

Social Meaning and Philosophical Method

...political subversion presupposes cognitive subversion, a conversion of the vision of the world.
(Bourdieu 1982, 127-8)

Questions:

Feminist philosophers and critical race theorists have complained that contemporary Anglophone philosophy, although sometimes useful, is not as valuable as it might be for our projects. On the one hand, there is a concern that analytic philosophy is overly *individualistic* and, on the other, that it is insufficiently sensitive to the *context* of theorizing, e.g., the social and political facts that give rise to the questions we ask (and don't ask), the methods we endorse (and don't), and the implications of our theories for living together. A theme in both these concerns is that there is a lack of attention to the *social domain*, both as a subject for our theorizing and its influence on us as theorizers. Today I would like to explore these concerns as they have arisen in the context of feminist and anti-racist social theory, to outline a particular motivation for them, and to consider how analytic philosophy might contribute more fruitfully to (theories of) social justice.

I. Social justice

Although the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement achieved great gains in the 20th century, it is also true that our societies remain unjustly stratified. Racial and ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ communities, non-citizens, the disabled, the poor, and others are categorically disadvantaged; and this disadvantage is *systematic* and *durable*. (Tilly 1999) There is no doubt that both individuals and social institutions play a role in causing this stratification. But persistent inequality is not simply a result of the bad or unjust actions of individuals or badly structured institutions.

To be more specific: good individuals don't necessarily make a just society:

The cumulative effects of a series of transactions, each of which satisfies the local criteria of justice, and which begins from a just starting point, may be disastrous. Asset markets can suffer from speculative booms and busts that throw millions of innocent people out of work and into poverty. (Anderson 2012, 164)

Nor is justice simply a matter of well-structured institutions. Let us assume for the moment that Rawls's theory of justice is a good example of a theory that applies to the basic structure of society. Cohen has argued that a just structure is not enough:

A society that is just within the terms of the difference principle, so we may conclude, requires not simply just coercive rules, but also an ethos of justice

that informs individual choices. In the absence of such an ethos, inequalities will obtain that are not necessary to enhance the condition of the worst off: the required ethos promotes a distribution more just than what the rules of the economic game by themselves can secure. (Cohen 1997, 10)

Cohen frames his critique of Rawls by echoing the feminist slogan "the personal is political." He is concerned with the ways in which legitimate choices and preferences within a structure can tilt it towards injustice; but note that the site of an additional constraint on justice is the social *ethos*. In fact, one might argue, individual and institutional injustice are just the tip of the iceberg: they are the expression of deeper and less tractable sources of inequality in social meaning. But what exactly is social meaning? On my view, social meaning is the glue that holds social structures together.

II. Social Structures

Social structures are networks of social relations. Social relations, in turn, are constituted through practices. Our practices relate us to each other and to the material world; they situate us at nodes in the structure. Consider cooking:

Cooking rice is an instance of a more general practice of cooking, and regular engagement in the practice is constitutive of a social role: cook. Being a cook relates one in specific ways to other persons (not only the customer or family, but also the farmer, grocer, garbage collector, sources of recipes, including traditions, cookbooks, etc), and also relates one in specific ways to things (foodstuffs, sources of heat, water, utensils). Cooking is only possible within a social structure that provides the ingredients, skills, tools; the norms for taste, texture and ingredients; the distribution of labor of cooks and consumers, etc.

What is a practice? Social *practices* are, in the central cases, collective solutions to coordination or access problems with respect to a *resource*. The solution consists in organized responses to the resource. Borrowing from contemporary anthropology (and social science more broadly), I have proposed this hypothesis:

Practices consist of interdependent schemas and resources "when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time." (Sewell 1992, 13)

Roughly, schemas consist in clusters of culturally shared concepts, beliefs, and other attitudes that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect. Both concepts and beliefs, in the sense intended, store information and are the basis for various behavioral and emotional dispositions. Although schemas are variable and evolve across time and context, their elements are sticky and resist updating.

Resources are things of all sorts – human, nonhuman, animate, or not – that are taken to have some (including negative) value (practical, moral, aesthetic, religious,

etc.). In social reality, schemas and resources are both causally and constitutively interdependent. Consider food, e.g., corn:

An ear of corn can be viewed as something to eat, as a commodity to be sold, as a religious symbol. In other words, we can apply different schemas to the object, and the schemas frame our consciousness and evaluation of the object. The different schemas not only offer modes of interpretation, but license different ways of interacting with the corn. Actions based on these different schemas have an effect on the ear of corn *qua* resource, e.g., it might be cooked for food, or the kernels removed to be shipped, or it might be dried and hung in a prominent place to be worshipped. The effects of our actions then influence the schema. If the corn sells for a good price, its value is enhanced and the farmer may invest in new and different varieties.

On this model (P=S+R):

- Social *relations* are established by entrenched and repeated practices.
- Systems of interdependent practices/reactions are *structures*.
- A social *group*, e.g., a gender, a race, but also farmers, nurses, the unemployed, is a set of people who function at a node (or set of nodes) in a structure.
- Schemas are the basis for social meaning.

III. Social Meaning

What is social meaning? Lawrence Lessig has done important work to clarify the notion:

Any society or social context has what I call here social meanings – the semiotic content attached to various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context...[the point is to] find a way to speak of the frameworks of understanding within which individuals live; a way to describe what they take or *understand* various actions, or inactions, or statuses to be; and a way to understand how the understandings change. (Lessig 1995, pp. 951-2)

Extending Lessig's suggestion, we should allow that not only actions/inactions and statuses have social meanings, but also include things such as corn, traffic signals, money, jewelry. Pink *means* girl and blue *means* boy, no? Lessig points out,

[Social meanings] change, they are contested, and they differ across communities and individuals. But we can speak of social meaning, and meaning management, I suggest, without believing that there is a single, agreed upon point for any social act...Even if there is no single meaning, there is a range or distribution of meanings, and the question we ask here is how that range gets made, and, more importantly, changed. (954-55)

In spite of the possibility of change and contestation, the effects of social meaning are “in an important way, non-optional. They empower or constrain individuals, whether or not the individual chooses the power or constraints.” (955; see also 1000) Semiotics, at least on one understanding, is the study of such social meanings, what they are, how they are created, reproduced, disrupted. On the picture I am developing, social meanings are constituted by the schemas that interpret resources for us. They guide our interaction with each other and with the material world.

How are social meanings relevant to social justice? Injustice is largely a social phenomenon; it is learned and lived through culture. Insofar as social meanings define our social practices, and internalized meanings guide our interactions, social justice requires attention to – and changes to – social meanings. Examples: (a) stigma and (b) social stereotypes/ideals.

a) Elizabeth Anderson characterizes racial stigmatization during Jim Crow:

The condition of racial stigmatization consists of public, dishonorable, practically engaged representations of a racial group with the following contents: (1) *racial stereotypes*, (2) *racial attributions* or explanations of why members of the racial group tend to fit their stereotypes, that rationalized and motivate (3) *derogatory evaluations* of and (4) *demeaning or antipathetic attitudes* (such as hatred contempt, pity, condescension, disgust, aversion, envy, distrust, and willful indifference) towards the target group and its members. (Anderson 2010, 48)

Stigma, like other social meanings, and like linguistic meanings, are collective and public. Such meanings affect us and our interactions even if we reject their content, e.g., whistling Vivaldi (Steele 2011)

b) George Lakoff offers an analysis of our ideal of *mother* in terms of five overlapping cognitive models based on birth, genetics, nurturance, marriage, and genealogy. (Lakoff 2000, 395) He says,

...more than one of these models contributes to the characterization of a *real* mother, and any one of them may be absent from such a characterization. Still, the very idea that there is such a thing as a *real* mother seems to require a choice among models where they diverge. (395)

When the situation is such that the models for *mother* do not pick out a single individual, we get compound expressions like *stepmother*, *surrogate mother*, *adoptive mother*, *foster mother*, *biological mother*, *donor mother* and so on. Such compounds, of course, do not represent simple subcategories, that is, kinds of ordinary mothers. (396)

The central case [is] where all the models converge. This includes a mother who is and has always been female, and who gave birth to the child, supplied

her half of child's genes, nurtured the child, is married to the father, is one generation older than the child, and is the child's legal guardian. (400)

Further complexity is added by metonymy: the housewife-mother is, in a particular socio-cultural context, taken to stand for the category as a whole. Thus we get further categories: *unwed mother*, *working mother*, etc. and a "representativeness structure" encoding a central ideal and norms explicable in terms of variation from the core.¹

As Lakoff goes on to note, the sub-categories of mother are historically and culturally specific. But we should also note that even the core models depend on the availability of knowledge (genetics) and social practices (marriage). "There is no general rule for generating kinds of mothers. They are culturally defined and have to be learned. They are by no means the same in all cultures." (401)

IV. Schemas and Language

By structuring the perception which social agents
have of the social world, the act of naming helps to
establish the structure of this world...(Bourdieu 1982, 105)

I've suggested that social meanings can be understood as schemas that are culturally assigned to actions, objects, events, and such. Internalized schemas provide recognitional capacities, store information, and are the basis for various behavioral and emotional dispositions. Importantly, schemas are learned and triggered by language, especially (but not only) the language of classification. Consider the effects of describing someone, say, Chris, as a woman, or a mother, or a slut. Language is a social resource. It encodes the schemas that govern social life, and does so in a way that establishes them as "common sense," seemingly inevitable.²

As we have seen, schemas can be problematic in a variety of ways. They may incorporate false normative or descriptive beliefs; they may be the basis for dispositions that are morally questionable. However, they may also fail because they rely on *inapt concepts*. Concepts are neither true nor false, but they can be evaluated: do we have reason to track the distinction drawn by the concept? Should we have this or that concept in our repertoire at all? If so, how we should construe it? What alternative concepts might we deploy instead? (See also Fricker 2007.)

¹ See also Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender* (2011) for an account of how the fundamental schemas for gender interact with other schemas.

² I'm *not* saying that "the meaning" of the term, say, 'mother' is the mother-schema or that social meaning just is linguistic meaning. The relationship between linguistic meaning and social meaning is more complex.

Consider again: 'slut,' 'mother,' 'woman.' Such terms are used to carve out an extension, to invoke a schema that attributes features to the members of the extension, establishes links to other concepts, and guides our responses. Suppose that through normative inquiry we determine that a social practice is misguided or unjust. One important response is to consider how our *discursive* practices are implicated: how does our language support the categorization that the social practice relies on; how does it prime us to respond in ways that are problematic?

Consider the cultural stigmatization of sexually promiscuous women ("sluts") in contrast to the glorification of sexually promiscuous men (and the related blaming of rape on women). A standard response, of course, is to reject the term 'slut' because it is demeaning and serves to carve out a distinction that we have no good reason to mark. Recently, however, some feminist activists have organized "slut walks" to challenge the evaluative content of the slut-schema: even sexually active and "provocatively" clad women are not "asking to be raped." According to the *Toronto Observer*, the organizers of the original walk wanted to "reclaim the definition of "slut" as someone who is in control of their own sexuality."³ One might not agree with this tactic, but it would miss the point entirely to claim that the effort is misguided because "that's just not what 'slut' means."

The point here is that language has social meaning beyond its purely linguistic meaning. Or perhaps, in a more Quinean mode, it is not possible to draw a sharp line between linguistic meaning and social meaning, even between descriptive terms and slurs. The act of "defining," and deciding which words to include (or not) in our vocabulary is a political act. This is not just true of terms such as 'slut.' Consider 'mother.' Women's lives are substantially organized around practices of mothering – in anticipation, in avoidance, in enactment, in resistance. But why do we employ the concept(s) of *mother*? What is a mother? For example, why do we persist in thinking that one's sex is relevant to one's parental nurturing? How we define 'mother' and whether we continue to categorize people as mothers are political choices.

If there is no clear line between linguistic/conceptual meaning and social meaning, then it isn't entirely clear what we are doing when we attempt philosophical analysis, especially of concepts that have social implications for action and affect. This is a remix of Quine's point about the web of belief. We rely on a web of schemas to communicate and coordinate. Instead of observation statements at the periphery, this web's periphery consists of schemas that guide action directly. Revision is permissible throughout the web, and is called for when the social practices constituted by the schemas are problematic. How we revise schemas – whether we

³ <http://torontoobserver.ca/2011/03/30/slutwalk-set-to-strut-past-queens-park-to-police-hq-on-april-3/>

discard or modify the concepts, core beliefs, evaluations, emotive scripts – must be justified holistically and in terms of the impact on social practices.

The elucidation and evaluation of a schema that constitutes a practice is not feasible without close attention to the particular social contexts in which the schema is deployed. The particular configuration of concepts, beliefs, evaluations, and dispositions that make up the schematic element of our practices is historically specific. And any improvement on this particular configuration will have to take into account the ways in which our social world has already been constituted by these practices and the social/political/rhetorical options available. This can't happen from the armchair.

V. Philosophical Analysis

Even the most strictly constative scientific description is always open to the possibility of functioning in a prescriptive way, capable of contributing to its own verification by exercising a theory-effect through which it helps to bring about that which it declares. (Bourdieu 1982, 134)

So far I have suggested that an action is meaningful in relation to a social practice. This challenges an individualism that, e.g., treats actions simply as outputs from an agent's beliefs and desires. I've also suggested that our conceptual repertoire is embedded in cultural schemas that organize our life together. Because many of the social practices/structures within which action is meaningful are unjust, we should subject the schemas to a form of critique that depends on rich empirical investigation. Note, however, that our theorizing itself a social practice, so should also be subjected to critique.

Analytic philosophy, at least in some forms, aims to provide analyses of our concepts and the relations between them. But it should be clear by now that from the point of view of those working on social justice, this is woefully inadequate. We can do so much more. For example,

(i) We need more in the way of a social philosophy of language/mind, epistemology, ontology. We need a systematic account of social meaning and meaning change; a more detailed account of how individual thought and action both depend on collective understandings and also constitute collective understandings; a theory of aptness. We more attention to the ontology and epistemology of social structures and the structural explanation of human action.

(ii) We need critique, critique of ordinary schemas, but also philosophical schemas. Philosophical concepts don't exist in a vacuum. They not only organize our thinking, but are also enacted in our social world; they are embedded in our social practices; they structure our lives. So we need to critique *the very philosophical concepts we study*, and not just take them as given. Consider, e.g., *knowledge, mind, body(!), person,*

nature, objectivity, justice, responsibility, freedom, agency, autonomy, morality in addition to the thicker concepts we use in everyday life: *family, mother/father, abortion.*

Without critique of the schemas that constitute our social practices, philosophy takes the status quo as given. For those of us who find the status quo intolerable, philosophy is implicated in the injustices we face. We do need to understand the schemas that structure our lives – both the concepts and the core beliefs – so explication is valuable. But without critique, our efforts are dogmatic. Even if a concept is valuable and worth preserving, philosophy needs to explain why.

It may be tempting to suggest that in the case of philosophical inquiry we are just concerned with truth. Does a bare concern with truth provide a basis for our inquiry? The simple answer is no. Truths can be expressed with inapt concepts (*grue?*). But inapt concepts don't make good theory (or even knowledge?).

Moreover, in the social domain, discourse structures reality; simply describing that reality is insufficient. Dogmatism is not the only danger: our inquiry may, in fact, undergird schemas that we should reject. An uncritical acceptance of truths and the concepts they depend on may actually cause systematic harm.

But how should we judge the aptness of our *philosophical* concepts and the schemas that embed them? Undoubtedly, many philosophical schemas lie close to the core of the web and there are ways to preserve them, even in the face of critique. However, as in any inquiry, aptness of concepts should be evaluated relative to the purposes of the theorizing (medicine: pathogen). Philosophy is many things, answers many different questions, has multiple purposes. But in central cases, philosophical inquiry is an inquiry into the concepts we (collectively) ought to use. It differs from scientific inquiry in that it aims to provide us with the basic tools we need to live together, tools that are transposable across different domains.

So we should be asking not simply what concepts track truth, even fundamental truth, but rather: What distinctions and classifications should we use to organize ourselves collectively? What social meanings should we endorse? Determining what is required for knowledge, or virtue, or autonomy, is not just a matter of describing reality for, as noted before, definition is a political act. And it is so whether we acknowledge it or not. Philosophy has the power to create culture; we are not just bystanders but producers. I urge you to attend to social meaning in your philosophical work, recognize its import for philosophy, and help us understand it better in the hope that this will serve the cause of social justice.

<http://web.mit.edu/~shaslang/papers/SMPMhdo.pdf>

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