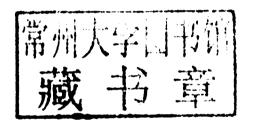# Categorization and the Moral Order

Lena Jayyusi

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Categorization and the Moral Order

LENA JAYYUSI

To Mother, Father,
and Jeff

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father for the intellectual curiosity he tried to instil in me, my
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and love he helped me towards conclusion.   Without him, this
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<div align="right">Boston, USA</div>

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INTRODUCTION

My underlying concern in this work is with the sociological analysis and description of members' practical activities and their practical interaction. Such a project systematically encounters a set of problematics:

A Analytically: What is the phenomenon? How does one conceptualize, locate and individuate practical activities and courses of practical interaction? What specific sort of activities can provide a focus for the understanding of other sorts of activities? What further issues, questions, findings about the social order does any particular analysis open up? That is to say, what horizon of significance can one uncover?

B Methodologically: How does one locate and individuate the phenomenon - how is access to it achieved? By what steps can analysis proceed? What counts as a warrantable analytic inference?

It is not that the methodological and analytic problematics are discrete as traditional sociological work sets them up, so that methodology is reduced purely to the problem of *methods* for data *collection* (interview schedules, participant observation, etc.). Methodology has to do with the logical status and methods of analytic *inference*. Clearly, then, this is already a *constituent* of the analytic problem and rests on some solution to the initial analytic questions appropriate to any domain. In other words, the latter problematic is a species of the former - they are intricately embedded one in the other. The strategy for (B) hinges on some understanding and development of (A).

Let me then specify here, concretely and substantively, how (A) and (B) are organized in this work.

Firstly, I took as my initial focus of analytic interest members' activities of describing, inferring and judging. As a result of prior work and of the perspective from within which that work had been developed (namely, ordinary-language philosophy and ethnomethodology) (1) it had become clear

a that the study of practical activities can be broadly located within the study of communicative interaction (2) and

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b   that the activities of describing, inferring and judging
were pervasive in the conduct of everyday life.   Indeed,
they seem to be *constitutive* of diverse social practices and
domains of social life.

How is the focus of analytic investigation then to be further
delimited and thematized?   One significant interest might be
in the study of how *persons* are described.   This was a
sociological interest rigorously developed in the work of
Harvey Sacks. (3)   Indeed, the description of persons turns
out to be intimately embedded in the description and ascrip-
tion of actions, in the work of practical judgment in everyday
life and in practical inferential activities.   Thus, the categor-
ization of persons (membership categorizations) (4) is criterial
and foundational in the understanding of members' practical
activities.   Further, in examining the ways in which persons
are described and the ways in which such descriptions are
used to accomplish various practical tasks - e.g. to deliver
judgments, warrant further inferences, ascribe actions, pro-
ject possible events, explain prior events, account for behav-
iour, etc. - it becomes clear that categorization work is em-
bedded in *a moral order*, how that occurs and *how* that moral
order operates practically and pervasively within social life.
Indeed, one can explicate in detail how it is that the social
order is a moral one.   As Phillips and Mounce say, '... the
very notion of social existence has moral implications.   The
relation between moral rules and society is not a contingent
one.' (5)   Hence, one is in a position substantively to
address and raise questions about issues classically located
within the jurisdiction of various 'official' domains of investi-
gation, i.e. sociology of deviance, moral philosophy, etc.
We will elaborate on this presently.

In that the study of practical activities can be conducted (to
a large extent) as the investigation of communicative inter-
action (an insight developed from within ordinary-language
philosophy and sociologically pursued in the work of ethno-
methodologists and conversation analysts), it becomes possible
to collect as investigable data a corpus of naturally occurring
activities and courses of interaction - either recorded *as* they
happen and subsequently transcribed (conversations, court-
room proceedings, radio broadcasts) or naturally inscribed *in
the course* of their production, i.e. texts of various kinds
(including reports, records and documents as well as literary
texts, television broadcasts and films).   Any corpus of such
data can then be analysed for various aspects of its produc-
tion, its organization and the cultural properties it reveals.
Crucially, the practical activities that constitute the body of
data are examined for their *informal logic*. (6)   This is an
analytically consequential point.   A core analytic issue sys-
tematically becomes that of the *intelligibility*, in situ, of

various activities and their outcomes and character for mem-
bers; the structures of, and the practical production of,
intelligibility are the abiding analytical concern.   Such a
concern opens up areas for detailed study and sociological
description that go far beyond the mainstream ethnomethodo-
logical concern with conversational sequencing and conversa-
tional activities, although rigorously grounded in that.   It
results in the systematic uncovering of various cultural con-
ventions that *enable* the production of sense, of practical
actions, and that inform the organization of social relations
and the various practices of social life.   In the investigation
of the cultural structures of intelligibility and the practical
methods by which they are produced, displayed, understood
and *engaged* by members, the distinction between topic and
resource remains analytically operable.   It is maintained
through the very topicalization of the cultural resources by
which a first-order understanding of the phenomena under
study is achieved;   an understanding accomplished, that is,
from *within* the irreducibly natural attitude   of everyday life.

The properties and workings of an unrelievedly moral order
are elucidated both in a broad sense - through the explication
of the formal properties of culture and the in situ production
of practical activities - and in the focused sense - through
the study of the practices of membership categorization (of
the descriptions and judgments of, as well as inferences about,
persons).   This is the 'cutting edge' of the present work, its
horizon of significance.   Let me here outline, briefly, the
ways in which this is of relevance to the study of various
domains of social life - indeed, how it operates within the very
practices that are taken to constitute such domains (including
those practices by which domain boundaries are theoretically
set up).

Sociology of deviance

What constitutes the phenomena for this sub-domain of sociol-
ogy?   It is the descriptions of persons - specifically, the
morally displayed and premised descriptions of persons by
other persons (either 'lay' persons or 'officials').   Indeed,
the very sociological term 'deviant' is a normative description
of members produced by, and incorporated or presupposed
within, the corpus of sociological work.   'Labelling theory'
attempts to address the process of labelling someone 'deviant'.
However, the categorization 'deviant' obscures the very diverse
procedures, implications and consequences behind the produc-
tion, use, display and practical intelligibility of various cate-
gorizations subsumed by that sociological rubric: murderer,
marijuana user, prostitute, alcoholic, child molester, etc.   It
would be incoherent to propose that *one* and the same process

of categorization, one set of criteria or consequences, one 'career' could be formulated theoretically for these various practices and the descriptions contingent upon them. As a result, much actual empirical work in this area has tended to be restricted to ethnographic descriptions. Whilst these are both interesting and illuminating there remains a pressing analytic task: the detailed study of the production, use and practical implicativeness of different categorizations within the moral order, in this case, ones that specifically and explicitly are used to display moral standards and do moral work. Such categorization work is, clearly, descriptive and ascriptive and involves both judgmental and inferential practices. The logic-in-use of such categorizations as the ones indicated above may thus be explicated as an integral part of the study of the logic of culture.

Sociology and philosophy of law

No one would seriously deny that the concepts and categories of law are embedded in a normative and moral framework. They are deeply tied to the practices of action and responsi-bility ascriptions. The procedures by which such ascriptions (and the consequent verdicts) are arrived at *within* the legal system (and which indeed, in part, *constitute* such a system) reveal and are embedded in the everyday moral and practical order: the properties and conventionalities of ascription, the distribution of rights and obligations (routinely categorially tied, as we shall see), the procedures for determining evi-dence, accounting for action, describing settings, adjudicating doubt and certainty, determining the grounds for action and allocating blame or responsibility, etc. The ties between des-criptions of persons and descriptions of events are routinely available in the accounts produced within a course of 'legal' investigation and deliberation and routinely reveal such accounts to be morally and normatively organized.

Political sociology

Work in this field is concerned, in part, with the description and categorization of events, activities, collectivities and social structures. Characteristically, the theoretical descriptions of conventional political theorists routinely stand in competition with, or in contradiction to, the accounts, political descrip-tions and judgments that other members routinely produce as a feature of their practical involvement within the conduct of social life.

A set of questions thus arises:

1 What possible claim to a higher truth-value, adequacy, intelligibility, etc. could such theoretical descriptions rationally have in contrast to the 'active' descriptions of members? Particularly as these theoretical descriptions and accounts turn out, routinely, to be used and usable in the service of the practical conduct of political life?

2 What possible claim to 'value-freedom' could they have? Some political sociologists and thinkers, particularly Marxists, do not claim value-freedom at all. Nevertheless we remain with the problem of how one is to assess their accounts as against others according to 'objective criteria', if any. What are these criteria? They turn out to be *practical* and in no way exempted from the self-same moral order from within which 'lay' members' political descriptions are generated.

One thing that seems important, then, for the study and understanding of political thought (both that which is generated 'on the ground', so to speak, and that which is 'theoretical') is the detailed investigation of the social practices of description, inference and judgment and the concomitant rigorous analysis of the logic of our practical moral order.

One interesting illustration of the normative logic of political description comes from Cheyney Ryan's excellent discussion, The Normative Concept of Coercion. (7) Having argued against the use of the notion of 'coercion' in a decontextualized manner by some philosophers of law, by whom it has been abstracted from its routine practical usage within a context of social and legal *rights*, Ryan proceeds to comment on the description by Western political theorists of Soviet institutions as 'coercive'. His point is that such a description is logically misplaced, since it is abstracted from the set of rights operative within the Soviet social and political system. In the Soviet Union, the right to private capital accumulation, free market competition, etc. does not exist. It is therefore pointless to describe Soviet economic institutions as inherently coercive, in consequence, since the use here of the notion of 'coercion' would presuppose the relevance of rights whose absence in the first place motivates that description. Ryan calls this illegitimate abstraction the State of Nature fallacy.

The State of Nature Fallacy underlies any attempt to explicate the notion of coercion in abstraction from the rights and obligations of the parties involved. It underlies those arguments which would adjudicate fundamental disputes over rights by suspending assumptions about the latter and appealing directly to coercion or liberty. (8)

He is saying that the use of the concept of coercion rests on the existence of established legal (or moral) rights and that it

is thus a normative concept.   In this he criticizes the posi-
tion of other writers (e.g. Dworkin) who hold that it is
purely a descriptive notion.   However, we can take Ryan's
point even further.   In describing Soviet economic institu-
tions as coercive, Western political writers are not simply com-
mitting a logical fallacy - they are indeed presupposing that
the legal rights to private capital accumulation and free
market competition, for example, which are operative within
Western institutions and legal organization, are universalizable,
i.e. that they are rights (presumably moral ones) that every-
one *naturally* has, and that, therefore, their institutional
absence is *coercive*.   The description here is a thoroughly
normative one.   It stands in contrast to the rights presup-
posed to be primary by Marxists - the right, for example, to
be free from capitalist exploitation and alienation.   It is such
rights, in their turn assumed to be universal, that inform
Marxist descriptions of certain regimes as 'oppressive' and
'coercive'.   Thus, the descriptions produced of collectivities,
social structures and institutions, movements and historical
events are unrelievedly *normative* in their organization.   This
does not mean that we can look around for a totally neutral
description from some Archimedean point, upon which such
evaluative descriptions can be predicated.   These are the
sorts of descriptions produced and they *are* embedded in the
contexts of rights, obligations, practical interests and moral
conventions that we can and do presuppose, or take for gran-
ted.   On the other hand, it does not mean that for members
there is no way of practically settling differences or assessing
the relative merits of different accounts and descriptions.
Indeed there are, for apart from the (normative) criteria of
consistency, logical coherence, truth-telling, factual relevance,
etc. there are other shared moral conventions and shared
understandings.   What these are and how they operate is the
very subject of our interest.   It does mean, however, that,
ultimately, there are no objective extrinsic criteria to deter-
mine right or wrong between the conflicting moral conceptions
that organize different descriptions of the world.   There are
only, and only ever will be, criteria from *within* a specific
morality.

The study of history

It follows from the above that the writing of history is also a
practice that is normatively organized and embedded in our
accounting practices generally.   The production of an histori-
cal account is not something *dictated* by real objective events
and phenomena but one that is *variously* organizable so that
the same events, characters and phenomena can be constituted
in different, sometimes *competing*, ways.   Hayden White (9)
has shown how the same events (e.g. the events of the French

Revolution) can be constituted differently by various histori-
ographers by the language they use to *describe* them.   He
argues that historical narratives employ fictional modes of
representation and that part of the explanatory force of his-
tories is to be located in their success in making 'stories' out
of chronicles by a process he terms 'emplotment'. (10)   'Em-
plotment' of a sequence of historical events can be accom-
plished in a number of alternative ways, so that the accounts
thus produced are, often, radically different in character and
are already prefigured by the very mode of language used,
e.g. metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or irony.   White
overemphasizes the literary origin of the story types and
practices which constitute historical narratives and the strat-
egies of sense production made possible by fictional art.   The
origin of both literary narratives and historical (or biographi-
cal) ones, their forms, organization and logic, lies in the
mundane practices of cultural members - accounting practices
that are not only methods of sense assembly, but also methods
of accomplishing various practical tasks, such as persuading,
blaming, exhorting to action, justifying, excusing, informing,
appealing for help, condemning, etc.   Such practices, it is
clear, are moral practices through and through.

Sociology of media

The study of the organization of media accounts also deeply
informs, and is informed by, the investigation of the normative
organization of descriptions and explanations, and of the
properties and methods of the moral order.   The ways in
which accounts provide for their own 'evidence', 'veracity',
'consistency', 'objectivity', despite their normative character,
can be one pivot of study.   The study also can provide for
an understanding of the ways accounts can produce, for mem-
bers, their character of 'bias', 'incompleteness', 'one-sided-
ness', 'distortion', 'unfairness', etc.   Such explications pro-
vide for us an understanding of the work of media accounts
(television, newsreels, radio broadcasts, newspaper texts,
etc.).   In looking at media accounts it becomes clear, for
instance, that alternative categorizations of persons are criti-
cal for the character of the account and the work that the
account is meant to accomplish.   Note, for example, the dif-
ference between two formulations such as

Terrorists exploded a bomb at a military installation today.

and

Freedom fighters exploded a bomb at a military installation
today.