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Abstract

Geographers' discussions of normative issues oscillate between two poles: the exhortation of 'moral geography' and the descriptive detail of 'moral geographies'. Neither approach gives enough room for ordinarily normative dimensions of action. Recent philosophical discussions of the implicit normativity of practices, and ethnographic discussions of the ordinary, provide resources for developing more modest accounts of normativity and practical reasoning. The relevance to geography of recent re-evaluations of the place of reflection and thought in habitual action is illustrated with reference to the antinomies which shape debates about the ethics and efficacy of behaviour change initiatives. The potential for further developing these insights is explored with reference to the normative turn in contemporary social theory, which includes discussions of conventions, practices of justification, lay normativity, phronesis, recognition, and orders of worth. The potential contribution of philosophies of action and intentionality and social theories of the normative for moving geography beyond the impasses of moral geography versus moral geographies depends on suspending an inherited wariness about the normative, which might be helped by thinking of this topic in more ordinary ways. The outlines of a programme for geographies of worth are considered.

Key words: critique justification normativity ordinary recognition worth

1 Introduction: what are reasons good for?

Discussions of ethics in geography oscillate between two poles, characterised by Jacobs (2010) as proposing 'normative moralities' and 'charting everyday moralities'. In the former strand of work, 'moral geography' has come to refer to more or less exhortatory promotion of ethical principles that ought to be realised in an otherwise imperfect world. In the latter strand, 'the moral' is thought of as a medium of power, where power is now understood to itself operate through the force of norms. Neither approach gives the normative dimensions of action enough space: in one version, normativity is elevated into a refined zone of reflection on ultimate principles; in the other, the space of action upon which normativity depends is reduced to an ethics of compliance. Both positions share a deep scepticism about the degree to which normativity inhabits the world in ordinary ways.

It is one of the more creditable aspects of recent work in 'non-representational' cultural geography (Anderson and Harrison 2010) that it succeeds in finding a foothold for ethics in the world, in the unstable relations between affects and bodies and objects. It is one of the more unfortunate aspects of this work that it closes down consideration of ordinary forms of reasoning about these relations, written-off as tainted by the related sins of 'representationalism' and 'humanism'. In geography as elsewhere, it has become quite common to preface arguments in favour of affect, emotions, embodiment, the non-representational, practices, or relationality with a loud disavowal of something called 'Cartesianism'. It remains unclear in much of the elaborate theoretical discussion around these topics just what attitude is meant to be held to the intuitive sense that people do tend to have of themselves as having inner selves, able to introspectively reason about their actions. Is this just folk psychology, ripe for correction? One might expect that an adequate theory of embodied action should be able to provide an account of how such beliefs and attitudes actually help constitute the intuitive, affectively attuned, unconscious, non-cognitive capacities of engaged agency in the world. Certainly, arguments which present the reasons used to justify action towards others as secondary commentaries on processes that can be adequately described in causal terms end up presenting the self-understandings of acting subjects as mere epiphenomena, at the very best as forms of functional self-deception (see Habermas 2008). And thinking of people in this way is not a good basis for developing an ethically oriented social science of any sort.

In my previous reports (Barnett 2011, 2012), I have suggested that the recent interest in 'social practice' might offer one way of re-casting the dilemmas which arise from oscillating between moralism and cynicism about the normative. In this report, I suggest that this work converges with styles of social theory keen to locate normativity squarely in the world, as an ordinary feature of ongoing flow of life, and which aim to do so without throwing the reasoning baby out with the rationalistic bathwater (cf. Rorty 1996).

2 Locating normativity

'Normative' is a scary word, wrapped around with intimations of prescription, and often taken to be the very model of power, that which deserves to be criticised and resisted. But living beings, as Georges Canguilhem (1991) reminded us, are not indifferent to their conditions of life, and in that sense, life is a normative activity. The general dimension of 'oughtness' that characterises any number of actions, practices

and processes is certainly not exhausted by considerations of rationality, justification, and validity. It extends to include all sorts of ordinary aspects of fitness, appropriateness, value, health, and the antonyms of each of these and other normative terms. So we might do well to adopt a modest sense of the normative, as referring to “the expectation that actions within a social field are likely to be judged, as right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, proper or transgressive” (Miller 2010, 415). Or, in a less restrictively ‘social’, resolutely naturalistic sense, normativity refers to “the whole range of phenomena for which it is appropriate to apply normative concepts, such as correct or incorrect, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, and the like” (Rouse 2007, 3). On these sorts of definition, ethical and moral concepts do not exhaust the normative realm, and nor do they necessarily best represent what is at stake in normativity.

There are three broad positions on the issue of normativity. The strong version seeks to nail down the fundamental ‘sources of normativity’. The long awaited publication Derek Parfit’s (2011) book on this issue has been hailed by some commentators as the most significant event in the analysis of ethics since the nineteenth-century. Parfit’s concern is to find a point of convergence between apparently competing moral concerns and theories. In its austere method, and its distrust of pluralism about morals, it is an approach unlikely to find much traction in geography and related fields.

There is a second, weaker version of normativity in strains of philosophy which are, it might be said, more concerned with locating individual action in a context of social practices. On this view, practices themselves contain an ‘implicit normativity’, one which may or may not be articulated. This refers to the sense that actions are always associated with reasons for the subjects of those actions. This idea of implicit normativity is associated with a view of practices that does not presume that there is an underlying, determinative norm that precedes and governs any action or performance (Rouse 2006). Rather, on this view, the normativity of practices is revealed in acknowledging the temporal constitution of actions for which reasons and accounts might be demanded, regrets and disappointments expressed, responsibility taken or disavowed. This second, weaker sense of normativity has affinities with a more social scientifically oriented, ethnographically sourced sense of normativity as an ordinary feature of life. There is, on this third understanding, no need to presume a strong model of rationality to recognise that actions are shaped by normative horizons. Rather, it is simply a matter of acknowledging the ways in which social life unfolds through capacities to be sensitive “to what makes other people feel comfortable” (Miller 2010, 420).

These two latter approaches help us see how normativity might be recast as a thoroughly social phenomenon, that is, a shared feature of ongoing interaction. Between them, they help put into perspective the socialisation of practical reason noted in my previous report (Barnett 2012). It is *practical* in the sense that the substance of this sort of reasoning is action, not merely knowledge; and also *practical* in the sense that this sort of reasoning is presumed to have a motivating force in moving people to act in certain ways. This sort of reasoning is a competence that is developed on the go - it is situated, embodied, skilled, and crucially, acquired *through* practice. In other words, it involves a competency that does not need, necessarily, to

stop to reflect; which is not the same as saying it does not involve reflection and reflexivity at all.

Understanding practical reasoning as an ongoing accomplishment is common enough in certain strains of geographical research on the practical, embodied enactment of space and time (e.g. Hitchins 2011, Lea 2009; McPherson 2010). In these accounts, normativity is thought of in terms of having the feel for the right thing to do. Recent work on habit, for example, questions the opposition between unconditional reflection and immersive embodiment, and its attendant evaluation of the active and passive aspects of action (e.g. Bissell 2012a, 2012b; Bridge 2005). The relevance of rethinking habit as an embodied, acquired, thought-imbued competency to negotiate practical situations converges with renewed interest in both social theory and philosophy in the topic of habit (e.g. Carlisle 2010, Martin 2011, Scarry 2011).

The relevance of this reassessment of the place of reflection in habitual action to geographical debates about 'ethics' can be illustrated by reference to current discussions about the politics of behaviour change initiatives in public policy. 'Behaviour change' has become a prevalent theme in social policy, environmental policy, urban planning, and other fields increasingly inflected by styles of 'design thinking' in which spatial practices are given considerable causal power. Much of the debate about these approaches, in both policy and academic fields, revolves around a distinction between the presumed *efficacy* of behaviour change techniques and their less obvious *ethical* implications. Popular and policy discourses around behaviour change, 'nudging', neuroscience, and social marketing rest on the claim that there are two systems shaping human behaviour: a rational, reflexive, cognitive system; and an automatic system, of unconscious motivations (Pykett 2011). There is a division within these fields of debate over how the relation between these two 'systems' is best understood. For example, one version of 'nudging' assumes that governments can best shape behaviour by prompting people to re-interpret their actions in new ways. It assumes that beliefs, habits, feelings, can be apprehended cognitively as a route to changing them. Another version presumes that the in-built, automatic systems which guide people's behaviour can be 'attacked' directly, without routing through any rational 'system' at all (see John *et al* 2009). The ethical worry shaping these debates follows in large part from the bifurcation between 'rational' and 'automatic' that underwrites such fields of applied social science. Both the assumed *efficacy* of behaviour change techniques, and the *ethical* worries they raise, hold fast to a simple division between autonomous, thoughtful reflection, and embodied, unreflective, habitual action,.

Geographers have contributed to a range of genealogical analyses of these styles of thinking about the newly susceptible subjects of public policy (Rose 2010), including research on the spatial politics of behaviour changes and other modes of 'soft paternalism' (Jones *et al* 2011, Pykett *et al* 2011), and work which discerns the emergence of new anticipatory logics in security apparatuses or urban design (Anderson and Adey 2011, Crang and Graham 2007, Evans 2010). These types of study are good at identifying new causal rationalities (Huxley 2006) that shape various attempts to intervene in different fields of action. But such genealogical or diagnostic analyses come wrapped around with strong claims of criticality which, when looked at closely, indicate the difficulty of making 'ethical' sense of these new fields of neuro-enhanced, behaviouralist intervention in spatial practices. There seem

to be two available routes. One can interpret these developments as rather sinister refinements of neoliberal governmentality, but that risks being drawn into a trap laid down by the reflective/automatism binary, of adopting an inadvertently rationalist posture of ethical suspicion. Or one can affirm the basic understanding of the non-rational, non-intentional, non-cognitive dimensions of action that informs behaviour change ideas, suitably re-packaged by reference to theories of affect, in order to install a dualism between *good* and *bad* affects in place of a dualism between mind and body (see Deleuze 1988). The political rendering of affect theory as a route to redeeming some ethical wiggle-room from strongly inductive, behaviouralist variants of social science depends on extending a high degree of credulity to the rhetorical deflation of intentionality and rationality in certain fields of contemporary neuroscience (see Leys 2011a, 2011b), and finds therein unexpected resources for disruption and creativity (e.g. Connolly 2011).

The difficulty follows, I suggest, from a failure to think of normativity ordinarily, along the lines suggested above. There is not a 'gap' between thought and action, mind and body, that needs to be mediated one way or the other, either by a model of introspective reflection that guarantees the autonomy of reason, or by newly discovered neural triggers which seem to undermine free will (Leys 2011c). Rather than thinking of a dichotomy between autonomous reason and the force of conditioning, between freedom and habit, we might think of perception and action, reflecting and doing, as going on *alongside each other*, arrayed horizontally as it were, rather than imagined as vertically mediated (Hurley 1998). Bringing the ordinary dimensions of normativity back into view is not, then, a matter of getting your ontology right: it is just a matter of being able to keep in view the coincidences, conjunctures and sequencing of different aspects of action.

3 Normative (re)turns

The relevance of understanding action to the concerns with *critique* which animate so much of contemporary human geography might be seen when one notices the convergence between these reconstructions of intentionality and rationality with the ongoing reformulation of Critical Theory. For example, Habermas has found common cause with Robert Brandom's inferential semantics to bolster his reconstruction of Critical Theory in terms of discourse ethics and deliberative democracy depends (Habermas 2006, 142-146; Habermas 2000; Brandom 2000b). In Brandom's project (1994, 2000a, 2002, 2009), the task of philosophical analysis is *making explicit* the commitments and entitlements embedded in action. The 'social practice' perspective of which he is the leading proponent, in its emphasis on normativity going 'all the way down', transgresses boundaries between ethics and epistemology and gives further impetus to the convergence of analytical and Continental traditions. For example, in Fricker's (2007) account of *epistemic justice*, aspects of the epistemology of testimony are combined with debates in feminist standpoint theory and insights from Foucault (see also Rouse 2005).

The utility of resources drawn from analytical traditions of theorising action and intentionality to the reconstruction of critical theory may appear less surprising once the shared reference to pragmatism, phenomenology, and theories of recognition is acknowledged (see Honneth 2010b, Ikäheimo and Laitinen 2011, Mendieta 2007, Pippin 2005, Pippin 2008). Axel Honneth, for example, draws on Deweyan

pragmatism in developing an account of the immanent emergence of normative principles of critique in social practices. He locates this point of emergence in the dynamic struggle for recognition that drives identity politics (Honneth 1995, 2007, 2009), pluralizing this struggle for recognition beyond the social relations of work and labour to include multiple forms of disrespect (by contrast, Gomberg (2007) and Sayer (2009) elaborate the idea of ‘contributive justice’, which maintains an emphasis on rights to meaningful work and the imperative to share labour but builds on the recognition paradigm). Honneth reconstructs the phenomenology of harm out of which struggles against injustice emerge (cf. Moore 1978), and shares in a broader reorientation of contemporary conceptualisations of justice around ‘the priority of injustice’ (e.g. Bernstein 2005, Sen 2009), rooted in the normative value of human dignity (e.g. Benhabib 2011, Forst 2011, Habermas 2010). What Brandom seems to provide for this tradition is a concept of rationality that is thoroughly socialised, rooting cognition in the reciprocal dynamics of recognition (Honneth 2011, 181).

Honneth’s revivification of the Hegelian concept of recognition is just one example of the overlap between a naturalization of norms in philosophy that opens up to social science (see Bransen and Smets 2000), and attempts to re-sensitize social theory to issues of normativity. The most ambitious example of the latter move is the attempt at ‘building a bridge between political philosophy and social science’ associated with the work of Luc Boltanski, Lauren Thévenot, and the French tradition of economic sociology known as ‘the conventions school’. ‘Conventions’ are understood in this line of thought with reference to the ideas of David Lewis, as devices for solving coordination problems in situations of uncertainty (Favereau 2008). The broader significance of this tradition lies in the effort to reassert a concern with everyday normative action into the overwhelmingly strategic, even cynical, views of power developed by Marxist and post-Marxist ontologies of power.

Honneth himself (2010a) describes this tradition as seeking to revive a fully ‘normative theory of society’ (see also Ricoeur 2000, 76-93; Ricoeur 2005). Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 37) claim that their approach seeks “to take seriously the imperative to justify that underlies the possibility of coordinating human behaviour”. (This emphasis resonates with the last works of Charles Tilly (2006, 2008), which likewise argued that practices of justification, evaluation, and accountability are constitutive of human relations, and that social action is coordinated by ordinary practices of assigning credit, distributing blame, and attributing responsibility). In the pragmatic sociology developed by writers such as Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), the normative dimensions of social life leads to an empirical programme of investigating the different ‘orders of worth’ through which practices are coordinated, challenged, and criticized. In a reversal of the idea that philosophy has a foundational role for social science, the canon of political philosophy is presented as providing formalized models of plural ‘orders of worth’, or logics of justification. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) develop the analysis of orders of worth into a fully-fledged re-theorization of the dynamics of capitalist modernity, one in which criticism is the internal driving force of organizational innovation. Echoing Honneth’s phenomenology of the multiple harms of misrecognition, they identify different ‘sources of indignation’ that provoke criticism (2005, 36-43), but argue that since the possibility of critique is internally related to the demand for justification, capitalism adjusts by responding unevenly to irreconcilable forms of criticism.

Rather than thinking of the task of social science as providing a revelatory insight into worldly affairs, between them, Boltanski, Chiappelo, Thévenot and their colleagues develop ‘a sociology of critical capacities’ and ‘a sociology of criticism’, focussed on understanding the orders of worth through which different fields of social practice unfold. Broadly speaking, this involves a relocation of the normative reference point for critique to the conditions of social interaction, echoing a post-Habermasian inflection found in theories of recognition (Honneth 2009). It is a relocation that generates the challenge of identifying the possibility of a critical social science from within a broadly descriptive social scientific investigation of ordinary practices of criticism (see Boltanski 2011).

The analysis of orders of worth has been further refined into what David Stark (2009) calls a ‘sociology of worth’. This focuses attention on the ways in which social worlds hang together not just through ‘the silent work of circulating boundary objects’ (Girard and Stark 2002, 1948), but also takes seriously the ways in which complex coordination depends upon flexible practices of evaluation and valuation, praise and appraisal, understanding and misunderstanding (Stark 2009, 7-8). The significant difference that Stark introduces into this style of work is a focus not on the resolution of coordination problems in situations of uncertainty, but the counter emphasis on the creative force of dissonance between competing evaluative principles in situated contexts. The uncertainty generated by the co-existence of evaluative orders opens up ‘opportunities for action’. Stark’s ‘methodological situationism’ (ibid., 32) focuses on the investigation of indeterminate contexts in order to better understand how practical judgement is enacted.

Stark’s account of the negotiation of multiple orders of evaluation, or worth, is less strongly ‘normative’ in its emphasis than that developed by Boltanski and others. It is closer in spirit to the third sense of ‘normativity’ identified in the second section of this Report, one in which implicit normativity is understood to be a thoroughly routine, ordinary dimension of everyday practice (Miller 2010). In geography, the importance of this tradition of economic sociology has until very recently only been registered by economic geographers and those working in the field of cultural economy (e.g. Storper and Salais 1997), but it is an approach that has potential to reach beyond these fields (e.g. Evans 2011).

These reconstructions of social theory around explicitly normative themes have affinities with Andrew Sayer’s argument that social scientists should take more notice of what he calls ‘lay normativity’. This idea refers to the motives, norms, and values that shape peoples’ conduct and behaviour. Sayer (2005, 6) is also concerned that an overly strategic, excessively cynical view of the social as regulated only by ‘power’ obfuscates the determinant influence of a range of normative rationales. These rationales “matter greatly to actors, as they are implicated in their commitments, identities and ways of life. Those rationales concern what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for and what is not”. Sayer’s reassertion of the importance to social science of considering ‘why things matter to people’ (Sayer 2011) is premised on a form of ethical naturalism that takes it as given that evaluating actions is a basic aspect of social practice. It is an approach which does not presume that values function as external or underlying determinative norms, but emphasises the routine dimensions of practical reasoning and situated judgement, understood in terms of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom (Sayer 2011, 70-86).

The same sense of embodied, situated, and learnt skills of reasoning which are deployed in relation to the situated response to problems is basic to the project of 'phronetic social science' developed by Bent Flyvbjerg (2001, 2006a). The project of 'applied phronesis' (Flyvbjerg *et al*, Forthcoming) has garnered some attention in geography (e.g. Hargreaves 2011), and there is certainly further potential, not least in the engagement with methodological issues that cross the qualitative versus quantitative divides. For example, Flyvbjerg's account of social science as applied phronesis informs both an assertive defence of case study methodologies that resonate with the more ethnographically inclined (Flyvbjerg 2006b), but also the development of the Reference Class Forecasting methodology of assessing the likely impact of 'mega-projects', most widely applied to geographical issues such as the design of urban infrastructure projects, transport planning systems, and city management (Flyvbjerg 2008).

The point of noting this range of examples of social theory which restore to view the practical dimensions of normative reasoning is not to suggest all of these strands of thought are of once piece. There are significant differences across them, conceptually and methodologically (see McNay 2007, Turner 2010). Nevertheless, what they do testify to is a broad return of a concern with thinking of the normative dimensions of social life in ordinary, routine, practical ways.

4 Conclusion

I have argued here and in previous Reports that there are interesting things to learn about the things that matter to geographers from paying greater attention to re-socialized philosophies of action and practical reason, and to social theories which are re-sensitizing the social sciences to issues of normativity. What these strands have in common is a shared 'pragmatist' disposition which re-centres both practical reason and social theory on concepts of action, and in so doing triggers a reassessment of the role of values and norms" (see Joas and Knöbl 2009, 540). There is a 'light touch' geographical imagination to this range of social theory, registered above all in the sensitivity to context, a concern with situated action, and a comparative mindset (e.g. Lamont and Thévenot 2000, Nash 2009). Somewhere in amongst philosophies of action, practical reason views of ethics, and pragmatic sociologies of critical capacity, there is an opportunity for developing the analysis of plural geographies of worth. This would be a programme in which the coordination of actions in time and space was understood to operate through the negotiation between multiple practices of evaluation, justification and accountability. The emphasis on the routine aspects of practical judgement that one finds in the traditions of work reviewed here suggests that, at some fundamental level, the competencies of acting subjects are not only worth taking seriously, but that they might also be perfectly adequate. This clearly presents a challenge to received models of the task of 'critical social science' (cf. Hammersley 2005), as Boltanski's (2011) sometimes tortured attempt to square the descriptive emphasis of pragmatic sociology with the imperatives of critique illustrates. Nevertheless, it is also an implication that might free us up to notice the ordinary ways in which the ongoing give and take of imperatives to justify, practices of evaluation, and expectations of accountability open up spaces for acting a little bit differently, here and there.

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