

Critique and naturalism

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Introduction

As a critical realist who has spent many years trying to practice a social science that is critical of the social world, I have frequently consulted the literature of critical theory as a source of clarification of the nature and purpose of this kind of research and knowledge. But while I felt it had some important lessons, it also seemed peculiar and strangely limited. At the same time, substantive critical social science has become increasingly timid and cautious in the last thirty years, compared to that of the 1960s and 1970s, and not nearly as critical of the social world as the writings of the founding figures of social science in the 18th and 19th centuries (Sayer, 2011).

In anglophone social science and philosophy, it is Habermas who has been the most influential critical theorist during this period. There are several things I find strange about his work and that of others like him:

- the extent to which it is concerned with defining and defending the nature, legitimation and purpose of social theory through continual reinterpretations of its founders' writing; as such critical theory seems inward looking and more deliberated upon than applied and used for critiques of society;
- its avoidance of ontology, and with that, naturalism, so the discussions of critique say little or nothing about well-being, flourishing and suffering;
- its tendency to prioritise procedural, and formal criteria for critique and avoid substantive content in terms of *what* is good or bad, both for reasons to do with Kantian influences, and avoiding partiality, ethnocentrism, and restriction of human possibilities;
- the avoidance of ontology is paralleled by a concentration on the 'horizontal' intra and inter-discursive relations of reason, while 'vertical' relations between discourse and its referents are de-emphasized;
- its overwhelmingly abstract focus and its avoidance of empirical references illustrating and exemplifying its claims.

Critical realism (CR), by comparison, is very much about ontology (Bhaskar, 1975, 1998; Collier, 1994). Where epistemology is concerned, it is permissive and fallibilist, emphasizing that while our understanding of the world is always mediated and fallible, it is fallible because the world is not the product of our thought: to be capable of being mistaken about the world, there must be something independent of our thought it can be mistaken about. At base realism is characterised by its insistence on taking this independence seriously, without falling into the defeatist trap of assuming it means we cannot expect to find any reliable knowledge of the world. In addition to *construing* the world in various ways, we can also socially *construct* things, but then, as with any process of construction, to be successful, we have to do this in ways that take account of the properties of the materials – physical and ideational – that we use. Wishful thinking rarely works. Our degree of success gives us feedback on the adequacy our understanding and practice.

CR has a naturalist element in the sense that, in line with its ontology, it implies that we need to pay attention to the kind of beings we are, so that where ethical reason is concerned, attentiveness to the capacities and vulnerabilities of humans and other sentient beings is fundamental. Instead of elevating reason, understood as detached rationality of thought, as the only safe source of critique, it includes other forms of making sense of and experiencing the world, including the natural and social sciences, and everyday emotions and practice.

While I write as a critical realist, I have also been influenced by three other major kinds of thinking, which complement it: neo-Aristotelianism, particularly the work of Martha Nussbaum, but also Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Joseph Dunne; the feminist literature on the ethic of care; and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Nussbaum, 2001, MacIntyre, 1999, Dunne, 2009, Taylor, 1993, Kittay, 1999, Tronto, 1994; Smith, 1759). Consequently, I'm not proposing to present a 'purely' CR view of critical social science. I shall draw upon some ideas from my book *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*, and try to take them a little further, noting some key differences from the critical theory tradition (Sayer, 2011). I shall present a brief summary of the main elements of what I see as a viable and justifiable critical social science. I then move from a discussion of relevant aspects of CR and naturalism to discussions of values, the character of critical social science, and a brief summary of my misgivings about discourse ethics, ending with a review of various critical standpoints for social science. First, though, it's necessary to clear some ground.

The scholastic fallacy and its siblings

[Critique has] "retreated into the 'small world' of academe, where it enchants itself with itself without ever being in a position to really threaten anyone about anything." (Bourdieu, P. 2003, *Firing Back*, p. 2)

'Scholastic Fallacy' is a term used by Pierre Bourdieu to refer to a tendency of academics to project unknowingly the particular characteristics of their contemplative and discursive relation to the world onto everything they study (Bourdieu, 2000). The fallacy could also be seen as a target of some of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. It's especially common in philosophy, the most contemplative and discursively focused of the disciplines, and hence in critical theory too. The unreflexive projection of a life of reason and contemplation onto social actors means that they are seen mainly as reasoners, not as doers - sentient in ways that go beyond the capacity for reason. As Bourdieu argues, much of what people do is 'on automatic', on the basis of dispositions and skills acquired through previous social practices and of which we are only partly aware. Further, just as 'distance from necessity' (e.g. having time for abstract and non-functional activities) affirms symbolic dominance, so does disdain for the concrete and empirical in some academic literature.

While this fallacy is very evident, particularly in the more philosophically oriented social theory, there are several other complementary tendencies.

First is a tendency to see causes always as enemies, the body and emotions as heteronomy, and reason as affording autonomy against these through (apparently) escaping causation and yet somehow capable of controlling our actions. The dichotomy of reason and causation provides no way of understanding how we intervene in the world, or of how we influence and are influenced by it, both pushing and being pushed, both as causal agents and as subject to causal processes. At a philosophical level this is underpinned by a tendency to see discourse as a-causal, indeed as radically different to the realm of causes. For critical realists, causes are simply whatever produces or blocks change, so while discourses and meaningful action, unlike purely physical processes, certainly have to be *understood* through *verstehen* to identify their constitutive meanings, they can also be causes of behaviour. If we didn't think reasons and other discursive elements could make (i.e. cause) people (to) think,¹ feel and act in certain ways, what would be the point of discourse?

Second, the human mind is reduced to its capacity for reasoned reflection, while its interaction with the body, and its capacity for emotion are seen as incidental or worse, a threat to reason. Aside from any intellectual justifications for this, the aversion to the body and emotion has a sociological explanation in the social (class) distance between academics and those whose work and relation to the world is primarily practical.

¹ A possible reason for the rejection of the idea of reasons and other discursive elements as causal stems from the failure to critique the dominant positivist conception of causation as being about fixed regularities. Discourse and its effects seem to lack regularity. CR shows this conception to be incoherent and argues for a concept of causal powers, contingently activated, whose effects when activated depend on context, so that causation has no necessary link to empirical regularities. So unique causes – material or discursive – can be efficacious (Bhaskar, 1998; Harré and Madden, 1975).

Keeping an academic cool and maintaining a professional gravitas – strategies of distinction in Bourdieu's terms - easily lead to an avoidance of vulnerability, emotion, love, infancy and helplessness, so that much social theory and philosophy has a somewhat autistic, lofty and masculinist character. It fits with a left-brain view of the world – logical and focused but lacking much of the awareness of context, or empathy and concern associated with the right brain. As neuroscience has shown, the former depends on the latter, and without it we cannot make good judgements or function successfully in interaction with others (Damasio, 1994). To argue this is not to reject reason for romanticism, for we need reason and science to deepen our understanding of it.

Third, the valuation of the adult, implicitly male, independent reasoner can easily lead to a view of human life that ignores our inescapable dependence on others, our need for care and emotional intelligence, and the way in which our capacities as adults, including our capacity for independent reasoning and for understanding others, depend on our upbringing. The more psychoanalytic currents in critical theory may address some of this, though again often more in dialogue with ancestors of critical theory (Freud) than through attending to the findings of more recent empirical research. Our social nature derives from our dependence on others for care in early life before it derives from communicative interaction. Both are important, and it is dangerous to dismiss the former as of only passing significance. The pathologies of contemporary masculinity in many societies have much to do with the suppression and denial of this vulnerability and dependence and of right brain awareness, and there is a great irony in a critical theory that prides itself on its reflexivity but embodies this one-sidedness.

The net effect of the scholastic fallacy and these associated tendencies is to lead us to disregard naturalistic criteria for developing critical standpoints, from which societies, practices and discourses can be evaluated. All these tendencies have to be countered if we are to develop adequate critical social science. One of many reasons why Axel Honneth's work on recognition is a welcome development in critical theory is that it takes us closer to naturalism and eudaimonistic criteria (i.e. concerning well-being) for critical theory. For example, it acknowledges the importance to individuals of unconditional love in their childhood (Honneth, 1995; 2007). It is therefore much more usable in critical social science than discourse ethics.

Critical realism and naturalism

As I noted, critical realist philosophy is primarily about ontology. Thus causation depends not on the logical relation between statements or regularities, as in logical empiricism, but on the qualities of things and their relationships. When applied in social science, it therefore asks the following kinds of 'retroductive' questions (Sayer, 2000):

- *What is it about x* that enables it to do y?
- *What is it about* people and society that makes them cultural beings and ethical/unethical beings?
- *What is it about* people that makes recognition – or anything - matter to them?

To answer the last two questions we would have to consider what our nature as human beings is. This is a question that many regard with alarm. We are cultural, historical beings, they will say, and to describe us as having a nature is to risk fixing us, universalising the historically- and culturally-specific features of our own culture and treating them as a norm. These are indeed risks, but to say that we are cultural beings is already to say something about our nature, and begs a realist question: what is it about human beings (and certain other species) that enables them to develop cultures?; not just any object or species is capable of being acculturated. The dangers of ignoring our nature (in the sense of constitution and capacities, not merely biology) are just as great. Often the fears are increased by a mistaken assumption that nature is immutable: but it can be changed, albeit in accordance with its properties. Sometimes attempts to describe human nature are referred to as ‘philosophical anthropology’, and in some circles this has become a pejorative term. But what I am proposing is not that² but an empirical understanding, to be revised as relevant research proceeds. There are risks if we get this seriously wrong, but greater risks if we pretend we can do without it, for then we can voluntaristically ‘socially construct’ abuse and violence as good.

Marx, in realist fashion, insisted on addressing these questions, particularly with regard to sentience. In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, he proposes that we should see ‘sensuousness’ not as mere capacity for reason but “as practical, human-sensuous activity”, as both making sense and being causally efficacious. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* he also offers a basic explanation of why things matter to us: “Man as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a suffering being - and because he feels that he suffers, a passionate being.” This much is well known to Marx scholars and no doubt to critical theorists. But there is also a less well known but striking comment in a letter to Lasalle. Following the death of Marx’s 8 year old son, Edgar, he wrote:

“Bacon says that really important people have so many relations to nature and the world, so many objects of interest, that they easily get over any loss. I am not one of those important people. The death of my child has shattered me to the

² While I did accept the term in my 2011 book, I’ve stopped using it not only because for some it’s a simple, unexplained – and unexamined? - pejorative, but because claims about our nature are no less based on empirical research, or more ‘philosophical’ than any other empirical claims. Further, I don’t see why ‘anthropology’ should be singled out from biology, neuroscience and psychology.

very core and I feel the loss as keenly as on the first day. My poor wife is also completely broken down." *Letter to Lasalle, 28/7/1855*

This suggests another aspect of our nature as social beings from those highlighted in Marx's public remarks. We are not just beings who are social in that we live together and form divisions of labour, and so on. It is also because we are social in the sense of relational beings, who depend from the start on others with whom we can form attachments, both for our survival and our sense of who we are and our basic ontological security. Our attachments are not wholly reducible to communicative interaction with 'interlocuters', as the scholastic fallacy tends to imply. And our need of attachments is one of the reasons for our vulnerability, and vice versa. We could also add, following Margaret Archer, that we are beings who tend, contingently, to develop commitments and concerns, whether their objects be work, justice, politics, religion, art, music, sport, science, philosophy, or anything from archaeology and bees to yoga and zoology (Archer, 2000). These may assume considerable significance in our lives, such that the well-being of such practices and having access to them becomes crucial to our own sense of self and well-being. These are not '*a priori*' claims but empirical findings that anyone can challenge.

Being both vulnerable and capable, always poised between how things are now and how they could be in future, we are, and have to be, *evaluative beings* (Archer, 2000). Normativity would have no point otherwise. And as social beings, our evaluations of others and their behaviour are particularly important. This capacity for evaluation is not only evident in conscious consideration of ourselves in relation to our circumstances, but in our ongoing semi-conscious, non-discursive practical action through our emotional, affective, physical responses, which depend very much on dispositions acquired through previous practice (Murdoch, 1970).

All these things - our capacity for practical, human-sensuousness, our capacity for suffering (and, by implication, flourishing), our dependence on and need of others as deeply social beings, and our emotions - are objective features, though of course the way they develop is culturally specific. We have *differently cultivated natures*.

To be cultural beings we have to have the requisite neurological capacity and social upbringing. The fact that we care about anything presupposes our neediness, our lack and desire, and our capacity for both flourishing and suffering. Well-being or flourishing are objective³ states of being which we strive (fallibly) to discover and create. Our intentions only work out if they happen to be compatible with those capacities. The fact that such states are generally socially constructed does not alter this. Parental love is

3. I am using 'objective' here in the ontological sense of things that can exist independently of our knowing them, not in the epistemological sense as 'true knowledge'.

more conducive to childrens' well being than neglect and abuse because of the vulnerable nature of children, regardless of whether this is recognized discursively or not. Nor does the fact that different cultures may offer different forms of well-being make them any less objective or mean that just any form of life can count as flourishing, as if our natures were wholly malleable and unconstrained.

Flourishing is not just the absence of suffering: as Aristotle emphasized, it goes beyond this to the exercise and development of capacities. What we are allowed/required to *do* with our lives is central to it: it is not just a matter of distribution of resources, or indeed recognition, important though these are, but contribution, or more generally 'capabilities', such as the ability to participate in the life of the community, to avoid violence and threat, to be able to exercise our bodies, imagination and senses, to participate in political decisions that influence our lives, and so on (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Nussbaum says her list of capabilities is presented as provisional and as the result of inter-cultural discussions on well-being. She describes it as 'thick and vague': thick in the sense that it acknowledges there are many elements of human flourishing; deliberately vague to allow for different cultural forms that they can take.

Sen and Nussbaum are well-aware of the phenomenon of 'adaptive preferences', where people, particularly in disadvantaged positions, accept those positions rather than resist them: as Bourdieu often said, 'they refuse what they are refused'. But consistent with their Aristotelian influences, they do not reduce well-being to a purely subjective matter of 'happiness'. Those who have been denied the opportunity to participate in the governance of their community may not initially appreciate the opportunity when offered it, when everything in their upbringing has told them they don't count and are not worthy. Which preferences are adaptive and which consistent with flourishing must be decided through open and democratic discussion that is open to empirical evidence and experimentation. Rather than bury our head in the sand and say it's all subjective, or that empirical evidence is unreliable, and refuse to engage with any proposals regarding human flourishing, we need to face the challenge presented by capability claims; for example, do we or do we not think that being able to exercise our bodies, imagination and senses is important for well-being?

To describe either suffering or flourishing is to make claims that are simultaneously and inseparably factual and evaluative. Thus a social worker who says 'this child is being abused' is making a statement that defies any fact-value distinction. In 'thick ethical concepts' such as abuse, humiliation, neglect or racism, the descriptive and the evaluative cannot be separated. If you don't know that suffering or humiliation etc are *bad*, you don't know what they *are*. We can't get far in describing social phenomena without reference to flourishing and suffering. When we ask people how they *are*, we expect them to give some indication of how *well* or *badly* things are going for them. If your doctor told you your blood pressure was 190/100 but refused to tell you whether

that was good or bad on the grounds that that would be a value judgement and 'not objective', you would seek another doctor.

I realise that many critical theorists also reject a sharp fact-value distinction, but consistent with realism and naturalism, my reasons for rejecting it are primarily ontological. The belief that we can understand the living world without value-judgements is wrong not because value-judgements are an affliction that we unfortunately cannot escape, but because they're necessary for describing states of being – and of course, for living. Good and bad health are states of being that can only be understood inter-subjectively but are not merely voluntaristically 'constructed'. 'Objectivity' in the epistemological sense of truth value has no necessary negative – or positive - relationship with values (Anderson, 2004). Defining objectivity in terms of value-freedom is a mistake. Facts and values are not necessarily separable and opposed. To be sure, evaluations are fallible, but so too are factual claims; they are not radically different. The desire for absolute guarantees of truth is misguided, and its inevitable disappointment easily leads to an impractical scepticism or relativism.

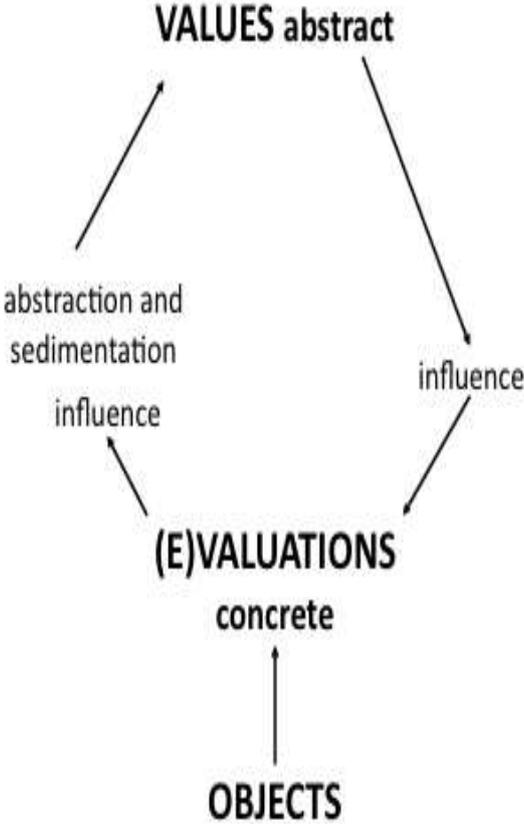
No doubt it will be objected that a criterion of well-being for critical social science is problematic because we cannot give a full account of well-being for all people and cultures at all times or places. That's true of course, but we should beware of the all-or-nothing fallacy here: just because we can't say everything about well-being it doesn't follow that we know nothing reliable about it.⁴ There are some fundamental elements, some of them enshrined in rights, which we do know about, and have little excuse for ignoring. How can critical social scientists use terms like 'racist' without implying something about human capacities for flourishing and suffering?

Values, virtues

Coupled with this naturalist basis for critical evaluation is a distinctive view of the nature of values. The familiar dichotomising of values and facts is the result of a 200 year process in which many philosophers and social scientists have attempted to expel values from social science. What is less often noticed is the other side of the coin in this process: *the de-rationalisation of values*. To correct this problematic divorce, we need to

4. Kant was too pessimistic about this: "It is not even known at all to us what the human being now is, although consciousness and the senses ought to instruct us in this; how much less will we be able to guess what one day he ought to become. Nevertheless, the human soul's desire for knowledge snaps very desirously at this object, which lies so far from it, and strives, in such obscure knowledge, to shed some light" (Kant, cited in Allen Wood 'Kant and the Problem of Human Nature'.)

re-connect values to evaluations. Values are abstractions from particular evaluations that become sedimented as value-orientations or attitudes, which then recursively influence evaluations of particular things. However, the circle need not be closed, for evaluations are *of* things that can exist independently of their evaluation - for example, someone else's behaviour. Particularly where ethical issues are concerned they are not merely conventional but eudaimonistic. That is, values have a direct or indirect relationship to understandings of well being or ill-being as objective states. Of course, the valuations are subject to challenge, but again, so too are factual claims; there is nothing exceptional about this.



Despite the tendency of values to shape particular concrete evaluations, it is possible for people to notice when observed practices or situations don't fit with their usual valuations. (We draw upon not one but many values in making any particular judgement, so it is possible for them to come into conflict.) Thus, a racist, confronted with unexpectedly virtuous behaviour from a member of the despised group, may be prompted to question her prejudices.

As Andrew Collier, a critical realist philosopher, argued, ethical behaviour depends on attentiveness to the situation at hand. This is evident in virtue terms like “‘considerate’ or ‘inconsiderate’, ‘thoughtful’ or ‘thoughtless’, ‘sensitive’ or ‘insensitive’” (Collier, 1999, p.16). When we wonder what to do or how we should judge something, the most important thing to do is find out as much as possible about it and reason about it (Collier, 1999; 2004). In English we often talk of (un)ethical behaviour or individuals as ‘(un)reasonable’, not only in the sense that they will (not) listen to reason, but that they pay close attention to the well-being of those they engage with, and are sensitive to others’ needs and vulnerabilities; it is an ethical judgement of their character. It implies a capacity for empathy as Adam Smith emphasized (Smith, 1759).⁵ We cannot have justice unless we ‘do justice’ to people by attending to their capacities and vulnerabilities, as they are.⁶ Anyone who merely followed norms regardless and without any attentiveness to such specificities would be considered ‘unreasonable’, and of course this can lead to highly unethical behaviour, as the infamous example of Adolf Eichmann showed. As Jarrett Zigon puts it:

“morality is better thought of as a continuous dialogical process during which persons are in constant interaction with their world and the persons in that world, rather than as a set category of beliefs from which one picks appropriate responses to particular situations.” (Zigon, 2009, p. 155).

In sociological terms, virtues and vices are dispositions - acquired embodied tendencies to behave in certain ways, and hence part of the habitus, though curiously Bourdieu himself made little of their ethical dimension. They have an emotional dimension, but again, emotions are not to be counterposed to reason as its opposite; as Martha Nussbaum argues, they have a cognitive aspect and are often intelligent embodied responses to our concerns, bodily, social and cultural (Nussbaum, 2001; 2014; see also Archer, 2000). Without them life would be difficult, indeed, as the condition of autism reveals, limited capacities for empathetic, emotional understanding make participation in social life difficult. This is also similar to Adam Smith’s view of moral sentiments as fallible but often intelligent responses to events.

The most congenial major school of moral philosophy for social science is not deontology, utilitarianism or discourse ethics but virtue ethics, because of its emphasis on the formation of subjects through socialisation. Instead of individuals seemingly born as independent adults, already possessed of an autonomous capacity for reason independent of socialization and social context, what we are and much of how we think and act depends on what we have become through our practical engagement in social life from birth, as neuroscience, developmental and social psychology and sociology all tell us in different ways. One might see the ethic of care literature as complementary to

5. ‘Sympathy’ was Smith’s preferred term, though for him this meant an ability to read others’ minds, feelings and situation rather than compassion, which might or might not follow from its exercise.

6 Nussbaum makes convergent points about justice and empathy (Nussbaum, 2006; 2014). I would also argue that equality of condition is important for well-being too (Sayer, 2011, 2014).

this through its enrichment of our understanding of how human beings contingently become ethical subjects. All of these literatures help explain the open-ended process of human becoming, and what it is about us that enables us to develop in such extraordinarily diverse cultural ways. Philosophy and the more philosophically oriented social theory, such as critical theory, need to take notice of this.

Whereas critical theory emphasizes 'horizontal' relations within discourse, between speakers, and (ideally) their search for resolutions of problems in a situation where the only force is the force of the better argument, CR also emphasizes the 'vertical' relation of subject to object. The 'reasonable' person attends to the other not only as an interlocutor, but as a person with particular capacities, vulnerabilities and biography, while taking account of the concrete context. The view of values as (vertically) related to the objects (persons or practices) being valued, as well as (horizontally) to others in the value community fits with this. It implies reducing the importance typically attached to social norms in social science.⁷ At worst, a view of ethics and morality as based on norms as mere conventions effectively de-normativizes them, for the values and valuations then become just a matter of 'what we do round here' rather than also having a eudaimonistic content. "Conventionality is not morality . . . To attack the first is not to assail the last." (Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*.)⁸ At best, norms are based on formalisations of practical wisdom derived from experience, and treated only as rough guides to concrete practices. This is why Aristotle put such emphasis on the importance of practical experience in developing virtues. Of course, the experience could be such that those involved in it are likely to develop vices. In distinguishing virtues from vices we have to engage with considerations of well-being, where, as with any kind of knowledge, we will find some things we are sure of, some we are tentative about, and some unknown, not least because flourishing has to be discovered and made, and there may be some kinds we have yet to find. We should pay less attention to the things of logic and more to the logic of things. Although procedural justice has its virtues, placing our faith in reason in the horizontal dimension is not a substitute for reason in the vertical dimension.

Another way of putting this difference is that the CR/naturalist approaches emphasize the 'aboutness' of discourse, values and reason. This does not entail an assumption of a privileged relation to the world which provides ultimate, absolute truths, just an assumption that though fallible, certain understandings of our selves, actions and world,

7. Norms differ from (individual) values in that their distinctive feature is that they are prescribed by others. Values can become formalised as norms, and conversely, norms can influence values.

8. Thanks to Dimitri Mader for bringing this quotation to my attention.

can be practically adequate, suggesting that they provide a good-enough fit between practice and contexts to allow successful action and flourishing in most cases.

The alienation of values from the object of valuation and/or from the subject makes them appear arbitrary, and when put in the form of prescriptions, as groundless injunctions. The reduction of concrete, thick ethical terms like 'kind' or 'cruel' to thin ethical terms like good and bad, right and wrong makes them appear as beyond reason. Reason – divorced from its object and from the subject, is reduced to formal rationality, logical consistency. These two reductionisms, paralleling the fact-value dichotomy, have done immense damage to social science, undermining the critical stance that was so evident in the work of its founders.

The fact that many have mistaken ideas about human nature (for example, that we are purely self-interested) does not mean that the whole subject is best avoided or that there is nothing to know, for again, mistaken ideas about something presuppose that there is something about which they can be mistaken (see also Midgley, 1984). And of course many philosophers had mistaken ideas about human nature (Kant on the capacities of Africans, for example). In addition, the failure to acknowledge our vulnerability and dependence in masculine modernist culture, led to a form of splitting in which these characteristics were seen negatively and projected onto the colonised others. But as Anthony Appiah argues, the problem here was not naturalism or universalism, but mistaken naturalism and a failure to be sufficiently universalistic (Appiah, 2005, p. 250) - or in CR terms, a failure to be attentive to the other.

Post-structuralists may be concerned that CR, particularly with the naturalistic emphasis sketched here, is essentialist. Although the word essentialist is used in a wide range of ways - and often as a simple pejorative in no need of explanation of what the 'sin' consists in – it generally reflects concerns first that phenomena, particularly people, are being treated as homogeneous, thereby denying difference. Second, it typically involves a suspicion of determinism: any object has particular properties so it inevitably behaves in a fixed way. CR (and other naturalist philosophies) certainly does claim that we and other species and things have particular capacities - causal powers and susceptibilities, some of them fairly distinctive. But first, CR doesn't have to assume homogeneity, in fact it can accept that difference goes all the way down, that everything varies, albeit to varying extent, and the adequacy of any ontology of discrete distinct objects needs to be checked rather assumed. So none of the properties that human beings have, whether similar or dissimilar to those of other species, exist in exactly the same form and degree in all individuals, for reasons to do with both biology and cultural difference *and* their interaction in shaping our mind-bodies. From a CR point of view, given the importance in ethics of attentiveness to particular persons, practices and situations, acknowledging variation and difference is vital for ethical behaviour.

Further, regarding the charge of determinism, most of these capacities or causal powers and susceptibilities may or may not be activated. Most people are physically capable of violence against others, but few may activate that causal power. Again, it is contingent whether such powers are activated, and even when they are, the consequences depend on the context and whatever other causal powers and susceptibilities are met. Further, many of our capacities only come into being in certain contingent circumstances, through particular interactions of physiological and cognitive social processes that depend particularly on our education and broader socialization – for example, whether we are brought up in a literate or non-literate society. So there is nothing deterministic about this kind of naturalism and it doesn't reduce to biologism.

A Qualified Ethical Naturalism

What I am proposing, then, is a kind of naturalism that is qualified in ways that allow it to escape the usual pitfalls of ignoring cultural variety and foreclosing possibilities of novelty. By 'nature' here I do not mean just biology but the total assemblage of processes that constitute us - cultural, social, cognitive, biological, material. These are the key qualifications:

1. Human nature/being is a constrained and enabled, but open-ended process of becoming, resulting from the contingent interaction and co-development of cognitive, social and biological capacities and processes. Ethics should take account of the differently cultivated natures of people throughout the life course and their capacities for suffering and flourishing in all their variety. Thus what is ethical for an able-bodied person may not for someone with a disability.
2. In the range of human cultures there are many different *conceptions* of needs, and well-being or 'the good'. While there is some variety in what is construed as good, not just anything that is claimed to be good is good, hence the need to acknowledge the possibility of misconceptions. Or to put it another way, because we are not completely malleable or indifferent to how we are treated, what is *construed* as good may not be capable of being successfully *constructed* to be good. Not all kinds of suffering and limitation can be passed off as good, and hence resistance to dominant misconceptions is to be expected.
3. Sometimes different cultural forms are forms of the same thing: cultures may have different ways of showing respect for others, but the importance they attach to observing them shows something in common – the importance of respect. In addition, different cultural *forms* allow objectively different kinds of flourishing, and suffering: a mainly Dionysian culture allows different kinds from a mainly Appollonian culture.

4. Some forms of practice have a high degree of cultural autonomy and are not biologically necessary, though they may have effects that are physiologically and psychologically beneficial and count among criteria for their evaluation. Insofar as members of particular cultures form commitments to those practices, for example those of a religion, so they form part of their identity, then denial of the possibility of practising them is an objective harm.

This is therefore an objectivist *and* pluralist view of well-being, but not a relativist one. There are many possible forms of flourishing, some of which we have possibly not yet discovered, but not just anything can be passed off as flourishing. This qualified ethical naturalism is compatible with the Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).

Habermas' discourse ethics

Having presented this brief summary of critical realist and related naturalist approaches to critical theory, let me briefly make explicit what I find problematic about Habermas' work on critique and discourse ethics.

In this, he attempts to ground critical standpoints not in some conception of human well-being but in the very preconditions of discourse itself. While I accept his arguments as sound on their own terms, and while the valorization of deliberative democracy is certainly attractive, the exercise remains, as many commentators have noted, a formal, contentless one; the good is whatever might be defined as good in unconstrained deliberative discourse amongst equals. Like its Kantian antecedent, it is basically a procedural approach to ethics. It abstracts from and leaves open the actual content of any ethical discourse, and removes it from the context of flourishing and suffering, from emotional reason, material practice and phronesis.⁹ Again, but for the fact that we are social animals and can suffer or flourish it is not clear why we would be motivated to deliberate with others. Any example of such discourse would have to appeal to evidence, standards, and norms, and these in turn would presumably have to adduce some implications for well-being, including that of valued cultural practices. Even where the internal standards of practices were appealed to as criteria - 'the good of the church/sport/discipline' or whatever - the practices themselves would have to be justified, and for this they must ultimately have to make claims about flourishing. Yet

9. Habermas claims to correct the Kantian model of the unsituated subject by acknowledging that our capacity for agency develops through socialisation into forms of life structured by communicative interaction, but even this involves a form of linguistic reductionism, and a scholastic fallacy; it ignores the role of the body, emotion, care and material action in socialisation (Habermas, 1993; Cooke, 1999).

Habermas is extraordinarily coy about what discourse might be *about*, as if vertical relations of reference or ‘aboutness’ do not also have a role (Collier, 2003). Ironically, given his critique of Foucault, his own work could therefore be accused of being crypto-normative.

Thus while discourse ethics serves as an interesting second-order reflection on critique it remains a way of evading the most important issue: *what* is good or right and *why*?¹⁰ Small wonder then, that discourse ethics has had so little influence on concrete studies in critical social science. Desirable though deliberative democracy is – not least intrinsically because it enables us to act rationally, justly and with respect for others – it is neither necessary nor sufficient for promoting flourishing. The distance of discourse ethics from ordinary life, so evident in its own discourse and style, with its apparent disdain for empirical examples, and from well-being as we defined it earlier, is its Achilles heel.¹¹

Conclusion

What is the essence of critique? Here are some possible candidates:

First: the reduction of illusion in society through the identification of false beliefs that inform practice, such as those of racism. One variant of this is sometimes termed ‘de-naturalizing’, i.e. identifying the contingency or historical and cultural specificity of social phenomena: the world has been and could be different. While this is indeed essential for critical social theory, and widely assumed to have radical implications, it doesn’t actually take us very far. A fascist could agree that another world is possible; a conservative could agree but argue that we already live in the best of possible worlds.

Second, and related to this, critique is sometimes defined as of the exposure and critique of contradictions and irrationalities, such as those underpinning capitalism’s crisis-prone nature. But why these should actually a problem for people still needs to be explained.

Third, it may involve critique of ideology in the Marxist sense – that is not only identifying false beliefs supporting domination, but explaining why they are held, and how they have a self-confirming character by helping to maintain circumstances (‘real appearances’) that support those beliefs. As Bourdieu said, a critique should be able to

10. For Aristotelians a strong distinction between the right and the good has little meaning.

11. For critiques of Habermas see Dews (1999), especially the essays by Maeve Cooke and Dieter Henrich, and Freundlieb et al (2004).

“explain the apparent truth of the theory that it shows to be false” (Bourdieu, 2005). This second explanatory stage is vital, but the reasons why the false beliefs are a problem is left unclear.

Important though all these characteristics are, they don't go far enough, because they leave out the critique of injustice, avoidable suffering, and restricted flourishing.

In actual critical social science, if not in its rationales, this eudaimonistic element is implicit in common terms like 'exploitation', 'oppression', 'racism', 'abuse', 'othering' – inherently evaluative terms. However, critical social scientists rarely go beyond these terms and defend the evaluations that lie behind them. Possibly they may assume that their readers already accept their valuations, or assume them to be too obvious to need defending. But they might also be aware that if they do pursue such questions, they are likely to be accused of importing their values into the analysis, as if these could only be a contaminant, distorting otherwise objective analysis. Alternatively they may be asked 'where their critique hails from', which again implies that the evaluation is problematic because it is 'subjective' and arbitrary, or deriving from an imagined Archimedean point (which it needn't), or imposing some kind of repressive universalism. Tactically, then, radicals may find it best not to reveal too much of their critical standpoints, for the more they do so, the more likely they are to be dismissed as 'subjective' or as authoritarians foisting their views on others. As a result, much of critical social science just gives the reader a vague negative feeling about the phenomena being analysed, but does not attempt to say in what particular respects and for what reasons they are problematic. It might therefore be termed crypto-normative.

I would argue that we need to analyse just *what* is problematic about the targets of such critiques of ill-being. In so doing, engagement with empirical evidence and a qualified naturalism are indispensable. Sometimes, moral and political philosophy can provide such an analysis, but the unfortunate divorce of philosophy from substantive social science in the 19th century meant that not only the dialogue between them but the content of the separated disciplines suffered. Critical social science and critical theory need to get back together again.

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