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Natural sources of normativity

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ABSTRACT

Normativity is widely regarded as being naturalistically problematic. Teleosemantic theories aimed to provide a naturalistic grounding for the normativity of mental representation in biological proper function, but have been subject to a variety of criticisms and would in any case provide only a thin naturalist platform for grounding normativity more generally. Here I present an account that identifies a basic form of valuational normativity in autonomous systems, and show how the account can be extended to encompass key aspects of the normativity of functions and practical reasons.

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1. Introduction: normativity and naturalism

Normativity is paradigmatically a matter of right and wrong, good and bad. Philosophical work on normativity seeks to understand the nature of normative claims, the nature of justification for such claims, and the fundamental sources of normativity. One common view is that there is nothing in the natural world, accessible by scientific means, which grounds normative claims. The most influential arguments to this effect are due to Hume and G. E. Moore: Hume argued that no normative conclusion can be validly derived from descriptive premises (Hume, 1978), whilst Moore's 'open question' argument asserts that any attempt to identify a normative property (e.g., goodness) with a natural property (e.g., pleasure) is always open to doubt, thus showing that conceptually the two cannot be identical (Moore, 1971). The popularity of this view is probably due to a more complex set of influences than just the force of these arguments, however. Lurking in the background are a pair of ideas that tend to work hand-in-hand: on the one hand, the idea that modern science replaced Aristotelian teleology with mechanistic explanation, and on the other, the idea that normativity is a very special feature of human agency, linked to consciousness and perhaps the capacity for reflection.

Whatever the exact reasons, it is often thought that naturalistic theory should not stray over the putative fact/value boundary. Yet

naturalist theory in this mode must overcome a major obstacle, which is that normativity seems to be an endemic and very important feature of human agency. Not only moral agency, but cognitive agency more broadly. Representations can misrepresent, words can be used wrongly, people can leap to irrational conclusions, and they can act unwisely. If adopting a scientifically based perspective means giving up normativity, this is giving up a lot. Naturalists practicing an austere norm eliminativism aim to show that these phenomena can be understood without appeal to normative concepts, despite appearances to the contrary, but it is not unreasonable to doubt that the project can succeed. Normative eliminativism may be an unnecessary straightjacket, however. Here I will sketch a naturalist approach that follows Aristotle in recognizing relatively rich forms of normativity in living systems. Specifically, it sees normativity as inherent in the organization or form of living systems, specifically in the form that generates their unity and hence explains their existence.

The most immediate point of comparison for this account is the etiological theory of normative function. The approach to functional normativity advocated here differs in fundamental ways with the etiological theory, and indeed with most other contemporary accounts of normative function, inasmuch as it begins with a different explanatory agenda. On the usual conception the task of function theories is to explain how functions are assigned to parts,

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whereas the approach taken here instead focuses on explaining value in relation to systems, and much of the emphasis is on identifying the relevant class of systems. This is done by means of a theory of the fundamental organization of living systems. The basic idea is not especially novel: as noted, it treads in the footsteps of Aristotle, and there are a variety of contemporary theories that attempt to give an account of the organization of living systems, which often assume that functional normativity pertains to these systems in virtue of their organizational structure.¹ Here I attempt to flesh out the intuition in a way that relates it to a broader understanding of normativity.

2. Normativity: some basic distinctions

Before proceeding further it will help to sketch out the nature of normativity in a little more detail. This cannot be done in an uncontroversial way, but the following distinctions capture at least approximately some of the major forms of normativity that have been discussed (see e.g. Darwall, 2001; Glüer & Wikforss, 2009; Schroeder, 2008). The initial description given above associates normativity with evaluation and prescription, but some have identified a kind of normativity referred to as 'descriptive.' Descriptive or 'non-evaluative' norms are such that it is possible to specify conformance or departure from the norm, but there is no reason from this alone to think that there ought to be conformance to the norm, or that nonconformance is bad. Etiological proper functions (discussed in the next section) are thought by most proponents to have descriptive normativity (Neander, 2009). If we include such non-evaluative norms within the realm of the normative then the minimal kind of normativity may simply involve some kind of non-arbitrary framework allowing comparison between actual and alternative states. There is room to doubt that this is sufficient for normativity, but it may at least be necessary.

In the case of 'evaluative' normativity the comparison between actual and alternative states takes the form of a valenced assessment. 'Valuation' (traditionally addressed by axiology) involves assessments such as 'good,' 'better than,' and 'worse than.' 'Prescription' (traditionally addressed by deontic theory) specifies what ought or ought not to happen, with the biblical commandment 'thou shalt not kill' being a paradigm example of a (candidate) prescriptive norm. 'Constitutive norms' specify rules which must hold if something is to exist, such as the rules of a game like chess. They are per se non-evaluative, though they can inform evaluations in conjunction with other information, such as an agreement (perhaps tacit) to play by the rules. With regard to games and other activities we can further distinguish 'performance norms,' concerned with how well the game or activity is conducted, with winning, losing and 'playing well' counting as paradigmatic performance norms.

3. Etiological theories of normative function

Since the mind is often thought to be entirely or at least substantially functional in nature, theories of normative function are an obvious starting point for developing naturalist accounts of the normativity of cognitive phenomena. The teleosemantic program takes this route, attempting to ground the normativity of mental representation in biological function (Millikan, 1984; Papineau, 1984). Causal theories of representation, such as that of Dretske (1981), attempt to explain mental representation in terms of causally based correlations. Thus, activity in a toad's retina is correlated with events in the world, and thereby represents

those events. The familiar problem is that understanding representation in terms of causal correlation leaves no room for misrepresentation, because correlations either exist or they do not, they cannot be 'false.' But there do seem to be false representations. Teleosemantics offered a solution by appealing to an etiological theory of normative function. It specifies what a representation is supposed to represent in terms of the 'proper function' of the mechanism doing the representing; thus, toads will respond to a long dark horizontally moving stimulus as if it is a worm, and it seems reasonable to think that this is what the detection system in their brain is supposed to indicate. In the lab they respond to artificial stimuli created by the scientist, but in these cases they are misrepresenting. The etiological theory of normative function explains proper function in terms of natural selection: the proper function of an item is the function it is adapted to perform. This has been an appealing pathway for a naturalist account of normativity because normativity is explained by appeal to a natural phenomenon (evolutionary adaptation) that is relatively well understood, clearly of great importance, and is intuitively normative (as the putative basis of 'biological design').

Nevertheless, for some progress with this approach has not met expectations (e.g. Godfrey-Smith, 2006). Specific difficulties in the analysis of representational content need not concern us here, however some of the deeper and thornier issues stem from the basic source of normativity. As noted above, the normativity of etiological functions is supposed to be descriptive rather than evaluative. Thus, on Millikan's account the proper function of a heart is to do what ancestor hearts did that made them the target of selection. But identifying this putative proper function will not allow us to conclude that this heart now *ought* to do what its ancestor hearts did, or that it is bad if it does not. By avoiding evaluation the theory evades Hume and Moore, however the result is a very thin and somewhat peculiar kind of normativity. Deviance from an ancestral state subject to positive selection is called 'malfunction,' but malfunction defined this way is not really 'mal': there is nothing inherently bad about it (cf. Ferguson, 2007). Indeed, an etiological defined malfunction may be functionally advantageous in the current context. It would be clearer and more accurate to replace the terms 'proper function' and 'malfunction' defined according to etiological theory with technical labels that have no evaluative associations. For instance, we could replace 'proper function' with 'AS-function' (for 'ancestrally-selected function'), and replace 'malfunction' with 'C-function' (for 'changed function'). With these substitutions the etiological theory no longer appears normative, which suggests that it is getting illegitimate normative 'oomph' by means of evocative labels. Without this oomph the grip provided by the theory is unconvincing: as we saw, the etiological theory is the grounding point for the teleosemantic account of misrepresentation, but misrepresentation defined this way is not really malfunctioning, or 'incorrect' functioning, it is just different functioning. If we think there is something genuinely incorrect about misrepresentation then we need more resources than the etiological account is providing.

The etiological approach is pseudo-prescriptivist in the sense that it gives something of the flavor of prescriptivity without the actual prescriptivity. It does not aim to explain valuation, nor does it support valuational assessment for the reasons just given. Yet, at least on first appearances, biological functioning seems to involve valuational normativity: an organ can function well or poorly, and an organism can be healthy or sick. Since etiological theory has nothing to say about these kinds of phenomena (again, talk of 'malfunction' is deceptive), it would seem to be at best

¹ These theories usually focusing on self-maintenance and/or self-production; see e.g. Schrödinger (1944), Maturana & Varela (1980), Bickhard (1993), Christensen & Hooker (2000a, 2000b), Christensen & Bickhard (2002), Kauffman (2003), Moreno, Etxeberria, & Umerez (2008), Barandiaran, Di Paolo, & Rohde (2009) and Toepfer (this volume).

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