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Abstraction and Idealization: an Irrelevant and Misguiding Methodological Divide

Abstract

Despite its wide acceptance and its seemingly uncontroversial character, the methodological divide between abstraction and idealization in political theory, if carefully examined, reveals itself to be worthless and counterproductive. In this paper, my attempt will be to show why we should overcome this well-established distinction, originally introduced by Onora O'Neill. I claim that there are two fundamental reasons for doing so. Firstly, this methodological divide does not give any substantive advice in order to build a normative political argument – I will call this first rebuttal the *irrelevancy* objection. Secondly, and more problematically, the divide contributes to obscure some crucial methodological issues that should be directly faced and clarified – I will call this second challenge the *misguidance* objection. Both objections are grounded on the idea that O'Neill endorses a naive and insufficient conception of description. Indeed, the distinction between abstraction and idealization refers to some features of the description adopted: it depends exclusively on its truthfulness or falsehood. Specifically, abstractions are subtractions of true predicates, idealizations are additions of false predicates. According to this distinction, for O'Neill idealization should be avoided, while abstractions are necessary. However, I maintain that focusing merely on the truth or falsehood of premises obscures the relevant methodological relationship, which is *triadic* and not *binary*. Indeed, the description a theory endorses is never selected just for its truth-value. The relevant methodological link is not that between theory and (the truth-value of) descriptive assumptions, but runs over a triangulation between theory, descriptive assumptions and criterion of appropriateness. As a consequence I claim that, even if there is a fundamental *logical* difference between abstraction and idealization, this sharp divide is *methodologically* unfruitful: focusing solely on such a binary relationship is at best useless, at worst harmful.

Abstraction and Idealization: an Irrelevant and Misguiding Methodological Divide

I – Introduction

Despite its wide acceptance and its seemingly uncontroversial character¹, the methodological divide between abstraction and idealization in political theory, if carefully examined, reveals itself to be worthless and counterproductive. In this paper, my attempt will be to show why we should overcome this well-established distinction, originally introduced by Onora O’Neill². I claim that there are two fundamental reasons for doing so. Firstly, this methodological divide does not give any substantive advice in order to build a normative political argument – I will call this first rebuttal the *irrelevancy* objection. Secondly, and more problematically, the divide contributes to obscure some crucial methodological issues that should be directly faced and clarified – I will call this second challenge the *misguidance* objection. I do not intend to sustain, as some authors do³, that the O’Neill’s divide should be rejected because we cannot properly differentiate between abstraction and idealization. Indeed, I maintain that there is a fundamental *logical* distinction between these two argumentative strategies; nonetheless, from a *methodological* point of view such a sharp dichotomy is at best useless, at worst harmful.

II – Onora O’Neill’s distinction between abstraction and idealization

The distinction between abstraction and idealization O’Neill defends⁴ is originally meant to give an answer to a fundamental methodological problem in normative political theory: should our theorizing about normative issues be pursued from an abstract point of view in which concrete reality is – to some degree – ignored? The fear that lies behind these concerns is related to a double set of problems: typically those who question the use of abstractions worry about the inadequacy of unrealistic prescriptions and the dangers their implementation might involve. It is indeed claimed that principles identified by assuming an abstract description of agents and society are insufficient to address the variety and specificity of concrete moral dilemmas, as they assume just a partial picture of social reality and its injustices⁵. But besides leading to an impoverished account of ethical life, abstraction is often accused of strengthening injustices, because it results insensitive to relevant social differences that should instead be protected⁶.

However, according to O’Neill, the majority of these critics is misdirected. The real target of such complaints is idealization, not abstraction. For O’Neill, there is a fundamental logical difference between these two methodological strategies. Both strategies concern the descriptive assumptions that must lie at the basis of a normative argument, but they do so in opposite ways. Abstraction consists in “bracketing” some of the predicates that are attributed to a true description of the agents or objects that are involved in the argument. Basically, there is a set of predicates that can be truly attributed to a certain subject and we consider just some of them as relevant to the argument. By doing so, for O’Neill, we are preserving the truthfulness of the description: we assume some of the true facts which belonged to the original true description. Therefore, abstract reasoning is truth-preserving⁷. On the contrary, idealization consists in “adding” some predicates to the original true description. When we

¹ See especially Farrelly [2007], Mills [2005].

² O’Neill [1987].

³ See Lawford-Smith [2010], p. 366; Stemplowska [2008], p. 327.

⁴ See especially O’Neill [1987], pp. 56-57; O’Neill [1996], pp. 39-44; O’Neill [2000], pp. 143-156.

⁵ For critics along these lines see Sandel [1982] and Taylor [1985].

⁶ See for example Okin [1987].

⁷ O’Neill [1996], p. 40.

idealize, we affirm something which is not included within the set of the predicates that belong to all the members of the class of subjects we are examining⁸. For this reason, idealization leads to falsehoods: by idealizing, we derive a false description from a true one. According to this definition, it seems possible to idealize in two distinct ways: we could either introduce some descriptive elements *ex novo* (e.g. by claiming that all humans are perfectly rational), or we could consider one of the predicates that is truthfully ascribed to a subset of the subjects considered and extending it to all the members of the set (e.g. by claiming that all humans have a IQ of 200).

That is why, for O'Neill, idealized assumptions are the actual responsible of the worries raised above. By idealizing we cannot, by any means, derive a normative framework that can be appropriately applied to reality. Either we risk promoting sectarian prescriptions and enforcing injustice (if some of the existing predicates are extended to all the members) or we end up defending a normative account which is not adequate for human reality (if we invent some of its features). Abstraction, on the other hand, is innocuous and necessary. O'Neill explicitly claims that, involving language, reasoning can never be fully determinate⁹. But more importantly, abstraction allows us to avoid sectarianism. Indeed, finding a universal normative framework does not obscure and threaten existing differences. On the contrary, it is the sole means we have to avoid prescriptions that tacitly accept established discriminations. So, besides being logically necessary, abstraction is normatively desirable.

III – A “description of a thing” and a “good description to give”

Following O'Neill's account, we are left with a specific methodological prescription: in practical reasoning, while we need to abstract, we should avoid idealizations¹⁰. This recommendation seems intuitively plausible: after all, if some prescriptions assume a fictitious account of reality, how and why should we apply them? For this reason, this methodological suggestion is *prima facie* appealing.

My contention is not that such a worry is baseless, or that we should not pay attention to the kind of facts we assume in our normative framework. Nor I maintain that both abstraction and idealization offer a false picture of reality, so that we should not really care about the distinction. Rather, I want to claim that such a methodological divide tells only a very partial story of the relationship between practical reasoning and descriptive assumptions. As this account sheds light only on some features of that relationship, the divide is unsatisfactory for two reasons: it cannot give significant methodological indications and it contributes to obscure core methodological issues whose clarification is of primary importance. For these reasons, O'Neill's divide is irrelevant and misleading.

The problem at the basis of O'Neill account lies in the rationale of the divide. The distinction between abstraction and idealization refers to some features of the description adopted: it depends exclusively on its truthfulness or falsehood. If the description is assumed by subtracting predicates, it is true and we are dealing with an abstraction; if the description is assumed by adding predicates, it is

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 41.

⁹ O'Neill [1987], p. 55.

¹⁰ To give a fair picture of O'Neill's perspective, it must be said that she does not exclude altogether a role for idealized reasoning. There are places where she suggests that idealizations may play an important role in specific forms of reasoning. For example, idealized assumptions (such as frictionless motion or perfect vacuum) may be necessary in scientific explanations. They may also have a point in economic research; we have indeed acquired knowledge about human behaviour by developing models of rational choice. Hence, strictly speaking, idealization is not problematic *per se*. Idealized assumptions should be carefully excluded just from practical reasoning, not from theoretical reasoning. See, O'Neill [1996], pp. 41-42 and O'Neill [2000], p. 151.

false and we are dealing with an idealization¹¹. However, such a criterion of selecting descriptive assumptions for normative theories rests on an insufficient understanding of what *describing* entails.

Surely, O'Neill is right when she says that every reasoning presupposes a sort of abstraction, if by that we mean a "simplification". In every kind of reasoning we assume a set of concepts which represents a partial picture of reality. Every time we endorse a description, we are logically obliged to detach from reality, because the account of facts we could endorse in our theory can never fully replicate reality. But this just means that we are obliged to abstract, and the simple recognition that we need to do it does not tell anything about *how* to do it. Looking carefully to what describing involves, we discover a complex procedure which cannot be reduced to the mere selection of true statements.

Precisely because it involves a selection of facts, assuming a description means making a choice – as Amartya Sen would say¹². Indeed, I take from Sen the distinction between a "description of a thing" and a "good description to give"¹³ in order to explain the necessity of introducing a third element between prescription and descriptive assumptions: the criterion of appropriateness. In fact, endorsing a description entails choosing which are the relevant facts we need to introduce in our argument. In this sense, a description is much more than a simple true picture – even if partial – of reality. Describing means deliberately *selecting* which facts are to be considered relevant for a theory, according to some implicit criterion which justifies the choice. In other words, the choice to adopt certain descriptive assumptions depends on the specific purposes and constraints we attribute to our theory. For a straightforward example, it makes no sense to consider the average height of adult humans when discussing issues of justice. For this reason, there is a crucial difference between a "description of a thing" and a "good description to give": the first is the sum of all the true predicates of that thing, the second is the selection of the relevant predicates according to some purposes.

Therefore, merely focusing on the truth or falsehood of premises obscures the relevant methodological relationship, which is *triadic* and not *binary*. The relevant link is not that between theory and (the truth-value of) descriptive assumptions, but runs over a triangulation between theory, descriptive assumptions and criterion of appropriateness.

IV – Two objections

By emphasizing only the link between theory and truth-value of the description, some methodological problems arise which make this account unsatisfactory.

Firstly, as the third component of the relationship – the appropriateness – is overlooked, we are left with a methodological criterion which is *irrelevant* because *insufficient* and *unnecessary* to the elaboration of a normative theory. On the one hand, O'Neill's divide is insufficient because within the set of the true predicates ascribed to a thing, there are potentially infinite true subsets we could choose. Saying merely that we must avoid false predicates is not enough informative, actually it says almost nothing about how we should choose the set of true descriptive premises¹⁴. O'Neill's criterion

¹¹ I leave momentarily aside the question of whether this is a good association. I turn back to this point in the final part saying that sometimes, if falsehood is understood in a specific way, a simple abstraction may be considered false.

¹² Sen [1980], pp. 353-354.

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 355.

¹⁴ A criticism that can be interestingly read along these lines is the one advanced by Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum maintains that although O'Neill is right in defending the dismissal of idealizations, she fails to propose an adequate abstraction. O'Neill's proposal is indeed deeply influenced by Kantian ethics. She starts from a very narrow account of human nature and social life: she recognizes that the problem of justice can be dealt with only if a *plurality* of potentially *conflicting* agents does exist, moreover these agents need to be thought as minimally rational, as they must be able to follow some sort of social life and to be committed to some means in order to gain any personal ends (minimal notion of instrumental rationality). (O'Neill [1990], pp. 212-213). According to Nussbaum, this approach is too thin on content. Such an approach is indeed unable to understand properly ethical life and to address real conflicts of values. For Nussbaum we

fails almost immediately to give methodological guidance: we need to develop additional instruments in order to select the correct set of true premises. As explained above, we need to focus on the appropriateness of descriptions according to the different theoretical purposes. Therefore, on the other hand, O'Neill's methodological suggestion is also unnecessary, because focusing on the connection between descriptions, kinds of theories and criteria of appropriateness we *do* consider O'Neill's worries but we also develop a more complex methodological framework. Indeed, by judging the appropriateness of descriptions we are forced to consider whether the premises of our theories should be true. For every kind of theoretical purpose in practical reasoning we must ask ourselves whether false premises undermine their accomplishment. Therefore, we can give relevance to the truth or falsehood of premises but we are not limited to that because appropriateness comprises the evaluation of truth-values but goes beyond it.

Consequently, O'Neill's divide cannot furnish proper methodological guidance and does not add anything to the alternative triadic framework here suggested. Hence, it fails because it is methodologically *irrelevant*.

Secondly, the binary relationship that O'Neill identifies misguides the debate, it contributes to neglect methodological issues that should be directly discussed. I find particularly useful to clarify this second objection with an example: a paradigmatic case of methodological issue which cannot be properly addressed with O'Neill's tools is precisely the one of idealizations.

O'Neill excludes idealization on the grounds that false premises are unacceptable in practical reasoning. In fact, O'Neill's rejection of idealizations is founded on the claim that false descriptive assumptions lead to prescriptive accounts which are inapplicable to the human case because both unfeasible and dangerous. This means that such a rejection is based on a precise account of the role of practical reasoning: according to her reading, practical reasoning is action-guiding in a specific sense – it has to lead to prescriptions directly applicable to reality. But, if we now realize that the relevant methodological relationship is the triadic one proposed above, then the reason which originally motives O'Neill's rejection of idealization ceases to hold. Indeed, if a description is chosen not merely according to its truth-value, but because it is appropriate for a specific theoretical purpose, it is no more sound to dismiss idealizations simply because they assume false descriptions. In order to reject idealizations we would have instead to show that in practical reasoning there are no possible theoretical purposes, beyond action-guiding purposes, that might require the use of idealizations. In other words, we would have to show that, besides being inappropriate for action-guiding theories, idealizations can serve no roles in practical reasoning¹⁵.

Therefore, O'Neill's divide is misleading because it focuses on the wrong kind of questions: we do not have to ask which is the truth-value of a description, we should rather understand i) which are the different theoretical purposes in practical reasoning and ii) which premises are appropriate to each of them.

should start instead from an idea of the human being and human functioning. We should understand what aspects of living humans understand as having such importance that they could not define their life as fully human without them (Nussbaum [1993], p. 327). Hence, while they agree on the necessity of abstractions, they disagree about the appropriateness of the respective descriptive assumptions.

¹⁵ There are many authors who defend a role for false assumptions in practical reason. Zofia Stemplowska, for example, argues that false assumptions are not inevitably useless, on the contrary they may be necessary to answer some specific questions. In particular, Stemplowska attributes two roles to the kind of idealizations we are here considering. First, assuming false descriptions may enlighten how crucial are certain real constraint in shaping our conception of justice (e.g. we would change idea about what justice requires if we thought human nature more malleable). Second, introducing falsities might help to clarify the relationship between two principles (Stemplowska [2008], pp. 326-329). Robert Goodin arguments along similar lines, see Goodin [1995], pp. 42-45.

Hence, following this line of argument the division proposed by O'Neill should be interpreted not as a dyadic one – according to the two parameter true/false, but as a four-place classification.

Descriptions may be:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - True → Abstraction – Appropriate <li style="padding-left: 2.5em;">– Inappropriate → revise or reject theory - False → Idealization – Appropriate <li style="padding-left: 2.5em;">– Inappropriate → revise or reject theory | } | According to the theory's purpose |
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So, besides being unable to furnish methodological guidance while abstracting, O'Neill's divide diverts the attention from the relevant methodological issues which are in need of clarification: the connection between theories, their purpose and descriptive assumptions and, consequently, the role of idealizations. For this reason, I maintain that O'Neill divide is methodologically *misguiding*.

V – Against the equivalence between abstraction and idealization

In this final section, I attempt to clarify my position by contrasting a classical argument against O'Neill's divide. The objection typically runs as follows: i) abstractions are subtractions of some predicates, ii) being so, abstractions picture a simplified version of reality, iii) abstractions therefore exclude some features of reality, iv) consequently, abstractions affirm the absence of some true predicates, i.e. they are false descriptions of reality¹⁶. According to this line of argument abstractions must be regarded as false as idealizations, and for this reason the divide collapses. The basic problem is that addition and subtraction are interchangeable, because subtractions are additions of negations. Hence, the divide is no more justified; moreover, when we describe something we are always affirming some falsities.

However, this argument is based on a mistaken comprehension of the operation of subtraction. Subtracting here involves – as O'Neill explains – the “bracketing” of certain predicates. This means that we must interpret the subtraction of some predicates as an operation which brings descriptions to a *higher level of generality*. So, for instance, if human beings are all those objects which are described by the predicates *xyz*, when we decide to consider only those entities described by the predicates *xy* we are assuming a description which *includes* all human beings, but applies also to other entities (e.g. *xyw*).

For this reason, behind the argument lies a confusion between generalization and identification. When we say “human beings are *xy*” we could either mean that human beings are defined by those properties (identification) or that *xy* are some of the properties human beings happen to have (generalization). So, for what has been said, when we abstract and consider *a* description of human beings, we are not committed to a statement of identity. If abstractions were identifications the argument would be sound: describing human beings as *xy*, would coincide with asserting the negation of all other possible properties. But abstractions are generalizations: describing human beings as *xy*, means that those entities that are $\neg x$ or $\neg y$ cannot possibly be human beings, but this description does not negate the existence of other properties which might belong to them.

¹⁶ See n. 3.

So, technically abstraction and idealization cannot be equalized. It would be hard saying that describing men as provided with limited instrumental rationality (abstraction) and describing them as perfectly rational (idealization) are two equally false descriptions.

The point that is worth emphasising here is that these objections grasp something, but what they correctly notice is not that every description is false. They point out instead that sometimes it seems intuitively correct to judge an abstraction as false, to recognize that it does not offer a sufficient nor reliable picture of reality as it is. But if I am right in maintaining that, strictly speaking, every abstraction pictures some true aspects of reality, the real problem concerning this kind of abstractions is not that they are properly “false”; rather, they are inappropriate with respect to the theoretical purpose they need to serve. They seem to distort reality because we perceive that something crucial is missing¹⁷.

To sum up, if it is superficial dividing between abstraction and idealization according to the truth-value of the respective descriptions, it is even more obfuscatory claiming that every description is false. However, what these objections partly suggest, and what I maintain, is that we need a more informed analysis of what it means to describe in practical reasoning. It is indeed necessary to provide a more detailed account of the various kinds of descriptions present in practical reasoning and an increased comprehension of the roles they might play in different theoretical frameworks. That is why, from a methodological point of view, O'Neill's divide proves to be irrelevant and misleading, and should be overcome.

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¹⁷ So, for example, we might think that the picture of reality that O'Neill adopts (see n. 14), even if abstract, would provide a quite unrealistic account of facts, if the aim of our theory were that of finding the best policy prescriptions for a contextualized political community.

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