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Normativity and Normative Psychology Introduction

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DOSSIER

NORMATIVITY AND NORMATIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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The normative domain is typically defined as the domain of what *ought to be* or what *ought to be done*, and contrasted with the descriptive domain, i.e. the domain of what *is*. This characterisation should perhaps not be taken too literally. On the one hand, the normative domain is quite large: it includes not only the concept of “ought”, but other *deontic* concepts such as “duty”, “right”, “obligation”, “permission”, as well as *evaluative* concepts such as “good”, “bad”, “admirable”, “disgusting”, etc. On the other hand, the normative domain includes not only *thin* concepts, i.e. concepts that have only a normative dimension (e.g. “right”, “wrong”, “good”, “bad”), but also *thick* concepts, i.e. concepts that have both normative and descriptive dimensions (e.g. “courageous”, “cruel”, “kind”). (See Ogien and Tappolet 2008)

Be as it may, it is clear that the normative discourse pervades our lives, our individual behaviour and thoughts as well as our interactions with other people. It is thus unsurprising that the normative has received increasingly greater attention by the philosophical community in the last few years, up to the point where normativity has become a central subject of philosophical inquiry. This new centrality is certainly due to the importance of the questions that normativity poses – both meta-ethical (e.g. What is normativity? What is the meaning and function of normative concepts? Are there normative facts? How can we have epistemic access to such facts?) and substantial (e.g. What are our duties? What things are valuable?). Yet, it has also been favoured by a shift in the very way of philosophical theorising. In contrast with the traditional “armchair” methodology, the last decade has seen an increasing collaboration between philosophy and more empirically oriented disciplines, which has allowed philosophers to approach old debates with new instruments and data. Within this general context, the emergence of an empirically-oriented form of normative psychology – a discipline that can be seen as an outgrowth of moral psychology – has brought new attention to questions at the intersection between psychological and normative questions. The aim of this dossier published by *The Ethics Forum* is to present some contributions within this growing field of research.

One traditional area of normative psychological research is the one concerned with the issue of moral responsibility. The first two articles of this volume be-

long to this area. Gary Watson's "Responsibility and the limits of evil: Variations on a Strawsonian theme" (1987) is a classic article in the field and is here translated for the first time in French by Aude Bandini. As the title suggests, Watson's starting point is Peter Strawson's seminal work on moral responsibility. In "Freedom and Resentment" (1962), Strawson attempts to reverse the standard account of the concept of moral responsibility. While it is rather common to think that there is an intimate connection between the judgment that one individual is morally responsible and the disposition to treat that individual with attitudes such as approbation, gratitude, indignation, shame and guilt, the standard view has it that such responses are only secondary and follow from the judgment that the individual is morally responsible. Within this framework, the question is to understand when this judgment is justified. On the one hand, there are the incompatibilists, who typically think that moral responsibility requires freedom and that freedom requires the falsity of causal determinism. On the other hand, there are the compatibilists, who think that holding someone as morally responsible is justified only if it produces the best possible consequences, independently of whether causal determinism is true or not. By making moral responsibility dependent on a metaphysical thesis about causal determinism, however, the traditional framework seems to reach a stalemate. Against this framework, Strawson famously argued that the relation between holding someone as morally responsible and being disposed to have certain "reactive attitudes" towards her is in fact a constitutive one, i.e. to regard someone as morally responsible just is being disposed to respond to her in a certain way in certain circumstances. The direction of the explanation is thus reversed: our "reactive" practices explain our judgments of moral responsibility, not the opposite. As such, moral responsibility is independent from the truth or falsity of causal determinism.

In "Freedom and Resentment", Strawson argues that some agents are, temporarily or permanently, exempted from our "reactive attitudes". As examples, Strawson mentions psychotics, children, hypnotized people, sociopaths and those "unfortunate in formative circumstances". This claim raises the question of why these individuals are exempted from our practices of blame and approbation. Unfortunately, Strawson's account is not explicit on this. The problem is not just that his account is thereby incomplete, but that it is unclear whether the gap may be filled with an explanation that does not reduce Strawson's account to one of the alternative, incompatibilist or compatibilist, views. In his article, Gary Watson takes on the challenge of providing a Strawsonian explanation of the previous exemptions. On the one hand, Watson emphasises the fact that our "reactive attitudes" express moral demands that presuppose that the individual to whom they are addressed is a full-blown moral self, capable of moral understanding. This explains why e.g. children, hypnotised people and sociopaths are legitimately exempted from our responses, in a way that does not presuppose any specific commitment towards causal indeterminism. On the other hand, Watson considers the question of whether it is possible to account for the exemption of those "unfortunate in formative circumstances" in Strawsonian terms. While acknowledging that none of the competing theories offers fully convincing expla-

nations, Watson earnestly calls attention to the unresolved need for a Strawsonian account to explain how much historical considerations do matter for our judgments of moral responsibility.

A significant part of Watson's article is devoted to discussing the story of Robert Harris, a man condemned to the death row for the hideous murder of two young boys and, yet, himself a long-time victim of abuse and violence. In more recent years, the literature on moral responsibility has multiplied its references to real or fictional stories as well as its use of psychological and neuroscientific findings. One intriguing suggestion that has emerged is that part of the disagreement about moral responsibility stems from the failure to recognise that our understanding of the concept and attribution of moral responsibility is much less unitary than one may think. This suggestion has led to a revisionist trend in the literature, aiming at substantially modifying the way the folks and the philosophers ordinarily think about moral responsibility.

Luc Faucher's "Tirer la responsabilité au clair: le cas des attitudes implicites et le révisionnisme" is part of this trend. Inspired by the revisionist framework proposed by Manuel Vargas (2005), Faucher's article suggests three "local" revisions of our understanding of the concept and attribution of moral responsibility, in the light of some recent social psychological studies on implicit and explicit attitudes. The first and second revisions concern our practice of responsibility attribution. While the folks and most philosophers think that attributions of responsibility obey a unique set of criteria, identical for everybody, empirical studies suggest that our attributions vary on the basis of contextual factors, most notably, the fact of being, or having been, victims of discrimination. The second revision is more local, since it applies only to those theories according to which the attribution of responsibility for a specific action or attitude to an agent requires that that agent identify with such an action or attitude. Whereas most theorists hold that the agent's identification is revealed by her conscious endorsement, Faucher argues instead that we have to look at the agent's implicit motivations in order to have a reliable indicator of what the agent's "real self" truly endorses. Finally, the third revision concerns our conception of moral responsibility. While it is common to think that conscious control is a necessary condition for moral responsibility, Faucher claims, first, that unconscious forms of control are possible; and, second, that conscious control is not necessary for someone to count as morally responsible.

As we have seen above, several authors take psychopaths to be exempted from attitudes of blame and approbation, on the grounds of their impaired moral understanding. The case of psychopaths is indeed of special interest for those empirically-minded researchers who work on the subject of moral responsibility and whose aim is to know exactly what capacities psychopaths lack, which are essential for moral responsibility. Jessy Giroux is also interested in psychopaths, but for a different reason. His aim is to consider the question of whether it is possible for psychopaths to be happy, where happiness is understood in the Aristotelian sense of *eudaimonia*. This question is important for the assessment of a

substantive thesis in moral philosophy, i.e. the thesis according to which moral behaviour is a necessary condition for happiness. Giroux's motivating idea is that, if psychopaths can be happy and if their behaviour is a paradigm of immoral behaviour, then the correspondence between morality and happiness is conclusively proven to be false. Against this conclusion, Giroux argues that psychopaths cannot be genuinely happy. On the one hand, some psychopaths will typically end up in prison, thus losing one essential condition for happiness, namely, liberty. Whether genuinely responsible or not from a moral point of view, they are, that is, deemed legally responsible, and punished, for their deeds. On the other hand, those psychopaths that will never be jailed lack another essential capacity for genuine happiness, namely, the capacity for contentment.

Connected to moral responsibility, but much less explored in the literature, the idea of trust is at the heart of David Robichaud's "La confiance et le rapport aux normes: Le problème de la méfiance face à la différence". Robichaud's aim is to explain what trust is and why trust levels are lower between individuals belonging to different identity groups. According to Robichaud, trust always involves the presence of norms: we trust other people to act morally or rationally, that is, we trust them to act in accordance with either moral or rational norms. Despite this fact, Robichaud argues that trust is not moral or rational in itself. Nonetheless, the intimate connection between trust and norms allows Robichaud to explain why we tend to trust less people that are different from us in some relevant respects. The reason is that our expectation that the other individual will act in accordance with certain norms, which is constitutive of trust, is lowered, on the one hand, by the belief that an alien other is significantly more likely not to know certain *implicit* norms governing our interactions, and, on the other hand, by the difficulty for us to gather enough information about the other individual's disposition to actually follow these norms.

The different themes of these four papers interconnect in many subtle ways. For instance, one interesting question concerns the implications that Robichaud's account of trust, as involving normative expectations, has for the explanation of the typical lack of trust exhibited by psychopaths and other paranoid agents. It appears plausible that part of the reason why psychopaths fail to live a successful life is precisely connected to their difficulty to trust others when appropriate. To revert to the question of responsibility, one may also wonder whether the attitude of trusting others should not be considered as one of the many reactive attitudes that are essential for holding other people as responsible, in addition to affective states such as gratitude, resentment, hurt feelings, indignation, approbation, shame, guilt, remorse, forgiveness, certain kinds of pride and certain kinds of love. Clearly, the answer depends, at least in part, on the question of whether or not trust can be considered to be a kind of emotion.

As these different questions, as well as the articles in this volume, show, normative psychology is an exciting new discipline that has a lot to offer both to its practitioners and to the interested readers.

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