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The Head and the Heart: Incentives and Norms

by Liam Kofi Bright and Remco Heesen [1]

We wager that on reflection most philosophers would reject any crude dichotomy [2] between reason and passion. We don't really think Newton unweaved the rainbow, we don't really think one should ignore the learn'd astronomer to go gaze at the stars - or avoid gazing at the stars because after all you have the star charts. One simply doesn't have to choose between these ways of accessing the world, and an appreciation for what is humanly significant can be combined quite comfortably with an analytical frame of mind. However, in more sophisticated guises, something of this contrast will find its way into philosophers' analyses, and we think to their detriment. This blog post is about something that seems to us an example of such, and we shall try to set out where we think it goes wrong and why we think this is important to realise.

The occasion for this reflection is a recent paper [3] by Hugh Desmond [4]. It makes a rather interesting distinction between "economic" and "ethical" approaches to the social epistemology of science. The economic approach, we are told, has scientists "modeled as credit-maximizing agents responding to incentives such as promotion, funding, or publication criteria". Whereas those who take the ethical approach understand scientists as "agents concerned with ideals such as honesty, respect, or reliability, and are capable of acting contrary to incentive structures". Desmond seeks to show that while the economic approach might apparently leave the ethical approach with little to do, in fact there are sociologically and epistemically important aspects of science that can only be explained on the ethical approach. (To find out more go read his paper!)

Both authors of this post are social epistemologists of science, interested in the same sort of issues as Desmond. One of us (Heesen) is even a major focus of discussion in Desmond's paper, acting as a representative [5] of the economic approach. But while finding the distinction interesting we do not in the end think it is a fruitful means of dividing up the space. Understanding why this is will help make it clear what we think social epistemology of the modelling sort that we have engaged in can do, how it relates to ethical projects [6] we are committed to, and just why we reject any hints of the dichotomy between the head and the heart.

Consider social norms. We find social norms all over the place, applying broadly or narrowly, and to matters of huge importance or near triviality. It is somewhat tricky to give examples, as social norms are almost by definition culturally relative, but we trust that some of the following will ring familiar: a social norm prohibiting stealing, a (pre-covid) social norm in favour of shaking hands upon first meeting somebody, a social norm prescribing the sharing of food (in certain circumstances), a social norm prescribing the order in which to use pieces of cutlery at a formal dinner, a social norm against engaging in sexual relationships with someone other than one's partner (if one is in a monogamous relationship), a social norm favouring monogamous relationships over other configurations, etc.

As the name suggests, it is a constitutive part of a social norm that it has a normative component: endorsing a norm amounts to endorsing the claim that everyone (to whom the norm applies) *should* do what the norm prescribes – or avoid doing what the norm prohibits. Ideally, perhaps, one should follow norms because it is the right thing to do, not merely because one has an incentive to do so. Our ability to follow norms seems wrapped up with

our ability to act with integrity, or to do things because they are what ought be done rather than because they are rewarded. As such, norms seem to fall on the ethical side of Desmond's distinction.

However, this would be too quick. Research of the past thirty years or so taking a game-theoretic approach to social norms has yielded fascinating insights into the origins of social norms, the incentives individuals have to comply with norms (both in general and in specific circumstances), and many other factors. The work [7, 8] of Cristina Bicchieri [9] is a great starting point here. In using game theory, this work could be classified on the economic side of Desmond's divide, but in light of the previous paragraph the reader might perhaps begin to see why we do not think this is the most helpful distinction.

One of us (Heesen) has done some work [10] on game theory and social norms, focusing on the social epistemology of science, our shared area of interest with Desmond. The social norm under discussion there is the "communist norm" [11], which enjoins academics to share the results of their research freely and widely. Roughly speaking, the claim had been put forward that the normative/ethical side of the norm must precede the ("economic") individual incentive to conform (the view [12] of Michael Strevens [13]). Whereas it was argued that the incentives to comply with the norm did not need independent normative foundation (Heesen's view). Importantly though, both sides would agree that both aspects are represented in the norm as it presently exists. There was no attempt to do away with either the ethical or economic factors involved in this situation – the puzzle was simply about how they interrelate.

In the case just discussed, the ethical and economic approaches cannot be neatly separated, and the philosophical interest is in the complex details of their interplay. This typifies the literature on game theory and social norms. Consider, for example, the following quote (from p. 40 of [8]):

Some conventions may not involve externalities, at least initially, but they may become so well entrenched that people start attaching value to them. For example, a group of people may routinely avoid smoking before there arises a consensus disapproving this behavior. Once a public consensus is reached, smoking incurs new costs. Not only would one be expected not to smoke, but the occasional smoker would incur the blame of the entire group. At this point, a social norm is born. It may also happen that some conventions lend themselves to purposes they did not have when they were established. Norbert Elias (1978 [14]) illustrated how rules of etiquette, such as proper ways to eat and drink, developed to become a sign of aristocratic upbringing and refinement, and were effectively used to exclude those who did not belong to the ruling class.

Again we see a complex interaction between incentives and normative expectations. To ask whether these phenomena should be understood in an economic fashion or an ethical fashion, where those are understood as rivalrous, or whether people are acting for incentive or normative reasons, would simply be to misunderstand what is going on. People are responsive to an environment containing norms against smoking, and given their desires to be a certain kind of person and enjoy a certain kind of normative status, the presence of the norm affects their incentives. There is no split to be made, it is one and the same thing we seek to explain, and incentives and norms do not compete with each other so much as feed into one another.

Neither the world nor our experience of it divides into an economic component and an ethical component. To think so is simply to externalise the crude psychology of passion versus reason. Our norms permeate our social life, shaping what we want or are averse to and thus what we are incentivised to do – while at the same time our behaviours and desires can form the basis of more or less explicitly codified norms. There is no risk of modes of explanation stressing one or the other factor truly crowding out or replacing their opposite – or, if there is, it is simply the risk of philosophers and social scientists doing our job badly. To understand ourselves and the worlds we build together we must inevitably refer simultaneously to both our material needs given our environment and our ethical principles guiding our moral agency.

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