Restoring the Moral Dimension: Acknowledging Lay Normativity[1]

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Abstract: Restoring the Moral Dimension

Contemporary sociological accounts of action tend to pay little attention to its moral or ethical dimension, emphasizing habit, discourse, convention and interest instead. Yet this dimension of social life is inescapable in practice, social relations being differentiated partly by the particular moral expectations that are associated with them. People are evaluative beings, continually monitoring or at least sensing their own and others' behaviour as more or less good or bad. Moral sentiments or emotions are not mere subjective forms of 'affect' but have a rational, referential

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aspect; they are intelligent dispositions and susceptibilities. They are not wholly reducible to effects of social position. The paper draws upon the work of Adam Smith and moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum to make a case for taking the moral dimension of social life seriously. This emphasizes the role of emotions as evaluative judgements of matters affecting actors' well-being and as fundamental to lay morality. By reference to examples of shame and moral boundary drawing, it is argued that concepts from moral philosophy can help illuminate the (un)ethical qualities of social relations and practices which sociology has tended to overlook. Finally comparisons are drawn with conventionalist, subjectivist, social constructionist and rationalist views of morality and values – views which, it is argued, have tended to produce an 'alienated' conception of morality in sociology.

Introduction

To begin with, I would ask like to ask the reader to consider their answers to the following questions for a few minutes:

1. What do you care most about?;

2. How do you feel you should be treated by others, and how do you feel you should treat them? Why do you get upset if someone mistreats you? And if you try to remonstrate and reason with them, how do you do this and through what kinds of argument? Why shouldn't they treat you like that?;

3. What kinds of behaviour would you feel ashamed of or guilty about and why?

I will explain the point of starting with these questions later.

I am not the first to call for more attention to be paid to the moral dimension of social life. Others such as Alvin Gouldner (1971), Janet Finch (1989), Zygmunt Bauman (2001), Carol Smart and Bren Neale (1999) and Ralph Fevre (2000) and Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) and many others have done so too. Unfortunately much of contemporary sociological theory and empirical research pays little attention to the moral or ethical dimension of social life, emphasizing habit, discourse, convention, power and interest instead.

I agree with much of what these other authors have said about the moral dimension of social life but in this paper I want to try a different approach, one which draws more heavily on moral philosophy and engages more directly with normative rationales. I shall suggest how we should think about morality in social life, primarily by reference to moral sentiments or emotions, drawing upon the work of Adam Smith (1759) and Martha Nussbaum (2001) on these topics. These relate morality to emotions, arguing that the latter are evaluative judgements of independent or objective situations which have or are imagined to have a serious bearing on our well-being and that of others. Given its status as a particularly 'social' emotion, I shall illustrate the alternative approach by reference to the example of shame. I shall then argue that moral judgements and distinctions can both reinforce and challenge social divisions, by reference to the widely-noted phenomenon of 'moral boundary drawing', and then conclude.[2] Finally I shall argue against conventionalist, subjectivist, social constructionist and rationalist approaches to moral values, and attempt to show that these produce alienated conceptions of morality which no one can live.

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[2] I should perhaps point out that, just in case anyone is suspicious of a title like 'Restoring the Moral Dimension', that I do not have a conservative, communitarian or religious agenda, nor do I believe that our society is in moral decline, on balance. The restoration I'm calling for is in social science, not society.

Why sociology struggles to understand the moral dimension of social life

I began by asking readers what they care about. Little of social science tells about why we care about anything. I would suggest that the reason for this is its *de-rationalized view of normativity and values.* Social scientists are taught to adopt and prioritise the positive point of view and, unless they also read philosophy, to suppress normative reasoning. The gradual separation of positive and normative thought that has occurred over the last 200 years in social science has involved not only an attempted (though incomplete) expulsion of values from science, but an expulsion of science or reason from values, so that values appear to be mere primitive, a-rational subjective beliefs, lying beyond the scope of reason.[3] We thus have on the one side reason, which does not seem to matter or motivate, and on the other values and emotion, which matter and motivate but from no apparent reason. This de-rationalisation of values is at odds with the fact that when necessary, as in the case of perceived injustices, we do reason about values, and not merely by appeal to personal preferences or mere convention.

The divorce of normative and positive thought in social science has rendered much of so-called critical social science unable to identify not only its own normative standpoints but the normative concerns, distinctions and valuations that figure so prominently in the lives of the people it studies. Consequently, social scientists are prone to theory-practice contradictions, that is, to producing accounts of action which do not fit their own mundane behaviour, and which they could not themselves live. Thus, while the behaviour of others is explained in terms of social positioning and discourses – in effect, implying 'they would say/do that, wouldn't they', sociologists generally explain their own behaviour, like everyone else, by *justifying* it. They do not, for example, say that the arguments that they put forward in sociological debate are no more than products of their position or self-interest. In the face of such theory-practice contradictions[4]

> ". . . we ought to examine what has been said by applying it to what we do and how we live; and if it harmonizes with what we do, we should accept it, but if it conflicts we should count it [mere] words." (Aristotle, cited in Griswold, 1999, p. 49.)[5]

Of course there are important respects in which our justifications are indeed influenced by our social position and by wider discourses, but reflexivity is needed not only to examine such influences, but also in the opposite direction, to examine what they do *not* explain, that is how everyday situations often require us to make decisions and *justify* what we do.

> "(W)ithout a categorical opening to the normative standpoint from which subjects themselves evaluate the social order, theory remains completely cut off from a dimension of social discontent that it should always be able to call upon" (Axel Honneth, 2003, p. 134).

In everyday life, the most important questions tend to be normative ones. Of course we need to have a positive practical knowledge of what there is and of how at least some things work, but unless we are particularly curious, or are involved in education, these things matter less to us than questions of what concrete behaviours or practices are good or bad, how we or others should behave and what we or others should do. This is not to suppose that we always need to think directly about such things, still less in terms of abstract general principles, for we tend to have 'a feel for the game', as Bourdieu would say, although we are likely to be pulled up and made to reflect upon things that happen to us that seem wrong or out of order. Moreover, habitual action can be based on acquired intelligent dispositions that discriminate between the good and the bad, indeed some definitions of virtues and vices identify them as dispositions (Sayer, 2004).

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[3] The early founders of the social sciences combined positive and normative discourses seamlessly (see O'Neill, 1998; Barbalet, 2001).

[4] Inevitably, extreme anti-humanist approaches are riddled with theory-practice contradictions.

[5] Similarly, Marx comments: 'The idea of *one* basis for life and another for *science* is from the very outset a lie', Marx (1844, 1975, p.355).

Lay normativity should be taken seriously precisely because it matters to people, and it matters to them because it is about things which seriously affect their well-being. The struggles of the social field, between different groups, classes, genders and ethnicities certainly involve habitual action and the pursuit of power, but they also have a range of normative rationales, which 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.

It might seem that these are just different 'values', only important in terms of how they correlate with social position. There is certainly some interesting sociological research on this, for example, in the research of Michèle Lamont and Pierre Bourdieu (Lamont, 1992; 2000; Bourdieu, 1984), but what matters to people is whether these different values are defensible, and with whether what they imply for well-being is true. There may be specific worries such as how parents should bring up their children (Reay, 1998b; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989), concerns about whether people are treated fairly and with respect (Skeggs, 1997), how they should conduct themselves following family break up (Smart and Neale, 1999; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003) or reflections on the way their lives are going in terms of balancing goods such as friendship and achievement (Archer, 2003).

Thus, if we are to understand lay normativity we need to go beyond a sociological reductionism which deflates and demeans lay justifications or rationales for beliefs and actions. Actors' rationales may indeed sometimes be little more than rationalisations of their position: the economically successful would value achievement, wouldn't they?; and the poor would say that other things than money are more important, wouldn't they? But while we all are capable of rationalisation, we are also sometimes capable of taking different views from the ones which fit our position most comfortably. Sociologists often do this themselves but are occupationally inclined to assume that those they study do not.

This is not to say that people necessarily have particularly coherent normative ideas. They tend to be disparate and sometimes inconsistent; middle class people may both resent snobbery from those more highly placed and be snobbish towards those below them. But however incoherent, the rationales are important in themselves, and as actors ourselves, we can hardly avoid engaging with them at least sometimes. Furthermore, in practice, motives are typically mixed, so that moral sentiments and considerations are mixed with ones of self-interest and expedience.

By morality I mean simply the matter of what kinds of behaviour are good, how we should treat others and be treated by them. Moral feelings, ideas and norms about such things also imply and merge into what philosophers term 'conceptions of the good' - ideas or senses of how one should live - though in everyday life these are generally less coherent and explicit than philosophers assume. I shall follow old uses of the term and include these implicit conceptions as part of what moral concerns are about. I shall argue later that these conceptions are related to assessments of what constitutes flourishing and suffering. Of course, as observers as in everyday life, we do not have to agree with the lay moral beliefs that we encounter, and may consider what others' believe to be moral conduct as immoral.

Some may prefer the term 'ethics' to 'morality'. Sometimes the two terms are assumed to correspond to a distinction between informal, embodied dispositions deriving from concrete forms of social life, and formal, abstract norms and rules, though confusingly the referents of the two terms are sometimes reversed.[6] I shall be referring mainly to actors' dispositions, practical sense and mundane reasoning, rather than to formal, abstract rules whose actual influence on mundane behaviour tends to be limited. I shall use the adjectives 'moral' and 'ethical' interchangeably.

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[6] In addition to the Hegelian distinction between sittlichkeit and moralität, we find that in political theory ethics is often associated with the pursuit of the good, morality with the right. Arguably there is a triple distinction: ethical dispositions or moral sentiments arising from interpersonal interaction, norms of particular communities, and supposedly universal moral principles. No matter how the distinctions are made, they are very fuzzy: norms can be internalized as dispositions; dispositions can be formalized as norms, the right and the good ultimately presuppose each other.

It would be strange to deny that these are important matters or ones that we could avoid, and there is nothing inherently conservative about them. Considering them should bring home the gravity of morality and how it is tied up with our conceptions of ourselves and our happiness and well-being. Of course it is not usually simply individuals that cause suffering and unhappiness but the very organisation of society, its prevailing discourses with their taken for granted assumptions and ways of understanding, which pre-exist any particular individual and influence their identity. But these *matter* to us. The nature of these causes is important precisely because of the harm or good they do. Social science tends to be better at thinking about such causes than why they and their effects matter to us. To be sure, some moral norms can be distinctly ideological, passing off oppressive relationships as natural and good, but it would be absurd – and again invite theory-practice contradictions – to suppose that all morality was like this.

The moral dimension is unavoidable. Hardly any social relationship

> "is intelligible without a recognition of the ethical responsibilities and obligations which it carries with it, and . . . much of our moral life is made up of these kind of loyalties and commitments." (Norman, 1998, p.216).

Moreover,

> "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).

In life we cannot evade moral evaluation, though often we do it largely on automatic: just as we know how to walk or queue, we have a feel for how we ought to treat others, including how to speak to them. There are of course different views and assumptions about how we should act on any particular occasion, even within the same culture, but we cannot avoid deciding, and we often soon find out if others are disturbed by our behaviour towards them.

In sociology morality is often seen as a set of external regulative norms or conventions, and often-reactionary ones at that, which govern or attempt to govern behaviour. I call this an alienated view of morality. It is alienated from what I began by asking readers to think about – matters of what we care about, what is important for our psychological, social and physical well-being, particularly in relation to how people treat one another. They include commitments, and have a strong emotional aspect (Archer, 2000). On the alienated view, moral judgement is often seen pejoratively as 'moralising' and implicitly authoritarian, and constraining rather than progressive. Treating morality simply as a set of conventions ('what we do round here'), norms and rules, backed up by sanctions, which tend to produce social order, renders opaque what matters to us or why morality should have any internal force. We do not just treat others in a certain way simply because there are norms dictating that we should and because we fear sanctions if we don't. Nor do we object to things simply because they upset us. We often behave in a certain way regardless of whether there are any penalties for not doing so, because we feel that it is right, because it is conducive to well being, and because to do otherwise would cause some sort of harm to people. To be sure, it is partly because we have internalised those norms, but some norms are easier to internalise than others: some seem moral, others immoral.

There are many theoretical issues regarding how we can best conceptualise morality, and several rival accounts to that offered here. I shall address these later, in section ?? but I first need to elaborate my own proposal.

Morality and emotions

The questions I asked readers to reflect on at the beginning of the paper were mostly about morality, as defined above, and they presumably prompted *emotional* responses. In so doing, they hopefully demonstrated one of the main points I wish to make, that morality and

emotions are closely connected. However, to appreciate this we need to consider the nature of emotions and resist subjectivist, irrationalist or anti-cognitivist accounts.

Emotions – as authors like Martha Nussbaum, Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier, Jack Barbalet and Bennett Helm emphasize – have a cognitive and evaluative character: they are embodied evaluative judgements regarding matters partly or wholly independent of us which are thought to affect our well-being (Nussbaum, 2001; Archer, 2000, 2003; Collier, 2003, Barbalet, 2001, Helm, 2001). They are about something. They provide unarticulated commentaries on our situation. They are ". . . highly discriminating evaluative responses, very closely connected to beliefs about what is valuable and what is not" (Nussbaum, 1993, p. 239). We need to reject the treatment of emotions as opposed to reason. On the contrary emotions can be rational. [7]

To be sure the evaluative judgements provided by emotions are fallible, but then so too is reason. Their fallibility derives from the fact that they are about something independent of them, such that they can be mistaken about it. Thus, we may mistakenly imagine that something is a threat to our well-being when it isn't, though some degree of success in evaluating such threats is a condition of survival. We may even be mistaken about what produces well-being – for example, imagining that wealth is more important than friends – but again that presupposes the relative independence of what is being evaluated from the subject's evaluation. Emotions obviously have a subjective aspect, but they are not simply subjective, but are fallible judgements of and reactions to things which are independent of us, that is which exist objectively. [8]

Taking the cognitive, rational, evaluative content of emotions seriously suggests something different from treating them as 'affect' The very word 'affect', with its academic, cold, clipped, distant, unemotional ring, seems symptomatic of intellectual disdain and belittles the force and seriousness of what it refers to. 'Affect' is also associated with non-cognitive views of emotions that I wish to oppose (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 61n). Significantly, as a verb, to 'affect' means merely to simulate a response, such as surprise (i.e. to *dis*simulate or deceive), and 'affect*ations*' are *artificial* manners.

I now want to relate emotions to morality by reference to the work of Adam Smith. The questions I asked at the beginning were inquiring into moral emotions, sentiments and commitments. Like Martha Nussbaum I suggest that:

> "Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support or subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning." (Nussbaum, 2001, p.1).

I would argue that the habitus includes ethical dispositions; they are a subset of our intelligent dispositions, which, when activated, produce moral emotions or what Adam Smith termed 'moral sentiments' (Smith, 1759). [9] It is in virtue of these that people often produce moral responses spontaneously, without reflection, indeed it is interesting that we would have doubts about the moral character of someone who couldn't respond morally to certain events without first deliberating on them. Thus, on seeing an elderly person being mugged we might

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[7] This is not to deny that they are also different from unemotional kinds of reason. For example, whereas we can easily decide to think about something different when we are untroubled by painful emotions, it can be extremely difficult to stop churning through painful emotional reasoning.

[8] This does not mean that emotions themselves cannot also sometimes reflexively become objects of emotional concern, so that we feel shame about shame or depression. Note also that 'objectively' here refers to existence, not to the matter of whether we have a good understanding of what exists. I.e. it is used here in the ontological rather than the epistemological sense (Sayer, 2000; Collier, 2003).

[9] In a rare reference to the ethical dimension of the habitus, Bourdieu argues that the word 'ethos' better refers to these dispositions, than 'ethic', which suggests coherent explicit principles (Bourdieu, 1993). For a slightly different analysis to mine of the relationship between sentiments, dispositions and emotions, see Rawls (1971, pp. 479-485).

respond instantly with horror, anger and sympathy, before we had chance to reflect on what had happened. Like other dispositions, ethical dispositions, virtues and vices are acquired and become embodied through practice involving relations with others, so people become habitually honest, trusting, or deceitful and suspicious. The activation of these dispositions has an emotional aspect, evident in sentiments such as gratitude, benevolence, compassion, anger, bitterness, guilt and shame. There can of course also be unethical dispositions and immoral sentiments

One of the virtues of Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1757/1984) 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 *im*moral 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.) Smith's analyses of moral sentiments are therefore 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 (developing[10]) 'sympathy', defined not as commiseration or compassion but more broadly in terms of "fellow feeling with any passion whatever" (I.i.1.5).[11] We can infer that while this capacity is partly hermeneutic, it is also partly pre-linguistic. 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 bad derives from a twofold relation: to the object and its properties – particularly the capacity of people for suffering and flourishing, and to others and their responses of approval or disapproval. Fellow-feeling may be flawed but to the extent it is not it enables awareness of the well being or ill being of others, through comparison with the observer's own experience, and this may be confirmed or contradicted by the observed's and others' responses. Individuals stand in need of the approval of others and continually monitor their own and others' conduct, although there may be occasions when they decide to act in a certain way regardless of whether it wins approval. 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

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[10] 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.

[11] While many commentators have overlooked this point, and thus imagined a constrast 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)

constructs, but some degree of reflexivity, deliberation and discrimination, though as we have argued, in many familiar situations responses may have become largely spontaneous products of learned 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 others. This implies a fundamentally eudaimonistic rather than egotistic orientation, though 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 and responses 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. Thus Smith was concerned about 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. He also noted the tendency of inequalities to corrupt moral sentiments, so that the wealthy are judged more indulgently than the poor. This ambivalence and willingness to acknowledge linkages between the good and bad, and his suspicion of systemic utopian views, is a hallmark of Smith's work.

Of course, like other authors of his period, Smith underestimated cultural variety. However, although moral sentiments such as shame or pride or contempt can be responses to very different behaviours and situations, according to culture, they each have a certain common structure. We may also regard some of the objects of moral sentiments as mistaken - for example, those of patriarchal morality. But whether we are right to feel shame about x or y, the general nature of shame remains the same whatever the object. I now want to analyse its basic features, as an example of a moral emotion, illustrating its sociological significance by reference to class. As we shall see, a philosophically-informed analysis which resists sociological imperialism produces insights missed by more standard sociological accounts.

Shame

Shame has been described as the most social of the emotions, as it has often been assumed to be an important mechanism of social integration, making individuals conform to external judgements and norms (Barbalet, 2001; Scheff, 1990). Although Smith did not single it out for discussion in his analysis of moral sentiments, it is occasionally mentioned[12] and is implicit in his emphasis of the way in which people monitor their own actions by viewing themselves from the standpoint of others. At the same time, it is a particularly private, reflexive emotion, in that it primarily involves an evaluation of the self by the self. [13] Shame is evoked by failure of an individual or group to live according to their values or commitments, especially ones concerning their relation to others and goods which others also value. It is commonly a

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[12] E.g. 1759, pp.84-5

[13] Shame is usually prompted by some experience in relation to others, imagined or real, but primarily concerns the self: "Shame is the most reflexive of the affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost." (Tomkins, in Sedgewick and Frank, 1995, p.136).

response to the real or imagined contempt, derision or avoidance of real or imagined others, particularly those whose values are respected (Williams, 1993). To act in a shameful (or contemptible) way is to invite such contempt, including self-contempt. It may be prompted by inaction as well as action, by lack as well as wrongdoing. Particularly where it derives from lack rather than specific acts, shame may be a largely unarticulated feeling existing below the threshold of awareness – one that is difficult 'to get in touch with' - yet still capable of blighting one's life. It can also operate at a second-order level, where one feels shame about feeling shame. At the extreme it can be an extraordinarily powerful emotion involving endless reflection and self-condemnation, sometimes tormenting people to the point where they commit suicide or violently attack others (Gilligan, 2000). Despite – or perhaps because of - its seriousness as an index of and threat to people's well-being, it is generally only acknowledged through euphemisms by those who experience it (Scheff, 1990). To be ashamed is to feel inadequate and shrink from the gaze of others, and though one might sometimes try to deny that one is shamed, it is very hard for people to admit to shame publicly, for this heaps humiliation upon shame.

Like all emotions, shame is *about* something: it has referents. It may relate to failure to achieve valued appearances, for example in looks or clothing (aesthetic shame), failure to carry out some task to an expected standard (performative shame), or - most importantly - failure to conduct oneself in ways deemed proper, and to live in ways considered acceptable (moral shame). All of these kinds of shame are common in the context of class inequalities, for example. Also like other emotions, it is a fallible response in the sense that it can be unwarranted or mistaken.[14] The person who through no fault of their own has a despised body shape or who cannot afford fashionable clothing, has done nothing shameful, but might still feel shame. Equally, the complementary feeling of contempt may be unwarranted, if it is unrelated to any shameful or contemptible behaviour for which the despised can reasonably be held responsible. This is the case with class contempt. Thus, as with other moral sentiments, we can acknowledge the existence of shame without endorsing every instance of it as appropriate. We may even deem some sentiments of shame to be misjudged or *im*moral, for example, the shame of married men of my father's generation whose wives went out to work, which supposedly indicated that they were unable to 'keep' them.

Shame may also be engendered by invidious comparison with others who have been done better than ourselves in competition for goods which we value, such as educational achievements or moral behaviour (Tomkins in Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p.161). This source of shame is particularly important in relation to class. Within the educational systems of class societies, the shaming of those who fail is a structurally generated effect, as Bourdieu's extensive research on such systems demonstrates, even though it is felt as an individual failure (e.g. Bourdieu, 1996). Those who believe that society is basically meritocratic are most vulnerable to shame.

Shame is often associated with guilt, and in popular usage the distinction between them is sometimes fuzzy and unstable, but broadly speaking, shame is primarily inner-directed, and need not be tied to harm to others, whereas guilt is more related to specific failures (real or imagined) in the treatment of others. While both involve responses to the real or imagined feelings of others, in the case of guilt the others' feelings are assumed to be ones of anger, hurt or indignation rather than ones of derision, contempt, or avoidance (Williams, 1993). In addition, whereas shame can concern aesthetic and performative matters as well as moral issues, guilt is aroused only by awareness of moral failings in the treatment of others The two emotions are often combined; one may feel both guilt at having failed to honour a promise to someone and shame about having let oneself down in this respect. What is often called 'middle class guilt' appears to involve shame as well as guilt insofar as it implies both regret about belonging to a society based on unfair inequalities and regret for specific actions of their own which help to reproduce middle class advantages at the expense of the working

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[14] This is less obvious than in the case of its opposite, pride, instances of which are often described as 'false'.

class.[15] However, they can also be distinct; an adult who is unable to read may feel shame about this, but not guilt.

Shame is in some ways the opposite of self-respect and pride, but they are also related. To experience shame is to feel inadequate, lacking in worth, and perhaps lacking in dignity and integrity.[16] Self-respect derives from a feeling that one is living a worthwhile life and a confidence in one's ability to do what one considers worthwhile. Although deeply private, self-respect is also a profoundly social emotion: it's impossible for us to maintain the conviction that how we live and what we do is worthwhile if there are no others who appreciate our actions (Rawls, 1971, p.440-1), and as Smith and many other writers emphasize, the approval of others is crucial for well-being, albeit, not just any others but those who are regarded as worthy of respect. Rom Harré suggests that actors continually seek out situations where they risk contempt and hence shame, in order to win respect, implying that unless we take such risks, we shall achieve little respect or self-respect (Harré, 1979). In this way, shame and self-respect are linked. Those who never risk contempt because they never put their beliefs 'on the line', whatever the situation, are likely to be seen as lacking the courage of their convictions, or having no convictions or commitments and hence lacking character. The strategy fails because it too invites contempt. One might also feel shame about not having any convictions. Maintaining integrity in the face of pressures to bend is a prime source of respect and self-respect but it is buttressed by the fear of the contempt and shame which failure would bring. Thus, the chief sources of self-respect among the American working class men interviewed by Michèle Lamont derived from their self-discipline, their ability to work hard, provide for and protect their families, and maintain their values in an insecure environment (Lamont, 2000). They could hold up their heads, and define themselves as morally superior to managers, who, they felt, lacked integrity, failed to value people properly and generally dissembled in their pursuit of money and status.[17]

It is therefore clear that, as the psychologist Sylvan Tomkins argued, the negative feeling of shame is dependent on a positive valuation of the behaviours, ideals or principles in question (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p.136ff). The standards against which we judge our behaviour are our own, though of course they are likely to be some form of internalisation of external norms and expectations. Thus "shame is far from requiring diminished self-regard as its essential backdrop . . ." (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 196). It is only if we have certain expectations of ourselves that we can be shamed. This central feature of shame is commonly overlooked by sociological accounts whose disciplinary inclination to emphasize external social influence leads them to treat shame as merely the product of external disapproval (e.g. Scheff, 1990). To fail to act or live in a way which one doesn't care about does not provoke shame. To be treated with contempt by others for whose values one has no respect might induce sadness and anger but it does not induce shame. The worst kind of disrespect, the kind that is most likely to make one feel shame, is that which comes from those whose values and judgements one most respects. The stronger the commonality of values, the greater the possibilities for shaming.

The shame response is an important mechanism in the production of social order, indeed it is hard to imagine how there could be much social order without it, for through it people internalise expectations, norms and ideals, and discipline and punish themselves. Discourses

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[15] Middle class guilt and shame is usually very limited and mixed with a good deal of self-justification. There are often only the barest traces of these sentiments because class inequalities are normalised, if not naturalised, and in any case responsibility for class inequalities lies with social forces that are not reducible to individual actions.

[16] "If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation. . . While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul." Tomkins, in Sedgewick and Frank, 1995, p. 133

[17] Presumably the managers were not shamed by this contempt because they did not regard the workers as worthy judges of their character and because they had other sources of self-respect, particularly achievement. Jackall's study of morality and corporate managers suggests the workers' criticisms have good deal of validity, as a result of the pressures of their jobs.

may give people scripts, but people can care about some parts of these scripts and feel indifferent about others according to how they bear upon their well being; they are not merely programmed by discourses. Underneath the remarkable variety of cultures, the universal human capacity for shame is one of the mechanisms by which people are ensnared by discourses and norms, in all their diversity. But the metaphor of being ensnared is also too passive, for the human need for recognition, whose pursuit always carries the risk of failing and being shamed, drives us to seek out ways of acting virtuously from among the many possibilities offered and defined by our culture. All this is not to deny the common presence of power in social settings involving shame, but on their own, concepts of power, whether in capillary or arterial form, cannot explain the internalised normative force and selectivity of shame responses. In this context, we might note that although not directly acknowledged by Bourdieu, a capacity for shame is a necessary but rarely acknowledged condition for symbolic domination, indeed the latter is scarcely intelligible independently of these emotions.

However, it is superficial to regard shame merely as an emotion which produces social conformity, for shame may sometimes promote *resistance* rather than conformity. Those who are fervently anti-racist, for example, may speak out against racism in situations where doing so might put them at some risk. If we had no normative commitments, then it is hard to see why we would ever want to resist and how we would ever be shamed, because we would simply 'go with the flow', accepting whatever the pressures of the moment required. However, the anti-racist who keeps silent when others make racist remarks is likely to feel shame for conforming instead of resisting. Shame can therefore produce either conformity or resistance, but we cannot make sense of this if we reduce it to no more than a product of fear of external disapproval.

When faced with objective conditions which are shaming, because they give people little alternative but to live in ways they do not consider acceptable, there is always a temptation to reconsider the valuations giving rise to the shame, de-valuing what was valued, and valuing what was despised. To the extent that working class people refuse what they are refused, they avoid the shame that accompanies lack, indeed this may be a motive for their refusal. By contrast, the desire to be respectable and recognized as such is a shame response dependent on some degree of positive feeling towards what is lacked. It is possible that societies in which downward contempt is limited and accompanied by more positive and generous sentiments, particularly where these concern goods to which access is unequal, are more likely to produce shame than ones in which downward contempt is more sweeping.

The struggles of subordinated groups for self-respect are particularly likely to lead to highly ambivalent dispositions and opinions. They may try to make a virtue out of their position and their toughness and fortitude in bearing burdens, at the same time as they feel shame about having to bear those burdens. These are simultaneously responses of resistance and compliance. An example of this was found in a study of working class people in West Cumbria, an isolated and oft-forgotten part of north-west England, with high unemployment and an economy dominated by the notorious Sellafield nuclear power complex. Attitudes and dispositions towards the latter indicated both resistance and resignation and rationalisation, both criticism of the industry's secrecy and dominance and - in response to outsiders' criticism of the industry - defensiveness towards it. They both wanted to know more about the hazards and did not want to know. They both celebrated the toughness implied by living so close to hazards, and felt shame and anger that they should have allowed their area to have become the recipient of nuclear waste from other regions and countries (Wynne, Waterton and Grove-White, 1993).[18] The mixture of shame, defensiveness, anger and defiant pride is typical of situations in which people have to seek self-respect in circumstances which are largely beyond their control. Concrete situations often confront us with competing pressures and value systems and though people don't necessarily have to resolve many of the resulting tensions in order to get by in daily life, they are likely to produce ambivalent emotions. The subaltern in particular are likely to be torn between envy and rejection of dominant values and the associated goods beyond lying their reach, and hence between acceptance and refusal of shame.

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[18] Thanks to Bronislaw Szerszynski for drawing my attention to this research.

Shame in response to inequalities is likely to be the stronger where actors have individualistic explanations of inequalities and where there are hegemonic norms than where the norms are disputed. Thus the more that working class parents are ambitious for their children and the more they accept dominant values regarding education, the more vulnerable they become to shame if the school system rejects them.[19] The black working class youths studied by Jay Macleod who believed American dream of individual responsibility for one's own fortune were more vulnerable to shame than their white counterparts who rejected it (Macleod, 1995). By the same token the French working men studied by Michele Lamont were less likely to feel shame than their U.S. counterparts because they had a more structural and politicised understanding of class (Lamont, 2000).

To the extent that the things we come to value are shared so that we identify with others, shame may derive from vicarious sources, through empathy or fellow-feeling (Tomkins, in Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p. 159). We may share the shame experienced by other members of our own group, or take on the shame we feel they should feel, even where they do not. As members of many groups we can experience shame in relation to any group that we identify with:

> "I may feel shame at the indignity or suffering of any human being or animal to the extent to which I feel myself identified with the human race or the animal kingdom, and have reverence for life as such." (Tomkins, in Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p. 160).[20]

Given that we belong to a number of different groups it is possible to feel both contempt and shame in response to another's behaviour, depending on which group is being considered. Members of the British middle classes may feel contempt for working class football hooligans for their behaviour and in relation to their class, but shame as fellow Britons.

Tomkins relates shame and contempt to inequalities as follows:

> "Just as contempt strengthens the boundaries and barriers between individuals and groups and is the instrument par excellence for the preservation of hierarchical, caste, and class relationships, so is shared shame a prime instrument for strengthening the sense of mutuality and community . . ." (Tomkins, in Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p. 156).

Modern societies tend to combine both tendencies, for while there is plenty of class contempt in them there is also sufficient commonality of values across classes to produce shame in response to class, indeed the commonality help to legitimize and reproduce inequalities; rather than perceive class inequalities as unfair and unjustifiable, the dominated may see them as reflecting differences in individual merit according to criteria they accept.

Shame is thus not merely a response to the disapproval of others, but has a more complex normative structure. In these ways, the moral sentiment of shame can both reflect and cut across and challenge social divisions. I now want to generalise that conclusion by reference to by a widely noted phenomenon in sociology - moral boundary drawing (Lamont, 1992, 2000; Southerton, 2002).

Moral Boundary Drawing

Sociology's investment in ideas of social divisions, boundary drawing and 'othering' is such that it is easily overlooked that we can be well or badly treated by people *regardless* of their social position; members of our own social group can behave well or badly, as can those of others. Experience of specific kinds of mistreatment within our own group helps us understand the suffering they cause in members of other groups, regardless of their differences. Such experiences are fundamental to the development of a moral conscience as

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[19] This is borne out by Diane Reay's research on working and middle class mothers' experience of putting their children through school (Reay, 1998) and also the experience of academics of working class origin (Reay, 1997).

[20] Many vegetarians cite shame in response to the suffering of animals reared for food as one of the influences upon their vegetarianism.

opposed to a sectarian consciousness. Radically different kinds of behaviour can coexist within the same groups or contexts: for example, as John Stuart Mill noted, families can be schools of both love and despotism (Mill, 1869). Even moral boundary drawing involves affirming moral norms of some sort. Moreover, the moral education we gain within our own groups influences our relations with others. Through all these relations, we develop expectations and norms which to some extent are treated as universal rather than group-specific. Insofar as they concern actual behaviours, not mere stereotypes, it is possible to identify behaviour which *contradicts* rather than confirms such stereotypes; we may sometimes notice that the stigmatised other behaves ethically while the respected peer sometimes behaves unethically. To be sure, we may relate to others in ways which imply double standards, but we do not operate with *totally* different standards in different contexts. Treating the same action in the same way whoever does it, acting 'without regard for persons', is itself a common moral principle, indeed it is intrinsic to concepts of fairness and the virtue of integrity.[21] Hence, although it may be incompletely carried through, moral thought involves a generalising moment which can cross the boundaries between social groups, indeed it is to this that we owe our ability to criticise inequalities such as those of class. This generalising tendency arises not so much from internalisation of general principles of reason but, as Smith argued, from everyday social interaction and the self- and mutual-monitoring and regulation that accompanies it.

Although moral criteria are often used by social groups to distinguish themselves from others, those criteria also cross-cut the boundaries and potentially threaten them. Thus, moral boundary drawing has a crucial ambivalence at its heart, which can easily be overlooked: While it provides us with reasons for rejecting and devaluing others, *it also treats the merits claimed for our own group as universally valid*. To value down-to-earthness, for example, as is common in working class culture, is not merely to say it's only a good thing for working class people, but that *everyone* ought to be down-to-earth. The same applies to middle class valuation of cosmopolitanism. If people did not think these judgements were universally valid there would be no reason for them to think less of groups which did not live up to them. Thus, while middle class valuation of cosmopolitanism could be attributed to mere pursuit of cultural capital for advantage, this is also too cynical. Just as sociologists value foreign food and holidays not only or necessarily in order to gain cultural capital but because they consider those things worthwhile in themselves, regardless of the advantages vis-a-vis others that they bring, so other members of the middle classes can value them for their own sake too.

Theories of lay morality

I now want to make explicit the theory of lay morality that has been implicit in the above account, and compare it to approaches which are more common in sociology, particularly conventionalism, social constructionism, subjectivism and rationalism.

My account implies that lay morality is *'naturalistic'*, that is based on assessments of, or a sense of, or feel for, the implications of different courses of action for the well being of others.[22] The others may be limited to members of the actors' own group or extend beyond these, and the extent of the moral community may vary according to what is at stake. Assessments of well being - or indeed flourishing, suffering, oppression, abuse and the like – are simultaneously positive and normative. We are needy beings – characterized by lack and desire, and we are psychologically as well as materially and socially dependent on others. When we recognize a blocked need or other form of suffering we are simultaneously making a positive ('world-guided') observation and a normative ('world-guiding') judgement. The standard positive:normative distinction has an 'excluded middle'. Some of the most important phenomena in life are only identifiable from within this zone: 'needs', 'desire', 'lack', 'flourishing' and 'suffering', including their specific forms such as 'fulfilment', 'health', 'illness', 'oppression' and 'disrespect'. Such concepts have both descriptive and evaluative content, indeed the two cannot be separated (Sayer, 2004).

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[21] This does not exclude the possibility of also recognizing that to treat unequals as equal is unfair.

[22] This can include not only assessment of the consequences but of the actions themselves.

Suffering and flourishing take the form of objective effects and characteristics, that is ones which can exist independently of their observation by others, such as injuries, hunger, depression and resentment, or health, fulfilment and contentment. There are not only physical/material causes of suffering such as violence and deprivation but social/psychological causes, such as refusals of autonomy, recognition and social contact. To a significant degree, moral responses to others depend on 'subjective' assessments of such objective effects, along with those of flourishing. However, morality cannot be only subjective, for it simply would make no sense to say of two identical actions, that one was good, and the other bad; there must be something different about the objects for them to be evaluated differently. And to argue that something is wrong because it upsets us merely begs the question of what it is bad about the object which upsets us. A purely subjectivist account of morality is therefore incoherent.

Actors can only assess well being and suffering via available cultural discourses, and such judgements are fallible, though as we noted, to assume they were always mistaken would make survival and flourishing incomprehensible. One of the reasons for their fallibility lies in the fact that cultural discourses tend to provide ways of legitimizing or disguising domination. Such discourses may be deeply ideological, encouraging the oppressed to embrace their position as worthy, for example, encouraging women to value domesticity and subservience to men. 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 western beliefs about what constitutes flourishing 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. Again, 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. Hence legitimations of suffering and restraint are always likely to be precarious, particularly in cultures in which egalitarian elements are also strong. Just as, in science, the theory-laden nature of observation does not make all observation purely theory-determined and hence prohibit empirical dissonance, nor do cultural conceptions of well being always prove self-confirming. People may still experience some aspects as oppressive, even where cultural discourses encourage them to accept and even welcome them. The implication of feminism and other critical theories is that these are *flawed* conceptions of well-being, ones which legitimise domination.[23]

Yet while it might seem easy to accept that cultures can be wrong about human physical capacities for flourishing (for example valuing foods which cause heart disease) it is perhaps harder to accept this might be true of the more culturally autonomous practices, such as those of religion, which seem to be self-confirming. To the extent that conformity to such beliefs about the good 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.[24]

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. People have many powers and probably the potential to develop powers not yet discovered. There are hence many ways of flourishing, though not just any way of life enables it. Our naturalistic explanation of lay morality therefore neither requires nor licenses ethnocentrism, though it is a common feature of lay moralities themselves, indeed this is one of the respects in which lay conceptions of the good are often flawed: they tend to underestimate the diversity of ways in which people may flourish. On the other hand, it does not licence relativism, since some ways of life can reasonably be established as causing suffering. To be sure, ideas about what constitute flourishing change, but in response to three possibilities: (1) the discovery of ways of

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[23] It can also be argued that while this domination obviously causes most suffering or denial of opportunities to flourish in the dominated, it produces an inferior form of well-being for the dominant too, that is one which would be surpassed in a more equal society.

[24] As we discuss later, this would be an example of a local optimum position which was inferior to a higher optimum which was more inclusive.

flourishing which had previously either not been noticed or not been tried; (2) the recognition of mistakes about what constitutes flourishing; and (3) shifts in power which establish new ideological legitimations of suffering. There is no inconsistency in arguing both that cultural, including moral values are fallible, and that different cultures can nevertheless provide different but equally successful forms of flourishing, and that some cultural conceptions of the good, including our own, are flawed or deeply ideological in various respects (Nussbaum, 1999 and Collier, 2003).[25] We would presumably not wish to endorse our own culture's conceptions of the good as perfect or refuse any criticism of them from outside, so there is no reason why we should regard other cultures as beyond criticism.

Even with these qualifications, it has to be acknowledged that just what constitutes well being or flourishing is complex and sometimes elusive, especially at the social level. It is not a matter of acknowledging something that is already well-established, but rather something that has only partly established, and also still to be discovered through social experiments. People and societies are open systems, and there are no doubt many forms of flourishing we have yet to discover and create.[26] This of course is also the stuff of political thought.

The concepts of well being implicit in everyday practice are imperfect. We may be satisfied with what is tolerable for our own group, rather than what is beneficial for all, and indeed may promote practices and institutions which allow us to flourish at the expense of others. Alternatively we may fail to realise the extent to which our flourishing is dependent on the flourishing of others. Implicit moral communities may be highly restricted. Even though, as Hegel argued in his analysis of the master-slave relationship, the need for recognition can only be adequately be met from equals, it can be tolerably met in unequal societies *within* particular strata or groups, and that very fact may reduce desire for more equal societies in which recognition is attainable by all simultaneously. Economists talk of local optima, positions which can be reached which, while not the best of all possibilities, are the best of more restricted, localised possibilities. They are like foothills on the edge of the alps – higher than the plains below, but lower than the mountains. Moreover they are divided from the higher mountains by valleys which may discourage attempts to seek higher optima, because that would require some interim sacrifices of current advantages in the hope of subsequent larger gains. The very existence of attainable local optima can reduce interest in pursuing the more distant but inclusive and superior optima.

I earlier noted the prevalence in sociology of 'alienated' conceptions of morality, that is, ones which view it as an external system of regulation and do not relate to what we care about or our well being.[27] The most common form is conventionalism, in which moral values are simply 'what we do round here'. To be sure, moral values do have a conventional character, but to *reduce* them to conventions, perhaps backed by sanctions,[28] completely fails to grasp the normative force of morality, and its seriousness, which derives from the fact that it bears upon behaviours which have significant effects on our well-being, and hence renders them as

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[25] While it is difficult to compare different cultures, translation and intercultural communication give the lie to a priori assumptions of incommensurability. Such assumptions are as dogmatic as the assumption that there are no significant differences among cultures. 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).

[26] Here I am alluding to the contrast drawn by Foucault between the ethic of authenticity and the ethic of creativity. The implication of my account is that 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] Iain Craib notes that this way of thinking, which denies any inner, subjective element of life, or sees it as no more than the product of the outer life, is characteristic of the 'normotic personality' (Craib, 1998).

[28] At times, in his more sociologically imperialist moments, Durkheim falls into this trap (e.g.???) though it is offset by the obvious critical intent of his analysis of modern society.

amoral. In recent years, a new variant of this conventionalism has become popular, which might be termed 'strong social constructionism' (Sayer, 2000a).

Morality is indeed a social construction. But we should take the metaphor of construction seriously: attempts at construction are only successful if they take adequate account of the properties of the materials that they use – including ideational materials in this case. These properties are at any particular time relatively independent of the constructors: they are not merely a product of wishful thinking. Just because we construe something as x, it does not necessarily become x. Social constructions may fail or be only partially successful. Morality is a social construction concerning behaviours, practices and social relations which have serious implications for our well being, and though the latter can take many forms, it is not merely a matter of social wishful thinking. To suppose that it was would be to say that people were remarkably stupid, indifferent between solitary confinement and sociability, between being objects of contempt and derision and objects of respect, between repression and liberation. It would also contradict our own practice, in which fallibly but persistently, we seek to do what seems to be for the best in terms of well being or flourishing. If well being were no more than what societies/cultures chose to call well-being, it would be hard to see why there should ever be any resistance or dissidence.

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.'

Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) interpret moral views on families in strong social constructionist terms. Referring to their finding that without significant exception, parents and step-parents feel that their children's welfare should come before their own interests, they say:

> " . . . this moral imperative fundamentally arises from the ways in which we have constructed the relational social categories of Adult and Child in contemporary societies." (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003, p.135).

But children are 'constructed' (i.e. construed, treated) as vulnerable because there is plenty of evidence that they *are* vulnerable. Do sociologists – able to 'see through' the (allegedly) absolute claim about their vulnerability to the underlying social construction - disregard this social construction in their own lives? I doubt it. In practice they know children really are vulnerable. There have been and are different 'constructions' of children which interpret them differently and hence lead to different treatments, with different effects, but children cannot be just anything; their malleability, like that of adults, has limits. To be sure, they are very adaptable: 8 year olds can be human chimney sweeps or employed as full-time carpet-weavers or waste-tip scavengers instead of attending school, but whether such 'constructions' allow them to flourish is another matter. It is significant that such treatments tend to be a product of poverty and are superceded when the hardship recedes. Certainly particular forms of parenting may extend their vulnerability (through being 'over-protective') while others may reduce it and increase their independence and responsibility, but they do not become independent and responsible, any more than they become vulnerable, just through a process of social wishful thinking. Insofar as they can be shaped – socialised, educated – this depends on their susceptibility to shaping. At any time t this depends on susceptibilities inherited from time t-1, which include some susceptibilities which are products of previous rounds of shaping or influence and some which are innate. Strong versions of social constructionism which assume that acts of construing successfully, voluntaristically constructs what they understand, regardless of the properties of the objects they are about, are absurd (Sayer, 2000a). They are also quite blatant forms of sociological imperialism. We can still acknowledge that social influences can produce effects even before birth, indeed even before

conception, but always in ways which are constrained and enabled by pre-existing properties of the biological materials being shaped.[29]

Finally, a further rival account of morality is that expounded by Zygmunt Bauman, particularly in his book Postmodern Ethics (1993). Bauman argues that formal, abstract, rationalist, conceptions of morality involving putatively universal rules and codes have a dominant place in modernity, and that these displace moral emotions (p.35). They may do in certain philosophical normative ethical theories but it is hard to square such an account with the experience mundane morality, in which moral emotions or sentiments have always loomed large – no less in modernity than at any time. Even in organisations with formal ethical codes, most practice tends to be governed by more informal and spontaneous sentiments, conventions and norms. The idea that laypeople follow moral *rules* in their daily practice, has been exhaustively examined by Janet Finch and found wanting in relation to family obligations; at best there may be norms functioning as guidelines which offer criteria to be used in making decisions rather than specifications of what should be done (Finch, 1989, pp. 142ff). The range of criteria in this case is diverse and allows many responses.

As in many of his works, Bauman exaggerates and seemingly accepts the reduction of reason to instrumental reason in modernity, presenting it as authoritarian and immoral or amoral, and marginalising substantive and practical reason.[30] But while the sphere of instrumental reason surely has grown with modernity, it is doubtful if practical reason has ever been eclipsed, particularly in matters of moral concern, including in the mundane practices of mutual recognition that are found in most social practices, even the more rationalised. I would argue that there was always a combination of adherence to tradition, habitual action[31] and fallible judgement according to implicit naturalistic criteria of flourishing and suffering, particularly in interpersonal relations To some extent there has been some de-traditionalization so that a post-conventional morality has begun to emerge, though some traditional roles and their associated normative expectations, particularly those relating to gender, still persist and are only in slow and uneven decline. But moral sentiments are as important as ever to this post-conventional morality: indeed as detraditionalisation, they become less 'corrupted' (as Smith put it) by inequalities and relations of domination.

Having (mis)represented modernist morality as absolute and unambiguous Bauman can only present post-modern morality as non-rational, ambiguous and uncertain. Some moral judgements are indeed difficult and prompt ambivalence, but there is no reason why we should imagine that all moral judgements concern irresolvable dilemmas. Bauman ends his pessimistic commentary on contemporary ethics with a plea for 'conscience', quoting Hannah Arendt on the moral lessons of the holocaust. She demanded that

> "human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have guide them is their own judgement, which, moreover, happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all these around them . . . These few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgements, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by . . .because no rules existed for the unprecedented." (Arendt, cited in Bauman, 1993, p. 249).

Having overemphasized the importance of formal universal norms in modernity, and apparently accepted the reduction of reason to instrumentalism and formulation of rigid universal codes, Bauman can only see morality as opposed to reason. He does not see that the assessment of things in themselves, and not only as means towards ends, involves reason, the use of our powers of inference, or that our emotional responses contribute towards that fallible but rational assessment. He thus has to resort to romanticism, invoking a heroic individual 'conscience' which dares to ignore rules and the majority as the guardian of

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[29] See Craib (1998) for related critiques of social constructionism and sociological imperialism with respect to psychological matters.

[30] See Paul du Gay's excellent critique of Bauman's analysis of rationalization, bureaucracy and the holocaust (Du Gay, 2000).

[31] Recall that habitual action can nevertheless be based upon acquired intelligent dispositions.

morality. I would argue that this conscience is nothing other than the ordinary empirical responsiveness to the suffering and flourishing of others that we learn through the informal moral education we get from interpersonal interaction, along the lines theorised by Smith. It involves intelligent dispositions, fellow-feeling and practical reason. Rules are secondary and not even necessary; they are fallible generalisations about or reconstructions and formalisations of fallible particular inferences, and their status is parasitic upon the latter, not prior to them. Much mundane moral judgement never relied on them.[32] The idea that there is or was a modernist morality which attempted to establish universal formal abstract codes and that this in now being succeeded by a postmodern recognition of unavoidable ambiguous and aporetic nature of morality is implausible, firstly as an account of how people act(ed) in modernism and secondly in attributing to postmodernity moral dilemmas and uncertainties which have always been present.[33].

To summarise: We presumably would not say to someone guilty of grievous bodily harm 'look, that's just not what we do round here' (conventionalism), or 'you shouldn't do that because it is socially constructed as evil' (strong social constructionism), nor would we say 'you shouldn't do that because it upsets me' (subjectivism); nor would we say 'you shouldn't do that because it breaks a rule' (rationalism). All of these would be distinctly feeble responses and easily brushed aside. Rather we would point to the harm and suffering they have caused to others (ethical naturalism). In other words moral judgements of actions are related to well being, both in terms of the actions themselves and their effects.

I suggest that there are reasons for the persistent appeal of such manifestly implausible views of lay morality. Each of them allows the sociologist to avoid providing or finding any justification for moral views or actions and to remain neutral as regards arguments about what is moral. Given the attempted expulsion of values from science that we mentioned earlier and the associated tendency to de-rationalise values and present them as a contaminant threatening scientific reason, many social scientists believe that neutrality is the best defence of objectivity in the sense of truth. However, making judgements of behaviour and situations does not necessarily prevent us representing them adequately, indeed because of the inseparability of positive and normative thought in dealing with matters such as suffering and flourishing, needs and lack, our understandings can be impeded by refusal of judgement. One of the things we might want to know is whether a particular practice is conducive to a group's well being; to do this we have both to discover the group's justifications for it and assess whether they are true, that is whether what they consider to be good or conducive to flourishing, is so

Secondly, there is a common kind of relativism about normative issues, according to which one should not be 'judgemental'. Ironically, this itself is a moral position, but not one that can be maintained in all situations. The unfortunate affect of these two tendencies is that they produce an alienated, uncomprehending view of morality, as if by refusing to grasp and assess its judgements, we can learn more about social life.

Conclusions

1. We need to take lay normativity seriously, acknowledging the importance of normative questions and problems in everyday life, if we are not to produce alienated accounts which no-one could live, and which hence generate theory-practice contradictions. This involves attempting to explain what we care about, and why it is that we care about those things, and taking their normative force seriously rather than ignoring this and simply noting the social coordinates of beliefs. We cannot avoid moral judgement in everyday life, and how we and others judge and behave impacts seriously on our well-being.

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[32] Ribbens McCarthy et al, also attempt to use Bauman's distinction between modern and postmodern morality. They therefore construe the unanimity of parental prioritization of children's interest as evidence of persistence of modernist absolute morality, rather than consensus in making inferences about childrens' nature and needs (2003, p.140). One is tempted to ask whether a more allegedly postmodern ambivalence and doubt about prioritizing children's interests be better?

[33] They were the stuff of greek trajedies, for example.

2. Our nature as needy beings, characterized by lack and desire is crucial. Failure to consider this – perhaps because it falls between the categories of the positive and the normative - is fundamental to the difficulties social science has with normativity. Philosophies of social sciences may characterize people as self-interpreting, meaning-makers, as causal agents and as susceptible to causal influence or various selections or combinations of these, but they often overlook the fact that people are characterized by lack and are hence capable of flourishing or suffering.

3. If we are to understand the moral/ethical character of action, we need to reject subjectivist theories of value, reductions of values to 'what we do round here', discursive effects, or effects of social position, or voluntaristic social constructions, all of which can lead us to ignore what moral sentiments and norms are about. Directly or indirectly, moral values concern independent or objective matters that have a serious bearing on whether we flourish or suffer. Moral sentiments or emotions are evaluative judgements or commentaries on things which affect or could affect our well being. While there are many ways of flourishing and suffering, and our valuations are in principle fallible, they tend to have some practical adequacy too, though in many cases in ways which only allow the flourishing of our own social group at the expense of others.

4. Lay morality can best be understood via an analysis of moral emotions or sentiments and their development through an analysis of social interaction, moral psychology and education, rather than merely as the internalisation of external formal moral scripts and rules.

5. Moral sentiments such as shame, indicate not merely the regulative effects of moralities in producing social conformity but provide sources of resistance too. Shame in particular is not merely the product of the derision and contempt of others but of the subject's personal identification with commitments and norms which she feels she has failed to meet. The commitments and norms represent fallible beliefs that, directly or indirectly, relate to what promotes well being.

6. Sociology inevitably tends to focus on how moral sentiments correspond with social divisions, sometimes, as in the case of moral boundary drawing, hardening those divisions. But moral sentiments and norms also cross-cut such divisions and presuppose their universality or generalisability. This is a fundamental property of morality.

7. To understand morality in social life, we need a post-disciplinary approach which resists sociological imperialism, or indeed psychological or philosophical imperialism (Sayer, 2000). A sociological imperialist approach which denies the relative autonomy of the biological and psychological and 'fills the body with social foam', as Margaret Archer puts it (Archer, 2000), renders pain, distress, pleasure and well-being incomprehensible, or at least as forms of self-delusion. Our social being presupposes that we have the bodies and minds *capable of* being socialised, that is having certain psychological and physiological properties or susceptibilities not possessed by objects which cannot be socialised or enculturated. Approaches to moral philosophy which abstract from moral psychology tend to produce alienated analyses of morality which, however, logical, fail to connect with our dispositions and susceptibilities, in particular with our moral sentiments. Approaches to moral philosophy which abstract from social structures and mechanisms, tend to produce individualistic accounts of social problems which attribute to individuals and social integration what is due to systems integration and the unintended consequences of actions.

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