

The Biological Roots of Normativity

Abstract

Any attempt to understand what norms are must take into account the fact that the concepts of norm and rule have an essential explanatory dimension. There are, however, two distinct possible explanatory strategies that appeal to norms. On the one hand, in explaining that some entity is as it is or acts as it does one can attempt (as Aristotle often does) to offer an explanation that appeals directly to the fact, if it is a fact, (and we can understand how normative facts are possible), that that entity ought to be in that way or act as she does. On the other hand, normative explanations can appeal to norms or rules indirectly through the mediation of an agent's representation and acknowledgement of those norms or rules, a kind of normative explanation that was taken to be paradigmatic by Kant.

In this paper I discuss whether it is possible to make any naturalistic sense of the direct normative style of explanation in which the norm itself is directly appealed to, rather than an agent's representation of that norm. Given the enormous difficulties involved in directly appealing to norms in a naturalistic context, difficulties that have been obvious since the seventeenth century, it has seemed self-evident that such explanatory appeals are always elliptical or illegitimate. I argue, however, that if one takes the central biological concept of an individual organism completely seriously, then it is possible to make coherent naturalistic sense of such explanations, by arguing: (1) that the concept of an organism implies the aptness of teleological description and explanation of the organism, its organs, and its activity; (2) that teleological language is intrinsically normative, (3) that, while teleological-normative explanations are not scientific explanations, the science of biology, including evolutionary biology, shows that teleological-normative explanations are consistent with the facts about the world that science discloses by explaining how living organisms pull off the trick, when they do pull it off, of being living organisms. I conclude by suggesting that recognizing that individual organisms, as individuals, are both subject to and responsive to natural norms, and that this kind of normativity is consistent with naturalism, opens up a path towards dissipating Sellars' problem regarding the relation between the manifest image and the scientific image.