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

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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 acculturize 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 prefer-ences'. But we cannot acknowledge such possibilities without evalu-ating 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