11 Sociologistic Accounts of Normativity

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11.1. Introduction

Normative discourse is among the most important and yet most puzzling things that we, human subjects and inquirers, engage in.

Normative talk is *prescriptive*: it makes judgments about how things ought to be, rather than how they are. The most familiar normative judgments are those of *morality*:

1. You ought not to have promised you would attend the conference if you knew you couldn't make it.
2. It is morally right for girls to receive an education.

However, it is vitally important to recognize that judgments of *rationality* are also normative. Thus, we might say:

1. You ought not to believe that smoking is good for you, given the evidence.
2. If you have no reason to doubt your senses, and it visually seems to you as though there is a cat in front of you, then you ought to believe that there is a cat in front of you.

Importantly, normative judgments are not only directed at others, but also at ourselves: each of the other-directed judgments above has a first-person counterpart. This is important in highlighting that we recognize in our own case a distinction between how we are inclined to act and how we *ought* to act.

When we make such judgments, either in their third- or first-person versions, we make them because, in some sense, we believe that they are *correct*. I make judgments (1) – (4), as opposed to their opposites, because I take these judgments to be correct and their opposites to be incorrect. But in what could the "correctness" of a normative judgment *consist*?

In the case of a descriptive judgment, such as

5. Earth is spherical,

we understand well enough in what its correctness consists. Its correctness consists in its truth, which in turn consists in its correspondence with a mind-independent fact – namely, that Earth has a roughly spherical shape. And we understand well enough what it is for this material body to have a roughly spherical shape and how it could have had that property independent of us humans having had any thoughts about it. We understand what it is for such a fact to obtain, and to do so without any help from human minds.

But could we give a similar account of the correctness of normative judgments? Are there human-mind-independent facts about what ought to be done, or what ought to be believed, that sit out there and to which our normative judgments must "correspond" if they are to be correct? Does correctness for normative judgments consist in truth by correspondence to mind-independent fact?

In some periods of human history, belief in supernatural beings was more common than it is these days (although it is still surprisingly strong). Among these supernatural beings, some were gods. In one of the most influential of these super-naturalist views, there was only one God, an almighty being who created the world. In such a monotheistic view, it was perhaps natural to think that normative facts were determined by the dictates of such an almighty being.

Such a view of normative correctness is much less available today in our disenchanted world. More importantly still – it was a totally unworkable idea to begin with, as Plato showed by posing the Euthyphronic question (see Plato, 1961, 10a, and Boghossian, 2017).

11.2. Durkheim and Bloor on Normativity

If God does not determine what is right and wrong, what possibly could? Let me quote here Bloor's description of Durkheim's view, which Bloor sees as the beginning of wisdom on these matters:

> All societies, said Durkheim, register in some form or other the difference between desiring to do something and being obliged to do it.... Inclinations and desires arise from within us. Duties and obligations compel us from outside. At the same time duties and obligations manage to get inside us, and we can feel the conflict between wants and oughts. But what are these strange external compulsions? What is a moral force? ...
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> [Durkheim] proposed a synthesis. The reality was that obligation was a social, not an individual, phenomenon. It was a constraint, a norm, collectively affirmed and enforced by the members of a group and thus external to each individual. The seemingly transcendental character of obligation, the way it seemed everywhere and nowhere, was a transfigured response to its social character. Its

> capacity to reach into the very interior of the individual derived from the innately social character of the human animal. Humans are innately responsive to one another. Both the rationalist and the empiricist accounts were partial because they failed, in their different ways, to do justice to the social.
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> (162–163)

According to Bloor's Durkheim, objectivist views of morality are founded on falsehoods: Kantian views because of their alleged reliance on a non-existent God; and utilitarian views because of their alleged failure to distinguish genuine moral obligation from pleasure or happiness. Both of these criticisms seem to me to incorporate serious misconceptions of their targets, but I won't pause over them.

The proposed alternative is an explanation of moral obligation in terms of the acceptance of norms by societies and their enforcement on their members. The individual may experience this societal pressure as though it were a response to the dictates of God, or of objective rationality, or what have you; but in reality, this experience of objective obligation is just a transfigured – that is to say, misleading – experience of what is at bottom a complex form of social pressure, one to which we are responsive because of our innately social natures.

This is a concise statement of a sociologistic view of normativity. And as Bloor emphasizes, Durkheim applied his account not just to morality but to *rationality* as well. It's an entirely *general* account of *normativity*. In doing this, Durkheim shows a coherence rare among theorists of the normative. If you are puzzled as to how there could be any objective facts about normativity, this puzzlement should extend to any sort of normativity, to rationality just as much as to morality.

We can distinguish between two different ways of understanding this sociologistic view of normativity.

On the one hand, it could be understood as a *reductive* view of normativity: to say that X ought to be done or believed is to say that it follows from the norms that we accept that X ought to be done or believed.

On the other hand, it could be construed as an *eliminativist* view of normativity: to say that X ought to be done or believed is to make some objectivist claim that corresponds to nothing real. If we are thinking clearly, we would eliminate such claims in favor of talk about which norms we happen to accept and what they allow or forbid. Such an account would be accompanied by a story about why we were misled into thinking that there was such a thing as objective normativity, a kind of unmasking of the experience of felt compulsion by objective norms as just a transfiguration of the underlying social reality – which is social pressure.

Bloor's remarks definitely suggest the second, eliminativist, view. If the reductive view were meant, Bloor's sociologism would just fall into place as yet another philosophical theory. But Bloor's attitude seems to be, rather, that philosophy, *qua* theory of normativity really *has no subject*

matter, and that clearly suggests an eliminativist view. The only real subject matter in the vicinity of philosophy's interest in the normative concerns social structures, strictures and enforcement. That's why Bloor can say, with breathtaking dismissiveness, that he agrees with Durkheim that all that philosophy is doing, at least when it comes to the normative, is bad sociology!

11.3. Bloor on Wright

Bloor goes on to illustrate the virtues of sociologism with a critical discussion of a paper of Crispin Wright's (2008), which is itself a critical discussion of my book *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (2006).

I will dwell on this part of Bloor's chapter for a bit both because it forms the bulk of Bloor's chapter and because it well illustrates the types of misunderstanding that divide philosophers from their would-be critics in the "sociology of scientific knowledge" (SSK).

Following my own setup, Wright says that, before any assessment of a relativistic view of a given domain can be made, an answer is required to three questions:

A. What is a *standard*?
B. What is it for something to be true *relative* to a standard?
C. What is it to *accept* a standard?

Why do I, and Wright, say that a relativist must supply answers to these three questions? Well, the explanation is simple. A relativist about a given domain, say, morality, is someone who holds that:

> (Moral Relativism) Judgments about morality cannot be absolutely true or false; they are at most true or false relative to the standards accepted by a society. As far as the standards themselves are concerned, there is no question of their correctness.

As we can see from this definition, answers to the three questions are required if we are to properly understand the relativist's position. We need to know what a standard is; what it is for something to be true relative to a standard; and what it is for a particular standard to be the standard of a particular individual or society.

Wright agrees with me in saying that "natural" answers to our three questions are as follows:

A. Standards are general propositions.
B. A particular proposition's being true relative to a standard consists in its being logically entailed by such a general proposition (together with relevant auxiliary facts).
C. Accepting a standard means believing the relevant general proposition.

Bloor finds the answers that Wright gives to the three questions on behalf of the relativist "unnatural." He prefers the following answers:

A. A standard is a social institution.
B. Relativity is social causation.
C. Acceptance is being a competent social actor.

Bloor's case for preferring these answers is, unfortunately, riddled with misunderstanding.

Against Wright's answer to A, he cites the "standard meter" in Paris. Is the standard meter a proposition, he asks rhetorically? Well, no, it's a metal rod of a certain length.

Doesn't that refute Wright's view that standards are propositions? Well, no, since the standard meter is not a standard in the relevant sense; it's just a metal rod. The standard, the norm, is something that would be formulated as follows:

(Length Norm) The lengths of things should be reported as multiples or fractions of the length of the standard meter.

That's the standard. And that, as you can see, *is* a proposition – indeed, a normative proposition.

But even if this were granted, isn't Bloor right that it's more illuminating to say that a standard is a social institution than that it is a proposition? After all, if something like (Length) is a standard among us, surely that has something to do with our having accepted it as a standard?

No, we need to distinguish the question *what a standard is* (Wright's first question) from the question: *how does a given standard come to have authority over us?*

In talking about standards, you need to be able to say that *there are many possible standards*, only some of which are standards that are operative in a given society. This shows that you can't say that a standard is a norm instituted by a society, since there are many norms that are not instituted by any society. In that sense, a standard is clearly a proposition.

If we then ask what makes one of these possible standards a norm that is operative within a given society, the answer may well be that it is so in virtue of having been socially instituted. What makes it the case that (Length) has the status of a standard or norm is that it has been accepted as a norm by the relevant members of society; as a result, it has the authority of a standard amongst the members of that society.

Bloor says:

> Wright's mistake derives from being in the grip of a false picture of a social process. He talks of propositions when he should be talking

> about how people co-ordinate their behaviour and conduct their interactions.
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> (168)

As I hope I've made clear, there is no conflict between talking about standards as propositions and talking about how some of those propositions become normative for a community by being adopted as standards to be followed.

11.4. Is Sociologism Enough?

But let us ask a more general question: What is it for a possible norm to have *authority* over a person or community?

In principle, it looks as though there is a distinction between a norm *having authority* over some community and that norm having been accepted or endorsed by that community. The two notions are logically distinct.

Although the notions are logically distinct, in some cases they clearly coincide. For example, everyone would agree that (Length) has authority over us only because it has been socially endorsed or accepted. Questions about which units of length to use in reporting about lengths is a *conventional* matter. It is decided upon by social convention.

And, of course, it makes sense that issues about how the length of things should be reported should be a matter of social convention. Standards for reporting on lengths need to be settled one way or another so that we can effectively communicate with one another, but within a broad range of options, it doesn't matter how they're settled. That's why when we come across people who report their lengths in inches and yards, as opposed to meters and centimeters, we don't think of them as making a mistake! We simply think that they have settled on a different conventional standard.

The hard question that interests philosophers is whether *that sort of social institution story* can account for the authority of *all* the norms that intuitively have authority over us.

Sociologism is the view that *any* norm can only come to have authority over an individual by his being part of a society that has come to accept that norm. As Bloor puts it:

> What is the social process which generates the sense of a standard as an external thing? The answer is: the ability of competent actors to invoke the standard in the course of criticism, justification and elaboration. It is in this sense that the standard can exist . . . as an object of "possible consultation."
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> (165)

Now, Bloor writes as though all of philosophy is committed to the idea that there must be norms that have an authority that is grounded in something beyond societal acceptance. This is one of the many places where he may not be as well-informed about philosophy as he needs to be if he is to be an effective critic of the discipline. I have many colleagues in my own department who are anti-realists about normativity and who would basically agree with Bloor's sociologistic view.

Bloor is right, though, that there are philosophers, myself included, who believe that it is impossible to account for everything that needs accounting for merely by appeal to the sort of authority that social pressure provides.

Take the case of a moral judgment like:

(Torture) It is wrong to torture an innocent child just for your own amusement.

Does anyone really accept that the truth of this norm consists in *nothing* over and above our living in a society that disapproves of such acts? What would we say if we were to come across another society in which the practice of abusing children for fun were accepted? Would we say: "Well, we don't approve of that in our society, but they can do as they please," or would we rather condemn them? Surely, the latter. But with what right would we do that if sociologism is correct and the normative authority of our norms doesn't reach across societal boundaries?

There are, of course, practices about which we do take such a tolerant attitude. For example, (and within certain limits, I suppose) we all take a relativistic attitude towards table manners. But we do not take such a relativistic and tolerant attitude towards (Torture).

Sociologism encourages us to resist applying our own norms to a different society, one that has explicitly disavowed the norms that we find natural. But ordinary moral agents, and not merely professional philosophers, reach across societal boundaries with our norms all the time and would find it intellectually and morally debilitating not to do so. By itself, of course, this observation hardly defeats sociologism. Sociologism need not deny that we are antecedently attracted to an objectivist view of morality. This attachment may be a residue of all sorts of myths. Sociologism seeks to correct our attachment to objectivism by insisting that nothing else is remotely scientifically acceptable.

What I want now to argue, however, is that the correction the sociologistic view is after is impossible to implement coherently. In particular, while it might be coherent to suppose that we could dispense with *moral* judgments with objective purport, it is not coherent to suppose that we could dispense with rationality judgments with objective purport. However, once we have admitted some objective normative facts, we may as well admit as many as there intuitively seem to be.

Consider *any* judgment we might want to make – for example, that Earth is spherical. We make the judgment, presumably, because we think it is justified by the evidence available to us. This is why it would be paradoxical (as Moore 1942 pointed out) for me to assert the following:

> Earth is spherical but I don't have any justification for believing that it is.

But now consider the judgment that Bloor, *qua* proponent of sociologism, wants to make:

> (Rationality) You should not make rationality judgments with objective purport.

Anyone putting forward this judgment would have to be doing so because they thought that (Rationality) itself is the rational thing to think given the considerations they have adduced. There is no other way to understand it. Could the notion of rationality presupposed by this very judgment – the judgment of sociologism itself – be itself simply understood as grounded in social pressure?

Suppose we tried to think of it that way. Bloor says sociologism is the rational thing to believe. In a sociologistic view, that would mean, roughly:

> It follows from the norms and assumptions that my society accepts that we ought to believe sociologism.

There would, however, be two problems with this way of trying to understand the statement of sociologism.

First, it seems false to say that it follows from the norms and assumptions of our society, however exactly that's to be individuated, that sociologism is true. Indeed, if what I've been saying about the objectivist presuppositions of ordinary moral judgments is correct, it would appear that, if society has any view about the matter at all, it is that sociologism is false, certainly as applied to morality.

Second, it follows from sociologism that if some other society were to accept different norms, or make different assumptions, that they would then be perfectly within their rights to reject sociologism. In particular, since there appears to be a community of philosophers who subscribe to different norms, or make different assumptions, they would be, by sociologism's own lights, perfectly entitled to reject sociologism. On what basis, then, are they being criticized by Bloor? Can't he see that, by his own lights, he is not entitled to criticize them?

What this shows, of course, is that Bloor himself does not treat the statement of sociologism in a way that is compatible with his sociologism.

He regards sociologism as simply true, not just as true relative to his own optional norms and assumptions.

Relativists, as we know, tend to be dismissive of such self-refutation arguments. They often claim that they are just pieces of logical sleight of hand that show nothing serious. I think this attitude is mistaken. Few things could be worse for a view than showing that putting it forward as true is incompatible with its truth.

11.5. Conclusion

If, as I have been arguing, a sociologistic view of normativity is as wrong-headed as I've been claiming, why has it been found so appealing? As far as I can tell, the proponents of sociologism think that their view is forced upon us by taking an appropriately respectful attitude towards the deliverances of basic science. (This would be ironic, if true. The people taken to be most responsible for science-bashing would be seen to be motivated by respect for what they take to be the deliverances of science.)

The train of thought goes something like this: Fundamental physics has shown us that, at bottom, there is nothing but particles and the void. In particular, therefore, there is nothing that could be the source of objective normativity. If there is no such thing as objective normativity, what we experience as objective normativity is just a transfigured version of social pressure. If all there is are various sorts of social pressure, then there can be no criticizing a society which has ended up endorsing a different set of norms than ours.

The basic flaw in this argument is the misguided scientism with which it begins. You can have respect for the great achievements of fundamental physics without supposing that it has given us a complete picture of the world in which we live. There are many important things which physics has not succeeded in explaining and which it may never be able to explain.

One obvious and enormously important example is consciousness. Another big lacuna is something that physics itself relies upon heavily, namely, mathematics. Mathematics concerns numbers and sets which are not among the concrete objects studied by physics, but are rather abstract objects. And physics has not given us any understanding either of the nature of abstracta or of our access to them. Another important gap is that of modality – statements about metaphysical necessity or possibility – of which the statements of mathematics are just one special instance.

In a word, the world we live in is a much more complex and mysterious place than a reductive physicalist picture can do justice to. To account for everything that needs accounting for, we are likely to admit fundamental and irreducible truths about consciousness, abstract objects and modality, at the very least. Once this is recognized, scientistic objections

to admitting fundamental and irreducible truths about normative matters will be seen to have lost much of their force.

References

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