

The Social Life of Normativity

This paper offers a framework for examining the different dynamics of obligation, legitimation, justification and authority in different kinds of relationships. In doing so, the paper urges the analytical treatment of the problem of normativity to broaden its interest from the analysis of the links or bridges between norms and actions and the analysis of relations between norms, to the analysis of the social dynamics of normativity in relations between persons.

Given the centrality of the problems of metaphysics and epistemology in analytical philosophy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the dominant approach to the study of normativity (in moral, legal, political and social theory) tends to focus on the nature and status of norms as amongst themselves (e.g., on the values of systematicity and consistency, or on the problems to do with conflicts between norms or their normative reach in new circumstances) or on the role of norms vis-à-vis the actions of persons (including their force, the way they guide persons, when they ought to be followed etc). In being so focused, however, the study of normativity excludes an entire domain of analysis the focus of which would be the relations between persons and the dynamics of obligation, legitimation, justification and authority in different kinds of relationships. In short, we need to make the analytical study of normativity less socially naïve.

Understanding interpersonal relations requires a different kind of approach to the study of the relations of individuals to the world, or to the study of the properties and relations between norms. In interpersonal relations, persons cannot simply be understood to be variables said to function in ways that suits the theoretical study of norms and their nature and role. Rather, it is persons in interpersonal relations that use the language of norms and values, responsibility, obligation, justification, excuse, and so on, in order to negotiate their relationships.

Second, understanding interpersonal relations requires looking carefully at the different kinds of relations there are, including more intimate relations (the marriage, the family, friendship, collegiality) and less intimate ones (between citizens and governments, and between persons in streets, in shopping centres, in other commercial contexts, and in public spaces). It is important, when considering these different relations, to pay attention to the disparity of power in such relations, and to the different ways that normativity functions in such relations (e.g., the dynamics of obligation, legitimation, justification and authority are different as between a married couple and that between a teacher and a student).

The third step requires looking at how different kinds of tensions are at stake in these different relations, e.g., agreement versus disagreement, stability versus change. In certain times, communities place emphasis on the value of agreement and stability; at other times, on disagreement and change. Similarly, in certain moments, interpersonal relations will enable and favour experimentation, and at other times will tend to prefer stabilisation. Understanding these tensions can help in analysing how persons negotiate their relationships.

In elaborating on the above three steps, the paper will also attempt to provide a clearer account of the concepts of obligation, legitimation, justification and authority in the context of a socially robust analysis of normativity.

NB. This paper could fit into either the Social Philosophy stream or the Metaethics stream.