Chapter 3

Positioning the Normative Practice Approach

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ABSTRACT

The concept of social practices has received growing attention in interpretative social sciences. This concept is based on a long tradition of hermeneutical, interpretative, action-theoretical, pragmatist, and phenomenological theories in the social sciences, starting with Weber’s famous definition of social action. In this chapter, some crucial stepping stones of this tradition are highlighted. In the line of these theories, a new approach of normative practices will be introduced, partially based on core philosophical insights of the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. Central features of this approach are 1) the multi-layered, intrinsically normative structure of social practices (constitutive side) and 2) the importance of regulative convictions, ideals, and attitudes leading the disclosure and development of those practices (regulative side).

INTRODUCTION

In the former chapter we saw that professionalism is going through a crisis. A key characteristic of professions as understood here is that their members are highly educated and skilled in a certain field of knowledge and practice. That specialist knowledge is a requirement for a competent performance of the practice. However, this observation does not yet determine how that knowledge is actually used in the performance of the practice. How does (abstract) scientific knowledge guide human
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action? In social sciences and philosophy this question gets a more general form: How can one explain and understand human actions, including the use of language, and their consequences in a scientific way? This question has always guided the development of the humanities and social sciences. How come?

The scientific development since the Enlightenment has come about as a result of the enormous progression in the study of physical reality. In other words: science has been concerned with describing and explaining what happens in the objective reality outside the researcher. It has attempted to explain physical reality as accurately as possible. But what if the scientific interest extends to human reality, culture and society itself and human beings and their behavior will become ‘the object of research’? This step raises many questions for the simple reason that then the human being is simultaneously the subject (researcher) and the object (researched phenomenon) of that kind of research.

Anthony Giddens calls this the problem of ‘double hermeneutics’. The natural scientist has to deal with a single hermeneutical question, namely the question about the meaning of the scientific discourse he or she produces about reality. However, the researcher in the humanities and social sciences has to deal with a double hermeneutical question. Namely not only the meaning of the discourse on the object of research, but also the meaning that plays a role in the people that are the object of research: after all, people themselves make sense to the things that happen to them and act on the basis of those insights. In his own words: “The sociologist has as a field of study phenomena which are already constituted as meaningful. The condition of ‘entry’ to this field is getting to know what actors already know, and have to know, to ‘go on’ in the daily activities of social life. The concepts that sociological observers invent are ‘second-order’ concepts in so far as they presume certain conceptual capabilities on the part of the actors to whose conduct they refer. But it is in the nature of social science that these can become ‘first-order’ concepts by being appropriated within social life itself. What is ‘hermeneutic’ about the double hermeneutic? The appropriateness of the term derives from the double process of translation or interpretation which is involved. Sociological descriptions have the task of mediating the frames of meaning within which actors orient their conduct. But such descriptions are interpretative categories which also demand an effort of translation in and out of the frames of meaning involved in sociological theories” (Giddens 1984, 284).

One of the ways in which this problem is solved is by introducing a kind of dichotomy between two approaches in humanities and social sciences, namely one in which the social is studied purely from an outsider perspective and another
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