Normativity and grammar of psychological concepts

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Abstract

This essay aims to establish the claim that psychological concepts such as love, desire, depression, etc. have a normative dimension, to then explore the potential source of this normativity. Building on Wittgenstein's social-constructivist approach, this essay argues that not only the psychological concepts that are available to us, but also our concepts' normative dimension is a result of our communal life. In Wittgensteinian terminology, normativity should therefore be understood as a grammatical feature of the language-games we play with psychological concepts.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; Theodor Schatzki; psychological concepts; social constructivism

Introduction

How we morally evaluate who we are or think we are, is of central importance to us as individuals. To understand the source of this normative dimension of our psychological concepts, which we employ to think about ourselves and others, it is important to gain an overview of the complex relations between morality, the mind, psychological concepts, and our social environment. This essay presents one line of analysis of these complex relations that builds on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and especially on Theodor Schatzki's reading of his philosophy.

Many of Wittgenstein's main philosophical contributions are to be located in the field of Philosophy of Psychology. His writings on the mind, the self, self-understanding, the nature of thoughts, etc. are objects of a vast field of secondary literature.[2] Schatzki approaches topics in social theory such as the structures of social life and the nature of individuality from a Wittgensteinian point of view.[3] In *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* he analyses how the mind can be understood as being constituted by social practices. This essay gives an account of the normative and, more specifically, *moral* dimension of our

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[2]See Peter M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Mind and Will* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) for a collection of related essays.
[3]Theodore R. Schatzki, *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

psychological concepts in a Wittgensteinian framework.

Wittgenstein on psychological concepts

In this essay the expression "psychological concept" is used to refer to every concept that can be used to describe or express our or someone else's mind. An example for such a description could be "She looks tired", an example for an expression "I am in pain"[4].

This is not unproblematic. It suggests that we have a grasp of 'the mind' independent of and before our deployment of psychological concepts. It might rather be the case that our use of psychological concepts constitutes the mind in the first place. If that were the case one cannot draw on the concept of the mind to define what psychological concepts are for there would be no mind without such concepts. Yet, given we master the techniques of talking about and attributing mental states, feelings, etc., in practice there is very little dispute about whether a given concept can be used as a psychological one. In this essay our common sense understanding of what psychological concepts are will suffice.

To Wittgenstein the semantic content, here understood as the meaning of a word, of psychological concepts is not determined by corresponding mental states but socially defined performances. Generally those outward criteria that enable one to attribute the mental state x to another person, i.e. that enable the usage of the concept, account for large parts of the respective concept. Accordingly, what goes on in 'the inner' is negligible when it comes to understanding the concept. Imagine how we would teach someone 'what being tired' means: "We say someone is tired when she is yawning, and her eyes are half-closed, and she feels very heavy." "What does it mean to feel heavy?" "For example her arms are hanging towards the ground and her head is leaning forwards, …" Psychological concepts are explained with recourse to corresponding outward criteria and not to inner mental states. As Wittgenstein writes about certainty:

> Don't ask: "What goes on in us when we are certain that ...?" but: How is 'the certainty that this is so' manifested in people's action?[5]

The understanding of the concept of 'certainty' and any other psychological concept does not presuppose an ability to somehow perceive the mental inner of others. That is because the inner is irrelevant for the meaning of such concepts. This is not to say that the inner is irrelevant as such, obviously it is not; how we feel is important to us but it is not important for the semantic content[6] of words, or, to put it in the words of Wittgenstein, *"a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it is not part of the mechanism."*[7]

Wittgenstein opposes the idea that the mind of others is ontologically and epistemologically hidden from us as an inner entity in the first place. Picture someone falling off her bike, holding her knee, screaming. We can all tell that she is in pain. To do so we need not perceive her inner state: "If I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause, I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me."[8] Without denying that inner states exist, the mind is in the described sense a public entity. If one had to judge whether someone else masters algebra, one would ask her to solve some calculations or maybe discuss certain algebraic concepts with me. One's judgment would be based on her performance of those tasks. What is going on in her inner is of no interest to the one judging. Even if one could somehow perceive her inner, what would one be looking for; *whether her mind takes on the form of /.../ displays 'understanding algebra'?*[9]

Instead, what we learn during our socialization is to apply certain descriptions such as 'sad', 'happy' and 'in pain' to certain outward behaviour. That is not to say that if we would not have those concepts the corresponding psychological states – mental states as well as the related behaviour – would not exist. Rather, it is to say that we might either not recognize them or feel an inability to describe someone who is in such a state. Think of someone who does not know mathematics trying to describe the mental state of someone who is currently working on a difficult calculation. She might just not be able to do it while we learned how to apply concepts such as 'concentrated', 'focused', 'resigned', etc. to observable behaviour such as facial expressions

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[4]Whether expressions such as "I am in pain" function as descriptions or not is discussed by Wittgenstein. In the *Philosophical Investigations* he writes, "the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Gertrude E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953/2009), §244). See Stewart Candlish and George Wrisley, "Private Language," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2019 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2019) as an introduction to discussions surrounding related topics in Wittgenstein's work. This essay does not hinge on whether "I am in pain" is an expression or a description.

[5]Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, xi.

[6]"Semantic content" instead of "meaning" is used here because when it comes to psychological concepts like 'love' it seems to be harder to understand that one's emotions are irrelevant for the meaning ("but what I feel means something!") than for just the semantic content. Nevertheless, "semantic content" is used as interchangeably with "meaning" and not in the technical sense it can have in formal semantics.

[7]Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §271. Emphasis by author.

[8]Ibid.

[9]See Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §192

or moaning in the given context. Wittgenstein's own related, famous example is found in the *Philosophical Investigations* §610 where he is asking us to describe the aroma of coffee. Our inability to do so, our lack of words might resemble the experience of the woman unable to describe the mental state of someone doing mathematics from above.[10] The example of algebra above described practices of attributing understanding to someone that resemble (oral) exams as found in our educational system. The concepts of 'understanding' and 'understanding algebra' have existed before our current educational system existed. In different times and cultures, people relied on other outward criteria to attribute understanding (of algebra) to others. This means that not only what concepts are available to us (in this case 'understanding' or 'understanding algebra') but also the specific content of the concepts (being able to recite formulas, solve calculations, ...) is a product of the community we live in.[11] Someone who counts as smart today might completely lack the ability to 'perform smart' in a different community, culture or time.

The normativity of psychological concepts

For the question regarding the source of the normativity of psychological concepts to make sense in the first place, psychological concepts need to 'have' a normative dimension. It is not the claim of this essay that psychological concepts are *intrinsically* good or bad. Indeed, it is the very point of this essay that they are not. Instead, the claim is a very minimal one: psychological concepts are among those concepts for which it makes sense to discuss questions of normativity (in contrast to maybe colour or number concepts). This is taken to be true because they are central to many normatively laden practices.

The expression "normatively laden practices" is not found in Wittgenstein's work[12], especially since the term "normative" is used here in a moral sense.[13] Rather, the claim relies on our everyday experience that psychological concepts are constantly subject to moral judgments. So a normatively laden practice should be understood as any social practice that involves explicit or implicit normative, or in this case moral judgments. Straightforward cases of such practices are arguments in which one might for example say, "You are so arrogant. I cannot stand it anymore." To give some more examples of such practices is the aim of this section.

Just as in the example of arguments, the attribution of a psychological concept often goes beyond a pure description of the concerned person. As a community we value certain psychological traits more than others. We for example speak of a "good person" if someone shows certain character traits. In addition, we might wish to be smarter, less egoistic, more cheerful, etc. Virtue ethics builds on the very idea that moral value is found in such character traits that some are morally good and some are morally bad.[14]

From another point of view one can say that the normativity of psychological concepts shows itself in the consequences that the attribution of psychological concepts can have for the persons concerned. On the one hand, having certain concepts such as 'depressions' available enables us to recognize a potential need for help in others and ourselves. On the other hand, concepts such as 'depressions', 'ADHD' or more obviously 'the hysterical woman' can and did lead to stigmatization.[15]

In addition, a normative dimension applies not only to the question of which concepts we apply but also to how we shape the specific content or our existing concepts. Many people's evaluation of themselves and their lives depends in large parts on their successful performance of family, romantic and amicable relationships. Since those relationships are all mainly based on different forms of love, what counts as success and failure in such relationships is highly influenced if not determined by people's success in adapting to how love is performed in their community.[16] Schatzki calls this the "teleoaffective structure of practices" which:

> [specifies] how actions (including speech acts) ought to be carried out, understood, prompted, and responded to; what specifically and unequivocally should be done or said (when, where ...); and

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[10]A difference being that in Wittgenstein's coffee example the background assumption seems to be that we know what coffee smells like and nevertheless do not know how to describe it while the above example explicitly assumes that the woman does not know mathematics and related psychological concepts.

[11]Note that the empirical claim that in the case of algebra there has always been some form of education attached to it is not made here.

[12]Readers interested in Wittgenstein's work on topics related to morality and social practices are referred to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rush Rhees, and A. C. Miles, *Bemerkungen Über Frazers Golden Bough* [Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough'], Harleston, Norfolk: Brynmill, 1979.

[13]In the following and if not stated otherwise, the term "normative" is employed in a moral sense.

[14]For an introductory discussion see Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2018 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2018).

[15]There are obviously differences between concepts that we apply in everyday language like 'hungry' and concepts that are rather used in clinical contexts like 'ADHD'. The differences are not further explicated because the point of the essay holds for both types of concepts. Accordingly, "psychological concepts" refers to both of them.

[16]This is not to say that there are no people that have established their own notions of love, friendship etc. This might be seen as the establishment of a new community with new or reshaped concepts. It is not a trivial matter to delineate in Wittgensteinian terms how such novel concepts could come about.

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which ends should be pursued, which projects, tasks, and actions carried out for that end [...].[17]

Who we are and who we want to be is central to our idea and conception of a good life. And *who* we can be and *how* we can be who we want to be is determined by the social practices (in Schatzki's terminology) that shape our psychological concepts.

The above examples show that normativity or normative judgments and psychological concepts are closely intertwined in many of our practices, i.e. areas and activities of our lives. This motivates an investigation of the normative dimension of psychological concepts and the sources of this dimension.

Normativity as grammar

Thus far this essay sought to establish that it is our communal practices that bring about and shape our psychological concepts, and that psychological concepts have a normative dimension. The next question to be discussed is from whence this normativity emanates. To answer this question, the source of our psychological concepts will be investigated.

In the following it is assumed and argued for that the communal practices constituting our psychological concepts do not come about by pure chance or accident. Thinking of a psychological concept as a language-game (or at least as part of a language-game) one can say that they arise out of our form of life and are part of our form of life.[18] Also part of our form of life is that we as humans have basic needs such as those for nourishment, sleep and sex as well as primitive, intuitive reactions to such needs. Some of our language-games are based on such primitive reactions.

> But what is the word 'primitive' meant to say here? Presumably that this sort of behaviour is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based on it [...].[19]

It is therefore not an arbitrary relation between our playing of language-games of hunger and desire, and the corresponding psychological concepts. The communal practices that constitute and shape the concepts of 'hungry' or 'lustful' are rooted in our nature. As Wittgenstein writes about our colour and number systems: "[They are] akin to what is arbitrary and to what is non-arbitrary."[20] The point here is that also our system of psychological concepts has non-arbitrary elements; basic human traits and needs for example. The source of normativity of such 'rooted' concepts can either be the primitive behaviour in which they are rooted or the language-game that we construct based on that behaviour. Such a language-game need not be of purely linguistic nature; it is a practice in which language and action are interwoven.[21]

It is plausible that primitive behaviour, such as displayed by children or animals, is neither morally good nor bad. This claim is based on us not having moral reactions towards such behaviour.[22] We would for example not call a baby rude that yawns in public.

The point is that we do not treat pre-linguistic, primitive behaviour as objects for moral judgments. Accordingly, the normative dimension of our concepts must be understood as a feature of the language-games that we play with or based on such behaviour. We have all learned that to yawn while someone else is talking is understood to be displaying boredom. This connection between yawning and boredom describes a language-game, a practice we are performing and not what yawning is. Normativity is therefore not inherent to what a language game is based on, i.e. pre-linguistic needs and behaviour as described above but a feature of the language-game itself. In Wittgenstein's terminology, the normativity of a concept is a grammatical feature of that concept.

Not all psychological concepts need to be rooted in human nature. Some language-games and corresponding psychological concepts might for example be rooted in certain cultural practices. A culture that does not know the practice of meditation might lack psychological concepts that describe the state of someone in meditation; the former serves as a condition for the latter. The point made above holds for those concepts/language-games even more: the normative dimension of a concept that is based on a social construction must itself be constructed.â€¨

"One must not sexually desire one's family members", "One should not display tiredness in public", "There is no shame in being hungry all the time unless one is already overweight" are grammatical sentences describing

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[17]Schatzki, *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, 101.

[18]See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23.

[19]Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §541. Emphasis by author.

[20]Ibid, §358.

[21]See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §7.

[22]See Peter F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1974/2008), 1-28 for an in-detail and famous discussion of this assumption.

our games of desire, sexuality, family relations, healthy lifestyle, etc. What they do *not* do is to say something about the essence of hunger, tiredness, or desire. People of different cultures are also hungry, tired and sexually aroused just like (most of) us but their different forms of life might result in very different normative evaluations; they might be playing different games based on similar primitive reactions. Different cultures and times developed very different views on the normativity of lust for example. While lust or desire was once characterized as a cardinal sin, we today welcome, take seriously and try to fulfil many of our desires and our lust. There are obviously more examples suggesting that normativity is not an inherent, necessary feature of a mental state but a result of which language-games we play with that state and its corresponding psychological concept; of how those states and concepts are interwoven in our form of life.â€¨I conclude that as a concept is understood when the language-game in which the concept receives its meaning is understood also the potentially normative character of the concept is understood when its corresponding language-game is understood. The meaning of a psychological concept is not to be found 'inside of us' and the normativity of such concepts is not to be found 'in' what the concept describes but the rules of our games, the grammar of our concepts.

Conclusion

This essay sought to clarify some of the complicated relations between morality, our mind, and psychological concepts by investigating the source of the normativity of our psychological concepts. Starting from a Wittgensteinian point of view it was argued that psychological concepts should be understood as results of communal practices. Some of those communal practices are based on primitive, pre-linguistic behaviour. In line with Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" it was assumed that pre-linguistic behaviour that is displayed by children is not morally judged by us. Accordingly, morality enters the stage when we start performing language-games based on such primitive behaviour. The source of normativity (in a moral sense) are therefore communal practices such as language-games; the way a psychological concept is interwoven into our form of life determines how we morally evaluate it.

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