



Why Things Matter to People

Social Science, Values and Ethical Life

ANDREW SAYER



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1 *Introduction: a relation to the world of concern*

This book is about social science's difficulties in acknowledging that people's relation to the world is one of concern. When we ask a friend how they are, they might reply in any number of ways; for example:

'I'm OK, thanks: my daughter's enjoying school, things are good at home and we've just had a great holiday.'

'Not so good: the boss is always in a bad mood and I'm worried about losing my job.'

'OK myself but I'm really appalled by what's been happening in the war.'

'I'm a bit depressed: I don't know where my life is going.'

Such responses indicate that things matter to people, and make a difference to 'how they are'. Their lives can go well or badly, and their sense of well-being depends at least in part on how these other things that they care about – significant others, practices, objects, political causes – are faring, and on how others are treating them. In some respects the answers are very subjective and personal, yet they are not just free-floating 'values' or expressions projected onto the world but feelings *about* various events and circumstances that aren't merely subjective. They reflect the fact that we are social beings – dependent on others and necessarily involved in social practices. They also remind us that we are sentient, *evaluative beings*: we don't just think and interact but evaluate things, including the past and the future (Archer, 2000a). We do so because, while we are capable and can flourish, we are also vulnerable and susceptible to various kinds of loss or harm; we can suffer.

The most important questions people tend to face in their everyday lives are normative ones of what is good or bad about what is happening, including how others are treating them, and of how to act, and what to do for the best. The presence of this concern may be evident in fleeting encounters and mundane conversations, in feelings about how things are going, as well as in momentous decisions such as

whether to have children, change job, or what to do about a relationship which has gone bad. These are things people care deeply about. They are matters of 'practical reason', about how to act, and quite different from the empirical and theoretical questions asked by social science. If we ignore them or reduce them to an effect of norms, discourse or socialization, or to 'affect', we produce an anodyne account of living that renders our evident concern about what we do and what happens to us incomprehensible.

When someone says 'my friends mean a lot to me', they are indicating what matters to them, what has import. When an immigrant says 'let me tell you what it means to be an immigrant' she is not about to give a definition but to indicate how being an immigrant affects one's well-being, what one can and can't do, how one is treated by others, and what it feels like. All of these everyday expressions show that we are *beings whose relation to the world is one of concern*. Yet social science often ignores this relation and hence fails to acknowledge what is most important to people. Concepts such as 'preferences', 'self-interest' or 'values' fail to do justice to such matters, particularly with regard to their social character and connection to events and social relations, and their emotional force. Similarly, concepts such as convention, habit, discourses, socialization, reciprocity, exchange, discipline, power and a host of others are useful for external description but can easily allow us to miss people's first person evaluative relation to the world and the *force* of their evaluations. When social science disregards this concern, as if it were merely an incidental, subjective accompaniment to what happens, it can produce an alienated and alienating view of social life. It needs to attend to our evaluative orientation, or to 'lay normativity', though that is a rather alienated way of describing it.

In his book *Culture and Truth*, Renato Rosaldo writes about his early work studying headhunting among the Ilongot people of northern Luzon, in the Philippines (Rosaldo, 1989). When he asked headhunters why they did it, they told him that 'rage, born of grief', impelled them to do it. Of one he says, 'The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him, he says, to vent and, he hopes, throw away the anger of his bereavement' (*ibid.*, p. 1). Rosaldo reveals that it took him fourteen years to understand this explanation, during which time his informants rejected his own proffered explanations, including one that interpreted headhunting in terms of transactions theory. What finally enabled him to understand it was the accidental

death of his wife and fellow anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo, who slipped and fell from a mountain path while on field research. Overwhelmed with grief and anger, and remembering the death of his brother years earlier, only then did he begin to understand headhunting and its relation to grief. Rosaldo goes on to note how anthropologists writing about the ways in which cultures deal with death did so ‘under the rubric of ritual rather than bereavement’, so that the emotional force of the experience – the thing that matters most to the people themselves – was edited out. In contrast, Rosaldo argues that ‘cultural descriptions should seek out force’ (*ibid.*, p. 16). I agree; indeed, not to do so is to misunderstand social life.

The aim of this book is to help social science do justice to this relation of concern, to lay normativity, and to the fact that we are sentient beings who can flourish or suffer. To do so we need to clear away a number of obstacles and develop more fruitful frameworks. One of the most important obstacles is the view that values are merely subjective or conventional, *beyond the scope of reason* – not susceptible to evidence or argument – and have nothing to do with the kind of beings that we are, or with what happens.

Imagine three friends sitting watching the television news together. Two of them are social scientists. Some disturbing footage is shown of survivors in a village which has just been bombed; people are standing in the ruins of their own homes, having just come to realize that their loved ones have been killed. They are wailing and screaming – beside themselves with grief. The non-social scientist says, ‘I can’t imagine anything more appalling than that. They have lost everything. How terrible.’ One of the social scientists responds, ‘Well, yes, but that’s just a value-judgement.’ The other says, ‘Well, according to the norms of our society, it’s bad; but we must remember values come from the norms of a society. We say these things are terrible not because they are, but rather we think they’re bad because our social norms say they are.’ The first viewer is outraged: ‘No, it’s not just my value-judgement. It’s a fact that they are going through appalling suffering – it’s as real as the rubble they’re standing in. They really have lost everything. They will be traumatized for the rest of their lives, regardless of what their norms are. How can it not be bad?’

This, of course, is an invented example, and you might say an unrealistic one, for it’s unlikely that social scientists would actually say such bizarre things in such a context. But many do make such assumptions

when practising their social science, and I invented the example to point to their absurdity. The non-social scientist is saying that her judgement is not arbitrary or merely subjective but reasonable in relation to what it's about – 'real suffering', she might say – and she provides reasons and evidence for her judgement. In effect, while she highlights the deeply evaluative character of human experience, and its relation to human vulnerability, her social scientist friends bracket these out, leaving mere values or norms, 'subjective' and strangely detached from their objects, the things they are about, so that they appear to lack justification.

The view of values as beyond reason is part of a whole series of flawed conceptual distinctions that obstruct our understanding of the evaluative character of everyday life: distinctions such as fact and value, is and ought, reason and emotion, science and ethics, positive and normative, objective and subjective, body and mind, animal and human. Each term conceals internal distinctions that may be important, such as the different kinds of reason, and while the terms in the pairs are different they are not simply opposed and mutually exclusive, but sometimes overlapping, so that for example there is emotional reason. The distinction between is and ought, that has dominated thinking about values in social science, allows us to overlook the missing middle, the centrality of evaluation. It obscures the nature of our condition as needy, vulnerable beings, suspended between things as they are and as they might become, for better or worse, and as we need or want them to become. Although many social theorists, particularly feminists, have attacked and deconstructed these distinctions, I shall argue that the deconstruction is far from complete, so that they still hold sway, even over some who claim to reject them. While I believe that values, feelings and emotions need to be taken more seriously in social science, I have no truck with a romanticism that attempts to deflate reason or rationality. Rather I argue that, properly understood, reason is involved with all these things.

The first part of the book provides a constructive critique of this framework of concepts. They are not merely questionable academic ways of thinking, but have become fundamental to the organization and self-understanding of modern life. The division between positive and normative thought has become institutionalized with the emergence of the academic division of labour, and the estrangement of social science, dealing with description and explanation, from philosophy and

political theory, dealing with normative thinking. I shall attempt to mediate between them by matching their complementary strengths and weaknesses, addressing social science's understanding of social influences on individuals, to philosophy's undersocialized view of individuals, and addressing philosophy's understanding of reason and normative arguments, to social science's often oversocialized view of individual action.

Another obstacle to understanding lay normativity is the tendency to overlook our sentient nature – not only in the sense of beings who feel things, but who can suffer or flourish in various ways. We can be well-fed or malnourished, healthy or sick, respected or despised and humiliated, powerful or powerless, supported or exploited, and loved or unloved; we can have a sense of self-worth or worthlessness, be stimulated or bored, happy or depressed, and so on. Hence our concerns. Concepts of human agency emphasize the capacity to do things, but our vulnerability is as important as our capacities; indeed the two sides are closely related, for vulnerability can prompt us to act or fail to act, and both can be risky. Capacity and vulnerability are always in relation to various circumstances, whether passing events or enduring conditions. We might say people sometimes value the things they care about more than themselves, but then those concerns have become a part of them rather than something separable. While attachments and commitments can bring meaning, interest, satisfaction and fulfilment to people's lives, in becoming dependent on them they become vulnerable to their loss or damage, and hence suffer. Given all these possibilities for different kinds of flourishing and suffering it is not surprising that we are beings for whom things matter.

Do we flourish or suffer and value things in various ways because of our nature, or because of the understandings and conventions of our culture that we have learned? Sociology and anthropology lean towards the latter answer, and are often extremely wary of any invocations of 'human nature'; and for good reason, as we are cultural beings, albeit ones who can easily mistake our cultural specificity for some general human nature. But not everything is capable of cultural variation – you can't teach a stone or insect a language or acculturate it, and it can't feel French or Muslim – so we must have the kind of nature that is *capable* of cultural variation. The problem is that human nature and culture are so complexly related that to give a sensible answer we have to get beyond a simple relation of opposition and deconstruct the concepts; we could talk about 'differently cultivated

natures', for instance. But if we simply opt for either nature or culture – for either biological or cultural reductionism – then we won't understand how we flourish or suffer. These are complex matters that we have to explore if we are to understand our relation to the world of concern. What is it about us that makes us like this?

It is in the context of capability, vulnerability and precarious well-being or flourishing, and our tendency to form attachments and commitments, that both values and reason in everyday life need to be understood. Social science's favoured spectator's view of action, coupled with its wariness of normative or evaluative discourse, can easily prevent it from understanding what is most important to people. It seems that becoming a social scientist involves learning to adopt this distanced relation to social life, perhaps so as to be more objective, as if we could become more objective by ignoring part of the object. It therefore often tends to produce bland accounts of social life, in which it is difficult to assess the *import* of things for people. One might of course try to report people's feelings about how their life is going as social facts about them, but that can easily allow them to be treated as values beyond reason, as merely subjective or conventional, by detaching their concerns from what they are about, thereby failing to treat them as evaluative judgements about things. We could just report that some group claims to feel happy or oppressed, but we are also likely to want to know whether their claims are warranted, and this involves an assessment of flourishing and suffering, not merely as subjective judgements but as actual ways of being. People often try to make the best of what they have and to value this rather than feel resentful about what they lack; they may have what economists call 'adaptive preferences'. But we cannot acknowledge such possibilities without evaluating their judgements.

There are obvious difficulties and dangers in making such evaluative judgements, particularly if researchers misunderstand what the others' situation is like from the inside, ignoring the meaning that their way of life has for them, as in ethnocentrism. Clearly, social scientists should seek to understand this, but to understand someone is not necessarily to agree with them. When feminist researchers argue that women are oppressed, even sometimes where they deny it, or that misogynists misrepresent women, they are adopting a critical relation to the ideas and practices of those they study, yet it doesn't necessarily mean that they misunderstand such people. Nor does such a critical relation imply

or provide a warrant for paternalistic, illiberal intervention: people still have the right to decide for themselves how to live. Rather it opens up a space for public discussion of what constitutes well-being.

Sometimes the only way we can adequately describe social phenomena is through *evaluative descriptions*: to describe actions as ‘compassionate’, ‘abusive’ or ‘racist’ is also to evaluate them. It may not be possible to find value-free terms for those actions without turning the descriptions into mis-descriptions; the scene of the bombed-out village might be described as ‘collateral damage’, but that would also fail to describe the enormity of what happened. Values and objectivity need not be inversely related. For many social scientists, assessing well-being is a step too far, a dangerous importation of the researcher’s own values. But well-being and ill-being are indeed states of being, not merely subjective value-judgements. As the lay television viewer said, the bombed-out villagers really were suffering. The very assumption that judgements of value and objectivity don’t mix – an assumption that is sometimes built into the definition of ‘objectivity’ – is a misconception.

People’s concerns cover a wide range of things, from health, to relationships, work, the arts, politics, religion, sport and many others. Within the general theme of lay normativity, I shall focus on ethical or moral matters, by which I mean, roughly, issues of how people behave or should behave in relation to others, with respect to their well-being. These are particularly important because the quality of people’s lives depends hugely on the quality of the social relations in which they live, and on how people treat one another. We continually monitor both our own behaviour and that of others, particularly towards ourselves, and those we care about. Our relation to self is strongly influenced by our relations to others; it is hard to have self-esteem if no-one else esteems us, and we can hardly avoid assessing ourselves by reference to shared standards and comparisons with others. To be sure, the social structures and norms in which we live shape how we behave towards one another, and provide positions from which we interact, strongly influencing what we can do and the kind of people we become, but they do not fully determine actions. Social structures and rules themselves can institutionalize moral norms about entitlements, responsibilities and appropriate behaviour; as such they can still be the object of ethical evaluation, whether in everyday life or academic commentaries; are they fair, empowering, democratic, oppressive, conducive to respectful treatment of others, friendliness or selfishness?

Although this ethical dimension of life matters enormously to us, social science is often poor at acknowledging and understanding it, preferring to account for action in terms of self-interest, or norm-following, or habitual action, or discursive constitution, which comprehensively fail to deal with the quality of ethical sensibilities. In so doing we may find it hard to recognize our own concerns as people, though in becoming a social scientist one can get socialized into not noticing this, and come to regard oneself as a spectator and not also a participant. This can cause theory–practice contradictions: in everyday life a sociologist who was mistreated by someone would probably feel that the wrong consists in having been harmed in some way, but as a social scientist they might gloss this merely as a transgression of norms, or difference in subjective values. Philosophy takes great interest in ethics, but mainly as regards what an ideal, rational morality would be like, rather than actual everyday ethical and unethical behaviour. It tends to value reason and discourse over emotion, dispositions and the body, and to focus on individuals as rational, autonomous actors in abstraction from the social circumstances that influence who they are and how they think and act.

As we shall see the connection of ethics or morality to well-being is vital. There are limits to the extent to which we can rationalize or wish away harm, and fabricate a sense of well-being. How people can best live together is not merely a matter of coordination of the actions of different individuals by means of conventions, like deciding which side of the road to drive on, but a matter of considering people’s capacities for flourishing and susceptibilities to harm and suffering. When we think about how to act, we do so with some awareness of the implications for well-being – both ours and that of others. It’s hard to define well-being but, while there are many aspects of it that we’re unsure of, there are also many that are rather obvious – for example, we know that children need care, that disrespect, abuse and violence are harmful, and that homelessness is bad. When we ask people how they are, they usually have no trouble telling us, but they would probably be stumped by abstract questions like ‘What is well-being or flourishing?’ Of course, ideas of ‘the good’, as philosophers call it, will vary culturally, but all cultures provide some notion of this, and indeed, of what is good or appropriate behaviour and what is a good or bad person. Given the importance of these matters to people, one might expect social science to have a better idea of what ‘well-being’ and so on mean. How could

it claim to understand society if it had no idea about what it might mean to flourish? However, on the whole it tends to be extremely coy about such questions, perhaps because it is feared that answering them would invite researchers to impose their own value-judgements or ‘conceptions of the good’ on those they study.

A minority of social science *does* address our relation to the world of concern and help us understand why things matter. Here is a male, Algerian migrant worker in France, quoted in Abdelmayak Sayad’s book *The Suffering of the Immigrant*:

What kind of life is it when, in order to feed your children, you are forced to leave them; when, in order to ‘fill’ your house, you start by deserting it, when you are the first to abandon your country in order to work it? . . . Their country is back there, their house is back there, their wives and children are back there, everything is back there, only their bodies are here [in France], and you call that ‘living’ . . . Who are these people? Men, but men without women: their wives are without men, but they’re not widows because their husbands are alive; their children are without fathers, orphans even though their fathers are alive . . . I ask myself who are the real widowers, the real orphans – is it them [the emigrant men], or is it their wives? (Sayad, 2004, p. 59, parentheses in original)

Sayad includes extensive quotations from interviews with immigrants in which they describe such feelings. He doesn’t merely report their views as social facts about them but takes them seriously as evaluations of their experience, as indicators of the precise ways in which they have suffered, and as sources of insight into their objective situation.

Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s *The Hidden Injuries of Class* gives us insights into why class inequalities matter in relation to individuals’ well-being (Sennett and Cobb, 1973; see also Charlesworth, 2000). Some more recent feminist writing on gender, class and race explores the kinds of suffering and repression engendered by these forms of inequality, and how people value themselves and others (hooks, 2000; Reay, 2002; Skeggs, 1997, 2004).¹ More generally there is a large feminist literature, which, in effect, shows the many forms of suffering and restricted flourishing to which women are subject (e.g., Bartky, 1990, 2002; Steedman, 1986). Significantly, these authors deal not only with the micro-politics of inequality and what Bourdieu terms ‘soft domination’, but with

¹ This is also what I tried to do in my *Moral Significance of Class* (Sayer, 2005).

people's well-being and their evaluative orientation to the world, particularly through their relations to others (Bourdieu, 1990). For example, in her book *Personal Life*, Carol Smart attempts to do justice to how lives are lived and notes that, while there is a significant literature on emotions in sociology, much of sociology ignores the topic, and either steers clear of dealing with emotions in everyday life, or deals with them in a distanced way. In particular, it deals with love in a 'disdainful' manner, as a frivolous matter associated with women's magazines and trivia (Smart, 2007). As she puts it, the 'seriousness of sociology as a discipline seems to become compromised if it gets too close to the taken-for-granted stuff of everyday life' (pp. 58–9). Rather than get close to things that matter very much to people – things which involve vulnerability and powerful feelings – it is tempting to remain loftily aloof. It is significant that this other, minority literature has in common a recognition not only of people's capacities but of their vulnerabilities, and it takes their first-person view of the world seriously, both recognizing their agency and what their concerns tell us about them and their situation.

While our evaluative relation to the world in society itself is the main subject of this book, the role of evaluation and values within social science is a minor theme. My point regarding the latter is not the banal one that social science is unavoidably value-laden; of course it is. Rather it is to support the fictional lay television viewer and argue that values in life generally are within the scope of reason. Moreover, without careful evaluative descriptions, that, for example, identify the presence of various kinds of suffering and flourishing, social science cannot develop adequate accounts of social life. While I am primarily concerned with the evaluative character of everyday experience itself and how we can best understand it, and only secondarily with values within social science, there ought to be consistency between the way valuation and values are understood in each.

From taking part in seminars and workshops on values and social research I have often encountered the strange idea that values are not only subjective but synonymous with 'bias' and distortion. It's further assumed that they are personal biases that one ideally should confess to, so that others will at least be able to 'take them into account', that is, *discount* them. This is self-deprecating insofar as it invites the reader to discount what may be reasonable evaluative judgements. Tactically, it's disastrous since it invites readers with different values to ignore them. It

implies that values are no more than subjective afflictions having nothing to do with what is being valued. In addition, values are often seen as private and inviolable – ‘my personal values’ – and not to be assessed by others. Because they assume that values are beyond the scope of reason, some social scientists try to avoid value-judgements in their accounts of social life, believing that this is necessary to ensure objectivity. As Weber put it, ‘Whenever the person of science introduces his personal value judgment, a full understanding of the facts ceases’ (Weber, 1946, p. 146). Others argue the reverse, that values are inevitable in social science, so we cannot expect to be objective. Although these two positions are diametrically opposed, they are completely agreed on one thing: that objectivity and values are incompatible. I disagree with both positions. Each is trapped within the framework of problematic distinctions that prevent us from understanding normativity. If values are within the scope of reason, they need not be regarded as a contaminant in social science itself.

Critical theory and critical social science fully acknowledge their evaluative relation to their subject matter, being critical not only of other academic theories but of social practices themselves. However, they have struggled to justify the critiques that they have developed. I shall argue that this is because they lack an adequate account of human capacities and vulnerabilities, generally through an exaggerated fear of ethnocentrism or other kinds of misjudgement of social life. As a result, their critiques have become more cautious, and retreated into an inward-looking reflexivity.

Us or them?

Social scientists tend to address their readers more as fellow spectators of social life than as possible co-participants. They generally offer third person accounts of what other people or ‘actors’ do and are like, how society is organized and how it works, and so on. Readers are not usually invited to check the accounts against their own experience and ways of thinking, although of course they may do so anyway. The validity of a social scientific account of some social group’s behaviour simply doesn’t depend on how it squares with the reader’s behaviour. Social scientists do not generally evaluate the thinking of those they study and hold them responsible for their thoughts and actions; they just report it. Philosophers, on the other hand, tend to address their readers as fellow participants in life, in first or second person mode;

when discussing examples of actions, particularly moral actions, they refer to what ‘we’ or ‘one’ would do or ought to do. If they refer to ‘what a rational person would do’, readers are implicitly invited to identify with such a person and to check such claims by reference to their own behaviour. When philosophers refer to an example of someone’s behaviour, the reader is usually expected to *assess* it in terms of whether it was justified.

As participants in social life, we hold each other responsible for our actions; in organizations, for example, individuals expect each other to take responsibility for doing certain things and we generally try to make things go well – sometimes just for ourselves, sometimes for others too. We are concerned about our well-being, and the worth of what we and they are doing. As social scientists observing others, however, our prime aim is to find out what they do and why. Unless it affects our research process, we don’t have to worry about whether we approve or disapprove of their actions, or whether they will honour their responsibilities. Even in so-called ‘participant observation’, the goal is still observation; the point is still to observe how others live. When we *study* an organization we hope we will be given plenty of access so that we can observe people freely and find out as much as possible. When we go to *work* for an organization, we worry about how we will be treated, whether it will be friendly, democratic and fair, or hostile, authoritarian and oppressive. As co-participants, the quality of our experience – including our relations to others – matters much more to us. The danger is that, because, as social scientists, we mostly want to observe and explain what people do rather than cooperate with them in some practice, we will project that spectator’s relationship onto them, and fail to appreciate the import of the practices for them, so that they appear as unfeeling actors of parts, bearers of roles, occupants of subject positions, mere causal agents. But in everyday life, when a friend tells us about what’s been happening, say at work, we are generally expected to evaluate it in some way and see it in terms of some wider picture of their and our concerns (‘wasn’t what the boss said outrageous?’). If we can’t see any such connection we might wonder why they’re telling us about it.

If I write ‘people’s judgements of what is good or bad depend on the social norms of their community’ it may seem a broadly acceptable social scientific proposition. If I ask you, dear reader, if all *your* judgements of people and practices as good or bad depend simply on the

social norms of your community, then you will probably say no. It is likely to seem not only wrong but offensive, for it suggests you merely believe what others have told you to believe. In other words, the third person, spectator mode tends to allow not only a distanced relationship to those under study but a demeaning one, because it leaves no room for the life of the mind, for personal decision and responsibility. This situation generates contradictions between what social scientists say in their theory and what they do in their practice. As social scientific spectators we tend to talk about behaviour in terms of what *explains* it, usually by reference to existing circumstances and meanings, but as participants, we tend to *justify* what we do, and implicitly invite others to accept or reject our justification. As researchers, sociologists might explain students' performance by reference to their social background, but in their practice as teachers they tend to hold students responsible for their performance.

It would of course be problematic if social science always tried to reconcile our third person, spectators' accounts of the thought and action of others with our first person, participants' accounts, for others may actually be different from us. But even where this is the case, they still think and have concerns. Like us, they are evaluative beings and things matter to them; they don't just go through the motions or act out parts. To avoid theory–practice contradictions, we need to check that the way we account for others' behaviour is not at odds with the way we account for our own behaviour. If there are differences in these accounts, they should reflect actual differences in behaviour; they should not merely be artefacts of social scientists' reluctance to acknowledge people's reflexivity, agency and concern. In order to encourage readers to think about social life from the inside, as participants and agents, as well as from the outside, as spectators, I shall, at the risk of a little grammatical clumsiness, regularly switch back and forth between referring to us and them, and we and they.

Some further things to bear in mind

- (1) As a social scientist myself, I am writing this book to or for fellow social scientists, but the issues are mostly conceptual, and many of the authors I shall draw upon are philosophers. Some of the terms and concepts I shall use may consequently be unfamiliar to social scientists; no doubt 'flourishing' and 'virtues and vices' will seem not only

vague but strangely judgemental; I shall argue that, while they need clarifying, social scientists cannot sensibly evade them. The major philosophical influences are also rather different from those sometimes seen in social science; they are not utilitarianism, Kantianism, hermeneutics, discourse ethics or social contract theory, but neo-Aristotelianism, Adam Smith, the feminist ethic of care literature and critical realism, which, in my view, are much more congenial philosophical partners for social science. While the book derives from an engagement with many theorists in philosophy and social theory, my intention is primarily to develop a constructive argument as to how we might deal with our evaluative, and especially ethical, being, and not to detail precisely what I do, and do not, accept in the work of other authors. My debts are extensive but selective.

- (2) We need a 'postdisciplinary' perspective (Sayer, 2000a). The conceptual problems that make it difficult to understand evaluative being are partly a product of the emergence of a division of academic labour, in which each discipline imperialistically seeks to extend its parochial concerns to the exclusion of others, and each imagines that it is the most fundamental and insightful social science. The mutual hostilities between sociology (and anthropology), psychology, politics and economics serve to support various kinds of disciplinary reductionism that prevent us understanding the social world. The polarization between oversocialized and undersocialized conceptions of individuals is the most obvious example. The divorce of normative from positive thought about society, through the separation of philosophy from the rest of social science, is another. A plague on all disciplinary imperialism and parochialism! If 'postdisciplinary' sounds a bit pretentious, it's actually little different from the familiar predisciplinary social science of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century founders (Sayer, 2000b). Although a social scientist myself, this research is based on a lengthy search within philosophy, particularly moral philosophy, for ways of overcoming social science's difficulty with lay normativity in general, and ethical being in particular. I ask readers to be open to ideas and orientations from outside their own disciplines.
- (3) Pierre Bourdieu has warned us of the dangers of what he terms 'the scholastic fallacy' – of academics projecting their contemplative, discursive relation to the world onto actors who have a more

practical relation to the world (Bourdieu, 2000). This removal from the pressures of practical activity also reflects and signals the privileged social position of the academic. Philosophy's preoccupation with reason and autonomy make it particularly liable to ignore or devalue practice, emotion, vulnerability, dependence and embodiment, and to marginalize psychological and sociological considerations. Another kind of scholastic fallacy involves the projection of social science's suspension of evaluation onto the people it studies so their evaluative relation to the world is overlooked. There is also more than a streak of scientism and status-seeking in the valuation of the bloodless descriptions of people we find in social science, like the 'rational actor' or the 'subject', which give the author an elevated status precisely because they are unlike those of everyday language. To be sure, we sometimes need these abstract concepts, but the linguistic distance also signifies social distance. There is further a kind of macho tendency to view the study of values, emotions and ethics as less scientific than the study of power, discourse and social structure.

- (4) It is probably best to acknowledge a certain wariness in social science of talk of ethics and especially morality. This has many sources:
- (i) A belief that morality is no more than a system of power, or a form of legitimation of a society's power structure. This corresponds to the view commonly (mis)attributed to Marx, that morality is relative to society, with the implication that we cannot appeal to it in developing critiques of such systems of power. But though moralities do indeed tend to be shaped by systems of power they are never wholly reducible to such legitimations (Walzer, 1989). Marx's work is both an attempt to develop a scientific theory of capitalism *and* a passionate critique of its oppressive (hence immoral, unethical) character. To suppose that it can only be one or the other is to accept completely the problematic modernist dualisms of fact and value, science and ethics that need deconstructing. Those who disparage morality – perhaps as 'pieties' – in the seminar room tend in their everyday lives and politics to be at least as morally offended by exploitation and oppression as anyone else.

- (ii) More particularly there is a common view of morality as something that restricts us, through ‘moralizing’. But to be against moralizing or ‘being judgemental’ is itself a moral argument. I am against moralizing too. But the critique of moralizing is not necessarily a form of immoralism, that is, outright opposition to any morality, but a more limited kind of critique; those who are against moralizing do not remain neutral about exploitation, abuse, rape and murder. We need also to be reflexive and acknowledge that this suspicion of morality is typical of liberal societies, in which individuals are supposed to be free to define their own conceptions of the good.
- (iii) In poststructuralism there is a more general view of normativity as a *normalizing* of behaviour. But it is self-contradictory to be against normativity: it would be like saying it is wrong to say anything is wrong. ‘Heteronormativity’ is a term that alerts us to the oppressive nature of norms that stigmatize homosexuality, but what is problematic about such norms is that they devalue something that does not deserve to be derogated, not the simple fact that it offers a valuation of behaviour. Those who (like me) are critical of heteronormativity are so because they are critical of homophobia, and hence normative in a different way. This misplaced resistance to normativity reflects the problematic dualisms that we will be deconstructing, in that it reduces normativity to ‘oughts’, to telling people what to do, ignoring the prior work of evaluation that lies between is and ought.
- (iv) Many may wonder whether this book will be concerned with morality or ethics. Given the above worries, ‘ethics’ tends to be seen as a more acceptable thing to study today than morality.² Many different ways of distinguishing them have been proposed, and confusingly, sometimes the same distinction has been proposed with the terms reversed. Currently, the

² ‘Ethics is avant-garde, whereas morality is petty bourgeois and passé’ (Eagleton, 2008, p. 261). This project grew out of a research fellowship on the *moral* dimension of social life; in talking about it to colleagues I gradually became aware that the ‘m’ word triggered extraordinary suspicions, including that I was engaging in moralizing. I have since found that substituting ‘ethics’ for ‘morality’ goes down much better.

association of morality with norms, and ethics with the questioning of such norms, is popular. While such a distinction makes sense, like other ways of distinguishing the terms, it is too restrictive to be helpful. Like many philosophers who are familiar with a variety of such distinctions, I will use the terms interchangeably to cover all the things that others have associated with either term; if you were to ask me which I am dealing with, I would say both.

- (v) For a social scientist, the philosophical literature on morality or ethics can seem strangely frustrating, as I know only too well, having wrestled with it for over ten years. One reason is that it offers little that we can be very sure about; anything which is described or endorsed as moral seems eminently contestable. Why should we accept such-and-such as ethical? Is it just our local norms that prescribe it? When it invokes supposedly everyday examples of behaviour to justify its judgements, we might wonder how these examples are justified. Here it may help to remember what is true of all processes of learning a specialist subject, be it ethics or physics: we always have to start from everyday understandings to get a foothold, even though we later need to revise some of those familiar concepts. Another reason for the strangeness of ethical theory is that it often abstracts from the social context in which actions take place, and takes the disembodied, adult, rational, implicitly male, liberal actor to represent humanity in all its diversity. In its concern to say what ought to be regarded as moral, much moral philosophy takes insufficient account of actually existing morality, with all its imperfections – but also with some of its strengths. Over and above all these things, the fact that we are capable of acting in many ways, moral or immoral, makes the subject inherently uncertain. But then if that weren't the case, and we could only act in one way, then ethics and ethical norms would be redundant. As Jonathan Glover remarks, the attribution of ethical dispositions to people as a feature of their 'humanity is only partly an empirical claim. It remains also partly an aspiration' (Glover, 2001, p. 25). Thus, whenever anyone says something like 'certain conditions x tend to produce a compassionate response in observers', it will be easy to imagine counter

examples, but to dismiss the claim on that perfectionist basis is precisely to misunderstand ethics. Yet, as I indicated earlier, strange though it may seem to social science-trained ears, this is where we live – between the actual and the possible, between present flourishing or suffering and future possible flourishing or suffering. And because we live with others and have to act, we cannot evade ethical matters in our practice, even if we ignore them in what we read and write as social scientists. The flip-side of perfectionism is an impractical scepticism that can lead us to abandon ‘good enough’ ways of thinking and acting that allow us to live adequately. Like weather systems, ethics is inherently fuzzy, and as Aristotle warned, one shouldn’t expect more precision than the subject matter allows. It’s also inconsistent for those who reject the idea of any kind of foundations for thought to reject ethical reasoning because it lacks foundations.

- (vi) Finally, one useful way of assessing social scientific ideas about evaluative being and ethical life is to ask whether they apply to us. If they do not, then we have theory–practice contradictions, and hence a good reason for doubting either our theory or our practice. As Marx put it: ‘The idea of *one* basis for life and another for *science* is from the very outset a lie’ (Marx, 1844; 1975, p. 355).

Outline of the book

In [Chapter 2](#) I develop some initial proposals regarding how we can best think about values in social life and in social research in particular, and defend the idea that values are things people can reason about. To do this it’s necessary to problematize and deconstruct a whole set of related and contrasting concepts – in particular, what I term the fact–value family of dualisms – in which the meaning of values and cognate terms is determined through opposition to ideas of facts, reason and objectivity. I argue that it is not enough to show that emotions and subjectivity influence how we reason and what we accept as fact, for we need also to acknowledge the opposite – the role of reason within emotion and value. In the course of this discussion I address the old question of the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy’, concerning whether

'ought' can be deduced from 'is'. I suggest that this way of framing this question comprehensively misses the point, thereby making our everyday judgements about what's good and bad and what to do by monitoring what is happening appear irrational and arbitrary. The chapter ends with a sketch and defence of how people reason about value-judgements in practice.

Chapter 3 continues the process of challenging the wider set of concepts in terms of which values tend to be understood in modernity and social life, by questioning the narrow conceptions of reason and rationality that have become common in modernity and which are often counterposed to values. Here I argue that just as values have come to be understood in a way that divorces them from what they are about, so reason has been abstracted from its relation to its object. This makes it hard to understand and appreciate the worth of the kind of practical reason or sense that we use in everyday life in guiding our actions, and which often makes little use of abstract rationality. While a rational person makes use of such abstract forms of reasoning, a reasonable person also or alternatively attends to the specificities of the object and the situation, in particular attending to the specific needs and capacities of other people. She has embodied know-how as a result of extensive experience of particular cases, and can make judgements about particulars, and she is not only clever but wise, in that she can assess the ends or goals of action themselves. I assess a range of different meanings of the term 'practical reason', arguing that all of them are helpful for understanding how people evaluate things and decide what matters and why. However, practical reason has often been attacked as opaque and inherently conservative, so I next address these suspicions. Finally, acknowledging that critiques of concepts of rationality in modernity have been common in social theory, I argue that the critiques of Weber and Habermas fail to get to the heart of the problems and hence also misunderstand values.

In Chapter 4 I address the question of what makes us 'evaluative beings'. What is it about human beings and social life that makes people beings for whom things matter? To answer this requires that we have at least some ideas about the nature of human beings, though developing such ideas has become controversial for a variety of reasons; for example, some fear that it is bound to invite a kind of naturalistic determinism, or to lead us into passing off contingent facts about our own society as universal, to attribute to nature what

is due to culture, and to result in the categorization of some as ‘less human’ than others. However, it is impossible to avoid at least an implicit conception of human nature in describing social phenomena, and having an unexamined, implicit conception is more risky than having an examined, explicit one. I therefore begin by rebutting such fears and then proceed to outline those features of human social being which seem to be most relevant to our evaluative relation to the world, paying special attention to ethical tendencies and cultural variety and development. Acknowledging the wondrous cultural variety of human life is shown to be compatible with acknowledging that we have much in common. Finally, I argue that social science’s implicit or explicit models of human beings as causal, meaning-endowing agents tend to overlook the fact that our relation to the world is not merely causal and interpretive, but one of concern. We don’t just do things and interpret one another. Things matter to us.

In [Chapter 5](#) I turn to what is probably the most important aspect of our evaluative being, the ethical or moral dimension of life, which concerns how, as inherently social beings, we live together. We are certainly imperfect ethical beings, but to the extent that we do relate to others in ways that are conducive to well-being, why do we do so? Building on the previous chapters, I outline a largely descriptive account of the elements of ethical being in everyday life – elements such as moral sentiments, capacity for fellow-feeling, virtues and vices, norms and moral reflection and argumentation. In the process I reject conventionalist accounts which tend to reduce morality or ethics to norms, and argue instead that our ethical sentiments are primarily related to our sense of harm and flourishing. In the [Appendix](#) I discuss some of the ethical theories that I have either drawn upon or rejected in developing my account of actually existing morality, and justify my judgements about them.

In [Chapter 6](#) I move beyond the general and abstract reflections of the foregoing chapters to explore a more particular, fundamental matter of concern to people – their dignity. Although it matters hugely to people, at least when it is threatened, it is notoriously difficult to define. However, if we examine the diverse ways in which the term gets used and the circumstances in which it is invoked, it reveals much about our deeply social nature and the things which make us capable of flourishing and suffering. Although the term is generally associated with autonomy, the analysis reveals that dignity requires a respectful acknowledgement

of vulnerability. In thinking about the nature of well-being, it's easy to get drawn back to the physical aspects of health and security, but dignity is sometimes valued more highly than those, and it is much more dependent on how others interpret and treat us, particularly in terms of relations of equality and difference.

The main focus of [Chapter 7](#) is social science itself, focusing on the question of in what sense it might be said to be 'critical' – not merely of itself and other ways of thinking, but of wider social practices themselves. It assesses a range of rationales for 'critical social science', noting that over the last four decades these have become increasingly cautious and timid, so that, for example, critique is reduced to uncovering hidden presuppositions and deepening reflexivity. The different rationales have different critical standpoints, such as freedom and the reduction of illusion. I argue that in addition to these, and in keeping with the larger message of the book, a stronger standpoint of the critique of avoidable suffering is also needed, though it is already implicit in limited form in existing critical social science. This requires a conception of the elements of human flourishing. Here it is argued that the capabilities approach, pioneered by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, provides a way forward. However, the isolation of this normative way of thinking from concrete studies of the social processes that produce well-being and ill-being is problematic.

Finally, in [Chapter 8](#), I outline some further implications of the book's arguments for how we approach social science.

If you are still doubtful – as I was for many years – of the need for social science to understand ourselves as evaluative beings and to delve into ethics, try recalling occasions when you have felt a burning sense of outrage at some injustice, cruelty or selfishness, whether to yourself or to others. These were things that presumably mattered, and hence are worth trying to understand. Then try explaining why you responded in that way; what caused or warranted that response? Why did it matter to you? The difficulty of explaining and justifying such responses should indicate that the ethical dimension of life is an extraordinarily complex and elusive subject. Yet since it matters to us so much, and since we have to decide how to act, then the subject is inescapable. In trying to answer such questions you may find yourself wondering whether to consider your responses as feelings or as forms of reasoning. You may wonder if they're simply learned cultural responses, and how you came to acquire

them, and what values and morality are. If so, you are already in the thick of thinking about the ethical dimension of life. We need to go back to basic concepts of value, reason and human being if we are to make any progress across this difficult terrain. If my arguments hold much water, then they suggest not only a different way of understanding normativity and ethics in life, but a fundamentally different conception of social science.