Normativity in the Social Sciences and Professions[1]

Andrew Sayer, May 2016

Introduction

In everyday life, the most important questions we face tend to be normative ones about what is good or bad, right or wrong. Because of our psychological and physical vulnerability, our dependence on others, and our capacity for diverse actions, our relation to the world is one of concern, for we can flourish or suffer. We are necessarily *evaluative beings*, continually having to monitor and evaluate how we, and other things we care about, are faring, often wondering 'what to do for the best', whether it is about our health, our actions, our environment or our relations with others. Some of this evaluation is done 'on automatic', semi-consciously, in the flow of life, but some involves reflection or 'internal conversations' (Archer, 2003). Evaluation is central to the work of professionals such as social workers, who continually assess the well-being and safety or otherwise of clients, and decide what they need and what would improve their situation.

But in social science it is positive (descriptive and explanatory) questions that are primary, and indeed normative judgements are widely seen as radically different, and in danger of compromising the objectivity of research. The orthodox position is that facts and value are sharply distinct, values cannot be derived from facts, and it is not the job of social science to make value judgements. And even though social science

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[1] This chapters draws extensively on my book Why Things Matter to People (Sayer, 2011).

generally recognizes that values and valuation pervade the worlds of those they study, its treatment of people's relation to the world of concern often fails to do justice to it. Typically, it either reduces their behaviour to the following of conventions or norms, or it treats values as merely subjective, and not about anything objective. People's values and evaluations are seen as just facts about them, not beliefs and claims that have import or significance and could be more or less true. The result is an alienated and alienating representation of social life that fails to acknowledge the force of people's concerns and evaluations. And if a social scientific account of a situation fails to tell us whether people are flourishing or suffering – because its authors believe they must not make value-judgements in their work – the account will inevitably be deficient as a description.

The inadequacy of these treatments of normativity is evident in many everyday situations. When a social worker says a child is being abused, this clearly involves not only an evaluative judgement that the situation is *bad*, but a factual claim about what is the case; she is not merely arbitrarily projecting a value-judgement onto the world or just following a convention or norm. It straddles any distinction of fact and value. And on the basis of what she believes to fact, the social worker has to decide what action should be taken; she appears to derive an ought from an is. And of course in life generally, we continually have to make judgements about situations and decide what to do.

In this chapter, I shall argue that if social science is to understand both everyday life and the work of professionals, it needs to overcome its resistance to normativity, both as part of its object of study and within its own practice or discourse. If it is to understand people and their world, it needs to take the normative dimension of life seriously, both in terms of how and why things matter to people, and recognize that

evaluative judgements may be more or less true. This involves challenging the

pervasive assumption that positive and normative thought, or fact and value, are

always radically distinct and incompatible. While it involves some arguments from

critical realism, the argument also draws upon literature from neo-Aristotelian ethics

and the ethic of care. I shall first argue that social science's dominant understanding

of the nature of values is flawed, and that its dichotomous treatments of fact and value

are unsustainable where issues of health or flourishing or suffering concerned. I shall

then discuss whether some valuations - for example, about well-being – might have

universal applicability or whether all such judgements are culturally-specific. Next I

argue that acting ethically requires attentiveness to the specificities of the other and

their context, and go on to illustrate this in relation to care and dignity. Penultimately,

I discuss and critique poststructuralism's own difficulties with normativity, before

concluding.

Social science and values

In so far as social science deals with normativity, it tends to treat people's sentiments,

concerns and judgements just as contingent facts about them and their societies. Their

values are either just subjective, individual preferences ('emotivism'[2]) or internalized

social norms ('conventionalism'). In neither case are they seen as rational or as

responses to objective states of affairs, such as practices of kindness or cruelty. In

conventionalism, values are merely arbitrary cultural conventions – 'what people do

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[2] "Emotivism[2] is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character . . . [they] are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. . . We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings or attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others." (MacIntyre, 1985, p.11-12). As we shall see, the term is unfortunate in that it suggests emotions have nothing to do with reason.

round here' – or in a more recent version, merely 'culturally constituted'. As Davydova and Sharrock note, this implies a 'conformity concept of morality' (Davydova and Sharrock, 2003; see also Bauman, 1989). Consequently, it can render people as socially-constructed dupes - objects of a superior sociological gaze. In both emotivist and conventionalist interpretations, the normative force of individuals' concerns and valuations - how and why they matter to actors – is lost, edited out, as if it were either unimportant or too obvious to require comment.

But both approaches seem at least half right. Values are subjective in the sense that they are important elements of individuals' characters and beliefs; they may be shared with others, but they are also felt personally. And conventionalism acknowledges that values vary significantly across societies, and that individuals tend to take on the values of their own culture. Yet while values are indeed culturally variable, they are not completely arbitrary; they have something to do with well-being and ill-being and they refer to something which is not merely their product. When those who are subjectivists or conventionalists in the seminar room experience bad treatment by someone in their everyday lives, they are unlikely to remonstrate with the perpetrator by saying 'look, personally, I just don't happen to like that', or 'don't you know that's culturally constructed as bad round here?'; rather they are likely to draw attention in some way to the harm and suffering that has been caused. This implies that values are not just conventions about what we should do and think but about matters to do with well-being, where well-being is not simply anything we care to define it as or just an experience, but a state which can exist even if it is not noticed, and which we can try to understand, or construct if it has not been achieved. To refer to harm is to identify objective consequences. To be sure, our sensitivity to and awareness of harm is mediated by available ways of seeing and convention, and our beliefs about harm are

fallible, but that fallibility presupposes there is something objective in the sense of independent of our beliefs about which we can be mistaken (Collier, 2003). At the same time, if we could never successfully identify harm, we wouldn't survive for long. We tell our children to be careful when crossing the road not because in our culture it is constructed as dangerous, but because it is dangerous whatever our culture, and the costs of our fallibility in making judgements about it are extremely high.

In other words, our values and value-judgements, particularly those concerning how people relate to one another, have a *eudaimonistic* content, to use Aristotle's term: that is, they involve an assessment of flourishing or its absence. Many social norms are based upon beliefs about what constitutes human flourishing, though some appear to be no more than arbitrary conventions. As Shaun Nichols shows, research on how people make ethical judgements shows them to be capable of distinguishing eudaimonistic moral norms or values from conventional or authority-based norms. He reports an interesting study by Nucci of Amish children in the United States in which it was found that 100% of them "said that if God had made no rule against working on Sunday, it would not be wrong to work on Sunday. However, more than 80% of these subjects said that even if God had made no rule about hitting, it would still be wrong to hit." (Nichols, 2004, p. 6). Other studies of children have shown them to be able to distinguish the moral from the merely conventional by their third birthday (Nichols, 2004, p.78). Interestingly, studies of psychopaths have shown them to be incapable of distinguishing the moral from the conventional, since they think of all wrongdoing in terms of the transgression of norms. By contrast, non-psychopathic criminals are able to appreciate that their actions were wrong not merely because they transgressed norms or conventions, but because they harmed others (Nichols, 2004, p.76). How

interesting too that some sociologists should support the idea that actions are only wrong because they are socially defined as wrong![3] Sociologists may sometimes cite actors' moral terms in inverted commas to indicate that they are not endorsing the judgements those terms imply, but it is a mistake to allow this methodological device to become an ontological assumption that they are just conventions rather than judgements about suffering or well-being (Davydova and Sharrock, 2004).

To understand normativity in life we need a conception of people which sees them as capable but vulnerable sentient beings, having needs and wants that are in continual need of replenishment or development. We are always poised between existing mixes of lack, suffering and flourishing and possible future ones, and always in varying degrees aware of our situation and concerned about it. This implies what might, for want of a better term, be called a 'needs-based conception of social being' and action, viewing actors not only as causal agents and as self-interpreting meaning makers, but as needy, desiring beings, dependent on others, having an orientation to the world of care and concern[4], and capable of flourishing or suffering. 'Needs' here is used as a shorthand that also covers lack, wants and desire.[5] While some have mainly physiological origins, others might be termed 'culturally-acquired or emergent needs' deriving from involvement in and commitment to cultural practices, such as the need of the religious to worship.

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[3] This subjectivist view of values goes back 2,300 years to Epicurus, and is reproduced in Durkheim's claim that 'actions are evil because they are socially prohibited, rather than socially prohibited because they are evil.' (Bauman, 1989, p.173).

[4] There are some similarities here with Heidegger's emphasis on care in Being and Time (Heidegger, 1962).

[5] Needs, lack and desire cannot be assimilated comfortably just to critical realism's concepts of causal powers and liabilities, for these are not simply powers to do or suffer change, rather they imply impulses or drives to remove the deficiencies they represent. Although following Bhaskar's later work, some critical realists may want to use the concept of 'absence' here (Bhaskar, 1993), in my view this effectively invents a concept (in non-realist fashion) as a substitute for identifying the mechanisms that produce and satisfy needs.

There are some common sources of reluctance to embrace such a conception. One is the fear – often driven by sociological imperialism - that acknowledging needs, drives and the like implies essentialism, biologism and psychologism.[6] Yet a reference to needs and the like does not have to imply that they are reducible to inborn bodily or psychological requirements, for although we are born with some basic needs, even these are quickly socially-cultivated and developed, and culturally interpreted and mediated. Contrary to a common misconception in much philosophy and social science, including post-structuralism, nature is not immutable. Consequently, to acknowledge that we have biological causal powers and liabilities is not to submit to biological determinism, for as with any living being, our interactions with our environment can modify as well as reproduce those powers. In particular, neuroplasticity means that our brains are continually being reshaped by our experiences, though at any moment, just how they are affected by them depends on what our brains currently allow. So we can reject a cultural determinism that treats people's characteristics as having nothing to do with their biology. Needs, lack and vulnerability presuppose not determinism but the *openness* of the world, for there is always the possibility of *failure* to satisfy, fulfil or endure. In critical realist terms, we live in open systems, whose future is not predetermined. Moreover, although lack is inescapable, we can to some extent shape what form our needs and desires take, though wishful thinking has limits. Nor does acknowledging biological powers and liabilities entail a homogenisation of human needs and wants, for each of us is different and we are capable of a vast range of forms of life. Further, as we noted, many needs and wants are effectively culturally autonomous and irreducible, though

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[6] On essentialism and anti-essentialism, see O'Neill (1994) and Sayer (2000a).

these too presuppose a capacity for acculturation not possessed by many other species.

The treatment of meaning within the needs-based approach goes beyond that of hermeneutic approaches in that it deals not only with signifiers and the signified, and shared understandings, but *significance* or *import*. This is what people refer to when they talk about 'what something means to them', such as what their friends mean to them or what it means to be an immigrant (Sayer, 2006). In such cases, they are not giving a definition of those things, but an indication of their import or significance for them, how they value them, how such things impact on their well-being or something else that they care about (Taylor, 1985). The relationship to the world that is implied is one of care or concern and valuation, in which things are assessed for their implications for well-being, however defined. Here, emotions, understood not only as 'affect' but as embodied commentaries on our well-being and concerns, are fundamental to understanding what makes us care about and want to do anything, and what makes anything matter (Archer, 2000; Nussbaum, 2001). An ethnographic study might explain, in a matter-of-fact way, how the members of a certain group understand and act towards each other in terms of meanings primarily as conventions or shared interpretations, but give little indication of just why some things have particular import or significance for them, that is how they affect things they care about.[7]

Describing 'what something means to me' cannot reasonably be glossed merely as subjective; the evaluations and feelings are *about* something, including the well-being or ill-being of actors, and perhaps the fortunes of particular practices and institutions.

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[7] Renato Rosaldo has noted this tendency in anthropology (Rosaldo, 1989).

We also assume that those subjective beliefs and feelings that we and others have are objective in the sense that they do exist. While they tell us something about the valuer, they are justified (or not) by reference to claims about the nature of their objects, and thus are descriptive as well as evaluative. Any account of social practices which gives no indication of their implications for well-being, if only in terms of correcting a misapprehension, invites responses like 'so what?', 'what's your point?' The editing out of significance, perhaps because it is felt to be 'unscientific', is a central cause of the alienated character of so much contemporary social science.

Beyond the fact-value dichotomy

Social science's difficulties in understanding the normative dimension of social life derive from the influence of certain philosophical ideas about facts and values. These include: 1) that facts and values are radically distinct such that while factual claims can be true or false, value judgements about what is good or bad cannot; and 2) that value judgements about what is good or bad or what we ought to do, cannot be derived from facts. Although these ideas are actually contested in philosophy (e.g. Putnam, 2002; Taylor, 1967, Williams, 1985), few social scientists realise this, and so they are allowed an extraordinary privilege.

Under the influence of these claims, social scientists are traditionally taught to distinguish sharply between fact and value; the belief that this can and must be done tends to become deeply engrained. While researchers can study values, they are generally taught that they must try to minimise the effect of their own values in their accounts, and to abstain from value-judgements, so that they can be objective. Radicals tend to oppose this by inverting it: they say that no-one can be value-free, so

they won't pretend to be objective. Yet of course, they don't just make up their research results and they clearly believe their accounts to be more true than those they reject. The problem here is that both conservatives and their radical opponents agree that objectivity and value-judgements cannot go together.

We can begin to see what is wrong with this assumption by going back to the example of the social worker's claim that 'this child is being abused'. This is a truth claim - a fallible claim about a state of affairs that is objective in the sense of capable of existing regardless of whether it is observed or understood by anyone. Indeed, as critical realists argue, it's precisely because of this independence of many states of affairs from their being observed by someone that makes knowledge of them fallible (Collier, 2003). The claim is based on a judgement, and in that sense is 'subjective', but this doesn't mean it cannot also be more or less 'objective' in the different sense of 'true'. The social worker obviously has values, and is aware of certain norms about how children should be treated. But those norms aren't merely arbitrary conventions; they are based on judgements about flourishing and suffering, and what is good or bad for children. So is the social worker's claim a factual one or a value-judgement, or both?

When we talk about people and their actions, we often use words which seem to combine fact and value, description and evaluation; we describe them as kind, cruel, courageous, generous, selfish, humiliating, racist, abusive, oppressive, and so on. These are 'thick ethical descriptions'. If you don't know that humiliation or cruelty are *bad*, then you don't know what they *are*; the descriptive and evaluative components can't be separated. Thus, when we decide to accept a description of some practice, say, as 'abusive' or 'racist', we simultaneously accept the implicit valuation. By comparison, *thin* ethical concepts such as 'good',' bad', 'duty', 'virtue',

'obligation', 'right' and 'wrong' - "empty moral words", as Iris Murdoch called them - can seem more like arbitrary assertions than reasonable descriptions and evaluations (Murdoch, 1970, p. 40). This is precisely because as abstractions and summarising terms, thin ethical terms are removed from the range of concrete situations and behaviours to which they might be applied and in terms of which they can be justified (Putnam, 2002, p.60). And it is this abstraction from concrete aspects of life which lends credence to the idea that all evaluative claims are radically distinct from factual claims. Yet where issues of well-being are concerned, we encounter a middle ground between fact and value.

Part of the problem here is a common misunderstanding of 'values' that reduces them to purely subjective phenomena, ignoring the fact that they are *about* things that can exist largely independently of them. It is clearer in the case of 'valuation' and 'evaluation', that these have objects, referents. It is easier to overlook the referents of values than those of specific evaluations, because values are more abstract – they are sedimented valuations that have become attitudes or dispositions, and which recursively inform particular evaluations or judgements we make on specific occasions. Sometimes we are scarcely aware of some of our values, but they influence particular evaluations that we make of events. Although our values tend to be deeply embrained or embodied, they can be changed. For example, it is possible for our negative values about a certain kind of person to be challenged if they behave in ways that we did not expect of them, generating cognitive dissonance. Particularly if the experience is repeated, our values may change, though habits of thought can take a long time to revise. Hence, though they are often difficult to argue about, values are not beyond reason. Typically, when we reason about them we do so by reference to the actions and circumstances to which they refer, for example, by pointing to

problems that are produced by a certain kind of behaviour, such as those associated with drug dependency.

When we turn to the idea that values cannot be derived from facts, usually referred to as the 'is - ought problem', we immediately notice that this middle ground is missing: evaluation - which spans both description and evaluation - is ignored and normativity is reduced to imperative direction – 'should', 'ought'. It is then argued that values cannot be logically derived from facts, and that social scientists should not attempt to derive any normative conclusions from empirical research. For example, from the fact that, someone has no home, it doesn't logically (i.e. deductively) follow that they should have one. But deductive logic is highly demanding and in not only everyday life but in science we make inferences that are not arrived at through deduction. Indeed, it is bizarre to insist on such a demanding criterion for inferring what to do. Imagine going to the doctor to have your blood pressure taken. She does so and gives you two numbers, one over the other. You say "is that good or bad? What should I do about it?" Imagine if the doctor answered "well, I can't tell you because that would be a value judgement and it would compromise my objectivity, and I can't advise you what to do because you can't derive an ought from an is."

This shows the absurdity of dichotomising fact and value in such cases, and of assuming that the only inferences that we can rely on are deductive ones. The fact that ought does not follow deductively from is, is purely of academic interest. Logic is about the relation between statements, not about the causal relations between things like your blood pressure and your well-being. Similarly, if you are hungry, you need food, not because of any logical relationship between statements about these things, but because your body lacks food and is telling you to get some. 'The force of the ought' here comes from the causal processes. We could not survive, let alone flourish

if we did not regularly derive conclusions about what's good and bad, and what we should do, from our observations of states of affairs. Those judgements are fallible of course, but then so too are simple factual claims.

Values and universalism

As I noted earlier, conventionalist views of values are common in social science because it is particularly clear in such research that values vary significantly between different societies, and that different ways of life are associated with different value-systems and define well-being in different ways. Such a realisation does not fit easily with claims that we can resolve value disputes by reference to a common set of characteristics constituting human well-being, for this might be taken to presuppose a common, universal human nature and to ignore cultural variation. On the other hand, it has to be accepted that, as Mary Midgley says, "you can't have a plant or an animal without certain quite definite things being good and bad for it" (Midgley, 2003, p. 54), and in everyday life it's important to be able to distinguish these with some degree of success just to survive. Yet some may still object that we don't know what well-being is, for we are always judging this from a limited perspective in human culture and history.

We need to steer a course between a universalism that ignores cultural difference and a conventionalism that implies that the collective wishful thinking of any culture can make any practice good and enable flourishing. The first step is to recognize that our remarkable capacity for cultural variation implies that we have something in common, which things like insects or rocks don't have. For example, regardless of where it was born, a baby can be taught any of the world's thousands of the languages; a child born

to English parents in London that was immediately given to Japanese parents in Tokyo would learn Japanese as easily as Japanese-born children do. So babies must have *similar* capacities in order to be able to become so *different*. To be sure, children vary in their linguistic abilities, just as in their physiques, but they have important similarities without which acculturation could not be explained. Further, the fact that particular cultural practices have similar affects on groups of people exposed to them suggests the latter share similar capacities and susceptibilities.

The second step is to acknowledge that we have 'differently-cultivated natures', which have adjusted to particular ways of life that produce certain common patterns of wants and needs, and corresponding sources of flourishing and suffering. Thus, someone deeply religious may be harmed if they are prevented from praying, whereas for an atheist, compulsory religious observance is a form of oppression. Different cultures provide both different ways of life and different interpretations of life and what is good or bad. But while they may enable different kinds of flourishing, not just any cultural practice enables well-being: some things like foot-binding or child abuse or eating junk food cause damage regardless of whether a particular culture believes them to be good. And given the fallibility of our present knowledge and the possibility of new forms of society, there may be forms of well-being that we have yet to discover. But this doesn't mean we know *nothing* about human well-being – we must beware of the all-or-nothing fallacy, that unless we know everything about something, we know nothing. We know that we need food and shelter, that children need love and security to be able to become confident social actors, that workers need time for their bodies to recover, that freedom from the threat of violence is important for well-being, that a degree of autonomy is important for human dignity, and so on. It would be fatuous to deny such things.

In other words, in accordance with the capability approach, there are certain things (capabilities) – beings and doings - that we must have the freedom to do if we are to flourish (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). The way in which these capabilities are understood and provided may differ between cultures, but they have something in common. Thus, the need for recognition and respect can be met in different ways in different cultures, according to their particular traditions. This, then, is a pluralist and objectivist view, in keeping with critical realism, but not a relativist one. It argues that there are many forms of well-being, but not that well-being simply depends on one's cultural point of view.

Attending to the specificities of the other

As we have seen, critical realism sees values as being about something that can exist independently of them, and as capable of being more or less true or appropriate for those states of affairs. In this respect, it has similarities to both Aristotelianism, which holds that, notwithstanding cultural difference, humans have some capacities for flourishing and suffering in common. And both of these approaches share with the feminist ethic of care a conception of good ethical behaviour that involves attending to the specificities of the other and the context, rather than simply following rules or norms to the letter regardless of the details of a particular case (Kittay, 1999; Tronto, 1994). For these three approaches, rules are at best 'guidelines' that may work in many common situations, but have to be adjusted appropriately to take account of difference. Andrew Collier, a critical realist, argues that the role of rules in ethics is limited to obvious things such as prohibitions on torture and murder:

"The main body of ethics cannot be formulated in such rules, but will consist

in recognising the complexity and specificity of every human being . . . Moral codes which consist of do-s and don't-s serve mainly to excuse their adherents from thinking about how they should treat this particular being in this particular situation. (Collier, 1999, p. 91.)

Good carers or social workers, like skilled surgeons, are distinguished by their ability to deal sensitively with difference. Rules and prescribed procedures may be helpful to novices for beginning to learn how to be a nurse, social worker or surgeon, but they soon learn more through practice than by following rules. Experts tend not to follow them, and indeed doing so might impede them and result in less efficient and poorer quality work. Although it's also possible for experienced practitioners to become complacent and make mistakes, the tendency of management of professionals to respond by making them follow formal procedures to the letter can be counterproductive.

Paradoxically, on this view, critical realists like Collier and Sayer (2011)[8] argue that 'norms' should *not* be seen as the essence of normativity, though in some social practices they may be given absolute status. At best they codify common moral responses that have been tried out and validated publicly as forms of wisdom. But as Collier says, precisely because slavish norm-following can become a substitute for attending to the situation in hand, this is risky.

Care and Dignity

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[8] Critical realists are not unique in demoting norms in ethics (e.g. Dancy, 2004), and one prominent critical realist – Dave Elder-Vass - gives norms considerable prominence (Elder-Vass, 2012).

Attending ethically to the specificities of the other involves protecting their dignity. This matters hugely to people. Though they may take it for granted if their dignity is respected, if it is not, they are likely to be deeply troubled. Dignity is commonly invoked both in declarations of human rights and by oppressed groups appealing for support, but it is rarely defined. Recently though, certain professional bodies have become more aware of its importance, for their work involves intervention in others' lives in the context of a power-differential between practitioner and client. Unless this is handled sensitively it can undermine clients' dignity. Consequently, there have recently been attempts to specify what dignity involves in the spheres of life they represent.[9]

Most commonly, dignity is associated with the idea of individuals having autonomy in the sense of self-command, and hence as having their own goals or ends that need to be respected by others. Our dignity is denied us if others use us wholly as means to their ends. And we cannot have dignity if no one listens to us and takes what we say seriously. To have dignity we must be allowed to act according to our own will and reasoning, provided we take due consideration of others' dignity. But as the latter qualification implies, this autonomy is not unlimited or reducible to simple independence. We are social beings, in varying degrees and ways dependent on each other. To respect someone's dignity is also to trust them to use their autonomy in a way that takes account of others, and their dignity. It includes trusting them to take on responsibilities competently and in good faith. Those who are not trusted or act in ways which betray trust lack dignity.

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[9] Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2013; Shotton and Seedhouse, 1998. Trade Unions have also begun to put dignity on their agendas and to define what it means. See, for example, Unison trade union's Dignity at Work campaign in the UK, and The Workplace Dignity Institute in South Africa

Dignity is also commonly associated with competence – with having capacities and being able to act effectively. But an implication of this is that our dignity is threatened if we lose some of the capacities that we once had, particularly if they are normally associated with flourishing. For example, someone who has lost their hearing or become incontinent may feel their dignity is threatened, especially if others either fail to take appropriate account of this or take advantage of their vulnerability. Dignity is therefore not only about autonomy and capacities, but vulnerabilities. Good care is sensitive to both capacities and vulnerabilities, and treats the patient in ways that gives recognition to the former without drawing undue attention to the latter.

Above all, respecting and supporting someone's dignity involves recognizing them as a whole person, with a history, achievements, needs, concerns, commitments and relationships to others that matter to them, and being attentive to their words and feelings. Care or other work with people that disregards all this and reduces clients to a set of characteristics that a professional unilaterally decides need to be dealt with, undermines their dignity.

While it is common, particularly in liberal societies to talk of dignity as a given quality of individuals, the above considerations show that it is relational – dependent on interactions with others. As such it is fragile: it is a basic need whose fulfilment depends on the kind of relationships people have to others, may or may not be realised, rather than something that is simply already realised in everyone regardless of this.

Post-structuralism's misunderstandings of normativity

Much of the above is at odds with the understandings of values, normativity and human social being that are dominant in social science in the tradition of Foucault. While he was renowned for being a tireless political activist, campaigning against various forms of oppression, as an academic Foucault refused to evaluate the practices he studied, and his writings are notably devoid of thick ethical concepts. Although he compellingly demonstrated how power or power/knowledge constructs as well as constrains, and can produce pleasure, he refused to distinguish between benign and harmful forms of construction or constraint: democracy therefore appears no better than dictatorship. His accounts generally have an ominous tone, yet they fail to indicate what, if anything, is problematic in the practices he studied. Hence, some authors have criticized his work for being 'crypto-normative' (Fraser, 1989; Habermas, 1990). But it is also crypto-descriptive, for if an account of social life doesn't at least implicitly indicate whether there is flourishing or suffering and injustice, it doesn't tell us very much.

Not surprisingly he was often questioned about this. As he put it on one occasion:

> "The role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they have to do. By what right would he do so? The work of the intellectual is not to shape others' political will: it is, through the analyses that he carried out in his own field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things." Foucault (1997, p.131).

It is clear from this and from elsewhere that Foucault (mis)understood normativity as a matter of 'oughts'; like positivists arguing about values in social science via the is-

ought relation, he reduced normativity to imperatives and ignored the more important and prior part - evaluation.

In post-structuralism, including queer theory, normativity is associated with *normalising*, particularly because the latter imposes identity categories that have the effect of suppressing difference, for example, marginalizing and stigmatising inter-sex people. But instead of resisting the prior reduction of normativity to norms, or challenging just those forms of normalising that have unfair effects, normativity in general is condemned on this ground and rejected. Yet of course, this is contradictory for being against normativity is itself a normative stance. Life is normative in the sense of continually requiring evaluation and judgements about how to act. It's inescapable. To be against sexism, homophobia and racism is to be normative. And some 'abnormal' behaviours, such as child abuse, are indeed harmful: not all differences are good, and hence not all normalising is problematic. Regardless of whether behaviours are normal or abnormal in the sense of common or uncommon, we have to assess them in terms of their implications for justice and well-being. But then, as we have argued, norms should not be the heart of ethics: again, we need to attend to the other, their needs, susceptibilities and capacities, and their situation.

But there are deeper obstacles to understanding normativity in post-structuralism, which lie in its social ontology and its non-realist tendencies. In reacting against the straw 'humanist' figure of the individual as an independent, sovereign, coherent, unified agent responding to an external world as it freely chooses, post-structuralism gives us a demeaning view of 'subjects' as wholly the product of social forces - not just constrained and enabled by them, but constituted by them. Even where subjects engage in 'care of the self', they do so in ways which overwhelmingly involve conforming with wider 'force-relations', discourse, or 'power/knowledge'.

In part, this is right: we are indeed constituted through our interactions with the wider world, from the moment of conception to our deaths. And post-structuralism has usefully drawn attention to the importance of the 'micro-physics' of power in everyday life in shaping who we are and what we do. But at every moment, our susceptibility to these interactions or forces depends on the powers of our mind-bodies, as these have so far co-evolved. And these powers go beyond physiological and psychological limits to include *reflexivity* – the ability to consider ourselves in relation to our social contexts, and vice versa (Archer, 2007). We do not have to flip from the caricature of the sovereign reasoner to the cultural dope, whether the latter appears in traditional sociological guise, or in post-structuralist form. We do not simply submit equally to any kind of treatment, regardless of its relation to us or what we think about it: some influences may get below our radar, but others can be resisted, welcomed or redirected according to how they fit with our bodies and our dispositions, beliefs, commitments and concerns.

Morality and ethics are not reducible to internalizedconventions or norms, and they can challenge the latter. As Michael Walzer puts it:

> "The moral world and the social world are more or less coherent, but they are never more than more or less coherent. Morality is always potentially subversive of class and power." (Walzer, 1989, p.22).

Our moral sentiments are not just products of prevailing forms of power, but are the co-products of our mind-bodies, our physiology – for example, the mirror neurons which enable empathy – and our capacities to feel and think, as these have been influenced by, and have engaged with, our culture. All of these are co-products of social, biological and physical interactions. As Kate Soper comments:

> " . . . the body is neither simply the effect of discourse nor simply a point of
> 'brute' resistance to it, but a centre of experience which is actively involved in
> the construction of discourse itself" . . . "Instinct and feeling, both physical
> and emotional, everywhere intrude to influence what is said – just as the
> things which come to be said intrude back upon feeling." (Soper, 1990, p.11).

It is one thing to reject the idea that we are sovereign individual subjects, guided by reason, coherent and internally unified, somehow already constituted prior to socialization; it is quite another to reduce people to ciphers, faceless 'subjects' or 'bodies', objects of a superior yet curiously unreflexive academic gaze.

Finally, post-structuralism's difficulties with normativity are underpinned by its overly-strong form of social constructionism which assumes that discourses produce what they name, unilaterally and successfully, as if collective wishful thinking – 'regimes of truth' - always worked. But while discourses can sometimes do this to some degree, there are invariably resistances, intractable objects and unintended consequences, and simply many other things going on. Thus a child who is taken into care by social workers may come to understand herself in the terms used by social workers and adopt an identity in foster care as a 'looked after child' (in the UK), and this may influence her behaviour, yet this does not simply replace the many other aspects of her identity and ways of thinking about them but exists in tension with them (Denenberg, 2016). Discourses as ways of thinking embedded and enacted in practices and institutions produce real effects, but like any knowledge, discourses are fallible; as critical realism insists, the world is not reducible to our knowledge of it, nor does it submit to our interventions if these do not fit with its powers.

Conclusion

I have been proposing a view of normativity not in terms of norms and imperatives or free-floating values, but as an ongoing process in the flow of life through which we monitor and evaluate things in relation to needs, wants, commitments and concerns, or more generally in relation to well-being. The verbal expression of these evaluations usually involves thick ethical concepts that defy any fact-value dichotomy. But this dichotomy is deeply ingrained in modernity, as part of a family of such hierarchical oppositions: objective/subjective, mind/body, reason/emotion, science/ethics. Thus, emotions are seen not as intelligent responses to the world but as irrational and unreasonable. In social science there has been an attempt to expel values from science and reason, and while there have been radical challenges to this, these often leave the dichotomy intact as we saw. What is less noticed is the attempted expulsion of reason from values, and it is this in particular that we need to challenge. One important reason why social science is poor at recognizing this is that the dichotomies have become an organizing principle of the division of academic knowledge as it has developed over the last 150 years, so that normative thinking has become ghettoized in philosophy and political theory, while the other disciplines assume that they can and should disregard it (Sayer, 2000b). The work of professionals like social workers is inescapably normative, but so too is life in general. Directly or indirectly, our evaluative judgements are related to well-being, including matters of fairness and justice. In turn, well-being is constrained and enabled by our differently-cultivated natures, by the kind of beings we have become. Whether to understand society, or to intervene in it as professionals, or just to live well, we need to study and evaluate these matters.

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