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INTRODUCTION

NORMATIVITY: APPROACHES, POLEMICS, PROBLEMS

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The current issue of Human Affairs is devoted to normativity. The topic brings more questions than answers, more polemics than consensus, more antagonisms than understanding. In terms of developing, enforcing, observing, violating, controlling and upholding social norms, normativity is a topic so extensive that it has become an explicit interest to several scientific disciplines and has been included at least implicitly in some others. Philosophy had been the classic domain of the investigation of normativity since time immemorial but the topic has gradually penetrated into anthropology, history, sociology, political sciences, psychology, economics, and law and has also become intertwined with biology, particularly in the Darwinian view of the world from an evolutionary perspective. Normativity is also interlinked with linguistics, not only because of the fact that many social norms are expressed in language but also because the language itself, through its structure and means of expression, is normative to some extent and its use is controlled by norms.

In spite of the fact that the topic of normativity is to a greater or smaller extent part of so many scientific disciplines and calls for a wide transdisciplinary collaboration, voices are heard stating that this theme should remain a research subject of philosophy only: it is argued that norms are not facts and normative laws relate mainly to *what ought to be done*, i.e. they are not causal laws and thus they are not subjects to be investigated by empirical sciences. Arguments against such opinions are based on the fact that although what an (intelligent) agent ought to do cannot (always) be unambiguously derived from the real situation because (mostly) there are also contradictory possible solutions, the norms regulate thought and action (the way in which they are followed up has causal consequences) and therefore they should not be ignored by empirical sciences.[1]

[1] For details on this polemic, see Smith, L. (2006).

Ethnographic studies brought a wealth of findings on norms, on how they are respected and violated. Although there is general agreement on the fact that in all societies people abide by norms, rules and/or moral principles, there is disagreement on the extent to which "codes of conduct" established from the outside or acquired internally are or ought to be fixed or flexible. While the original notions embedded in *normative theory* were based on the fact that people interiorize the rules of society in which they live, Edgerton (1985) prefers an alternative theory—*strategic interactionism*—, where he places emphasis on the fact that people seek to adapt the rules for their own ends. Edgerton also alerts us to the fact that all societies allow for exceptions to many rules but, at the same time, they enforce the observance of other regulations without exception and there are considerable differences between societies in the number of rules enforced without exception. Such norms are conditioned or justified by inequality, by the need for cooperation and perception of grave danger. Although societies differ in particular norms and social regulations, there is one thing that seems to be universal—a fact stressed by Edgerton—that each society has both strict rules and rules with exceptions.

Taking a stance on the extent to which social norms are interiorized or "automatically" observed necessarily brings another important political dimension, namely the measure of the individual's authenticity, his or her free will and personal responsibility for his/her action. This is also directly associated with the ability to judge whether a particular social norm is in accordance with the individual's and/or group interests with which s/he identifies and also with the interests of other groups to which they do not belong (e.g. in the case of racism, discrimination, violence, fascism, etc.).

There is another question that bears on this case: whether there are any universal norms or whether the norms are rather historically and group specific, whether we can generally claim that some particular norms are correct and/or good, whereas others are not and what authority ought to judge it. The urgency of these questions has been evident throughout history as never-ending socio-political-economical and religious struggles.

From the perspective of group identity, Grimalda (2004) contrasts two hypotheses. The first is that the group of agents on which the particular subject bases his/her judgements is relatively "local" (i.e. individuals from the group with which they identify serve as models). On the contrary, the second hypothesis is that the individuals to which a subject refers are not constrained by geographical, cultural or socio-economic barriers in the current globalising world. The on-line testing of these hypotheses in the real world will sooner or later bring answer to the question of whether migration and multiculturalism will lead to the strengthening of group boundaries and intergroup differences e.g. by stricter social norms or, the other way round, the norms of a particular group will be relativized and dissolved or whether finally new norms will be created through the synthesis of those which look antagonistic today.

An entirely different kind of issue related to norms is that in order to be able to follow the rule, it is necessary to be able to identify it in a particular situation or determine whether it is adequate to be used in that situation. Since, however, there is an almost unlimited number of situations, where a particular rule has to be used, it is not possible to establish all the conditions of the proper use of the rule beforehand. At the same time, as Pettit (2002) put it, although a rule-follower understands the situation and clearly sees the choice that has to be made, s/he need not necessarily have read the rule correctly. Pettit gives a mathematical example where the rules are much more clearly identifiable than in the social domain, and yet even in such an exact area, it is not always possible to understand the rule correctly only on the basis of the finite examples of its use:

1+1=2, 1+2=3, 2+2=4, 68+57=125 (plus)
1+1=2, 1+2=3, 2+2=4, 68+57=5 (quus)

He sees a problem in that any *finite* set of examples may be extrapolated by an infinite number of modes and, at the same time, it may be caused by an infinite number of rules. Different persons can then show different inclinations to extrapolating particular examples in a particular (and systematic) mode and sometimes also without awareness.

The fact that we have also to distinguish strictly between descriptive and prescriptive rules and norms complicates the situation still more. The discovery of different rightfulness in the world (not only the social world) and its description in the form of descriptive rules is entirely different from norms, which describe how individuals ought to behave within a particular community. At the very least, the consequences following from the misunderstood expectation of what an individual ought to do in a particular situation may considerably differ from the misunderstood descriptive (for example mathematical) rule. If we only focus on the normative point of view, there still is (as Dubois (2003) put it) a difference between the *description* (mostly sociological) of what the majority members of a particular society do or think and the *prescription* of how to think about things, how to perceive them and how to act. In this respect Dubois characterizes a sociocognitive approach in contrast to a sociological approach by the fact that he regards as normative those events which are socially prescribed and not those which are statistically more frequent or which occur amongst the majority of the group members.

Horne (2001) characterizes norms only as rules with at least a certain degree of consensus which are enforceable by social sanctions. Horne sees poor agreement as to what norms actually are, since there are at least three definitions, such as: (1) the system of meanings in which individuals interpret the situation, (2) patterns of action, and (3) behaviour-regulating statements. It is thus mainly the enforceability of a certain kind of behaviour in particular circumstances which distinguishes

between the rules of the type "ought" (embedded in social norms) and the rules of the type "is". Critto (1999) gives a complex definition of social norms as shared ways of thought, desire, decision-making and action, which are observable in regularly repeating behaviour and are adopted because it is expected that owing to them particular problems will be solved. This definition is more sociological in character and introduces another dimension into norms, namely their adaptability to the situation.

But norms can sometimes be against the interests of an individual and/or a group either because of ignorance (lack of knowledge or misreading the causes and effects of action), or as a consequence of the conflict between the interests of an individual and a group. In this respect, Horne (2001) shows that behaviour has to be judged on the two orthogonal scales: the costs and benefits from the perspective of an agent and, at the same time, the costs and benefits of the particular behaviour to others. Hence, norms that are harmful to individuals could have been formed because the group benefit was greater than the costs to the particular individual, whereas norms that harm a group could have been formed because the (alleged) benefit of an individual from the particular behaviour was greater than the (alleged) losses from the fact that others also display such behaviour. It may relate e.g. to different groups that close themselves off for fear of weakening their own community and thus they obstruct their own enrichment by means of new (whether positive or negative) patterns of thought, experiences and actions. A more negative case occurs when different minorities become isolated (to differing degrees through the actions of the majority and themselves), since they lose access to the economic, social, and cultural resources of a bigger social entity. Another example of norms detrimental to a group is a situation where the group uses up resources too quickly for them to be renewed. In the long-term, however, and in agreement with evolutionary assumptions, it can be expected that different social entities undergo a process of selection in which the surviving groups are those with the most adaptive system of norms, whereas groups not able to adapt sufficiently to their surroundings are condemned to extinction. If the opposite were true, we would probably not exist today. Since the successful survival of individuals requires cooperation, the groups that survive for a long period of time are those which have cooperation anchored in their norms. From the perspective of game theory this cooperation can mainly be understood as non-zero sum games i.e. when both interacting sides win more than they lose. At the same time, every individual tends to gain for him/herself as much as possible and it is therefore necessary to secure and control reciprocity, mainly through the ability of disclosing deception (disobeying explicit or implicit norms) and its subsequent punishment.

Another great problem or polemic arises here and that is whether the creation of norms is an exclusively conscious product of homo sapiens or whether the norms emerge at a much lower level, even without the necessity of conscious effort being present at their introduction or their reflection. In this respect, Dennett (2003)

refers to the computer modeling of evolution which showed that agents whose joint interaction is affected by the viscosity factor (the tendency to live in the place of birth), and who have the possibility of choosing who they interact with, will begin to structure their space by fusing cooperators and thus eliminating deceivers who will then have to interact with themselves. Dennett states that such emergent strategies of joint segregation and ostracism are already used at the macromolecular level of intragenomic conflict. Moreover, it has been shown that as long as agents have the opportunity to learn from experience, then even a simple version of the ability to take notice of what has happened, to alarm others, to condemn frauds and propose sanctions leads to a situation where the punished are those who do not punish at all because they enable parasites to thrive[2]. The point we want to make with respect to norms and in agreement with Dennett is that the concept of justice as fairness (in terms of joint help and proportional participation in the "produced goods") can naturally and spontaneously emerge; computer agents have passed through moral evolution only on the basis of elementary Darwinian logic. According to Dennett, the simplicity and rigidity of the ability to discriminate parasites can precede language, conventions and ceremonies and the evolutionary development of the capacity for controlling its members then enables the social and cultural evolution of all modes of local norms.

Such a Darwinian outlook on the formation of certain (proto) norms without the help of language contributes partially to finding a solution to the well-known problem of philosophy (two articles relate to this problem in the current issue of Human Affairs), namely that each norm expressed explicitly needs another norm to explain it, which, finally leads to infinite regress. If, however, there are implicit norms created by evolution, which delimit certain behavioural patterns (regardless of the fact that they can also be later verbally explicated), they could be referred to during interpretation of the verbally established norms and no infinite regress would take place.

Language is another significant issue in the context of norms for several reasons. First, it *has to be controlled by norms itself* to ensure that its use enables mutual understanding. In addition, *language is one of the means for developing, introducing, fixing and controlling norms*. Another feature of the use of language, although less recognizable, yet at least equally important, is that *it reflects the social position of an individual or a group*. That means that the use of language depends on extralingual domains and structures in which an individual or a group find themselves. Along with language competence, people also learn where, when and under what circumstances they can say something. They may be able to say something one way to one person, while they can say something similar to another in a different way, but under no circumstances can they can say it to a third. In this

[2] Dennet also alerts us to the fact that the practice of punishing those who do not punish opens up a space for the development of group conformism and power structures.

respect, Bourdieu (2005) warns us of the pitfalls at all three levels (italicized above), which can also be applied to understanding, upholding and the use of norms for power. He points out that common nouns such as work, family, love, etc. in fact presuppose different meanings because people using the same language occupy different social positions and the understanding of such notions and/or roles, expectations and notions allied with them (e.g. what is expected from a mother or what should the function of a family should be) is not the same. For instance, the role of a mother from a higher social class is different from those of the intellectual mother, the unemployed mother, the single mother, etc. Another fact is that having the ability to produce comprehensible sentences does not mean having the ability to produce sentences that will be listened to. Bourdieu wants to make the point that being able to create sentences with a particular meaning is not always sufficient – if those speaking want to achieve or influence something through those words, then they have to have the corresponding social position that serves as the basis for their authority and competence. For example we would perceive and judge a particular communication related to health differently according to whether it was expressed by a doctor or an astrologer; in the same way, our respect for a demand will differ according to whether it is uttered by our superior or our subordinate. Bourdieu also shows that the more formal the (linguistic) behaviour required, the more dominating the holders of legitimate (linguistic) competence authorized to enter into communication with the authorities become.

We can see that not every person has an equal opportunity to establish, modify or abolish social norms. The formation of new words, a group of words, the rules of grammar and their "safeguarding" within the framework of the standard language is normative not only from the perspective of language use but also from the point of view of new findings and demands outside the language area. The position of cultural and intellectual capital within society is thus irreplaceable because it can serve as an alternative to financial capital (although it often goes hand in hand with it). There is space here for further polemic, this time about which people, organizations or groups are authorized to create norms. And about how to secure norms that serve not only the interests of those who propose and enforce but of all people. Ellickson (2001) believes that individuals who want to change something can join various governmental and nongovernmental organizations. He assumes thereby that non-profit nongovernmental organizations should be more involved in changing norms in favour of the public good than for-profit organizations and that governmental agents usually show neither better technological intelligence (for recognizing the importance of new inventions) nor higher moral authority than members of civic society. We agree with this opinion and we should add that a relatively optimum variant in the field of norms is the currently pluralist society. In that society, cooperation and the coordination of various formal and informal authorities may take place in establishing new norms

but, at the same time, other individuals and groups can safeguard the norms which have proved good so far and others are allowed to rebel (to some extent) against norms.

In conclusion, some polemics related to the issues of norms mentioned in this introductory contribution have been analysed in more detail in the articles submitted for the current issue on normativity and legitimacy. The reader has an opportunity to create a more complex picture of the contemporary approach to and understanding of the topic of normativity. [3]

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