maneuver. The main problem is that on naturalism, there is no intrinsic intentionality. This means that no experience that we have is inherently of a particular object, so we cannot simply say that an experience is of an apple. Rather, a representation is what it is because of a physical process that modifies the brain, and that brain state means something only because it is conceptualized a certain way.⁵ As a result, on naturalism, we have no direct nonconceptual access to apples, so we can never see an apple for what it is. But if we can never see an apple for what it is, there is no good reason to say that our conceptualization of an experience tells us about something in the world outside our brains. Perhaps instead all we ever perceive are our own brain states, and the concepts we apply to them are all fictional concerning the real world. Smith’s point is *not* that, on naturalism, objects could not be represented in experience, just that this is not something we could ever claim to know.

History is repeating itself. When John Locke offered his causal theory of perception, Berkeley argued that it made it impossible to know what objects are in themselves. In his contribution to Smith’s book, Errin Clark draws the connection explicitly while critiquing the Churchlands’ naturalized epistemology. For the Churchlands, our brains represent the world by “synaptic weight configurations prompted by, and hence corresponding to,

⁴ R. Scott Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality: Testing Religious Truth-claims* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 17.

⁵ Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*, 52.

patterns of external stimuli”⁶. Further, since all representation is a conceptualization of brain states, there is no distinction between observation and theory: “Ones perceptual judgments of x just are theoretical explanations of x.”⁷ So again, one has no non-conceptual access to objects of experience, and since on naturalism, there are no essences, one also cannot claim that perception is “directly determined by what the object of perception is like”⁸. Thus there is no reason to think that our experience tells us anything about real-world objects and, ironically, “we are... thrust into something like Berkeleyan idealism.... [E]ach of us only has our own experience, our own ‘way of knowing’ *we know not what.*”⁹

The absurdity for naturalism is that its account of knowledge undermines our reason to accept its underlying ontology: the particles and forces that lie at the foundation of reality are not things we can know to exist. But then, we cannot even know that brains exist: and so we cannot claim that knowledge involves conceptualizations of brain states.

2. Kant’s revenge: The inability to form valid concepts of objects.

Knowledge requires not only access to objects but also that we can subsume those objects under appropriate concepts: thus to know x is an apple we must have an apple concept, and that concept must correspond to what x is. This is not a trivial requirement, as Kant realized. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant pointed out that we have many fictional concepts (such as fate or fortune), which do not correspond to anything demonstrably real. So, in response to Hume’s skepticism about the categories of substance and causation, Kant offered a “deduction” of these concepts, aiming to show that they are valid of the world we experience. Similarly, Smith challenges naturalism to provide an account of the origin of our concepts which makes it reasonable to believe that they have real-world validity.

According to Smith, in a paradigm case of forming a concept, one must first be exposed to many examples (or pictures) of a thing, and there must be

⁶ Errin Clark, in R. Scott Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*, 111.

⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁸ Ibid., 123.

⁹ Ibid., 123.

many noticings of their common features.¹⁰ The initial proto-concept thus formed may then need to be corrected so as to exclude near-misses, but eventually one has a fairly stable apple concept. Since this process of concept formation takes time, it is necessary to compare the evolving concept to various apples and non-apples one experiences. But Smith points out, this process makes sense only if one has some independent non-conceptual access to the objects themselves. However, as we saw, naturalism is incompatible with such access since it denies that our experiences are intrinsically of anything and claims that we are always conceptualizing or taking our brain states to mean something else. Thus, on naturalism, to form a concept of an apple cannot be done by comparing experiences of apples, but only by comparing conceptualizations of experience.¹¹ This means, however, that all concept formation presupposes prior concepts. So, unless naturalism wishes to assume a sufficiently rich stock of innate concepts, it cannot account for how concepts are formed in the first place. But even if it can, the problem is, without independent access to the real-world objects, there is no way to tell that the concepts formed are valid. On naturalism, we may as well be plugged in to the super-computer of *The Matrix*, in which case our conception of what we are experiencing need not correspond to anything in the world around us.

To be fair, as Smith points out, unlike Dretske, Tye and Lycan, David Papineau does offer a naturalistic account of concept formation, but the problem is that he too maintains that “experiences *themselves* are conceptualizations of brain states”¹² so it seems there is “no room for any direct seeing, only seeing *as* or seeing *that* something is the case.”¹³ So the problem again is that concepts cannot be formed in the first place, and there is no way to independently test their validity by comparing them to non-conceptual experience.

The same problem arises for the more sophisticated accounts of Searle, Dennett and Murphy. While Searle wants to defend external realism (that reality is independent of how we represent it), he also supports conceptual relativism, according to which “all representations of reality are made relative to some more or less arbitrarily selected set of concepts.”¹⁴ But this means that

¹⁰ Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*, 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 161, quoted in R. Scott Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*, 60.

since there are many conceptual schemes and no independent access to reality as it is, there is no way to argue that a particular scheme, such as naturalism, carves reality at the joints. So if someone has a non-naturalistic conceptual scheme with a non-naturalistic ontology, there is no way for the naturalist to provide evidence to show that person that naturalism provides a superior ontology, since there simply are no facts independent of the rival conceptual schemes the naturalist can point to. Similarly, Dennett denies the existence of any original or intrinsic intentionality, so he also must maintain that all we can do is to take our brain states to mean something else. Applied consistently, Dennett would be forced to embrace the views of Jacques Derrida, according to whom, we can only access our own interpretations and so have no means of determining whether some of these interpretations are closer to objective reality than others. So like Searle, Dennett has no way to demonstrate that his materialistic conception of reality is superior to alternatives. Despite her non-reductive physicalism, Murphy ends up in the same place, because she too thinks that “all contact with reality is a conceptualization, or interpretation”.¹⁵ This, however, is ultimately self-contradictory: there can be no interpretation of x unless x is something beyond the interpretation. For if not, we merely have the imposition of a concept with no object that is being conceptualized, precisely what Kant thought about fate and fortune. Naturalism along these lines seems unable to avoid the embrace of a radical postmodernism which is unable to distinguish truth and fiction, knowledge and conjecture.

3. Husserl’s revenge: The inability to verify that an object matches a concept.

Yet a third problem for the naturalist is that he cannot give a credible account of how we come to know something. As Husserl argued, it seems that this requires a process of verification (e.g. that an object is an apple). To know something, we must not only have a concept of it, we must also be able to come epistemically closer to that object, so that we can see that it does fall under that concept. Thus, to use one of Smith’s examples, if I see a distant woman in a grocery store who looks like my wife, but I am not sure, I can move myself physically and epistemically closer to the person until I see that she either does or does not match up to the conception I have of my wife. This process seems only to make sense if one has nonconceptual access to the

¹⁵ Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*, 176-177.

object of experience so that one can compare that experience with the concept, to see if they match. To do this, one must be able to attend to one's experiences and notice their features.

To buttress this account, Smith also gives two examples which appear to require us to notice an experience for what it is. First, in cognitive therapy for uncomfortable feelings, one learns to distinguish those feelings from one's interpretation of them.¹⁶ For example, in K. N. Oschner's experiments, patients learn to identify their own response of sadness to certain stimuli, and can then downwardly suppress it by providing a more neutral interpretation of the stimuli.¹⁷ For this to make sense, the experience of sadness must be detachable from a particular interpretation of its object: it cannot be that to see the stimulus *is* to see it as sad, for then I could never adopt a different response to it. Secondly, I am reliably informed by an expert, Smith himself, that surf fishing cannot be taught by a set of rules; rather "the individual fisherman must pay attention to what is represented in experiences...the felt-quality of both the bite and the resultant tag on the line."¹⁸

Yet it seems that naturalism can account for none of this, since there is no non-conceptual access either to real-world objects of experience or even to the experiences themselves. I cannot know if I am getting epistemically closer to an object that matches my concept if all my experience is itself a conceptualization. This would be like saying I am closer to London because I think of my experience in increasingly Londonish ways. I must have some way of accessing the object itself to see if it has the characteristics of London. Similarly, if I can only access experiences through my conceptualizations, it seems I cannot reconceptualize them. For if I cannot experience certain stimuli except by conceiving them as sad, I cannot independently access the stimuli and my response of sadness for what they are, and so I cannot reconceive a more neutral response, and therefore cannot downwardly suppress my sadness to those stimuli. But the fact is we can do all these things.

¹⁶ Ibid., 47-48.

¹⁷ K. N. Oschner et. al., "Re-thinking feelings: and fMRI study of the cognitive regulation of emotion." *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 14 (2002), 1215-1229.

¹⁸ Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*, 186.

4. An alternative ontology for knowledge.

Well, if naturalism cannot provide a credible ontology for knowledge, what *is* required? For one thing, it seems clear that an unabashed essentialism is required for both mental and physical properties. If Rea and Koons are right, for physical objects to be knowable, they must have essences so that they have well-defined identities and persistence conditions. One reason for this is that, on naturalism, causal powers reduce to those of an aggregate time slice (a particular configuration of matter at a time), and even if I can know this time slice, it is useless knowledge as it is instantly obsolete. But, following Husserl and Dallas Willard, Smith focuses on the idea of mental essences. Assuming that there are potential objects of knowledge, we can know them only if there is intrinsic intentionality, so that a thought is the thought it is because of what it is about. Thus the thought that the Packers suffered from poor refereeing could not have been the same thought if it were not about the Packers but about Hurricane Sandy instead. For knowledge to occur there must be a match between the intentional properties of the thought (the features it represents its object as having) and the intensional properties of the object (the features of the object given in experience).

In the ideal case, “every property of the object present in experience matches the corresponding properties of the object as it was thought to be.”¹⁹ A consequence is that while a simple abstract object may be fully known, one may have only partial knowledge of a physical object because it is not fully given. However, the important point is that on this account, the concept of an object in no way modifies the object; indeed the concept does not even guarantee that the object exists. However, for this very reason, experiences are detachable from concepts, and so one can have independent access to objects and determine whether they match those concepts. As an analogy, because a glove does not modify hands, one can determine whether the glove fits a given hand. Likewise, because the concept of an apple does not modify apples, one can determine whether a given object of nonconceptual experience matches that concept.

More than this however, the process of acquiring concepts and ultimately presuppose a radically different ontology from naturalism:

¹⁹ Ibid., 191.

“[K]nowledge of reality involves...following through on a series of noticings, comparings, forming concepts; seeing whether what is represented in experience matches up with one’s concepts; adjusting or correcting concepts, and more. There is, that is, an active agent that owns and possesses these states, and does these activities.... And it seems the self must somehow literally retain its personal identity through change, such that it is the same person who owns these thoughts and experiences, grows in understanding and learning, and more.”²⁰

Indeed, it appears that knowledge of reality requires “a robust form of dualism (indeed, *substance dualism*).”²¹ It is not only objects of knowledge but the knowing subject which must have a well-defined identity at a time and over time. There must be a unified self which can compare its experiences with its concepts, and that self must persist over the time it takes to determine if there is a match.

5. Assessment

As I suggested earlier, I think Smith’s book nicely complements the project of Rea and Koons. While the latter show that naturalism cannot define objects that could cause our knowledge (an outside-in objection), Smith shows that naturalism cannot explain how the subject can access objects, form valid concepts of them and come to know that those objects fall under those concepts (an inside-out objection). I also admire Smith’s admirable patience in sifting such a wide variety of naturalist views. In this he is a good model of virtue epistemology, considering the best replies a naturalist might make to his view before giving his final assessment.

I can imagine a couple of replies that naturalists might make to Smith’s book. The most fundamental revolves around the so-called “KK-Principle.” It is widely accepted that accounts of knowledge which require absolute certainty make the unreasonable demand that in order to know something, one needs to know that one knows it. Without access to some self-evident truths, we are off to the races and one has to know that one knows that one knows....etc. Now, Smith’s Husserlian account of knowledge does not require

²⁰ Ibid., 193-194.

²¹ Ibid., 194.

absolute Cartesian certainty (and it is compatible with partial knowledge and fallibility). Still, someone might say that his critique of naturalistic epistemologies amounts to the claim that they cannot show that any of their conceptualizations amount to knowledge of the real world, and so amounts to the claim that they cannot know that they know that world. A typical reliabilist response is to say that if, in fact, my conceptualizations are caused to be the way that they are by the way some real object is, and *if* that causal process is one that transmits information about the object to that representation with fidelity, *then* I can know that object as it is. To be sure, I cannot get outside of my own mind to see if this is what is happening, and so I cannot know that I know, but I will have knowledge if those conditions obtain regardless of whether I can refute radical skepticism. And whether they are naturalists or not, most epistemologists dismiss radical skepticism on the grounds that while radical doubts might be true, the burden of proof is on the skeptic to provide evidence that the process of belief formation is unreliable, not on the non-skeptic to show that it isn't.

However, it is not clear to me that Smith does require one to know that one knows. Indeed, he says that "I am not so concerned with skepticism to think that I must refute a skeptic."²² If this is right, Smith's account of concept formation and of matching concepts with experience is only supposed to show how such things are possible (he does not offer to prove that this is what really happens), but his point is that if they do not happen, it is hard to see how we can know anything, and that if naturalism is true, they cannot happen. Smith can surely grant that on naturalism it is *logically possible* that our concepts, interpretations or takings do carve reality at the joints, but argue that *this is very unlikely to be the case*, because we have no apparent means of forming or correcting our concepts on the basis of the way the world really is. So, as Victor Reppert says of his famous Argument From Reason against Naturalism, Smith could say that he is not giving a Skeptical Threat Argument (since his account does not exclude that threat either), but rather appeals to an Inference to the Best Explanation. If this is correct, then perhaps Smith would say that on naturalism, it would be an astonishing coincidence if our experiences and concepts were *of* real-world objects.

A related point is that, if the argument is an Inference to the Best Explanation, then it is most likely that the naturalist will attempt to counter Smith by offering an account of reliability premised on naturalistic evolution or

²² Ibid., 183.

the learning history of an organism (e.g. operant conditioning, or the reconfiguration of neural networks). Someone might argue that even though we do not have direct epistemic access to the way the world is via nonconceptual experience, still the kinds of concepts we have are shaped by interaction with a real environment (through natural selection, operant conditioning, re-weighting neural networks, or whatever), and so over time, those concepts have grown closer to the way the world really is because it is an advantage for surviving (or thriving). Could it be, therefore, that although we have no nonconceptual access to the objects of experience, real-world objects have, as it were, access to us, and these objects “program” and refine our concepts so that they are the kinds of things which can match up with reality under the right conditions? On this view, although there is no intrinsic ofness in our representations (experiences or thoughts), could we not still say that a representation type is of something X because over time, under normal conditions, only X causes a token of that type? So, for example, perhaps evolution accounts for some basic abilities to distinguish shapes, and learning history accounts for the ability to distinguish apples from pears and oranges etc., and as a result, there is a type of representation whose tokens will, under normal conditions, only be caused by apples. (In this way also, one can also misrepresent an orange as an apple because the conditions are *not* normal: the orange is moldy or under a green light, the subject is wearing green-tinted glasses, etc.)

So the naturalist I am imagining grants that we do not have nonconceptual access to objects of experience, but claims that all the same, those objects have access to our experiences and concepts, and thereby shape them to be *of* those objects. At least, this is something we can say with a tolerable degree of accuracy, realizing that concepts may be fuzzy, incompletely mastered, etc. Now obviously such an outside-in objection can be subjected to a skeptical threat, since there is no way to traverse the causal chain to show that it really is features of the object (and not, say a brain state) that cause the corresponding features of the experience or thought. But if Skeptical Threat Arguments are off the table, can Smith show that this scenario makes our paradigmatic knowledge claims ($2 + 2 = 4$; that’s an apple; chemotherapy kills cancer cells) unlikely? That is, can he show that granted that we do know many things, this is more likely to be true if his Husserlian account of knowledge is true than if an evolutionary/learning history account of the formation of experiences and concepts is true? My impression is that Smith will point out that what it takes to navigate life need only be useful, not true, and that

contingent interactions between humans and their environment are insufficient to account for the tight connection between concept and object required for knowledge. He says, for example, “There is an incredibly vast array of complex, interrelated abilities that seem designed to function together...it seems that we have been made in such a way that includes an incredibly sophisticated set of abilities, and a vast number of instructions, just to know reality.”²³

6. The importance of Smith’s work

As Smith says in the last chapter, if his basic thesis is correct, the Philosophical and Methodological Naturalism serving as gatekeepers of our intellectual and public life are Emperors with serious wardrobe malfunctions. As already noted, if naturalism makes it impossible to know the real world (or incredibly unlikely that we do), then we can have no confidence in its pronouncements on basic ontology. As a result, we need to reexamine naturalism’s low views of the value of human life, and its rejection of morality and religion as sources of possible knowledge about the real world. If a credible ontology for knowledge require substance dualism, then physicalism is false and we have evidence that humans are ensouled beings made in the image of God and therefore with considerably greater value than a sequence of aggregate time slices. Since naturalism is false, it would also make sense to consider whether we can know if God exists, which religion is true, and the basis for moral values. All of this would make a vast difference to what is taught in public schools, and to what counts as “*truth in the public square.*”²⁴ And it might provide the foundations for that common good that seems to elude so many Western democracies today. At the very least, Smith’s book ought to provoke a considerable re-assessment of the authority invested in naturalism throughout public life. I strongly recommend this powerful and incisive book.

Angus J. L. Menuge is Professor of Philosophy at Concordia University Wisconsin at Mequon, Wisconsin and the newly elected President of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. He is author of Agents Under Fire: Materialism and the Rationality of Science, and of many papers on the philosophy of mind and Christian apologetics.

²³ Ibid., 203.

²⁴ Ibid., 230.