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Restoring the moral dimension in social scientific accounts: a qualified ethical naturalist approach.

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Introduction

As a social scientist I have long been troubled by the lack of recognition in contemporary social science of what might be termed the moral dimension of social life. In much of recent social theory, action is assumed to be either merely interest-driven, or habitual, or a product of wider discourses and institutions. Often it adopts a sociologically-reductionist account of actors' motives and actions, in effect, saying 'they would say/do that, wouldn't they, given their social position', which is in contradiction with the first person accounts which actors (including social scientists) offer for their own behaviour, which involve *justification* rather than sociological explanation. Actors' rationales or normative dispositions are discounted - either altogether, or by reducing them to conventions or features of discourses. Even those social theorists who, like Durkheim, invoke morality a great deal, often concentrate on its effects in reproducing social order, reducing it to mere convention backed by sanctions. This gives no insight into its normative force, and hence why it should matter so much to us. The idea that ethics or morality¹ is simply 'what we do round here' will always be unconvincing, producing an alienated view of actors as mere dupes that misses what they care about and why.

Positive, including positivist, social research can of course treat actors' moral concerns as social facts, but the effect of the expulsion of normative thought from modern social science tends to mean that the normative force of those moral concerns is not analysed, thereby



reducing them to apparently arbitrary conventions. Hence, the expulsion of values from science that has occurred over the last two centuries has been accompanied by an expulsion of reason from values, and the rise of the view that values can only be subjective, not objective. More recently, post-structuralists have adopted what Habermas has termed 'cryptonormative' stances, both abolishing the subject and refusing normative valuation while surreptitiously appealing to the readers' normative values by using terms like 'domination', 'oppression', 'racism', etc., without justifying these evaluative descriptions. This treatment of actors as mere products and bearers of discursive conventions and the discounting and evasion of moral judgement is not something theorists or anyone else can *live*.

"Moral judgment is what we 'always already' exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitute our life together. Whereas there can be reasonable debate about whether or not to exercise juridical, military, therapeutic, aesthetic or even political judgement, in the case of moral judgment this option is not there. The domain of the moral is so deeply enmeshed with those interactions that constitute our lifeworld that to withdraw from moral judgment is tantamount to ceasing to interact, to talk and act in the human community" (Benhabib, 1992, pp.125-6, emphasis in original; see also Habermas, 1990).

Nor can subjectivist and relativist approaches to morality be adhered to in practice. In engaging in arguments about ethical matters, we can hardly avoid appealing to common standards and to objective or independent circumstances, rather than merely to our own individual preferences or those of our community. To reduce morality to no more than personal preference or arbitrary discursive convention would be to render incomprehensible both the inherent seriousness of moral issues and the way in which we (including post-structuralists when off duty) argue about them.

But while it is easy to identify the performative and theory-practice contradictions involved in these positions, it is much more difficult to provide an account which does justice to lay normativity, which acknowledges both the validity and fallibility of lay ethical values, which tells us where such values come from, what encourages or discourages their development, and from where their force and legitimacy derive. This paper offers some suggestions towards this end, as regards ethical dispositions or moral sentiments and how they might be understood. It proposes a 'qualified ethical naturalism' which acknowledges both the intransitivity or otherness of human social being, its scope for both flourishing and suffering, and its possibilities for extensive cultural mediation, diversification and development. In other words it seeks to do justice to actors' ethical dispositions or moral sentiments and hence offer a way of restoring the moral dimension to social scientific accounts. This is less ambitious than the moral realism advocated by Andrew Collier in *Being and Worth* (1999) but very much in keeping with his arguments in *In Defence of Objectivity* (2003).

In trying to restore the moral dimension, I have turned to ethical theory, and to classical social theory, in which normative and positive thought were not separated and in which the conception of society as a moral order was more common. Being particularly interested in normativity and economic activities, or 'moral economy', Adam Smith has an obvious appeal and part of this paper amounts to a response to his work on moral sentiments. This, I will argue, is highly sophisticated and implies a realist view of ethics, albeit a 'thin' form of realism that needs supplementation to prevent it lapsing into emotivism or conventionalism.²

At the same time, attempting to bridge the divide between social science and moral philosophy also exposes weaknesses on the latter's part. Just as positive social science has neglected the normative character of social life, so moral philosophy tends to pay insufficient attention to positive matters regarding the nature and context of moral concerns in everyday life. Typically, it tends to individualise the explanation of good and evil, as if the problems of the world were merely a product of bad moral decisions.³ I shall argue that the causes for much evil and suffering derive from particular forms of social organisation, though not independently of individuals, and that the scope of ethical theory needs to expand to consider these.

From the point of view of a social scientist wanting to understand the moral dimension of social life, much ethical theory is too purely normative, too reduced to abstract reason and hence too alienated from recognisable actors embedded in recognisable social settings to provide much insight. It might offer good reasons for philosophers, or indeed others, to



approach ethical issues in a particular way, but this might be quite different from how people think and act (Glover, 1999, p. 295). Of course, at one level this is only reasonable, insofar as the purpose of moral philosophy is openly normative, and lay ethics are imperfect.⁴ For example, Rawlsian theory offers an imaginative and original normative approach to certain ethical issues, but it does not pretend that people think in this way. But even if we accept this radical normative purpose, and thus a certain distance from how things are, there must be some connection between the positive and the normative: "(E)thics must be grounded in a knowledge of human beings that enables us to say that some modes of life are suited to our nature, whereas others are not" (Wood, 1990, p. 17).⁵ A normative ethics which took no account of what kind of beings humans (or indeed others species) are would be an absurdity. On the one hand, moral philosophy has to take account of human capacities (many of which exist in potentia) and limitations, on the other it is of little use if does not help us see how, within those constraints, we could not come to lead better lives. As Jonathan Glover remarks, the attribution of ethical dispositions to people as part of their "humanity is only partly an empirical claim. It remains also partly an aspiration."⁶ (Glover, 2001, p.25).

Equally, any positive account of social life needs to acknowledge that actors are evaluative beings, for whom normative questions are generally more important than positive questions. In this sense, the normative is an important part of the positive. Part of the socialisation of social scientists involves learning to forget the peculiarity of prioritising positive questions about the social world, but this often comes at the cost of neglecting the importance of normative questions to actors.⁷

From a positive or explanatory point of view, the obvious realist question about the moral dimension of social life would be: what is it about humans and human society that makes us have moral concerns? Any good answer to such a question would have to go beyond invoking our capacity for language and meaning making and deal with what it is that makes us *care* about anything. Thus, an adequate account of the moral dimension of social life needs an understanding of the nature of the subjective experience of it. As Charles Griswold puts it: "Ethical life cannot be rightly understood when what is indispensable for it - the subjective standpoint of the actor - is downplayed." (Griswold, p. 53) This is not a license for a subjectivist view of ethics; on the contrary it is a necessary component of realist or naturalist views of ethics. Moreover, actors are also of course objects as well as subjects of moral concern. Consideration of this dual nature is necessary for answering our realist question, what is it about people that makes them capable of moral concern? Without an understanding of lay subjectivity, ethics is reduced to a philosophical genre.

While some conception of the nature of human being must be at least implicit in any ethical theory, if it is left implicit there is a danger that it will be inadequate. Thus, for example, many ethical theories ignore the fact that a significant proportion of social relations occur not between adults but between adults and infants, and hence they propose as universally appropriate actions which might be harmful for such cases - most obviously liberal theory. Any normative moral theory has somehow to balance the vulnerability and the material and psychological dependence of individuals on others and their capacity and need for autonomy. The kinds of dependence and autonomy and the balance between them varies between different societies, so that the development of subjects itself varies too - with different mixtures of good and bad effects. However, although the universal human capacity for cultural diversity is highly distinctive, humans are not so plastic that just any imaginable form of culture and society can be lived with indifference, without pushing against any limits, without making any difference to whether they flourish or suffer. Some forms of culture and society are more detrimental or beneficial than others. The diversity of cultural forms does not disqualify or relativise ethical theory but just presents it with more difficult judgements.

The social character of life is also central, not only abstractly but in terms of the difference made by concrete forms of social organisation. When philosophers ask how we should live or what is the good life it is tempting to think of this in individualistic terms and as a matter of reasoning how one should act. However, of course in practice the good life does not depend simply on making the right decisions, on thinking well about how to live, but upon the constraints and enablements, including discourses or world views. of particular forms of social organisation.



Finally, we need to be aware of the fact that the philosophical standpoint can lead one to project onto lay actors the exceptional rationalist, contemplative stance of philosophy (Rawls' 'plans of life' is an extreme and slightly comical example). As recent social theory has shown, particularly that of Pierre Bourdieu, this overlooks the practical character of everyday life, and the extent to which action is habitual, embodied, partly non-discursive and done largely 'on automatic' (see especially Bourdieu, 2000; Crossley, 2001). Although this point is exaggerated by Bourdieu (Sayer, 2004), it is important to be open to it. I shall suggest ways in which this can be acknowledged, that is how restoring the moral dimension can be done through the concept of ethical dispositions, and by taking emotions seriously. Conscious reflection is still acknowledged but supplemented with a recognition of the habitual. In other words I shall argue that we need to adjust the relations between concepts of reason, emotion and habit in a way which counters the tendency to render them as opposites.

Ethical dispositions: emotion, reason and habit

While there have been important developments in realist philosophy and social theory on the relations between emotion and reason (Archer, 2000; 2003; Collier, 2003), I shall argue that in seeking an adequate understanding of the moral dimension of social life, it is important to consider embodiment, dispositions and habit too, in order to avoid an overly rationalistic concept of action. Moral philosophy inevitably tends to exaggerate the role of reason in moral life, for the simple reason that it is itself the application of reason to the subject, though this overrationalisation is a common failing or occupational hazard of the social sciences too (Bourdieu, 2000). I shall first summarise some of these developments and then suggest how they might be related to ideas of dispositions and 'habitus'.

At the same time as the role of reason in everyday action often been exaggerated, the meaning of 'reason' has itself often become attenuated, at worse to the application of deductive logic and to instrumental rationality. This is most evident in contemporary economics but sociologists such as Weber have reinforced it too (MacIntyre, 1985). This attenuation has frequently been coupled to a complementary attenuation of concepts of emotion and habit, so that they are de-rationalised. When we say things like "we have reason to be angry" (because someone has deceived us, slandered us, or whatever) we don't mean merely that we have a logical argument for being angry⁸, or that being angry is a means to an end. Rather, citing such reasons also indicates that reason can be related to needs, desire⁹, commitments and practical matters of welfare. As Margaret Archer's recent research shows, people's internal conversations include thinking and worrying about their commitments, weighing them up in a way which involves a kind of practical reason or substantive rationality, dealing with the valuation of ends and concerns themselves, not merely means towards them (Archer, 2003).

Attenuated, alienated conceptions of rationality are complemented by de-rationalised conceptions of emotions in emotivist, subjectivist and relativist treatments of value or valuation. These have become popular in lay thought as well as philosophy. Not the least of the deficiencies of these approaches is that they render unintelligible the seriousness with which we argue or reason about values and moral issues (Collier, 2003; Midgley, 2003). As Andrew Collier notes, while many are attracted to such views when discussing ethics in the abstract, when challenged to consider particular problems that arise in everyday life, they abandon this and argue that x (itself) is good or bad.

Realists have challenged such de-rationalised views of emotions, arguing that emotions have a cognitive aspect, providing 'unarticulated commentaries' on matters that are important to actors, with regard to the physical world, practical action and social relations (Archer, 2000, 2003; Collier, 1999, 2003; Norman, 1998; Nussbaum, 1984). Thus one might feel sad as a result of illness, failure to carry out some practical task, or unfriendly treatment by others. In all cases the emotion is about something independent. Of course, reflexivity allows the self to become an object of such commentaries, and for some moral emotions, especially shame, their object is primarily internal (Sedgewick and Frank, 1995). Emotional responses may be mistaken - a possibility deriving precisely from the independence of their referents. It is possible where the object is internalised for them to take on a self-fulfilling character (for example, self-contempt for lack of confidence leading to further loss of confidence), though even here there may be grounds for arguing that the resulting emotion (e.g. low self-esteem) is falsely based and hence unwarranted (e.g. the individual underestimates the goodwill of



others). Moreover, fallibility does not counterpose emotion to reason for the latter is fallible too, and emotions can also successfully direct us towards objects such as selfish or violent behaviour, which exist independently of the spectator, indeed our survival depends on this kind of reference being successful at least for a substantial part of the time. The fact that emotions normally have a palpable physical expression does differentiate them from reason, but these expressions are intelligible and rational rather than inexplicable - the cringe of fear, the curl of the upper lip of contempt indicating physical distaste, and so on (Sedgewick and Frank, 1995). As Raymond Williams observed, thoughts can be felt, and feelings can be thought (Williams, 1977).

While the capacity for some emotions seems to be innate, others exist in potentia and are developed contingently through social interaction. The acquisition of a *capacity for or disposition towards* particular moral emotions or sentiments regarding particular practices is the product of a practical learning process depending on both these primary emotions and contingent forms of socialisation. This learning process is partly subconscious and non-discursive, like the learning of practical skills, through which we achieve a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 2000; Crossley, 2001). Through practice, through the repeated experience of social interaction, 'ethical dispositions' become part of the structure of dispositions oriented to the individual's habitat and position within the social field that Bourdieu termed the habitus.¹⁰ This is not to say that there is no conscious reflection involved in their acquisition. Just as one has to think and concentrate in trying to learn how to return the ball at tennis, even though the skill is a practical, bodily one rather than a matter of learning a description, so the acquisition of ethical dispositions may involve reflection during particular social episodes - on what emotions are telling us, which of course can then modify the emotional response. The reflection is both about the object and our emotional response, mediated by reference to the responses of others. As dispositions, they enable us often to respond immediately to some situation without having to reflect on it. At the sight of an adult beating up a child, we would expect an observer to be horrified, and we would have doubts about the character of anyone who had first to reflect on whether it was good or bad. Ethical dispositions can therefore be 'intelligent dispositions'. Someone who had formerly been indifferent to sexism can become sensitised to it through learning and reflection, so that dispositions towards it become embodied, and hence their responses to instances of it do not have to wait for further reflection.

An implication of the intelligent character of ethical dispositions is that while there are grounds for distinguishing ethical dispositions embedded in the social relations of communal life from formal moral norms, they need not be seen as antithetical; it may be possible for norms to be internalised as dispositions. Conversely, some formal norms may be largely formalisations of common dispositions.

There can also, of course, be unethical dispositions - for example, to be cruel, selfish, vain, and so on. How far these develop depends, like ethical dispositions, on the nature of socialisation or everyday moral education, including the discourses and reasoning available to and contingently drawn upon by actors.

Once acquired, (un)ethical dispositions, have some inertia, but their strength depends on the seriousness of the concerns which are their object and the frequency with which they are activated. The mode and context of their activation can recursively change dispositions, making actors more, less, or differently ethical. Some experiences, like blood-donating, may be 'consciousness-raising', while others, like a night out with the lads, may be 'consciousness-lowering'. In either case the process of change is likely to take place through small steps. For example, in the negative direction, people may find that minor immoral acts may pave the way for the sanctioning of major ones, though they may realise, usually too late, that they have crossed a moral boundary (Glover, 2001 p.35).¹¹ That our capacity for unethical as well as ethical action is nurtured or stunted by our involvement in particular social practices and situation in contexts rarely of our own choosing, is often ignored by normative moral philosophy, but is crucial for any critical social science and philosophy. It raises the question of how, given that we are obviously capable of both evil and good, each of which may bring good or bad consequences for individuals, the good is preferred on the whole. Moral philosophy's dominant individual focus leads us to neglect the fact that in practice, both ethical and unethical behaviour tend to have clear social causes¹², though of course this is not a determinism for individuals may sometimes reflect on such causes and override them. I



shall return to these issues later. For now I want to enlarge on the social context of (un)ethical action via the work of Adam Smith.

The virtues of Smith's analysis of moral sentiments

One such study of the morality or ethics in context is Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1757/1984). One of the virtues of **this** is that it adopts a 'bottom up', empirical approach (Griswold, 1999), analysing moral sentiments and judgements through examples so that one can appreciate what the *objects* of the particular moral sentiments in question are. Smith achieves this with considerable insight, sensitivity and nuance. He also takes human imperfections - our capacity for *immoral* sentiments and acts - more seriously than do many philosophers. His account incorporates a social psychology in which moral sentiments and acts arise from an ongoing process of moral education and regulation through interaction with others. Individuals are analysed as thoroughly social beings, not merely continually situated in social relations or influenced by them, but continually *needing* others and their approval, and being alive to their welfare. (They are thus far from the asocial, autistic figures assumed by contemporary mainstream economics, sometimes through appeals to egregious misrepresentations of Smith's work.) Thus, Smith's analyses of moral sentiments are always set within the context of individuals' real and imagined relations to others.

He begins with an empirical claim concerning the universal human capacity for (developing¹³) 'sympathy', defined not as commiseration or compassion but more broadly in terms of "fellow feeling with any passion whatever" (I.i.1.5).¹⁴ We can infer that while this capacity is partly hermeneutic, it is also partly pre-linguistic. Like a realist, Smith refers to the objects of moral sentiments, which in many of his examples are the sentiments and experiences and situations of others. While we have a capacity for understanding others' situations and responses and for having similar feelings to theirs, Smith insists that this understanding is fallible, and that just as a representational discourse is a different kind of thing from what it represents, so the emotions that we experience when we observe others' experience are not, and indeed cannot ever be, identical to theirs.

Smith's imputation to individuals of a certain capacity to distinguish good from evil derives from a twofold relation: to the object and its properties, and to others and their responses of approval or disapproval. Individuals stand in need of the approval of others and continually monitor their own and others' conduct. In reflecting on how to react they invoke the imagined judgement of an 'impartial spectator'. This does not imply a god's eye view, but the fallible view of an imagined other. Nor does it imply a demeaning 'hypodermic' model of actors passively absorbing discursive constructs, but some degree of deliberation and discrimination, though as we have argued, in many familiar situations responses may have become largely spontaneous products of learned intelligent ethical dispositions. Like any kind of knowledge, moral judgement is social and it is epistemologically and psychologically, and sometimes socially and politically, difficult for us to decide to act in ways which are at variance with the views of others, though not impossible. One of the ways in which the moral failings of individuals are restricted is by the regulative effect of the approval and disapproval of others (real and imagined), and of course this same mechanism is crucial for our moral education. Thus, Smith's account of this regulative effect provides a sociological but not sociologically-reductionist explanation of the acquisition and development of moral sentiments. At the same time, the analysis of how actors consider the responses of real and imagined others provides an element of universalisation. Unlike some moral theories, however, it locates this as a tendency inherent in everyday social interaction instead of treating it simply as an abstract principle.

Smith's insistence on individuals' need of others, on the socially embedded character of judgement and action, together with his discussions of moral sentiments such as benevolence and compassion and his criticism of self-love, suggest that while he also famously noted the importance and value of self-interest, at least with regard to market exchange, he saw our imaginations and our most intense cares as connected to the good of all. This implies a fundamentally eudaimonistic rather than egotistic orientation, though as we shall see, this can be overridden, with mostly undesirable consequences, in certain kinds of social context which promote the latter (see also Nussbaum, 1996, p.48).



While the most striking feature of The Theory of Moral Sentiments is its systematic and subtle analysis of how individuals make moral judgements within interpersonal relations, it also addresses another kind of relationship - namely how particular forms of social organisation tend to encourage particular kinds of moral sentiment, good or bad. The most famous example which concerned Smith was the way in which commercial society tended to promote vanity, and the elevation of the pursuit of praise and prestige over the pursuit of praiseworthy action. Again, to acknowledge that the kinds of social relations we grow up among influence the kinds of people we grow up to be, is not to deny that anyone can resist their influence, but to recognise that it is difficult, and may sometimes be too much to expect.

To return to the matter of lay moral judgement itself, Smith appears to waver between realist and conventionalist views.¹⁵ Although he could be taken to be proposing a purely conventionalist view of the good - the good is merely whatever the community approves of,¹⁶ or what spectators find 'agreeable', which might also suggest an emotivist view of moral sentiments - he mostly rejects such conclusions. While he argues that this approval or disapproval is itself fallible, it is often warranted, because it is in keeping with the nature of the action or situation being evaluated: "Originally, however, we approve of another man's judgement, not as something useful¹⁷, but as right, as accurate, as agreeable to truth and reality: (1984, p.20, [l.i.4.4]) However, this realist point is immediately compromised when he continues "and it is evident that he attributes those qualities to it for no other reason but because we find that it agrees with our own." (ibid.) - implying a subjective or conventionalist view of truth.

Smith's most clearly realist argument is his insistence on a distinction between praiseworthy acts and praise, arguing that a praiseworthy act is not, contra sociological reductionism, simply any practice which happens to be praised, but one which is good or worthy even if it is not praised.¹⁸ Moral acts are not merely ones which are conventionally approved but are done regardless of whether they receive approval, in fact even, in exceptional cases, in the face of disapproval. The behaviour of those who hid Jews from the Nazis in the second world war was moral despite the fact that their behaviour brought them not merely disapproval but considerable risk. Thus, sociologically reductionist, conventionalist accounts of morality merely reproduce the mistake that the praiseworthy is no more than what happens to be praised.¹⁹ He also described virtues in non-conventionalist ways; for example, he considered benevolence, and the restraint of selfishness as "constituting the perfection of human nature" (1984, p.24, [l.i.4.4]) implying it is necessary for us to flourish, which points to an ethical naturalism, a point to which we shall return.

As to just what constitutes praiseworthy behaviour as an object, aside from whether it is praised, Smith is somewhat vague, and he tends to rely on appeals to the particular examples he works from rather than making general claims. In any case, the above argument does not say enough because of course many acts which are carried out in the face of disapproval are not moral but immoral, indeed that is why they are despised (though again, they are not immoral *because* they are despised).

It is at this point that we need to go beyond Smith and consider ethical naturalism.

Ethical naturalism

As a theory of the nature of ethics I am proposing what might be termed a *qualified ethical naturalism*. It is ethically naturalist in that it considers that the very meaning of good or bad cannot be determined without reference to the nature of human social being. As a first cut, we can say that the meaning of good and bad ultimately relate to human needs and human capacities for flourishing or suffering. This is not merely a matter of 'values' or 'subjective opinion', or of pleasure and pain, for it concerns objective matters - objective in the sense of independent of what particular observers happen to think.²⁰ Like 'needs', the categories of 'flourishing' and 'suffering' transcend the positive-normative divide.

It is a *qualified* ethical naturalism because it also acknowledges that these capacities are always culturally-mediated and elaborated, in three ways:

1. Cultural influences upon our environment condition bodies in certain ways - for example to be tough or soft, violent or passive. While these influences may be articulated discursively they are also enacted physically through action and materials;



2. Human needs and capacities for flourishing or suffering are always interpreted in various ways by particular cultures, so that the same circumstances will be interpreted differently, though not just any interpretation is likely to be accepted. For example, to some extent socially-produced suffering may be legitimised as natural, and perhaps be accepted as fate by the dominated, but not just any suffering can be coped with or legitimised, and therefore resistance is always likely;
3. Further, some kinds of goods and needs are indeed wholly culturally-determined and relative, so that their satisfaction also influences whether members of particular cultures flourish (for example, the need of Muslims to pray). These goods are both defined and valued by particular communities as part of their norms, and they are internalised (to varying degrees) by their members in their commitments so that individuals identify with them and give meaning to their lives through them. Hence many moralities and their associated ethical sentiments apply primarily to those inside a particular community, and not or less so to other communities.

Many will want to say that human flourishing and suffering are 'socially constructed', not merely in the sense that people construe them in different socially-available ways (which critical realists would accept) but that there is no human essence so flourishing and suffering, morality and immorality are no more than what particular cultures happen to construct or 'constitute' them as. This tends to accompany a relativist view of ethics, so that, for example, there are no independent grounds for deeming female genital mutilation to be unethical. (See Nussbaum, 1999 for critiques of such absurdities).²¹ However, even the third kind of culturally-specific needs presuppose natural human qualities not available to most species or objects and so are not entirely independent of any naturalistic preconditions. Socialisation cannot possibly 'go all the way down' as Rorty argued, for socialisation presupposes an organic body with particular powers and susceptibilities not possessed by objects, like planks of wood, which cannot be socialised (Geras, in Archer, 2000, p.41). Bodies can be socially modified but always within limits.

This qualified ethical naturalism attempts to accommodate both the wondrous variety of human cultural forms and elements which seem to be common to all (Nussbaum, 1993).²² While there are universal human needs these are always culturally-mediated - though within limits, and in addition there are wholly culturally-produced (but naturally enabled) needs. This capacity for considerable cultural diversity is an *essential* feature of human beings, involving issues as fundamental as sexuality identity, and cosmology.²³

As a second cut, we need to note that actors' concepts of the good and the bad and their understanding of human flourishing and suffering are, like all understanding, formed in terms of available schema or discourses, which in turn are embedded in cultures. They are fallible, though again it would be absurd to imply that they are all entirely mistaken (since this would involve theory-practice contradictions and make simple survival incomprehensible, indeed impossible). Strong versions of social constructionism collapse the difference between understandings and what they are about or of, and hence can make no sense of the fallibility of beliefs, for they assume that what is thought, must be, so that understandings always successfully construct the world as they imagine, and social wishful thinking always works. (The opposite idea - the belief that ideas can be perfect reflections of the world - is little better.) Of course, cultural practices *do* construct or attempt to construct social life in their own image, but how far they are successful depends on how they relate to the properties of the objects they manipulate and address, including people, which are not the product of wishful thinking but are 'other.'

While it might seem easy to accept that cultures can be wrong about human physical capacities for flourishing (for example promoting foods which cause heart disease) it is perhaps harder to accept this might be true of the more culturally autonomous practices of the kind referred to in 3), which seem to be more self-confirming. Cultural discourses provide commentaries not only on the extent to which cultural practices enable flourishing and suffering, more simply on what is good for us, and to the extent that conformity to such beliefs helps one be accepted as a member of a community, their claims have a self-fulfilling character: those who conform may flourish more than those who rebel. But such discourses may be deeply ideological, encouraging the oppressed to embrace and value their position as worthy, for example, encouraging full-time housewives to embrace domesticity, dependence



and subservience to their husbands. At the same time, discourses, belief systems or cultures are usually rich enough to provide ways of questioning their own beliefs. Thus, one doesn't have to be a non-westerner to see that many beliefs about what constitutes flourishing in the west are mistaken. The complexity, unevenness and (increasing) openness of real societies tends to invite actors to compare situations of relative flourishing with other situations of oppression and to question why what is possible in one sphere is not in another; for example why values of equality have not been extended to gender relations. The fallibility of any discourse, practice or 'social construction' is a product of the independence or otherness of the materials (including personal, social and discursive materials) from the concepts their users may have of them, and this otherness can often be detected.

What is culturally-defined as good (for example, junk food, traditional gender roles, neoliberalism and acquisitiveness) is not necessarily so. As stratified beings, that is simultaneously physical, chemical, biological, psychological and social beings, we can be affected by different kinds of suffering on different levels - physical sickness, socio-psychological pathologies resulting from culturally-produced double-binds, and social contradictions (for example, the development of money as an end in itself rather than a means to an end). There may also be feedbacks from one level to another; when capitalism (social level) may makes you sick it does so via its influence on the psychological, biological levels.

However, to acknowledge the fallibility of popular conceptions of the good and of morality is not to suppose that there is only one best way of living. As Nussbaum (1999) and Collier (2003) argue, it is possible, indeed necessary to acknowledge the remarkable cultural diversity of human societies, and that there is more than one way in which flourishing may be achieved. Societies are open systems. It is therefore quite consistent to argue both that cultural, including moral values are fallible, providing mistaken ideas about what constitutes flourishing, and hence producing physical suffering, psychological damage, and limitation of human powers, and that in principle that different cultures could provide different but equally successful forms of flourishing.

This is not to underestimate the difficulty of assessing what constitutes flourishing or suffering, but we can make some discriminations between them. Clearly it requires us to assess what human social being involves and what is distinctive about it. Thus, recognizing the human capacity for agency and creativity and need for stimulation, all people have not only certain basic needs regarding 'beings' (such as food and shelter, and a healthy environment), but also a need for access to diverse activities or 'doings' (Sen, 1993). As Aristotle argued, flourishing is assisted by full, active use of capacities - which is why the deprivations of prison really do damage people - so that "the more enjoyable activities and the more desirable pleasures arise in connection with the exercise of greater abilities involving more complex discriminations" (Rawls, 1971, p. 426n). There are many actually existing kinds of being and doing and many more possible ones, but it is in virtue of our stratified nature that it is possible, notwithstanding this cultural diversity and openness, to speak of 'basic needs', and indeed, as Nussbaum and Sen have demonstrated, to define these sufficiently broadly to avoid ethnocentrism (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993).

Flourishing and suffering are typically unevenly distributed. As social beings, the extent to which particular individuals flourish or suffer depends on their relationship to others, on social structures and embedded distributions of power which enable, constrain, and provide interpretations of, their lives. Some individuals or groups may flourish at the expense of others or may suffer in ways that help others flourish. In other words there may be localised possibilities for flourishing for some, which, though better than some alternatives, are inferior to other social arrangements that allow flourishing to be more of a positive sum game. The ideal would be a society in which the flourishing of all is the condition of the flourishing of each individual. However, the very existence of local secondary optima, and material conditions such as the spatial segregation of the dominant and the oppressed, reduce pressures to work towards more inclusively beneficial forms of social organisation. One of the impediments to better forms of society is the fact that the eudaimonistic impulse can be met tolerably well from the point of view or people's well-being locally, and sometimes at the expense of others who are, or are imagined to be, remote.²⁴

In proposing this qualified ethical naturalism I am trying to avoid two main pitfalls:



1. An over-extended naturalism which grounds ethics in ahistorical bodies. This ignores cultural variety and historical change, and hence the openness of human development - the fact that we can become many more things than we have been or currently are. We might be able to become more - instead of less - ethical than we are now. In addition, social change may pose novel moral problems: for example, new forms of technology (e.g. reproductive technologies), social association (e.g. global neoliberalism) and developments in social thought²⁵ (such as animal rights arguments). Ethics cannot be *reduced* to a matter of authenticity in relation to a primordial human nature, though as we argue nor can it be wholly divorced from human nature. Human nature allows us to be cruel and violent as well as kind and caring, and therefore even when dealing with universal human characteristics we need to distinguish between what constitutes flourishing and suffering. We need to avoid both a naive objectivism - in which these matters are simply self-evident and not culturally interpreted - and various forms of idealism, that falsely assume that what ever is culturally interpreted is solely the product of culture, confusing mediation and interpretation with production, and supposing that creativity or 'construction' can occur out of nothing, and regardless of the properties of the materials used in construction.

Our qualified ethical naturalism avoids this kind of reductionism, by acknowledging the openness of social systems, the fact that humans can become and live in many more things than they have so far. In developing those new ways they will acquire new culturally-emergent powers, and discover new ways of flourishing - and suffering. Thus ethics must allow a creative dimension, albeit not creation out of nothing, as if it meant denying any kind of natural limits and enablements, as seems to be implied in some of Foucault's work (Foucault, 1987?), but creation through the use and development of existing materials. There therefore need be no conflict between an ethics of authenticity and an ethics of creativity.²⁶ Nor need there be any conflict between this concept of the pursuit of the good as one of discovery in the dual sense of discovery of what already is and of what could be, and the concept of objectivity as defended by Andrew Collier (Collier, 2003). We learn as best we can what is objectively possible and what objectively expands human flourishing through social experimentation. That such social experiments, such as those of state socialism, Talibanism or global neoliberalism can go horribly wrong, is precisely in keeping with rather than in contradiction with the idea that what constitutes human flourishing is an objective matter, in the strong sense, that is, one independent of 'social construction'.

2. Various forms of relativism and idealism, which treat norms, including morality, as purely a matter of convention, as nothing more than 'what we do round here'. The relative success of various norms or arguments is interpreted in a sociologically reductionist way, being attributed wholly to matters of social positioning, socially-granted authority, performance and confidence, and power and luck. It is often coupled with refusals of normative argument, and indeed, through a sociological reductionism which reduces the internal force or validity and veracity of arguments to matters of social authority and power. Such approaches run into three related problems. Firstly, they cannot articulate why anything is progressive rather than regressive - why, for example, racist resistance to liberalism is not progressive while anti-racism is (each after all, involves different ideas about 'what we do round here'). Secondly, it involves a performative contradiction (why argue or reason so carefully for a position which denies argument or reason any force?). Thirdly, it involves theory-practice contradictions (when crypto-normative writers are wronged in everyday life, they don't complain by merely appealing to 'what we do round here', or by pulling rank, or using force to gain revenge; they usually *explain* to the person who has wronged them why their actions were wrong or unfair, and they expect them to 'see reason', not merely authority or power).

These three problems all derive from a more basic one in social science: a common but often unnoticed inconsistency between third person accounts of behaviour which explain it wholly in sociological terms ('they would say/do that, given their social position'), and first person accounts of behaviour which use *justification* ('I do that not because of my social position but because I believe - and am willing to argue - that it is the best thing to do, given the nature of the situation'). Ironically, there is a complicity here between sociologically-reductionist accounts of the effectivity of discourse and the belief of populist politicians and media that political argument reduces to a matter of confidence, style and conviction.²⁷

An a priori assumption that all societies or cultures are completely different and incommensurable would be as dogmatic as an assumption that they are no different. (It would



also render inter-cultural communication inexplicable.) Just how much difference and similarity there is among them is an empirical question, and existing evidence suggests both extraordinary differences and overlaps and similarities (Nussbaum, 1993; 1999).

Social structures as objects of moral concern

I noted earlier that Smith correctly recognized that moral and immoral sentiments and behaviour tended to be encouraged or discouraged by particular forms of social organization, and that his concerns about the damaging effects of markets were consistent with this recognition of social influences. I now want to draw out some critical implications of this approach regarding contemporary moral philosophy's tendency towards individualistic approaches which neglect the evaluation of social structures.

Acknowledging the importance of social influences on individual behaviour enables us to see that it is no accident that instances of evil or anti-social behaviour tend to be concentrated in particular places or institutions, because they are induced by problematic forms of social organisation involving inequalities of power, material deprivation and various forms of discrimination and refusal of recognition²⁸. Thus Hobbesian and violent behaviours are often induced by absolute deprivation and refusal of recognition, coupled with expectations raised in the wider society regarding levels of consumption and desirable lifestyles, including gender models (Gilligan, 2000). Many of these formative processes are highly self-reinforcing and multilateral in character; it becomes difficult for individuals not to behave in a Hobbesian manner if the majority of their community are already doing so.²⁹ The young men of the Chicago black ghetto interviewed by Loic Wacquant make it clear that their world is overwhelmingly Hobbesian (Bourdieu et al, 1999, pp. 130-167), and that if they were not suspicious of others, and continually on their guard and prepared to use force, indeed sometimes to treat attack as the best form of defence, they would be sure to end up as victims. Of course, such social conditions do not wholly excuse anti-social individual behaviour, for individuals might be expected to reflect on and override such influences, but again, this is often a lot to expect.

In such cases, critical concern should be focussed on the whole situation rather than simply on individual conduct. In everyday life, people tend to resort to individualistic explanations, assuming that if there are local concentrations of anti-social behaviour there must simply be local concentrations of evil people. In this way, political objections are defused and diffused into moralistic condemnation of individuals. However, much of moral philosophy, with its focus on individual action and its neglect of social contexts, offers little challenge to this view.³⁰ The standard questions in practical ethics tend to concern what individuals should do, not what kinds of social organisation should exist. Thus for example, problems concerning inequalities of wealth are often reduced to the question of whether the affluent should give money to the absolutely poor, not how poverty comes to exist in the first place and whether the mechanisms that reproduce it should be allowed to persist (e.g. Singer, 1993). It tends to imply that the proper response to poverty is for the well-off to do X, even though it is clear that poverty is caused by Y (structures of exploitation and domination) rather than the lack of X.

By contrast, the critical realist model of emancipatory explanatory critique (Bhaskar, 1979) focuses attention on the causes of problems, and how they might be removed or blocked. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Sayer, 2000), it offers no help in deciding just what are problems. A right wing opponent of taxation or asylum seekers could use exactly the same formal structure of explanatory critique as that proposed by Bhaskar to find ways of eliminating these 'problems'. This is why critical realism needs an ethical theory (e.g. Collier, 1999), albeit one geared to evaluating social arrangements as well as individual behaviours.

This prioritisation of questions of what the individual should do in the face of social circumstances such as entrenched inequalities has tended to give moral philosophy a bad name in social science, for encouraging a diversion of concerns which are properly political into moral or moral matters, or what Weber scathingly described as -

"[T]hat soft-headed attitude, so agreeable from the human point of view, but nevertheless so unutterably narrowing in its effects, which thinks it possible to replace political with 'ethical' ideas, and to innocently identify these with optimistic expectations of felicity" (Weber, cited in Bellamy, 1992, p. 216).



This polarised (and partly unfair) response is complemented by a kind of amoral libertarian socialism which values political struggle in itself and lacks any justification for its goals other than power itself.

Hence, in addition to overcoming the divide between positive social science and normative moral philosophy, we need to overcome the divide between matters of individual morality and political concern about social structures.

Conclusions

I have argued that we need to relate ethical dispositions or moral sentiments both to the kinds of beings we are - social, embodied beings located in various societies or communities - and to what it is that makes people not merely respond to conditions but discriminate among them. Individuals are both vulnerable and hence dependent on others, and are capable of having dominion over themselves to some degree, of seeing themselves as ends and not merely means for others. We are dependent on others not only in terms of needing their care as infants or in ill-health or needing their products through the division of labour but in terms of recognition and the public, shared nature of many forms of flourishing. We are vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits because we have things we care about and with which we identify, whose enhancement or loss affects our well-being (Frankfurt, 1998; Norman, 1998; Nussbaum, 1986). If we were not beings who were capable of caring, needing, lacking and desiring we would lack much reason to seek or resist anything. Reason on this view is not mere logic. When we say we have reason to do some thing, we do not mean merely that we can produce a piece of reasoning but that we have a need to do it. At the same time, to appeal to reason is to refer to standards and circumstances which are not reducible our desires or preferences but are independent of them, hence objective, and are intersubjectively verifiable, at least in principle.

An adequate understanding of the moral dimension of social life needs to draw upon both social science and moral philosophy, indeed to ignore the boundary between them. It needs to recognise the rational, cognitive aspect of moral sentiments while acknowledging that they can be based on embodied ethical dispositions as well as introspection. It needs a strongly social conception of the formation and exercise of moral judgement, though without lapsing into sociological reductionism that renders morality as no more than 'what we do round here'. It needs to consider not only what are the proper objects of moral concern but also what it is about human beings that enables them to be subjects (and also objects) of moral concern. In other words it needs to provide a moral psychology, ideally one that goes far beyond Smith and deals with the development of moral sensibilities from birth. An understanding of the subjective aspect of the moral dimension of social life in no way licenses a subjectivist view of morals but is in fact a necessary component of an adequate realist analysis.

In these respects, Adam Smith's sophisticated analysis of moral sentiments offers a good starting point, illuminating the fact that we are evaluative social beings, aware that others are spectators of our own behaviour or could be, as we are of them. However, he fails to resolve the tensions between conventionalist or emotivist views of values and realist views. For this we need an ethical naturalism, albeit one which is qualified to take account of the reality of cultural diversity and innovation. This is compatible with realism and with Andrew Collier's analysis of the nature of objectivity, although its claims are more limited and modest than those of strong versions of moral realism such as those posed in *Being and Worth* which require us to accept that being itself is good (Collier, 1999).

I have argued for the restoration of the moral dimension to social science's descriptions of social life, partly by drawing upon the insights of moral philosophy and some of the classical social theory that predated the divorce of positive and normative thought. However, I have also noted the limitations of contemporary moral philosophy in terms of its individualistic tendencies. Taking the social influences upon individual behaviour seriously requires us to evaluate social structures themselves as proper objects of moral concern, thereby uniting the moral and the political instead of allowing moral deliberation to have individualising and depoliticising effects. I am sure that this is consistent with Andrew Collier's enduring concern not only with morality but with the search for a socialist society.



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Endnotes

¹ I shall use the terms morality and ethics interchangeably, while recognizing that there is a difference between formal norms and dispositions relating to an ethos, which some authors use the two terms to distinguish.

² Though I do not want to misrepresent Smith, my main purpose in referring to his ideas is not to produce either an authoritative account of his moral philosophy, but to use and adapt certain elements that might help us understand the moral dimension of social life.

³ Critical realism is an exception here for its analysis of structure and agency and of explanatory critique enable it to avoid individualism and voluntarism (Archer, 2000; Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994).

⁴ For instance, everyday thinking is patently inadequate for dealing with matters such as responsibilities towards distant others and future generations.

⁵ Behind a veil of ignorance, we might be encouraged to consider such questions, indeed Rawls' arguments regarding primary goods presuppose them.

⁶ This identifies the weakness of simple dichotomies of the positive and the normative with respect to ethics.

⁷ While empirical researchers are often exasperated by their interviewees' tendency to interpret positive questions normatively (for example, when they ask questions about class), they should sometimes pause to reflect on the extraordinary nature of their own tendency to bracket out normative questions.

⁸ Anti-naturalists would refuse such a possibility by denying that it can ever entail ought. This is not only flawed in its own terms, as Bhaskar has

demonstrated (Bhaskar, 1979), but it argues on the wrong terrain for it misidentifies relations between substantial processes, such as being assaulted, insulted or deceived and the consequent effects on one's well-being and state of mind, as logical relations between statements.

⁹ This also implies that reason itself has 'shoving power' (Archer, 2003; Collier, 2003).

¹⁰ However, as Smith suggested, individuals' ethical dispositions seem to vary less according to their social position than do their aesthetic dispositions, presumably because of the greater role of universalisation in the formation of the former (Smith; 1757; Sayer, 2004).

¹¹ This is a tendency taken advantage of in military training: for example, novice soldiers are made to alter their ethical disposition towards violence through bayonet practice.

¹² For a compelling analysis of the social causes of individual violence see Gilligan (2000)

¹³ This should be unpacked to distinguish innate capacities from acquired capacities. Exceptional conditions may inhibit the acquisition of certain of the latter, such as severe deprivation of contact with others in childhood. One of the complexities is that we have to deal with capacities which contingently (but often almost invariably) develop from pre-existing capacities as emergent powers, and in which that development depends on environmental factors. Thus, a capacity for language use presupposes but is not reducible to certain non-



linguistic preconditions. Likewise, moral imagination - the capacity to imagine the consequences and implications of actions - may be restricted or extensive.

¹⁴ While many commentators have overlooked this point, and thus imagined a contrast between the 'sympathetic' individuals of The Theory of Moral Sentiments and the supposedly merely self-interested individuals of The Wealth of Nations, it has to be said that Smith does sometimes use 'sympathy' in the more common sense. It is important to note that the common idea that there were thus two Smiths has now been overwhelmingly refuted by intellectual historians (Winch, 1978; 1996; Griswold, 1999; Weinstein, 1999)

¹⁵ This has been noted by several commentators. See Griswold, 1999, for an overview.

¹⁶ This is a common view in sociology (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 115). It raises interesting questions about what sociologists do when they mark essays, referee each others' papers, and how they argue.

¹⁷ In addition, he is clearly rejecting a utilitarian account here (see also Griswold, p. .244).

¹⁸ This argument has antecedents in Aristotle, and is further developed by MacIntyre through his distinction between internal and external goods (MacIntyre, 1985). MacIntyre cites the work of Goffman as an example of this sociological reductionism. It is analogous to the conventionalist view of truth favoured in recent sociology of science. In both cases it seems to encourage a view of detached superiority on the part of the sociologist, a view which is at odds with its absurdity.

¹⁹ In the terms of critical realism, this involves what Bhaskar terms an 'epistemic fallacy' in that it transposes ontological matters into epistemological ones (Bhaskar, 1975).

²⁰ See Collier, 2003 for a brilliant analysis of the multiple meanings of - and confusions surrounding - objectivity.

²¹ This also tends to involve an 'upward' reduction of the biological to the social through a denial of ontological stratification and emergence. Another component is a dogmatic anti-essentialism, which typically argues, illogically, that because gender and identity have no essence, nothing has any essence, and which imagines that to impute essences to things is to deny that they can change or assume different contingent forms according to their associated accidental properties (Sayer, 2000).

²² It is interesting that the beliefs and practices of ancient Greece can, without contradiction, be drawn upon to illustrate both points.

²³ It is both a *generative* essence - generating cultural variety - and a *diagnostic* essence, that is a characteristic which is distinctive in humans, though some degree of cultural variety has been found in other higher animals too (see Sayer, 2000, chapter 4).

²⁴ Likewise, from the perspective of an ethical theory based on the need for recognition, this can often be met locally, within particular groups, which may at the same time deny, and indeed depend on, the denial of full recognition to others (Wood, 1986, p.93).

²⁵ Of course these three things tend to be connected - new technologies involve changes in social relations and ways of thinking

²⁶ It is not only absurd to call, as Foucault does, for an ethic of creativity that is not based on truth about desire, life, nature or body (Foucault, 198?, p. 262), as if these would prevent creativity and new discoveries; it is also dangerous, to call for an ethics which disregards the affordances and limits of human social being.

²⁷ I recall attending a seminar on the impact of discourse which took a sociologically-reductionist and crypto-normative line to this topic. It was held on the day on which Britain and the US committed themselves to invade Iraq, and the speaker made a derogatory aside about the government's stance. While the remark was, in my view, quite justified, it undermined the whole thrust of the talk in appealing to the lack of internal force to the government's arguments rather than to the social position, authority and habitus of politicians.



²⁸ This is not to deny that unethical behaviour is possible in more favourable circumstances too, though even then, one suspects there would be a social or social psychological dimension to their explanation.

²⁹ See also Glover's analysis of 'Hobbesian traps' (Glover, 2001)

³⁰ An important exception is the large volume of work on markets (e.g. O'Neill, 1998)..