

Subjectivity, Emotion and Science

Introduction

Subjectivity seems to be quite different from the rest of the stuff in the world. Things that are endowed with subjectivity are special sorts of things; they feel, they think, and they act. They have, as we say, minds. Now I do not think that *mind* and *subjectivity* are synonymous terms. To my ear, ascribing *subjectivity* to some creature is to indicate an interested involvement in the world, an experiential point of view, and a stake in how the world unfolds. Perhaps these are properties also of minded beings, but if that is so, it is not, I think, simply a truth of semantics. Be that as it may; though I shall also touch on the topic of concepts and meaning, mere definitions of terms do not matter much for my main purpose in this context. I want to consider the relation between our practical experience and actual knowledge of subjectivity, on the one hand, and the rapidly developing scientific illumination of the capacities that subjectivity involves, on the other. I will suggest that if we are concerned with subjectivity, and interested in the relation between science, folk knowledge (our commonly shared core of assumptions and competencies) and philosophical inquiry, we ought to pay particular attention to the *emotions*.

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Empirical knowledge and conceptual change

Many of us take it that we have a *scientific* view of the world. This means at least that, though we may in fact be ignorant about much of what science has actually uncovered, we take it that the practice of science is the best route to knowledge of how things are. We take it that ordinary folk knowledge on various topics stands to be corrected by scientific discovery, as indeed much of it has been over the last centuries. However, as science advances and penetrates some domain of folk knowledge, this is not simply a matter of exchanging true (or at least systematically justified) belief for false opinion. Also our classifications, our concepts, are changed. Concepts as such are not true or false, though they may turn out to be empty (*phlogiston*). More often, however, conceptual revision rids us of concepts that are superficial, pointless, or based on misconceptions (*sub-lunar*). The great revolutions in natural sciences are all conceptual breakthroughs as well as empirical discoveries—indeed, the two are usually intrinsically related.

To say that our concepts change is to say that we begin to classify objects in some domain according to different properties. The history of biology, for instance, can be construed as a story about such change, as can some of the disputes among current theorists. The disagreement

between, for instance, Gould and Dawkins over evolutionary explanation, is less about which properties there are, and more about which properties biologically *matter* (Sterelny). To say that some property scientifically matters, is to claim that it has explanatory value. In the natural sciences, a key explanatory factor is *projectability* (Griffiths). To say that a property is projectable, is at least to say that it reliably co-varies with other properties of objects in the domain. What we want, scientifically, is to identify things by concepts that lock on to their systematically projectable properties. A scientific attitude, then, is to accept that while we still classify things in many ways for diverse purposes (*food, red, evil, square*), scientific classification has primacy when we want to say how things really are. With regard to physical elements, for instance, we have come to treat microstructure as having the final classificatory word. With respect to living matter, ancestry plays the essential role. Science, in such cases, progresses by homing in on *natural kinds* (Griffiths, Murphy).

Science and folk psychology

However, while we have little difficulty accepting such dynamics with regard to black holes and quarks, gold and H₂O, anemones and nucleic acids, things are not so simple when we turn to the matter of mind, to the properties of subjectivity. Past decades have seen tremendous progress in our scientific understanding of the biological mechanisms underlying many aspects of our mental lives. Psychology, biology, anthropology, and ethology have provided what some view as a revolution in our scientific understanding of ourselves and related beings. Yet there are philosophers who claim that the very nature of subjectivity is forever beyond the ken of any science with which we are now familiar (Nagel). The mind, they say, is in principle *irreducible* to the concepts of natural science. Others take the view that our folk-knowledge of mind is on a par with astrology and magic; as science progresses, our current terms of psychological interpretation and understanding will be replaced by quite different, genuinely explanatory concepts, typically taken to be fixed by the neural sciences (Churchland). When we want to talk about what the mind *really* is, say such thinkers, we have to talk about the brain, in terms that make perspicuous the connections between neural development, traits and events and what we call behaviour.

I think both these views are misguided. Subjective states may well be amenable to natural-scientific investigation, in pretty much the sense with which we are familiar. However, the fact that they are does not mean that folk-knowledge of mind must be rejected, or substantially revised in the name of scientific progress. The staunchly anti-reductivist attitude underestimates, it seems to me, the dynamic interaction between scientific concepts and ordinary categories. The scientific view of mental categories as eliminable, by contrast, assumes that more precise neurobiological knowledge together with scientifically informed classification of behaviour will undermine our ordinary folk-psychological categories. The actual effect of such scientific success, however, may in fact be quite the opposite. An interesting example, worth looking briefly at before we turn to our knowledge of emotion, is the case of cognitive ethology.

Animal minds and human minds

The study of animal behaviour was dominated by strict behaviourist methodology long after the cognitive revolution took hold in human

psychology. There are many reasons for this, but one worth pointing out here is the lingering association of mental faculties with linguistic abilities. Thinking of *thought* as something intrinsically tied to *language* may have seemed to demystify the life of the rational mind, but it hampered our ability to conceive and explain the behaviour of “dumb brutes.” Freed of this prejudice, cognitive ethology has over the last few decades evolved into a conglomerate of research programs. Partly as a result of dramatic improvements in neurobiological knowledge coupled with increased sophistication in evolutionary theory, concepts referring to cognitive, affective and communicative abilities are embedded in naturalistic accounts of animal behaviour (Allen and Bekoff; Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt; Leary and Tangny). Animal minds are not black boxes but complex systems of representational abilities and affective responses.

So are human minds. They are, however, in some respects dramatically different from those of animals. The remarkably fine-grained and along some lines infinitely productive system of representation and communication that is human language, is indeed one extremely salient respect in which the human mind is unique. Moreover, while language is undoubtedly a biologically conditioned ability bestowed on us by evolution, there is good reason to think that the concepts we need to describe knowledge of meaning involve an understanding of norms of rationality (Davidson). If this is right, it has consequences for ordinary psychological states of the sort that we typically capture when we attribute particular beliefs and desires to each other, by means of linguistic content. When we language-users communicate and interpret each other by attributing what philosophers call propositional attitudes, we understand each other in terms of mental states that are tied to linguistic meaning. In so far as these states are captured through concepts sensitive to norms of rationality, there is no way to directly integrate them in a purely biological science of behaviour. Hence, conceiving of the mind in terms of propositional attitudes, states theoretically describable in decision-theoretic terms, appears to insulate genuine psychology from serious penetration by biological categories.

Emotion

The conception of mind as a set of action-explaining propositional attitudes is an idealization that captures important features of our mental lives and explanatory practices. It affords us, however, an impoverished approach to the nature of subjectivity and its relation to the terms of natural-scientific investigation of human experience and behaviour. Turning to emotions, our prospects are richer.

As we would expect, the great advances in empirical research into emotions have brought with them a number of classification proposals (Damasio; Ekman and Davidson; Griffiths). This diversity, however, may indicate more than the usual creativity displayed in the course of the rapid advancement of sciences into new domains. Careful examination of the nature of emotion as an explanatory, experiential and interpretative category shows that we identify emotions along a remarkably diverse range of axes (Elster). Particular sciences will take hold of at most some of these.

It has been reasonably well established that folk classifications of some states of emotion turn on properties that are quite robust, about which we can make discoveries, and with regard to which we may be corrected. The pan-cultural (Ekman; Griffiths) distribution of core features of what are

often called basic emotion attests to this. It suggests that some affective states are psycho-biological natural kinds, linking us to creatures without language, identifiable independently of fine-grained propositional attitudes. How such emotions arise in us and what they lead to, how we know them in others and ourselves, and what we are able to do by virtue of having and recognizing them—these are questions that various sciences are currently exploring. Yet, unlike other aspects of our nature that science can treat in this way, emotions are visible, indeed essential resources, within the context of ordinary interpretation itself. While we routinely explain behaviour rationalistically, in terms of the beliefs agents have and the goals that motivate them, we spontaneously understand behaviour also as expression of emotion, in a way that cannot be reduced to decision-theoretic terms. Furthermore, the interface between biological categories and affective states represents one end of an impressively wide spectrum; basic emotions may directly connect us with our biological natures and evolutionary roots, but the life of human emotion encompasses states that cannot be understood or perceived except in the context of propositional attitudes. Human emotions have, at least in significant measure, a *narrative* identity and significance, and depend on an ability to explicitly perceive actions and events as meaningful (Goldie).

I cannot show it here, but I believe that our knowledge of emotion in fact represents a competence with finely graded states across a spectrum, a spectrum tied at one end to biological response-mechanisms and at the other to uniquely human narrative abilities. This suggests that the diversity and heterogeneity of emotion-states is not arbitrary. Rather, the multifaceted folk-psychological category of emotion is a conduit between the dimensions of meaning, narrative and value, on the one hand, and the dimension of biological constraints and possibility, on the other.

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