

NORMATIVITY WITHOUT NORMATIVISM¹

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Stephen Turner's book *Explaining the Normative* (Polity, Oxford, 2010) constitutes a powerful onslaught against one of the main intellectual havens where the thesis of something like a transcendental foundation for rationality is still alive and flourishing. During the two last centuries, naturalism has been conquering one territory after another, but there was a portion of philosophical land where it seemed that ordinary scientific research would necessarily be insufficient to offer us an account of what happened there. This thesis has often been expressed as the 'irreducibility of normativity' (see Parfit 2011 for a recent exposition), and Turner's book aims at showing that the arguments supporting this thesis are not defensible. I am absolutely sympathetic to the claim that the normative is just an ordinary citizen of the natural world, though probably more complex than other vulgar things like neutron stars, hurricanes or lizards, but my own impression reading the book has been that Turner tries perhaps to go a little bit farther than where I would be happy to take company with him, and I shall try here to explain the slight differences I see in our ways of understanding the question, albeit running the risk of misinterpreting some of his claims of course.

I have to make a confession to begin with. A large part of my own work in analytical philosophy of science has been inspired by the idea that, besides analysing the 'internal' structure and dynamics of 'purely epistemic states' (i.e., what makes of something a theory, or a case of empirical confirmation, or a case of approximation to the truth, etc.), it was convenient to look at 'scientific objects' as the result of the decisions of human agents (i.e., scientists), and those decisions would not only be guided by 'epistemic interest', but also by 'social' ones. Most of the work done in the sociology of scientific knowledge in the last quarter of the past century tended to interpret the 'epistemic' and the 'social' as not only different, but usually conflicting aspects and forces within the possible motivations of scientists, with an increasingly smaller space left to the former as we approached the more radical, relativistic brands within the discipline. Looking for some approach in which the 'epistemic' and the 'social' could be conceived as coherent, complementary, and even interdependent elements of the process of scientific research, I came across Robert Brandom's breathtaking theoretical fabric as disclosed in his book *Making it Explicit*, and found in his notions of *commitment*, *entitlement* and *scorekeeping* a particularly apt methodological tool to represent the dynamics of scientific research in terms of a 'conversation' governed by a system of inferential rules. These are rules that

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help scientist to 'keep score' of the contributions and burdens of each participant, and such that the explanation of why a scientific community adopts the rules it adopts might be given in terms of a combination of 'epistemic' and 'social' goals (i.e., only norms that are efficient enough in helping scientists to satisfy *both* types of goals would be accepted). The idea, then, of rational behaviour (in this case, the behaviour of scientists, but I am sure the idea can be made much more general so as to cover most of social action) as explainable by the agents' submission to the validity of some norms governing the dynamics of their (i.e., the agents) obligations and permissions was a framework I found considerably apt to explain *both* why science is 'just' a social battlefield *and* an efficient institution in the production of something like objective knowledge. Of course, this approach needed to assume the existence of norms and norm-guided behaviour, though in no moment did I doubt the possibility of giving an account of both things within a plainly naturalistic framework. In fact, I found it surprising that the reluctance of Brandom and other philosophers in the 'inferentialist' school was taken as 'naturalist', since it was more or less obvious that, after all, what Brandom was doing could be phrased precisely as an attempt to describe and analyse what type of behaviour (empirically determinable by means of just good-old-fashioned descriptive, non-normative concepts) should an empirically given being display in order to be classified as engaging in a Sellarsian 'game-for-giving-and-asking-for-reasons'; a kind of analysis that is still more obvious in Brandom's later book, *Between Saying and Doing*. So, I confess I wanted to have my cake and eat it too: to have both a description and explanation of social behaviour (and even rational behaviour in general) in terms of norms, commitments, reasons, 'proprieties', and the like, and also staying within a 'safe' naturalistic worldview which accepts that all that there is is what the best confirmed theories of our empirical sciences tell us there is. I celebrate, hence, Stephen Turner's book as a deep and clever attempt to deconstruct the anti-naturalist transcendentalism (what he calls 'normativism') that transpires in much of the literature on norms and norm-guided behaviour, and in particular in many philosophical theories about the 'nature of rationality'. However, I think that Turner's argument is also dangerously close to throwing the baby of normativity away with the bathwater of normativism.

Normativism, i.e., the thesis that every form of rational thinking presupposes the existence of non-naturalisable normative facts and has to assume the validity some kind of Grundnorm self-evident to all rational agents, can be rightly criticized, as Turner does, for necessarily resting on circular arguments, for accepting the existence of some type of queer facts not connectable to the natural causal order, for resting in the end on confusing metaphors, and for many other sins that make it suspicious of too closely resembling the old-fashioned supernatural entities of traditional theology, like God's and our rational, immortal soul's ghastly capabilities. But is it really necessary to dispense with normativity, i.e., the fact that there are such things in the world as norms and norm-guided behaviour in order to erase transcendental normativism from our intellectual zoo? The problem here is the usual one within the discussions about reductionism: should the reductionist attempt to explain the *emergence* of the 'reduced' things, events and properties?, or

should he (for the reductionist is typically a male in our philosophical imaginary) explain those things *away*? Perhaps I am not being fair to the aim of Turner's book, but my reading of it leads me to think that his argument is more of the second, 'eliminativist' type. Consider, for example, the following quotation:

Is there a fact that there are meanings and oughts? Or is merely a fact that people understand one another and that they have beliefs about obligations, or that (given that obligation is a local notion of our culture and time) that we can interpret as being about obligations? (*op. cit.*, 188)

When molecular biologists explain chromosomes on the basis of their chemical properties, they are not trying to deny that 'there is a fact that there are chromosomes'; they want, rather, to explain why chromosomes are the way they are. Even when (to cite what is perhaps the most famous example of reductionism) physicists explain the appearance of the rainbow, they do not deny that 'there are' rainbows: these are simply a concrete species of optical phenomena. Cannot we take the same 'scientific' attitude towards meanings and oughts? Of course, meanings and obligations only 'emerge' when some very specific type of cognitive systems allow them to emerge, which includes the fact that some conscious agents understand, undertake and attribute those meanings and obligations, as rainbows only appear when some image producing device exists and is focused towards the right direction in the right circumstances. The critical point is that an acceptable naturalistic explanation of normative *facts* like meanings and commitments could not merely consist in directly identifying them with the beliefs of agents *about them*; i.e., my obligation of paying, say, €25,000 in income tax this year does not *consist* in my believing that I must do it, nor in the belief that such is the case by someone in the tax office, nor is of course something like a 'collective belief'. It can indeed happen that I *actually* have the obligation of paying €25,000 this year, whereas my own belief about it is a different one (for example, I may have unconsciously miscalculated my tax return, and think that what I have to pay is €25,009), and that nobody else actually has any belief at all about this issue (for my tax return may be checked automatically by a computer that has been programmed so as not to inform about differences of less than €10). Of course, from a naturalist point of view my obligation, as a normative fact, cannot be but somehow *constituted* by some psychological attitudes of some flesh-and-bone people (*viz.*, their beliefs and decisions about the *creation* of the norms regarding income tax, and about the legitimacy of the institutions and processes establishing the tax), but it does not *consist* in anyone's beliefs *that* I have such and such specific obligation, for the latter beliefs can, as any other kind of beliefs, be right or wrong.

We can say something similar regarding Turner's attempt to dispense with transcendental explanations of rationality (i.e., those assuming that the existence of irreducibly normative facts is a prerequisite of any kind of rational thought) by resource to Donald Davidson's well known but probably not often well interpreted ideas about rationality and the 'charity principle'. Turner is right in pointing out an important shortcoming of the trans-

cidental approaches: there being committed to the assumption that one that violated some principle of rationality (e.g., consistency) would be 'irrational,' and hence 'unintelligible'. The fact, Turner insists, is that in general we can pretty well *understand* the people that, according to our own views, have some self-contradictory beliefs or support claims that lead to contradictions; we simply consider that they are *wrong*. Davidson's point that understanding someone implies being in agreement with *most* of what he or she thinks allows, on the one hand, that two people are in disagreement about some things, but on the other hand, and more importantly, it does not commit us to the claim that they must share something like a 'kernel' of a priori, universal rationality principles. Instead, following Turner's interpretation, it only commits us to the idea that rational conversation and interaction is guided by 'empathy': my capability of 'seeing what you are behind', i.e., of tracking your own chains of arguments; a capability that can be given a plainly 'naturalistic' explanation through our knowledge of neural systems (e.g., mirror neurons, and the like), and does not need any kind of 'transcendental foundation'. The problem is that when I discover that some of your ideas are wrong, I am not simply 'following your chain of arguments'. In a way, I am following your arguments while simultaneously following *my own* arguments, and seeing that both chains lead to contradictory results; but often it is the case that what I find is that *it is you who is not correctly following your own chains of reasons*. So, in order to assess your beliefs, I have to make a distinction between the process of reasoning you are *actually* carrying out, and the process of reasoning you *should* be carrying out (of course, each of us can, and even must, apply this very same distinction to our own selves).

Does this entail that we have to presuppose something like irreducible normative facts? I don't think so. What is necessary is that when we attribute a belief to somebody (or to ourselves), we not only identify that belief with a 'mental state', but with a *particular* kind of mental state, namely the state of treating the content of that state as something that is subject to reasons, i.e., to say it in Brandomian jargon, the state of undertaking the commitment to revise that belief if compulsory arguments show it must be revised. But, what a kind of psychological state is this? The idea behind Turner's strategy of naturalisation-through-empathy was, as far as I understand it, to consider only the *causal dispositions* within the working of the other's brain (and all the relevant things), and 'follow' these dispositions as far as possible. Stated differently, to empathise with someone's reasoning would consist in something like being capable of *predicting* what he or she will or would affirm under relevant circumstances. This includes our capacity to make counterfactual, subjunctive judgments about the linguistic behaviour of others, but nothing in this assumption goes against the hypotheses that all the relevant process is grounded on physical, natural capabilities, for counterfactual judgments are, after all, common in any area of natural science or its application. But what we are now trying to 'predict' is not what the agent *will* do or say, but what she *should* do or say, i.e., *what she would do or say were she appropriately honouring her commitments*. Normativists would argue that this is not anything like an empirical prediction, but I think, with Turner, that we don't need to follow them in this point: the only thing we need to transform this

prediction into an empirical one is an empirical *description* of what lines of behaviour or reasoning are 'appropriate' to the commitments of the agent. Of course, this can only be done in a tentative, incomplete and perspective fashion: each agent will have her own (and probably mistaken at some point) ideas about what lines of action are appropriate to such and such commitments; ideas that she can apply rightly or wrongly, but it is according to these ideas that she will make her 'predictions' about what others 'should' do. Note that the fact that the term 'appropriately' occurs within my phrase 'were she appropriately honouring her commitments' does not presuppose any 'irreducible' notion of 'appropriateness' (i.e., one which is not ultimately accountable in terms of the actual attitudes of some subjects), for it has to be understood in the sense of 'appropriately *from my own point of view*', i.e., from the point of view of the person assessing the linguistic or cognitive behaviour of the other agent. What I (counterfactually) predict in saying what it is that the other person *should* do, is what she would do if her behaviour corresponded to what would be an appropriate compliance with her commitments according to my own interpretation of those commitments.

In conclusion, I am optimistic about the possibility of reducing normativity to either biological or social 'natural' processes, but this reduction would certainly not consist in 'explaining away' normative facts. Instead it would involve showing how the particular kinds of psychological attitudes we are capable of constitute such a complex game of mutual interactions in which 'being obliged' or 'being entitled' consist in. And I am sure that Stephen Turner's book on *Explaining the Normative* would be a remarkable milestone in the collective argument leading to that conclusion.

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