

Stephen P. Turner: *Explaining the Normative*

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Normativity is a keyword in contemporary philosophical discussions. That norms have a place in philosophy, traditionally especially within ethics, is clear; but an increasing number of current philosophers are busy arguing that also other parts of philosophy have certain “normative dimensions”, parts where norms are *prima facie* not in focus, such as in the philosophy of language or of mind. Turner, in his book, concentrates on the criticism of the claim that as ordinary social science, revealing ordinary causal interconnections and ordinary facts, does not provide means for disclosing normative facts, which exist over and above the causal ones, and hence is not able to provide a sufficient account of human societies. This is a claim Turner vigorously rejects.

In his first chapter, Turner characterizes the ways in which normativity is claimed to enter the explanation of human and social phenomena and indicates how this might interfere with the ordinary scientific explanation. He writes:

The background to normative facts is ordinary, involving the kinds of facts that are parts of the ordinary stream of explanation. There is nothing binding, compelling or constraining about these facts. So these new normative facts constitute a rupture in the world of ordinary fact. The normative, however, arises out of ordinary facts: meanings, obligations, rationality and so forth, come into existence through actions, learning, and the like, but have the special added properties of norms: of binding, constraining and the rest. Once the norms are established, they have consequences for behavior. They do not directly cause behavior, but they regulate it normatively, by specifying what is the right way to say something, what obligations one has, what one owes to others as a result of one’s meaningful actions, and what is justified for others to do in response to your actions. (p. 9)

Turner lists what he sees as “the explanatory peculiarities of normativity” (pp. 14-26): the list includes “queerness” consisting in the necessity of admitting “puzzling objects” such as “self-authorizing principles”, “objective values” or “dictates without dictators”, dependence on various problematic modes of argumentation such as transcendental arguments, analogy or circular reasoning, etc.

The second chapter of the book concentrates on the ways in which

'normativists' may conflict with 'scientists'. Turner contends that social scientists are able to describe human societies and human affairs in their multiversity; but he assumes that normativists will claim that any such description will fall short of truly describing normative phenomena, because normative phenomena transcend any description of contingent affairs. However, Turner argues, the very concept of normativity (let alone concepts such as truth, rationality etc.) is itself largely a product of our particular society, and as such it is not reasonably seen as "transcendent". He states that "to attribute tacit forms of our societies, to say, for example, that the persons in the Polynesian *tabu* society tacitly possess concepts that they did not possess explicitly, seems to muddle the notion of possession, which normativism usually treats as unproblematic" (p. 33).

Different human communities, Turner claims, have their various ways of organizing their affairs, ways that often include directions concerning what should or should not be done, what is permitted or what is prohibited, or the likely consequences of certain actions; and this is a fact that social science can account for very well. In particular, Turner claims, we can usually see alien communities as following various "Good Bad Theories" - "meaning that they are good theories for a particular, unspecified set of purposes in a particular setting, but bad theories if we are thinking of them as adequate explanations of anything, or proto-explanations that can be turned into genuine explanations with a little empirical vetting and some minor revision" (p. 43). There is no need for any notion of normativity, Turner claims, over and above this.

Turner then considers what he calls the "fundamentalism" being exhibited by some normativists, which "involves the claim that all views other than our own are wrong, and justifies this claim on the basis of our own preferred grounds, such as reflective, self-validating analysis of our own views" (p. 47). Needless to say, if one does accept this kind of "fundamentalism", then the idea of normative *facts* does indeed follow naturally. But Turner concludes:

[M]any forms of normativism, notably fundamentalism, pile up enormous burdens of proof by dismissing other opinions as erroneous when the "errors" cannot be accounted for as errors. Moreover, fundamentalism relies on a set of devices, such as the ideas of eyes opening to the dictates of reason, that are basically fictional. It fails to produce the results it promises, namely, objective normative conclusions. (p. 59)

In Chapter Three, Turner surveys the historical debate on the sources of normativity in law. He takes pains to show that the pursuit of legal normativity can be seen as a paradigmatic case of pursuing normativity in general, with all its blind alleys and circularities. Philosophers of law have desperately sought for some source which would sanction what we call *justice* and what we try hard to codify as something more than a mere deliberate convention. Hans Kelsen was driven to postulate the existence of an essence of normativity in a crystalic form: an entity he called *Grundnorm* and that acted as a “regress stopper” for the process of validation, as “only a norm can validate a norm” (p. 75). But, as Turner claims, this regress, the stopping of which necessitated this solution, is illusory: it “only arises under the description of the law as binding – a description not grounded in any sort of normative fact” (p. 91).

In the next chapter Turner turns to another, more general source of the normativists’ ideas, namely to the claim that in order to account for concepts, meanings, understanding and other exclusively human tools and abilities we need normative language. Turner denies this: according to him, this is merely an unjustified insistence on privileging a particular description of something that is also describable in purely non-normative terms. Turner writes:

Is there a salient difference between the language of thought and the language of baptism that allows the normativist thus to avoid this challenge and affirm that the traditional (normative) language of thought, unlike that of baptism, is sacrosanct, and that alternatives to the traditional language of thought (such as naturalist psychological ones) that purport to be nonnormative are a case of changing the subject, misdescribing, and missing constitutive features of the phenomenon? Why is the normativist’s claim that we must swallow normativism in order not to change the subject any different from the Christian claim that describing baptism correctly requires acceptance of the whole Christian belief? Why, to put it simply, is the language of belief, concept and the like any more than another Good Bad Theory? (pp. 102-103)

Turner is convinced, and he elaborates on his conviction in Chapter Five, that current normativism is actually propagating the legacy of sociologists postulating various kinds of collective objects (collective will, group intention, objective mind etc.), all of which he finds mythical. In this chapter he discusses especially the view of Wilfrid Sellars and John Searle concerning collective intentionality, which he sees as document-

ing this. These authors, according to Turner, are driven to collective intentions in the form of some mysterious entities that are not collective in the unproblematic sense of summarizing individual instances, but are somehow independent of those instances, and are more than the individual instances taken together:

Kelsen's problem was to find a way for wishes to become binding on others and not just self-binding. Getting wishes to bind others will not work. But participating in a binding form of consciousness, if there is such a thing will. Searle has a similar idea: that we have a special biological capacity for going into the collective intentional mode... For Sellars, the precondition of the form of consciousness S is the internalization of the concept of group. A concept of group is "internalized" as a concept of "us". This internalization produces a change in consciousness which is, or permits, or in Sellars's mysterious term "becomes", a form of intending. (p. 129)

In contrast to this, Turner thinks that "collective claims are not based, as Sellars and others (notably Searle) often imply, on a 'group sense' in some sort of raw, preconceptual mode, but on a fully developed set of ideas about the group – a theory, if you wish, about the existence of nations, races, and so on. These ideas are Good Bad Theories" (p. 136).

In the last chapter of the book, returning to some of the problems tackled earlier in Chapter Four, Turner focuses on the philosophy of Donald Davidson, namely on the rejection of "the very idea of a conceptual scheme". This rejection led Davidson to repudiate the relativity of norms, whereby he arrived at a standpoint close to what Turner regards as fundamentalism, certainly with respect to the concept of *rationality*. Though Davidson, in contrast to other normativists, sees rationality as something very non-rigid and flexible, he does not escape, according to Turner, the basic predicament of normativism – the inability of grounding norms in something non-normative and hence being left with a self-contained realm of the normative flying free of the tangible world.

Turner thinks that in the end the conundrum of the (alleged) irreducibility of normativity, which though shrinking to a minimum in Davidson's hands still persists even there, can be resolved with the help of concepts first introduced by Max Weber, namely the concepts of *empathy* and *Evidenz*. This, Turner contends, can bring us the desired anchor for the normative in the non-normative:

The “norms” that govern meaning, the meanings of terms applied to the world, may be readily understood in nonnormative terms: as empathic projections that are confirmed, sustained, corrected and improved through interaction with others. (pp. 177-178)

Hence, in contrast to Davidson, “Intelligibility here bottoms out not in a theory of rationality, but in an actual point of empathic contact” (p. 179).

This last chapter of the book is followed by a short Epilogue which returns to the historical dimension of the problem of normativity.

Let me start the critical part of this review with a personal remark. Reading Turner’s book I was overwhelmed by a strangely ambivalent feeling: on the one hand, I found very little to disagree with in the book; but on the other hand this would not make me change my mind and cease being what Turner would classify as a normativist. I do think that norms and normative considerations are essential for understanding social phenomena; though I agree with Turner that to try to establish ‘the normative’ as a realm independent of that of ordinary facts is mistaken. Let me now try to sort this ambivalence out.

First, I wholly agree with Turner that we must reject “normative fundamentalism” claiming that normative facts are independent of any contingent social facts and thus elude investigation by standard scientific methods. It is clear that explaining social (or, for that matter, any other) phenomena we should avoid anything supernatural, magical or mystical and that we should avoid “ruptures within ordinary streams of explanations”. Also, I agree that many of the philosophers whose work he discusses critically in the book may be guilty of at least flirting with the capricious trafficking of facts of a suspicious nature. The trouble though, it seems to me, is that in his exposition Turner does not draw enough distinctions.

The first and greatest oversimplification are the labels *normativist* and *normativism*. As he himself claims, “the sheer variety of normativism mocks any attempt to defeat them or even make them consistent with one another” (p. 67). Indeed. But why, then, summon all the thinkers whose views he considers and rejects in the book (Korsgaard, O’Neill, Kripke, David Lewis, Boghossian, Searle, McDowell, Brandom, Haugeland, Rouse and many others, to name only contemporary philosophers) under a common banner? Turner’s primary target are the “fundamentalists”; but most of those Turner discusses as normativ-

ists may not be fundamentalists in this sense. Philosophers like Kripke or Boghossian, who concentrate on the phenomena of language and meaning, and who point out the perplexities of the normative dimension of semantics, concentrate on problems that do not crucially depend on the question of the fundamentality of normativity. People like Sellars, Brandom, or Haugeland do not seem to have a problem with normativity being socially instituted, but merely insist, for one reason or another, that the normative is somehow irreducible to the descriptive. And as for Davidson, he even tended to be hostile to those who overstress the role of normativity (*viz.* his discussion with Dummett), and he has no understanding for a fundamentalist conception of normativity (he only stresses that we cannot but take the most basic of our norms for absolute).

Another problem is Turner's indiscriminative usage of such terms as "causal mechanism" or "ordinary stream of explanation". It does not seem that what he has in mind can be explanations that are causal in the narrow sense of the word – *viz.* something like explanation in terms of causal laws of natural science. Turner's favorite example of laudable explanation is in terms of "Good Bad Theories" (theories that may be "bad" in the sense that they are not true by our scientific standards, but they are "good" in that they serve the purpose of organizing or coordinating the society); but are such explanations *causal*? Theories deliver *reasons* for the members of the society to do certain things and reasons are not obviously causes.

It might be possible to object that explanations in terms of reasons are, at bottom, causal, for reasons are in the brain, and hence the talk about reasons is translatable into talk about the causal functioning of brains. But how do we know that reasons are in the brain? Our neurophysiology is not (yet?) in a position to locate them. (Let me leave aside the question whether such seeking of reasons in the brain makes sense at all.) But where else would they be save in the brain? But if we accept this line of argument ('reasons are in the brain not because we are able to show this, but because no other possibility is viable'), we open up a space for those normativists who do not insist on fundamentalism to concur: to say that one's explanations may be (for all they care), at some deep base, causal (for where else, save in the brain, would normativity be rooted)?

From this viewpoint, the normativist might accept that perhaps talk about norms can – in a sense and in a way – be seen as a talk about hu-

man brains, though no factual reduction is imaginable. The point is that normative facts are *institutional* facts, and institutions are produced by such a complex interaction of so many human brains that it is practically impossible to trace them to their neurological roots. Would it make sense to propose replacing the 'normative' talk about football – about the rules of the game, about strategies, about football leagues and cups – by 'scientific' talk about the brains (and, perhaps the legs) of football players, spectators and administrators?

Consider the problem of meaning, which figures as a central concept in some of the discussions between normativists and anti-normativists. Personally, I side with those who claim that it is normative; in the sense that meaning claims do not describe what there is (or at least not exclusively this), but rather at least partly prescribe what should be done (in particular how the expression should be used). Turner might object that this presents no principal problem for scientific explanation: if this is the case, then the meaning claims are something more like imperatives, and hence they do not state any facts. (And it is not clear why speech acts other than statements would pose any principal problem to scientific explanation.) I agree, and I think it would be indeed capricious if the normativist explanation were not continuous with science. However, the point is that we do perceive meanings as something substantial and constitutive of our social world. Hence in a sense, I think, we do live in a world of „normative objects“. Again, such objects are in no way supernatural; they are just more intricate versions of such paradigmatic normative objects as knights, pawns or bishops in chess, the existence of which clearly in no way contradicts natural science.

All in all, I find Turner's book as a very important stimulating addition to current philosophical discussion; it presents arguments every normativist should come to grips with. I think Turner underestimates the variety of normativism, and overlooks the possibility that it might have something to contribute to the philosophy of social science without smuggling in anything supernatural; but I very much appreciate the meticulousness with which he documents all the ways in which various sorts of normativism can potentially lead (and historically have led) us astray.

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