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Part One

Meta-concepts

Meta-ontologies delimit what we can say about the world and its contents, although its contents are not directly related to our utterances, evaluations and narratives. In this part of the book, the authors address some of these contents from a universal or transcendental position (see Volume 1, *On Learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations* [Scott, 2021], where the argument was made that this cannot be avoided). In [Chapter 2](#), Tone Saevi explores those associations and connections between phenomenology and the concept and practice of learning, focusing in particular on the adult–child relationship. In [Chapter 3](#), David Scott examines the nature of social orderings. In addition, he addresses a key concept in any epistemological and ontological theory, that of the hermeneutic dimension to the social world and our utterances about it. Following Paul Ricoeur (1984; 1985; 1988), we now might include in this meta-ontology: mythology, exegesis, psychoanalysis, metaphor and narrative theory. In [Chapter 4](#), Henrik Rydenfelt sets out an anti-representationalist view of the complicated connection between mind and world. In [Chapter 5](#), David Scott investigates the notion and practice of a *Bildung*. In [Chapter 6](#), Robert Isaksen explores those important relations and connections that might exist between the meta-ontology of critical realism and the concept and practice of learning. Critical realism is not a homogeneous idea, as is evidenced by the divergent contributions of the early work of Roy Bhaskar (for example, [Bhaskar, 2008a](#); [2008b](#); [2011](#)), his later work (for example, [Bhaskar, 2002](#)), and Margaret Archer (for example, [Archer, 2007](#)), although these have some affinities and similarities. In [Chapter 7](#), Bushra Sharar explores how values and valorisations play out in learning systems and at learning sites.

Each of these chapter authors frames or enframes their work in a particular onto-epistemology: Tone Saevi's work is framed by a phenomenological perspective; David Scott's work in both [chapters 3](#) and [5](#) is enframed by a dispositional and conceptual realism; Henrik Rydenfelt adopts a pragmatist (in a philosophical sense) ontological framework; Robert Isaksen assumes a critical realist stance on knowledge and the world; and Bushra Sharar uses an Aristotelian ethical frame ([Aristotle](#),

2018). These enframings are very different; however, they have one common element, that of a belief in the normative or valorised nature of the social world and how we can know it. What each of them allows is a sense of agency and volition in social theory.

The normative dimension comprises a state of affairs in which an action, disposition or minded state is justified through a norm or valued marker or criterion. The most obvious application of this is in the area of ethics – every ethical concept or category has normative elements of one kind or another. These kinds might include: moral transgressions, virtue-dispositions, eudaemonic states of being and so on (see [chapter 7](#)). Each of these kinds entails a judgement about whether a person's actions are apt or correct – whether the reasons given for these actions are satisfactory or not (see [chapter 3](#)). In turn, this raises questions about the justifications and rationales that can be given to this reason-giving ontology.

Issues of normativity and valorisation, for some, should not – this is an axiological claim – be restricted to ethics and morality. Some philosophers and social theorists claim that knowledge, indeed all those activities which we might want to call epistemic, have irreducible normative dimensions. There are perhaps three types of normative theory: methodological normativity, where an assumption is made that we, in the learning process, select, interpret, evaluate and make sense of sensory inputs, in order to develop practical theories about the world; object normativity, where the worldly objects that concern us are in themselves normative; and meta-normativity, where the meta-theories that underpin our everyday activities are, in effect, normative claims about what the world is and should be.

A possible way of understanding these normative perspectives is to accept that values are central to understanding how we live and how we should live, and that this valuing goes all the way down, into our descriptions of the world, into those attempts we make at creating better futures and into our relations with other people. We therefore need to work at how we do and can understand the world as it is and as we would want it to be. There are two dimensions to this claim. The first is ontological,¹ and this amounts to an assertion that objects in the world and human beings are valued in relation to each other and to other object-types.² Objects are arranged in the world, and there could be other

1 As in the sense of the constitution of what is.

2 In some cases, these valuations inhere in the words themselves. So, we can compare a word such as *execution* with a word such as *murder*, and we are persuaded to understand the former as being legitimate and right because it is state-sanctioned, whereas the latter has no such legitimisation. Both are in fact *killings*. And further to this, these valuations change over time.

arrangements of these objects in other possible worlds. Indeed, objects (material and discursive), object-relations, object-formations and human beings could be differently formed. Difference therefore is understood as both dissimilarity and as the construction of boundaries between objects in the world.

A second dimension to this normative claim is that, as a consequence, values and valorisations are central to a notion of epistemology³ (and this, in turn, involves a claim that epistemology [see [chapter 1](#)] has ontological dimensions). This invariably elicits a complaint from those who assert that we can develop value-free knowledge of the world. (This is, in effect, a rhetorical device for claiming that one version of research or knowledge, their own, is superior to another – the assertion is semantically empty.) If we accept that a notion of value-free knowledge is conceptually incoherent, and that we inevitably make prejudgements about the world in our investigations, then being in the world is understood as a practice, primed for investigation, but resistant to algorithmic and value-free methods for describing it used in the natural sciences and used by some in the humanities and the social sciences – the division between the natural and the social used here is another example of the irreducible normativity that inheres in our accounts of the life course and in our roles in this. Again, if we accept that values are ontologically and epistemologically present in the world, and in our endeavours to understand the world in its many iterations and in its many possible iterations, then we have to consider what these values might be and what their provenance is.⁴

Virtue ethics is one of the three approaches to ethics that have a normative dimension.⁵ It foregrounds the virtues or moral character of the individual, and it can be contrasted with approaches that focus on duties or rules, as in deontological ethics, or on the consequences of

3 As in the sense of the mind's or minds' relation(s) with reality.

4 Charles Taylor (1998: 27) writes about the impossibility of operating in the world in a non-normative sense: '[D]oing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; ... the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations. Moreover, this is not meant just as a contingently true psychological fact about human beings, which could perhaps turn out one day not to hold for some exceptional individual or new type, some superman of disengaged objectification. Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.'

5 There are many ethical theories in existence, such as: axiological theories, collectivism, Confucianism, consequentialism, deontological ethics, egalitarianism, hedonism, humanism, individualism, moral realism, natural law, nihilism, normative ethics, objectivism, relativism, utilitarianism and virtue ethics.

actions, as in consequentialism. Virtue ethics is different from deontological and consequentialist ethical forms in a number of ways. They are related to dispositions, and what this means is that the ethical act comprises an inner state, which is already there (in some form or another), having been learnt, seeking to express itself in the world in relation to a problem in the world that requires some action. Dispositions, as inner states, precede, condition and have some influence over actions. A disposition is a character type, an habituation, a state of preparation or readiness, and a tendency to act in a specified way. Dispositions, then, have this persistent quality, although they can in time be modified.⁶ They have a strong affinity with a person's chosen identity, and they are essential elements of any coherent theory of learning.

The virtues also operate at the cultural or discursive level. At this level, they are dependent on membership of a practice, and this includes how they are instantiated in that practice. They are practice-based insofar as being excellent in the practice requires a judgement to be made as to what is considered to have value in the practice. This therefore implies a relation (a type of progression) between a novice and an expert within the practice.⁷ The pivotal issue here is that any designation of an ethical virtue is always, and can only be, understood in terms of some conception of how a society or social grouping is organised, or even perhaps about excellence within the practice. Ethical judgements always supervene on epistemological judgements.⁸ The reason why this notion is important is that, first, the identification of the virtues requires a theory of knowledge (that is, epistemology) and of being (that is, ontology), and the identification of a relationship between the two, including a notion of volition; and, second, any ethical theory (deontological, consequentialist or virtue-based) requires a theory of intention.

6 The argument that I am making here is that concepts are essentially acquired dispositions. In defence of this proposition, I have already suggested that even the most propositional of statements can be expressed as doing something in the world.

7 Alastair MacIntyre's (1981) notion of a practice in which virtue resides in the pursuit of excellence within that practice would also embrace witchcraft, iniquity, autocracy and the like, and thus there needs to be some notion of deontology or consequentialism attached to the particular goods that are being sought in the practice and what the practice is about.

8 One of the consequences of arguing that ethics supervenes on knowledge is that one has to look, in the first instance, for the knowledge element in any ethical judgement we might want to make, with this epistemological and ontological object-relation traditionally expressed as a relation between knowing the world and the world itself.

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