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A normative sociocultural psychology?

Svend Brinkmann

Introduction

First, I will begin by saying a big thank you to the organizers of this event – Alex, Flora and Tania! Thanks for organizing this and for inviting me. I have really been looking forward to this week, and I am thrilled to be here!

Second, I should perhaps say a few words about my interests in order to introduce myself. I originally studied philosophy and switched to psychology, but philosophical problems continue to haunt me in a way that I hope is fruitful to an understanding of psychological matters. This manifests itself in two ways: On the one hand I have been writing on the relevance of philosophy, and of philosophers such as John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein, for psychology, and this is an ongoing interest of mine. On the other hand, I find myself incapable of approaching any psychological topic without struggling with questions such as: “But what *is* psychology?” – “What is it about a phenomenon that makes us classify it as a *psychological* phenomenon?” Etc.

Fortunately, I now have a job where I am not only allowed, but in fact *required* to pose such questions, since I have been hired to work in the fields of general psychology and also qualitative methods, which is another of my main interests.

About psychology

If some of you have had a chance to look at my papers, you will know that I have this perhaps strange approach to psychological phenomena – acting, thinking and feeling (and everything in between) as *normative* phenomena, and what I will do in these brief remarks is to present and clarify what could be meant by this. And perhaps also sketch some consequences for sociocultural psychology, which is in my mind the only psychology that is genuinely worthy of its name, psychology. The human soul, the mind, the psyche, is a sociocultural entity. Or, more to the point (for it is not really an entity or object), the concept of mind refers in my view to an array of

intellectual, volitional and emotional *capacities* that centrally involve the use of language. In other words, the mind is an array of rational *abilities*, it is a general term for our skills and dispositions (Coulter, 1979:13). The mind is not some thing that can be understood as an element in the physical world's chains of causes and effects, and it is also not some private realm of consciousness, as the Cartesian tradition believes. In this case, as in many others, we should follow Aristotle rather than Descartes or the modern materialists.

Thus, the mind is not a thing or a place. As the great American philosopher Hilary Putnam says: “the mind is not a *thing*; talk of our minds is talk of *world-involving capabilities that we have and activities that we engage in*” (Putnam, 1999:169-170). If we conceive of the mind as a thing, we immediately ask ourselves “but where is this thing?” And today, the most obvious answer seems to point to the brain. Thus, we get the fallacies that plague contemporary cognitive neuroscience, arising from the attempt to locate something in physical space that in its very nature is non-localizable. It is not meaningful to ascribe mental capabilities to the brain. The brain does not think, feel, perceive, act, or remember. Only persons do these things, and of course they need their brains in order to do so, but the brains are not doing the job. As “world-involving capabilities”, to borrow Putnam's term, there is no metaphysical gap between the mind and the world, just as there is no metaphysical gap between our hands and things. The mind, in a sense, is a complex extension of our hands that enables us to manipulate and cope with the world and its events. And whenever we do something, we become subject to normative evaluation. When we address a psychological phenomenon, we can not only ask “did it happen?”, but also: “was it done *well*?” John Dewey expressed much of this by saying that the mind is not a noun, but a verb. Here is a nice quote from Dewey:

”Mind is primarily a verb. It denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves. Unfortunately, an influential manner of thinking has changed modes of action into an underlying substance that performs the activities in question. It has treated mind as an independent entity *which* attends, purposes, cares, and remembers” (Dewey, 1934:268).

Just as we should not ascribe psychological phenomena to the brain, we should also not ascribe them to a mind, as Dewey points out. The mind is not a thing that does something, but a term for our ways of dealing with things and other people.

Something that follows from this is that mental life is normative, as I said. Mental life is lived in what some philosophers call the space of reasons rather than the space of causation (cf. McDowell, 1998:296). I believe that the existence of mental life presupposes special human practices of giving and asking for reasons for what we do, think and feel. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, mental life is constituted by normative rather than causal connections. These normative connections, as instantiated in social practices, is, to me, the proper subject matter of psychology and something that sociocultural psychology often investigates (however in slightly different terms).

Let me illustrate the difference between the space of reasons and the space of causation by introducing two brief and simple examples:

Example 1. A doctor taps on my knee, and my leg moves. This is a pure physiological or reflexive process that can be fully explained in causal terms. We can state the *cause* of the leg's movement, but we cannot meaningfully articulate a *reason*. The event is not as such a mental event. Of course, the doctor may have had a reason to tap on my knee (i.e., to examine my reflexes), but the movement of the leg as such is causally determined: *I* had no reason to move my leg, and there are no normative or conceptual processes involved.

Example 2. I watch a sad movie and begin to cry. At first sight, this looks very much like the first episode, because it appears that the movie is the *cause* of my sadness. But there is an important difference that makes this second event a mental event. For in this second case, I can state a *reason* for the change in my mood (e.g. "when she left him, it was so sad that I had to cry"). Was it warranted? Perhaps I did not understand the movie; perhaps it was full of irony that I did not catch? By becoming aware of this, I may be brought to understand that I had no reason to cry. In the first episode, such normative considerations are irrelevant. We can say that the second episode is a mental process because it is subject to normative moral evaluation. It

could be that my reaction expressed a deep, moral sensitivity on my behalf (and thus was morally praiseworthy), or it could be that my reaction was “too much” and improper (and thus morally blameworthy).

The idea that mental life is lived in the space of reasons can be traced to Wittgenstein, and, in a sense, all the way back to Aristotle. I will mention just one example to illustrate this: Although Aristotle understood motivation (to take a classic psychological subject) as a natural phenomenon, he did not think that it could be fully understood in causal terms by natural scientists (the *phusikos*). He claimed that we also need the work of the “dialectician” (Robinson, 1989:81). For the latter *human* scientist “would define e.g. anger as the appetite for returning pain for pain, or something like that, while the former would define it as a boiling of the blood.” (Aristotle quoted from Robinson, 1989:81). What Aristotle called “dialecticians” rightly place anger in the space of reasons, for they know that there is such a thing as *justified* anger in the face of preposterousness. What makes “boiling of the blood” (or some modern neurophysiological equivalent) *anger*, is not something found in the blood (or in the brain), but precisely that it is situated in a practical and normative context where it makes sense to question, justify and state the *reason* for “boiling of the blood”. Were this phenomenon entirely outside the space of reasons, we would confine it completely to the science of physiology.

As Rom Harré (1983:136) once pointed out, the reason why dread and anger are mental phenomena (i.e., emotions) but not indigestion or exhaustion, for example – although all of these have behavioral manifestations as well as fairly distinctive experiential qualities – is that only the former fall within a normative cultural moral order. In order for us to identify something as a mental phenomenon (rather than a physiological one), we always presuppose some particular set of norms of justifications – however implicitly. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued: “Psychologies [...] express and presuppose moralities.” (MacIntyre, 1988:77). But why talk about the evaluative background as a *moral* order? Why is it not just conventional, like the rules of football? Because, to quote from Alfred Louch’s book on *Explanation and Human Action*: “To identify a piece of behaviour as an action is already to describe experience by means of moral concepts” (Louch, 1966:26-27). The reason we call something an act simply *is* that we can judge it morally – or so I argue.

The question then becomes: From where does the normativity of mental life originate? My answer is that mental life is normative because it is lived in social practices. Or what we could appropriately call culture. Different practices offer people different reasons to act, think and feel in required ways, and these reasons serve as our source of justification for what we do, think, feel and say. Different practices, e.g. the practices of the courtroom and the dinner table, display different normative *affordances*. When we observe people thinking, for example, we observe them engaged in practices in which there exists a normative difference between good and bad ways of thinking that does not originate in the individual. This normativity exists *in* the practices, and is what individuates and defines practices as such. And when we examine the normativity of social practices, we need what has been called “thick ethical concepts” (for example virtue concepts) that involve contextual meaning and a union of fact and value. We cannot make do with “thin” ethical concepts like ‘good’ or ‘right’. My paper on the naturalistic fallacy is all about this issue.

All practices, as MacIntyre has argued in *After Virtue* (from which we have read a chapter), contain standards of excellence. Practices are in fact *constituted* by their standards of excellence (MacIntyre, 1985a). They are constituted by their “internal goods”, i.e., by the goods participants achieve when they excel in the practice. There is no need to postulate a mental realm of psychological activity behind the practical actions of thinking, feeling and acting in order to account for the normativity of practical life (Harré, 2002:143). This does not mean that individuals do not think, feel, or act; of course they do, but it is only possible for them to do so because their activity is framed in a space of reasons in which they are susceptible to normative standards that do not arise from individual mentality.

This culturalist view quite easily leads to relativism: For if normativity is internal to practices, and if practices are historically and culturally variable, then it becomes difficult to evaluate a given practice morally. The practice of torture has its own kind of normativity and so do the practices of criminal gangs. Here we end up with some kind of nihilist social constructionism. My answer to this challenge implies the argument that not all normative necessities in mental life are conventional (and thus

historically contingent), for certain norms are *objective moral values* in the sense that they are not themselves conventional, but the condition of there being any conventions whatsoever. The philosopher Anthony Holiday (1988) has articulated this view in an important book on *Moral Powers*. Holiday's argument revolves around his observation that all semantic and normative necessity must be seen as ultimately grounded in moral necessity: There are certain language games, to use Wittgenstein's term, which Holiday calls "core-language-games", that are essential to any language imaginable. These core-language-games function to preserve certain moral values without which language would lose its communicative force, and hence its meaning. Holiday identifies three such core-language-games that I will all too briefly sketch here:

1. *Truth-telling language games*: There are truth-telling language games that serve to preserve the value of truthfulness, which cannot be construed as a mere convention or a changeable social construction. This value is *presupposed* by any conventions or processes of social construction. Adherence to the truth-telling norm "is not itself conventional, but the condition of there being any conventions whatsoever", as Holiday says (1988:93).

2. *Justice language games*: And there are justice language games, which are those we engage in to determine guilt and innocence in non-arbitrary ways. As a value, it is a *condition for* our having a language and a form of life, rather than something constructed *in* speaking. If there were no objective normative distinctions between guilt and innocence, it would not be possible for us to distinguish harm-attracting activities from safe ones (Holiday, 1988:105), and we could not trust participating in some practice, though it did us no harm yesterday, would not be treated as treason tomorrow (ibid:105). We would thus not be able to engage in language games at all, and language would be impossible.

3. *Ritual language games*: Finally, and perhaps more congenial to conventional cultural studies, there are ritual language games, or simply rituals. If we are to have linguistic and normative practices, and complex forms of human life, there has to be what Holiday calls "deep-seated agreement which is only possible if the integrity of the persons who speak the language is sustained, and clearly this cannot be done

unless reverence for persons and their rights to speak and be listened to is a prevailing norm.” (Holiday, 1988:109). This presupposes a respect for ritual that is necessary to create and maintain a particular form of life.

We can say that such core-language-games serve to protect an elementary moral normativity in human life. My conclusion here is that we not only live in a moral world because we have language and mental life. In a sense, it is the other around: We have language and mental life because of objectively real moral values. Consequently, moral norms should be indispensable components of sociocultural psychology, for the phenomena of this science are constituted by moral orders. So, in summary, my two central theoretical conclusions are very simple: First: Psychological phenomena are normative. Second: Not all normativity is conventional (and morality is one important kind of non-conventional normativity). This means that psychology cannot be value-free, for it studies phenomena that make sense only if considered on an evaluative background. And one sense in which psychology is value-laden in a *radical* way is that it can itself affect the normative space of reasons that it studies. For example when we come to interpret our lives and actions in light of psychological knowledge and theories – which we constantly do in our contemporary “psychologized” world. So psychology has moral *effects* as well as moral *contents*. Studying the normative moral orders that structure mental life can itself contribute to the development of these moral orders – in good ways or bad. Studying the normative moral orders in *good* ways should in my view be a central task for sociocultural psychology. No other psychologies are able or willing to do the job.