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Emotions versus Reasons: A Critical Analysis of Jon Elster's View about Social Norms

Abstract: In this paper I will analyze the individualistic interpretation of social norms developed by Jon Elster. First, I will present his argumentation regarding his distinction between rationality and social normativity which will also provide the opportunity to present his conception about the most important features of social norms. In the next two sections I will analyze his attempt to distinguish between social norms and other types of similar rules and his typology of the main categories of social norms. Finally, I will mention several objections that in my opinion affect his theory of social normativity based on the emotional states of our minds.

Keywords: Jon Elster, social norms, emotions, rationality, individualism.

1. Introduction

The philosophical investigation of social world, like most philosophical domains, usually originates in the attempt to answer some basic questions which can be formulated in various alternative ways: What is the foundation of the social world we live in? How do we explain its very existence and the fact that contemporary societies sometimes contain hundreds of millions or even billions of citizens living together in relative harmony and cooperation, connected by very intricate relations and creating organizations, institutions and complex social systems? What are the conditions of social order? Or, by using the words of Jon Elster from the "Introduction" to his book *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order*: "What is it that glues societies together and prevents them from disintegrating into chaos and war" (Elster 1992, 1). And, once more, in social philosophy, like in most fields of philosophical inquiry, there are several alternative ways to answer such questions, answers that presuppose the reference to basic concepts. The concept that is commonly invoked in

relation with the problem of social order is the notion of the "social norm" which is expected to prescribe what is socially acceptable and what is not.

Contemporary attempts to explain the foundations and the status of social norms are marked by an important controversy: the one between holism and individualism. Defenders of the holistic approach maintain that social norms derive from trans-individual and structural social realities such as economical, juridical or political structures which exist and evolve autonomously and are more important than individuals (Biriş 2014, 52-53). On the other hand, followers of the individualistic approach argue that social norms derive from aspects which define individual human beings (Biriş 2014, 45-47). For some of them, like the representatives of rational choice and game theory, the key element is reason combined with the tendency to satisfy egoistic interests and desires, while others, like Jon Elster, emphasize the defining role of the irrational dimensions of human nature like emotional states of mind.

The main objections against the holistic approach are related to the fact that the trans-individual social realities are usually problematic from a metaphysical and epistemological point of view (for example notions like the "collective conscience" of Émile Durkheim), and with the suspicion that the consequences of holism are unacceptable from a moral point of view (Hollis 2001, 102-104). For example, if everything in the social world is shaped by the dynamics of trans-individual realities, how can we account for individual liberty, autonomy and responsibility?

The most important worries about rational choice and game theory are related to the difficulties they face when confronted with the challenge to explain how social order and social norms are derived from rational strategic choices made by self-interested individuals, without invoking any trans-individual social realities (language; moral, juridical or religious principles and so on). For example, how are the players in a coordination game supposed to negotiate a rule of common behavior without making use of a common language or of a common set of principles which are not their creation and transcend the purely individualistic framework? Another set of objections are associated with the description of these rational agents which are supposed to possess fully ordered preferences, complete information and a perfect internal computer, features that are unlikely to be acquired by real individuals. Moreover, ordinary individuals are far from corresponding to the theoretical image depicted by the aforementioned theories: they are not fully rational beings (Hollis 2001, 114).

Acknowledging the problems associated with social choice theory, which was the main investigation subject matter of his earlier work, Jon Elster gradually shifted in his more recent contributions to a significantly different conception about social order and the nature of social norms from which it is derived. This interesting explanation of social norms doesn't have the theoretical and systematical character of his previous work. It is more a "thick phenomenological description" as he prefers to call it, which originated from an "increasing disillusionment with the power of reason" (Elster 1992, VII-VIII), and, I would add, with the role that reasoning and reasons play in the foundation of social order and of the social norms it rests on. Consequently, he attempted to provide a different explanation of social norms based on their relation with our emotional states of mind.

In the next section of this article I will present his thesis about the various features which distinguish rationality from social normativity. In the following two sections I will examine his arguments for the distinction between social norms and other types of similar rules and his classification of the most important examples of social norms. In the final section I will formulate several objections that in my opinion affect his theory of the relation between social normativity and emotional states of mind.

2. The differences between rationality and social normativity

In the book *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order*, Elster mentions various differences between rational action (in the instrumental sense) and the obeying of social norms. Firstly, in his opinion, while rationality is concerned with outcomes (It is rational to do X if is the best way to achieve Y), social norms are not outcome-oriented: they just state to do X, or to do X if some conditions are realized, but they make no reference to any outcome. Secondly, he believes that rationality is essentially conditional and future-oriented, while social norms are often unconditional and when they have a conditional form they usually make the action dependent on past events. Moreover, rationality presupposes the principle of optimizing the relation between cost and gains (and cutting one's losses), whereas social normativity often prescribes accepting significant loses and risk without getting anything in return. Thirdly, social norms are *social*, in the sense that they are shared by other people and enforced by their approval or disapproval (for example by social sanctions like ostracism). Another important characteristic of social

norms is the fact that they are supported by emotions like embarrassment, anxiety, guilt and shame which are experienced by the individuals when they are observed violating them (Elster 1992, 98-100). And, in Elster's opinion, this emotive aspect of the norms is more fundamental than their cognitive aspect: while rationality presupposes difficult calculations concerning the opportunity of a specific action, "the operation of norms is to a large extent blind, compulsive, mechanical or even unconscious" (Elster 1992, 100)

He insists that an explanation of norms can be formulated from an individualistic perspective. And he summarizes the aforementioned aspects of social norms in the following definition: a norm is "a propensity to feel shame and to anticipate sanctions by others at the thought of behaving in a certain, forbidden way", a propensity that becomes social when it is shared with other people and which exists at an unconscious or a barely conscious level (Elster 1992, 105-106). More recently, in the book *Explaining Social Behavior*, he prefers a more concise definition by characterizing the social norm as "an injunction to act or to abstain from acting" (Elster 2007, 354).

Elster also argues for the reality and autonomy of norms, interpreting these two terms in a way which has a direct relevance for the distinction between rationality and social normativity. He defines the "reality of norms" in terms of their independent motivating power: the fact that norms are more than post-rationalizations of self-interest and are original sources of actions. The "autonomy of norms" is defined in terms of their irreducibility to rational optimization (Elster 1992, 125). Although he mentions several examples of social norms used in self-interest manipulations, he affirms that they prove precisely the independent motivating power of the norms which derives from their emotional grip on the mind: unless they are considered important in themselves, it will be pointless to manipulate them for personal benefit. Moreover, he observes that many times norms (like those of revenge) create obligations and not options (Elster 1992, 128-129). They do not configure a set of different alternatives from which we can choose by using our instrumental rationality. They just prescribe what must be done.

Concerning the autonomy of social norms, he analyzes and rejects four attempts of reducing them to rational optimization. The first one tries to reduce social norms to the rational incentive of avoiding social sanctions. Elster replies that norms do not require external sanctions. Often internal sanctions (like shame) are sufficient. The second attempt creates an indirect link between social norms and individual rationality by stating that they

help us to save the cost of decisions, to overcome weaknesses of will, enhance the credibility of threats and promises and so on. To this he replies that it confuses social norms with private rules and habits. Moreover, many norms prescribe irrational behavior. This will entail the puzzling thesis that somebody could rationally decide to behave irrationally (for example, to revenge). He offers a similar response to the third argument which tries to link social norms and collective rationality: for example how can the codes of honor promote collective rationality when they prescribe violent actions which many times make the social climate worse? And the same conclusion derives from an analysis of the main categories of social norms which will be mentioned in the next section. Finally, the fourth argument tries to link the existence of norms to their contribution to genetic fitness. He insists that evolutionary explanations of this type do not take a narrow form by stating that "Feature X exists because it maximizes the genetic fitness of the organism", but they take a broader form like "X exists because it is a part of a package solution that sometimes maximized the genetic fitness of the organism". However, he argues that the broader form allows the tendency of obeying a specific social norm to detract from genetic fitness, while being retained by natural selection because it is a byproduct of a gene which proved to work for the better. It also allows a social norm to be maladaptive today, while being adaptive at the stage of history when it was fixed (Elster 1992, 149-150).

3. The difference between social norms and other types of rules

Elster also differentiates between social norms and similar phenomena like moral and quasi-moral norms, legal norms, conventions, private self-imposed rules, tradition, habits and compulsive neuroses and similar cognitive phenomena. One difference between moral and social norms is the fact that social norms are "nonconsequentialist obligations or interdictions" unlike moral norms which are often understood as consequentialist in nature (Elster 1992, 101). A more important difference is mentioned in the book *Explaining Social Behavior*: moral and quasi-moral norms are capable of shaping our behavior even when the agent is not observed or is not aware that he is observed by others, while social norms require the emotional state of mind generated by this type of awareness.

The main difference between legal norms and social norms is that legal norms are enforced by specialized agents who areauthorized to impose formal sanctions, while social norms require only informal sanctions like avoidance or ostracism imposed by ordinary people.

Conventions differ from social norms because they are outcome-oriented, they are often arbitrary and they can be imposed by the self-interest of the agent (Elster 2007, 357-358). The social aspect of the norms separates them from private self-imposed rules (for example, not to drink or smoke because it affects your health) and various habits and compulsive neuroses (like the neurotic obsession for washing your hands fifty times every day). Unlike tradition, which is understood by Elster as "mindlessly repeating today what the ancestors did yesterday" and has a tendency to slowly change by imperfect imitations, the traditionalist attitude supported by social norms has a long term memory and it is much more committed to the original principles.

Social norms also help solving what Elster calles "the first problem of social order": the problem of focusing and coordinating people's expectations. In this sense they resemble psychological salience of one course of action in relation to others: for example the psychological support for actions which possess qualities like simplicity, temporal priority, equality and so on. Nevertheless, the prescriptions of social norms are not imposed by the simple mechanism of psychological prominence and they often do not possess qualities like those cited above. The nature of their "grip on the mind" is not rational, but emotional. Moreover, I believe we should notice another difference which is not explicitly formulated by Elster: for social norms their social aspect is essential. If the psychological prominence might help even an isolated individual to choose a specific course of action, the effect of social norms is possible only in a social framework.

4. Categories of social norms

In the final sections of the chapter dedicated to social norms from his book *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order*, Jon Elster classifies them in ten categories or "examples of social norms", as he prefers to call them, without claiming that it's a complete and systematic classification or that it's the only one imaginable.

The first category is the one of "consumption norms": norms governing manners of dressing, manners of table, manners of speaking and so on. An interesting feature of these norms is that even if they are essentially trivial in themselves, they usually have a great social significance and their violation often is associated with severe and even cruel punishment (avoidance, exclusion and so on). This feature demonstrates once again the non-rational character of social norms: the

instrumental utility of such norms is highly questionable, they often change in manners that remind us of cultural fashions, but they are nevertheless very present and very effective in our societies.

The second class of social norms cited is the one of norms against behavior socially perceived as being "contrary to nature": cannibalism, incest, homosexuality (in some societies) and so on. Elster states that there is often a "culture of hypocrisy" surrounding some of these norms (for example against homosexuality): although the practices of violation the norms in private are tolerated, when they are violated in public the perpetrators are punished, because their conduct demonstrates disrespect for public opinion. Even norms against cannibalism admit some exceptions, which show that there is a "penumbra around the main norm", as Elster calls it: a room for maneuvering (Elster 1992, 110).

In the next example, Elster refers to the norms regulating the use of money: some of them are perceived as acceptable, while others are socially unacceptable. For instance, in some communities it is considered impolite to pay your neighbor in order to mow your lawn, or to buy someone's place in a line, rules that seem to be irrational from an economical point of view. As, he notices, it simply "isn't done", even if accepting this kind of offer in some given occasions doesn't imply that you will be treated as inferior.

The fourth category of norms is the one governing reciprocity: to return the favors done to us by others. Once again, Elster underlines that such norms are not always associated with rules of morality or rationality. And he invokes the *potlatch* system of American Indians: it might be interpreted as a "poisoned gift" which cannot be refused and usually creates a much higher obligation. Reciprocity rules can be found virtually in every society even if they to do not take this excessive form. The norms regulating gifts and mutual help exist in most societies and they are often complex and generate social obligations and sanctions. In Elster's view, these practices have a clear normative dimension which separates them from the simple (and voluntary) exchange of favors (Elster 1992, 114).

He continues with the presentation of norms specific to medical ethics: the priority of more serious cases, the rule of giving the fullest treatment possible, the non-discrimination rules and so on. He synthetizes the main medical principles for treatment application in the following three criteria: a) Choose the patient who will benefit mostly; b) Choose the patient with the smallest surviving chance; and c) Choose the patient that has the greatest chance of surviving without treatment. He observes that many times health authorities adopt the first (utilitarian) criterion, and

that practicing doctors often choose the second (professional) criterion. Nevertheless, there are professionals, like the mental health specialists from Norway who prefer to select patients by using the third criterion: the least serious cases. Hence, Elster concludes that often rules of medical ethics are not always outcome-oriented.

The next category of norms refers to the codes of honor: codes that regulate "the life of the proud man". In his view, the codes of honor have two sides, one positive and the other negative. The positive side tells to be courageous, to return favors, to keep our promises, to tell the truth, while the negative side recommends revenge, aggressive and threatening behavior, insulting and so on. And they prescribe these types of behavior to us even when it is not in our self-interest to do so. Moreover, sometimes obeying the rules of these codes presupposes great risks and dangers. Nevertheless, the victims of dishonor often do not feel free to choose not to revenge.

The seventh example corresponds to the rules of retribution: the rules governing the liability for the harm you caused. Retributive systems of different societies vary to a large extent. In some communities it requires both the intention and the success in producing a given outcome, while in others it might manifest in the absence of both conditions: people are responsible for all actions in which they are causally involved. For example, the members of Jalé population of New Guinea believe that the husband is liable for his wife death in childbirth, because he is the one who impregnated her. In Elster's opinion these examples show that this type of social rules are not outcome or incentive-oriented as we would be tempted to think, because no incentive is created when we make people responsible for all actions in which they are more or less causally involved (Elster 1992, 118-119).

His analysis continues with the presentation of work norms: rules that prescribe you have to earn your income from work and not from other arrangements and rules that regulate the proper work effort. He notices that such norms prevent some workers to accept wage subsidies. They also determines them to be careful to the lower and upper limits of what is perceived as the proper level of work effort, or forbids experienced workers to train new workers who would be disposed to do the same job for a lower wage.

The ninth category is the one associated with the norms of cooperation. Unlike utilitarian maxims of cooperation that recommend cooperating only if the average utility is increased, the social norms of cooperation he mentions are not outcome-oriented. Take for example, the

Kantian view according to which you should cooperate only if it would be better if everybody cooperate than if nobody did. In Elster's opinion this norm is not really outcome-oriented because it does not recommend you to consider the outcome of *your* specific action.

The final example of norms he mentions is the category of norms of distribution like those which prescribe equality, equity, a reference-point and so on. Elster insists that this type of norms (like all the other categories) is characterized by a grip on the mind and by an emotional appeal which does not depend on the individual or social welfare. For instance, these rules might recommend the destruction of an indivisible good if it cannot be provided for everyone or an egalitarian distribution, even if inequality would be better for everybody.

5. Objections

A set of objections has to do with his view concerning the relation between social norms and emotions. Firstly, Elster maintains that norms have a "strong grip on the mind" due to the emotional states (shame, contempt and so on) triggered by their violation (in the mind of the agent or of the observer). Hence, he perceives the emotional state they trigger as an essential characteristic of social norms: he defines the social norm as a "propensity to feel shame". However, when he explains the nature of some emotions like shame or contempt he argues that these emotional states of mind are experienced when a social norm is violated in a social context: the individual who violates the norm experiences shame and the observer experiences contempt (Elster 2007, 153). Consequently, I believe that we are entitled to ask: are the emotional states the foundations of social norms or it's the other way around? Elster doesn't provide a clear and definite answer for this question. If he maintains that social norms secure the foundation for emotional states, then the individualistic framework which he assumes is undermined. If, on the other hand, he affirms that emotional states represent the basis from which social normativity is derived, it is very hard to maintain the *social* nature of these norms: it is difficult to understand how people came to share *those* feelings in relation with *that specific* set of rules. Moreover, it will be even harder to explain the diversity of the social sets of rules from a synchronic or a diachronic point of view, a problem which will be presented in the following sections in a more detailed manner.

Another set of objections has to do with the relation between norms, emotions and our cognitive processes. In the book *Explaining Social*

Behavior, when he explains the emotional states of shame and contempt (defined as "evaluative emotions"), he states: "Shame is triggered by a negative belief about one's character. Contempt and hatred are triggered by negative beliefs about another's character" (Elster 2007, 148). Referring to this problem, in his article *Emotion Management in Crisis Situations*, Ilie Fârte underlines the fact that emotions are related with individual's convictions, wishes, goals, preoccupations and values, they can be *guided* through the use of reason and that they provide a *first judgment* of assessment or appreciation (Fârte 2013, 63-64). Hence, the nature of our emotions and of the distinction between our emotional and our rational and cognitive side is not as straightforward as Elster would think. Therefore, as he mentions explicitly in the same book, emotions are characterized by *cognitive antecedents*: "emotions are triggered by beliefs, often by the agent's acquiring of a new belief" (Elster 2007, 147). So, I hate or despise someone if I believe that his actions prove he deserves to be hated or despised.

Nevertheless, I think we are entitled to ask: how do people acquire these new beliefs which trigger emotions? The only answer Elster provides is the one I already mentioned, namely that emotions like contempt or shame have "close relation" to social norms and when these norms are violated, those who are responsible experience shame and the observers experience contempt. Therefore, it seems that, in his opinion, the reference to the beliefs which represent "cognitive antecedents" of emotions indicates nothing else than the conviction that a social norm was violated in a social context. Moreover, it entails that some kind of cognitive and evaluative process must take place: the agent evaluates if the social norms were violated or not. And in order to be capable of forming a belief concerning the violation of the social norm, the agent should have a relatively clear idea about the *content* of the norm: a belief regarding the prescription of the norm. But, this answer is very puzzling if we take into consideration the aforementioned characterization of a social norm as a propensity to feel shame and to anticipate sanctions which exist at an *unconscious* or a *barely conscious* level.

A possible solution in accordance with his view would be to admit the existence of unconscious or of barely conscious beliefs and of similar processes of evaluation. And this solution would also justify the use of the word "propensity" in the description of social norms. Nonetheless, we must ask once more: how do people acquire this kind of beliefs? Are unconscious beliefs arrived at in an unconscious manner or they were acquired consciously (for example by learning them from other members

of the community) and became unconscious beliefs later when the agent internalized their content? And once more, if the first alternative were true, it is very difficult to understand how these norms became *social* norms which are shared with the other members of the community. If the second alternative were true, then those beliefs wouldn't have an unconscious *nature*: they simply became unconscious because this is the way our minds work in order to be more efficient or because of other psychological reasons. Hence, those beliefs associated with the social norms do have a content that must be reflected upon in a cognitive manner (at least in an earlier stage of their evolution) and this is an *essential* feature of their nature. The fact that they later became unconscious is simply a feature of *the way they work* and not a feature of *what they are.*

Nevertheless, if this is true, then the aforementioned distinction between rationality and normativity also becomes difficult to sustain. A social norm cannot be understood simply as "a propensity", or as "an injunction to act or to abstain from acting", a compulsory tendency which is neither future-oriented nor outcome-oriented. And, in this scenario, a social norm becomes something we *think about* and not only something that we experience by the means of the emotional states of our mind.

Another difficulty that Elster's theory has to face is the fact that the social world seems to be more complex than he is willing to acknowledge. I believe that a more appropriate account of the social normativity specific to a given society would be the one which states that there is not only one set of social norms shared by all the members of that society. Hence, a more plausible description would be that any given contemporary community (maybe with the exception of those very rare communities which are homogeneous from a religious or ethnical point of view) is characterized by the simultaneous existence of various alternative sets of norms. To be sure, between these alternative sets there are some similarities, but also many differences. Moreover, it is reasonable to affirm that, in pluralist and democratic societies, between the members of the same community, social class, profession and so on, there are significant differences between the sets of social norms they are committed to. Consequently, they will have a different perception concerning what is normal and normatively acceptable or not, at least in some respects. For example, a university teacher could share many of the social norms existing in his professional community ("work norms"), while disagreeing with them on various matters concerning "consumption

norms" like the dressing code, reciprocity and retribution rules, rules about drinking, about the proper use of money, and so on.

In my opinion, the existence of these differences between various sets of norms which are endorsed by individuals from the same community doesn't necessarily undermine their *social* nature. It could be true that every norm from my set is shared with other members of my community, but, in the same time, my set of norms as a whole is not identical with any other set: I share some norms with some members of my community and other norms with other members.

And I believe it is reasonable to assume that when such differences do occur, the most probable response to the contempt manifested by the other who doesn't share my set of norms will not be the emotion of shame triggered by the fact that I violated *his* (or their) social norm. It is more likely that my emotional response will be different: indifference, if I do not value his opinion on that subject, contempt or anger, if I perceive his reaction as a violation of my set of social norms, and so on. Hence, the emotional reactions to the same social action could vary to a large extent even between members of the same community, profession or social group. While some of them would perceive it as a clear violation of a social norm and would react consequently, others could remain indifferent to it or react in an entirely different way.

Furthermore, the sets of social norms vary not only from a synchronic point of view, but also from a diachronic perspective: the set of norms shared by the members of a given community or specific to a particular individual slowly changes from a stage of its evolution to the next. For example, it is obvious that in the 18th Century the majority of "honorable" white citizens in United States perceived racial segregation and slavery as a normal and even normative social phenomenon in relation with a shared set of social norms, and that this perception changed in a spectacular manner in the next two centuries. Additionally, it is also clear that any given individual is capable of reflecting about the social norms he endorses, of changing his mind and of learning to see matters from a different perspective. And it is reasonable to believe that this will also change his emotional response to the violation of a rule he used to endorse.

But if these arguments are true, then Elster's theory is confronted with the problem of explaining how this change takes place. If he wants to persevere in his view regarding the non-rational nature of social norms, he would have to come up with an alternative explanation of the variations of social norms. However, it is very hard to imagine how this non-rational

process would look like and how could it function in a non-arbitrary manner. So, the only alternative for him would be to concede that social norms derive (at least partially) from a rational and cognitive process, which would presumably be outcome and future-oriented. But, this concession would undermine all his effort to distinguish between rationality and social normativity and between social norms and the other kinds of similar rules.

Ester's obvious reply to all this description would be that the kind of social norms he had in mind do not alter so easily, and that we use the same expression he uses ("social norms"), while referring to a similar but nonetheless different social phenomenon. He could argue that the very criterion for distinguishing this similar phenomenon from real social norms is the very presence of the emotional experience. So, how would I know if I experience the work of an authentic social norm? The response could be something like: "Your gut doesn't lie!", "The fact that you experience shame or contempt when a given action is performed is proof enough that you are committed to the norm which prescribes its interdiction".

In my opinion, this kind of conception which states that social norms hardly ever change is fairly counterintuitive and very difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, even if we ignore this objection, his solution has to face another difficult problem. If social norms are indeed very persistent and do not alter significantly from a diachronic point of view, we still have to explain their synchronic variation: why the sets of social norms vary significantly from one community to the next? And this is a type of variation that Elster himself acknowledges in different occasions, for example when he refers to differences in revenge norms between the South and the North of United States. So, is the variation explainable in terms of some kind of natural and persistent differences between members of different communities? This reply has the unacceptable consequence of raising the suspicion that the differences are so significant that they cannot be overcome. And, from this statement, to the thesis that people from very different communities are like individuals of different subspecies, it is only a small but very dangerous step. One problem with this thesis regards its *unethical consequences*: it could be used to justify discriminatory evaluations and actions against those perceived as being naturally different from us. This will undermine any effort to transcend our specific principles and standards and any hope for social progress. Another problem of the same thesis will be related with its epistemologically unacceptable consequences: the *epistemic relativism*

which derives from it. Any set of social norms would be equivalent with any other; none of them could be criticized as being inappropriate and none of them could be accepted as being right outside the specific context of the community which supports it.

6. Conclusions

In the previous sections I presented Jon Elster's interesting attempt to explain the nature and the features of social norms from an individualistic perspective which turns away from the dominant individualist model based on rational choice theory. In order to accomplish his ambitious objective, he argued for the existence of significant differences between social normativity and rationality. Unlike rationality rules, social norms are not outcome or future-oriented, they do not aim at optimizing the relation between costs and gains, they are social, in the sense that they are shared by many people and are supported by their approval or disapproval and by social sanctions, they have an "emotional grip" on our minds. Moreover, he argues for the reality of social norms based on their independent motivating power and for their autonomy based on their irreducibility to rational optimization. All this features helped him differentiate social norms from similar rules: moral and quasi-moral norms, legal norms, conventions, private self-imposed rules, tradition, habits and compulsive neuroses and similar cognitive phenomena. He also investigated several "examples" of social norms which illustrated in specific ways their nature, features and functions.

However, his main objective was to validate the idea that social norms can be described in emotional terms. He insisted that the main connection which explains the existence and the efficiency of social norms is not the one with the rational processes of our minds, but the one with their emotional states. In his opinion, there is only an *unessential* link between instrumental rationality and social norms (sometimes they coexist and sometimes they don't), but there is *a necessary and essential link* between the social norms we endorse and some of the emotional states we experience (shame, contempt and so on).

In my opinion, the aforementioned objections prove two important things. On one hand, the relation between social norms and emotions is not as strong and straightforward as Elster would want. Since we argued that the emotional response could vary from a member of a community to the next and even from one evaluation of the same individual to the next, depending on how the "cognitive antecedents" of the emotion change, it

follows that the link between emotions and norms is not as simple and as necessary as Elster sustains. On the other hand, the connection between social norms and rationality is not as accidental as he thinks. It's an obvious fact that sets of social norms vary significantly from a synchronic and from a diachronic point of view, and rationality must play an important role in the explanation of both these types of variation. If we want to maintain that the dissimilarities between people belonging to different communities are not insurmountable, that people do not belong to different subspecies and they can communicate and can learn from each other, then we have to admit that rationality plays an essential role in these processes. And the same is true if we want to maintain that our sets of social norms do change and get better from a historical stage to the next, and that social progress is possible.

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