

The Emergence of Culture

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Abstract

This paper argues that culture necessarily depends upon both subjective and objective moments. Earlier theorists have seen the objective moment in terms of, for example, *collective representations* (Durkheim), *objective knowledge* (Popper and Archer), or *epistemological communities* (Nelson). This paper argues, however, that the objective moment of culture takes the form of an emergent capability of social groups called *norm circles* to exert normative influence on their members. Only individuals have the power to hold the beliefs that constitute the content of culture, but only norm circles have the power to designate such beliefs *as* culture.

Keywords

culture, norm circles, critical realism, collective representations, objective knowledge, feminist epistemology

Author biography

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Introduction¹

Although it can be defined in many ways, this paper will take *culture* to refer to “practices, rituals, institutions and material artefacts, as well as texts, ideas and images” (Jay 1984: 112).² We may simplify this list and say that culture consists of institutionalised practices and *intelligibilia*: artefacts from which we may decipher meanings. Sociologists are concerned with how these practices and intelligibilia are produced, reproduced and transformed, how they are differentiated and homogenised, how they may be influenced and how they may themselves influence other aspects of the social world. As a critical realist I take the view that the *theoretical* answers to these questions will depend upon the *ontological* nature of culture and of its social context. In particular, they will depend upon whether culture is merely subjective – existing purely as the mental properties of individuals – or whether it also has an objective aspect – one that depends on larger social forces. In phrasing the issue in these terms, I have already by implication excluded a purely objectivist ontology of culture; instead this paper will argue for an ontology of culture that necessarily depends upon *both* subjective and objective moments. It will, to be a little more specific, offer a new way of thinking of the objective aspects of culture: as a property of a specific social group that I call a *norm circle*.

To clarify the ontological points at issue, the paper will begin by discussing Durkheim. It will draw selectively on the work of Margaret Archer and the feminist epistemologists Helen Longino and Lynn Hankinson Nelson, while qualifying its use of Archer by questioning that element of her argument that is drawn from the work of Karl Popper. Finally, it will argue that the objective moment in the ontology of culture can be most persuasively theorised using the concept of norm circles, and show how this both draws on and improves on the work of these other authors.

¹ My thanks to Margaret Archer for taking the time to read this paper and for her extremely valuable comments. This paper was written during the tenure of a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. I would like to thank the British Academy for their financial support.

² Jay also refers to these as components of a “whole way of life” (Jay 1984: 112), but this term is loaded with the (unnecessary) assumption that Archer describes as the “Myth of Cultural Integration”

Culture as collective representations?

The central focus in sociological explanations of culture and its impact is its relationship to human social action.³ From a subjectivist perspective, our actions appear to be the product of individual choices, motivated by our independently formed beliefs and/or dispositions, and culture is merely those practices that individuals choose to perform on this basis. But such an understanding ignores the most fundamental feature of cultures: culture is a *shared* set of practices and understandings. If each of us made an entirely unconstrained individual choice of what practices to perform, there would be no such thing as culture. Unless our practices are shared they are not culture, and they can only be shared if we are all somehow influenced to follow common practices (Alexander 1990: 26). A *purely* subjectivist account of culture would thus be incoherent; it would lack the means to explain how culture can acquire the shared quality that makes it culture. It is the need to explain this shared quality that has driven social theorists to investigate the objective moment in the cultural process: the way in which our actions *depend* on a culture that exists in some sense independently of the individual actor.

One of the most important attempts to explain culture in terms that combine both objective and subjective moments is found in the work of Emile Durkheim.⁴ Durkheim recognises that each of us acts on the basis of our *representations* – today we might say our *mental properties*, or our *beliefs and dispositions*. Durkheim, however, distinguishes between what he calls *individual representations* and *collective representations*. Individual representations are simply the specific beliefs or dispositions of particular individuals. What has always been more controversial is the ontological status of what Durkheim calls *collective representations*. These are representations that are shared across a society; one way of thinking about them is that

(Archer 1996 [1988]) (see below). The conceptual ambivalence of *culture* is discussed, for example, in (Williams 1976: 76-82) and (Jenks 1993).

³ I have discussed the determination of human action in more detail in (Elder-Vass 2007).

⁴ Strictly speaking, Durkheim seeks to account for *social facts*, and not just culture; what we call culture, however, is a subset of social facts. The religious values and practices that Durkheim invokes in *Suicide*, for example, are part of culture, but the suicide rate is not, though Durkheim calls them both social facts (Durkheim 1952 [1897]).

they are that part of each individual's beliefs and dispositions that also happens to be held by every other individual (or most others, perhaps) in their society.⁵

This way of thinking about collective representations might seem consistent with a subjectivist conception of culture. But it would leave us without any explanation of why or how our culture was shared. For Durkheim, the point of the concept of collective representations is that they form part of such an explanation because they represent the objective moment in the cultural process. For this to be possible, they must be something more than simply individual representations that happen, as if by accident, to be held in common in a group.

Social facts do not differ from psychological facts in quality only: *they have a different substratum*; they evolve in a different milieu; and they depend on different conditions. This does not mean that they are not also mental after a fashion, since they all consist of ways of thinking or behaving. But the states of the collective consciousness are different in nature from the states of the individual consciousness; they are 'representations' of another type (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: xlix).

In particular, these collective representations, he argues, "reside exclusively in the very society itself which produces them, and not in its parts, i.e. its members. They are, then, in this sense external to individual consciousnesses" (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: xlvi). Collective representations, as a variety of social fact, are "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him" (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: 3). But such arguments inevitably prompt us to ask where these representations, these ways of acting, thinking and feeling, could possibly reside if they do not reside in the individual members of society. One of Durkheim's formulations seems to offer an answer:

Of course, nothing collective can be produced if individual consciousnesses are not assumed; but this necessary condition is by itself insufficient. These consciousnesses must be combined in a certain way; social life results from this combination and is, consequently, explained by it. Individual minds, forming groups by mingling and fusing, give birth to a being, psychological if you will, but constituting a psychic individuality of a new sort (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: 103)

Many critics have suggested, then, that Durkheim's collective representations exist in some kind of *group mind* (indeed he (or his translator) uses this term himself in at least one place: Durkheim 1964 [1901]: 8). Such a conception is quite

⁵ Durkheim tends to ignore the problem of whether there are such things as clearly bounded *societies*.

implausible, in two senses. First, given the looseness of his language on this question, it is far from clear that Durkheim meant that ideas could exist outside the minds of individuals. In his introduction to the English translation of the *Rules*, for example, Catlin argues that Durkheim “may be acquitted of any graver charge than lack of caution” on this question (Catlin 1964: xxiv). Second, there is no known mechanism by which groups *as such* can have beliefs or mental properties; their members may be able to agree on beliefs, they may be able to share beliefs in the sense that each member of the group has the same belief about some question, but the beliefs themselves always reside in the heads of the individual members concerned.

But if there can be no group mind it is hard to see how collective representations could reside exclusively in a society as opposed to its individual members. Durkheim’s argument thus leads us to a recognition of the fundamental challenge facing objectivist accounts of culture: how can culture exist in a form that is external to individuals and yet able to influence their behaviour? But as we have seen, pure subjectivism cannot explain culture either, because culture by definition is shared by a group and requires some mechanism by which individuals are influenced to conform with it. Durkheim has correctly recognised this need for both objective and subjective moments in our explanations of culture, but in his attempt to show how the two can interact, the objective moment remains mysterious. It is this mystery that essentially defines the ontological problem of culture.

Culture as objective knowledge?

For sociological realists like myself, one of the most promising recent attempts to theorise this relation between the subjective and objective moments of culture comes from Margaret Archer. Archer frames the relationship between culture and human action as a *morphogenetic cycle* (e.g. Archer 1995: 193). In the first phase of this cycle, the agent is conditioned by the prevailing objective culture; in the second, the agent acts; and in the third the actions of the agent contribute to the reproduction and/or elaboration of the culture, thus providing the input to phase one of subsequent cycles. The objective culture is thus a product of human agency, but nevertheless once produced exerts a causal influence of its own. At any one moment, for the purposes of

analysing the relationship between the two, we can treat culture and agency as analytically distinct, while recognising that they are mutually dependent.

Although Archer labels her approach *analytical dualism*, however, her argument is not that we must distinguish culture from agency for purely methodological reasons. On the contrary, analytical dualism is a methodological strategy for dealing with real ontological diversity. Archer ascribes causality in the social world to at least three different types of referent: personal emergent properties (PEPs), cultural emergent properties (CEPs), and structural emergent properties (SEPs), and beyond the social order she also recognises the causal significance of material things (Archer 1995; Archer 2000: 161-9). As I understand it, she labels her dualism *analytical* for two reasons. First, it selects just two out of the many types of emergent property for the purposes of analysing the relations between those two, while temporarily bracketing the influence of the others. Second, this is not an extreme dualism of the Cartesian variety: there is no suggestion here that culture and agency, or structure and agency, or any other analytical pair, are composed of fundamentally distinct substances. On the contrary, both culture and structure are emergent from interactions between human individuals, though today's culture may be a product of such interactions in the past rather than in the immediate present. Culture, then, is ontologically distinct from human agency but (at least historically) dependent upon it.

None of this, however, yet addresses the central problem encountered by Durkheim: in exactly what *form* does this ontologically distinct culture exist, that is capable of acting back upon human agency? Archer's solution to this problem is to invoke Karl Popper's account of objective knowledge, and to identify what she calls the *cultural system* with Popper's "World 3" knowledge, although her exposition of this at times differs a little from Popper's. "At any time," she argues, "a Cultural System is constituted by the corpus of existing intelligibilia – by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone" (Archer 1996 [1988]: 104). These 'intelligibilia' are concrete material things – books, films, documents, musical scores, and the like – from which we can extract cultural meaning. But the Cultural System itself consists of the *ideas* that are expressed in them rather than the

material objects themselves (which exist in Popper's World 1 of material objects).⁶ Hence its components may be logically related to each other, in particular through relations of consistency or contradiction (Archer 1996 [1988]: 105; Popper 1979: 298-9).

It is important, however, to distinguish these World 3 ideas from what Popper calls "knowledge in the subjective sense, which consists of dispositions and expectations" of individual human beings, and which constitutes the contents of his World 2 (Popper 1979: 66).⁷ Popper summarises his argument thus:

we may distinguish the following three worlds or universes: first, the world of physical objects or of physical states; secondly, the world of states of consciousness, or of mental states, or perhaps of behavioural dispositions to act; and thirdly, the world of *objective contents of thought*, especially of scientific and poetic thoughts and of works of art (Popper 1979: 106).

This World 3, according to Popper, contains "knowledge without a knowing subject" (Popper 1979: 109), "knowledge in the objective sense, which consists of the logical content of our theories, conjectures, guesses" (Popper 1979: 73). As an account of knowledge, this is perhaps open to the objection that our libraries contain an enormous amount of knowledge claims that have since been refuted or that have come to be seen as obsolete, or indeed were never really accepted as valid, as well as those that are currently considered knowledge. Archer, however, does not invoke Popper's World 3 as a model of knowledge as such, but rather as a model of culture. In some ways World 3 works much better as a model of culture, because cultural beliefs can not be refuted by the same sorts of considerations as knowledge claims, and the idea that there may be a patchwork of incompatible and even outright contradictory cultural beliefs within the archive is not at all problematic. On the contrary, Archer shows that this is a virtue of the model, in her relentless critique of the "Myth of Cultural Integration", the idea that has often been implicit in social theories of culture that cultures always consist of harmonious mutually compatible bodies of belief (Archer 1996 [1988]: throughout).

⁶ There are some intriguing similarities here to Foucault's conception of discourse and its relation to the archive (Elder-Vass 2009a; Foucault 2002 [1969]).

⁷ Popper also sometimes includes in World 3 all *potentially* intelligible ideas whether or not artefacts exist that encode them (Popper 1979: 116, 154, 159 fn 8). Archer, however, is more cautious on this front.

For Archer and Popper, then, the objective moment of culture is embedded not in a collective consciousness but in a collective archive. This has the advantage that the physical material of the archive clearly exists externally to human beings and so its contents are in a synchronic sense autonomous of them and capable of acting back upon them. But this physical material is still only part of Popper's World 1; what the argument requires is that *World 3* is autonomous of human beings and capable of acting back upon them. This is much more problematic.

One objection to Popper's theory is that the archive contains not knowledge as such, but only potential knowledge: that as a material resource it contains only marks on paper (or some other medium) and that there is no informational content to such marks in the absence of a reader or other interpreter. To put it differently, they contain not ideas but *representations* of ideas. Popper himself admits that only those books that are *capable* of being understood can be considered to belong to World 3 (Popper 1979: 116). But this would seem to imply that they only *become* knowledge or cultural content when they are read, and thus that when they do become knowledge they do so as beliefs or understandings of individuals – as part, in other words, of Popper's World 2. Within books, then, there is no knowledge or culture, only marks that may be used to communicate them; and when that communication is completed successfully, what is produced is subjective (World 2) and not objective (World 3) knowledge or culture. Popper is aware of such arguments, and in response argues that if all our tools and subjective learning were destroyed, but “libraries and our capacity to learn from them” survived, we could recover our society's capabilities (Popper 1979: 107-8). This, he claims, shows that World 3 knowledge exists independently of us. But it shows nothing of the sort. The books are World 1; our capacity to understand them is World 2; and from these we can reconstitute further World 2 knowledge. Where do we find World 3 – objective knowledge – as opposed to readable marks, and as opposed to individual belief?

In the end Popper does not escape from the problematic we find in Durkheim. If World 3 knowledge exists and can influence us, it must exist in some concrete form and Popper fails to identify any such form. We can be reasonably confident that knowledge or ideas can exist as mental properties and that as such they can participate in logical relations. But outside the brain, I would argue, there is no way for ideas to be thought or to participate in logical relations. Popper is in danger of adopting the

idealist view that ideas ‘as such’ can be autonomous of people, can influence action, and can enter into relations, independently of being mental properties. Popper’s identification of World 3 knowledge with the logical contents of the *physical* archive is perhaps intended to avoid such charges, but this does not succeed if, as I have argued, books and other intelligibilia do not contain ideas as such but only representations of them.

One implication of this argument would be that the sense we sometimes have of an objective external culture is an illusion. But it may be an instructive illusion: a distorted picture of a real object rather than an entirely false hallucination.

Culture as a property of groups of people

One pointer towards the possible nature of that real object is provided by the feminist epistemologists Helen Longino and Lynn Hankinson Nelson. Like Popper, they are focussed on knowledge, and indeed specifically scientific knowledge, rather than culture, but like Popper’s work, theirs can be deployed in a discussion of culture if we recognise that both knowledge and culture are matters of what ideas we accept and use to guide our practices.

Longino and Nelson are focussed on the processes by which certain claims come to be accepted (in their case, as scientific knowledge, but similar arguments apply to the processes by which certain beliefs come to be accepted as appropriate for guiding our cultural practice). By contrast with many traditional philosophers of science, both stress that this is a communal rather than an individual process (Longino 1993). Knowledge is established as such, they argue, when it is accorded this status by the “structures of cognitive authority” (Longino 1993: 118) within the community concerned. Nelson, however, goes a little further, and argues that “communities are the primary loci – the primary generators, repositories, holders, and acquirers – of knowledge” (Nelson 1993: 124). She continues,

But although I do not think individuals are the primary epistemological agents ... I do not deny that individuals know. My claim is that the knowing we do as individuals is derivative, that your knowing or mine depends on *our* knowing, for some ‘we’. More to the point, I will argue that you or I *can* only know what *we know* (or could know), for some ‘we’... The ‘we’, as I understand things, is a group or community that constructs and shares knowledge and standards of evidence – a group, in short, that is an ‘epistemological community’. Hence, on the view I am advocating, communities that construct and acquire knowledge are not

collections of independently knowing individuals; such communities are epistemologically prior to individuals who know (Nelson 1993: 124).

With regard to Nelson's formulation, Durkheim's problematic still beckons: the idea that groups as such can *know* is still as questionable as ever. I would also argue that we need to focus not on the relative *priority* of groups and individuals in the process of knowing but rather on their relative *roles*. But despite these qualifications it does seem to me that these thinkers have pointed us in the right direction: if we are to find an objective moment in the morphogenetic cycle of culture, that moment will not take the form of a collective consciousness or a collective archive, but the form of a collective itself, a group of human beings.

To be more specific, I suggest that the objective moment is provided by groups that I have called *norm circles* (Elder-Vass 2008; Elder-Vass 2010). A norm circle is that group of people that is committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm (although I shall extend this argument below by suggesting that intelligibilia may also be considered parts of norm circles). Each norm has its own corresponding norm circle, and although these may sometimes be clustered there is no necessity that the norm circles for any two norms consist of the same group of people. In this model, then, it is not a homogeneous monolithic society that exerts normative influence over us, but rather a patchwork of intersecting or overlapping groups that are committed to a variety of different standards. This patchwork resembles Simmel's model of intersecting social circles (Simmel 1955: 125-189), but also Nelson's model of overlapping epistemological communities (Nelson 1993: 125, 150). One important consequence is that there is no need for the norm circles model to fall into the myth of cultural integration criticised by Archer: there may be many diverse and indeed conflicting norm circles in any given social space, or there may be heavy clustering of norm circles around a broad cultural consensus, and it is an empirical question which is the case.

Elsewhere I have argued that normative social institutions are produced by the action of norm circles (Elder-Vass 2008; Elder-Vass 2010), and I have been tempted to say that culture is produced by specifically *cultural norm circles*, but on reflection I am tempted to argue that all norms are cultural and all culture is normative, so there is no need to differentiate between cultural and other norm circles. Whether we are talking about styles of music, food, or painting, about the use of language to communicate ideas, or about the ways in which we regulate our social relations with

each other, to list just a few examples, all of these are norm-governed elements of culture.

The mechanism by which norm circles produce a tendency to conform to a given norm is in some respects a familiar one. As Durkheim puts it, for example, “The peculiar characteristic of social constraint is that it is due... to the prestige with which certain representations are invested (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: lv). And not only the prestige of those actions that are normatively approved but also the sanctions that attach to those that are disapproved:

the public conscience exercises a check on every act which offends it by means of the surveillance it exercises over the conduct of citizens, and the appropriate penalties at its disposal... If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effect as a punishment in the strict sense of the word (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: 2-3).

Those around us, in other words, endorse and enforce a set of normative conventions and customs, and the consequence is that actors tend to internalise a tendency to conform to these norms. To work its effects on our behaviour, “collective force is not wholly external to us; it does not move us entirely from the outside” (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 157). “Inhibition” according to Durkheim, “is the means by which social constraint produces its psychological effects” (Durkheim 1964 [1901]). Now the subjectivist might interject at this point that it is not “the public conscience” or “social constraint” that exercises such checks and sanctions on our activities – concepts that still bear traces of Durkheim’s collective consciousness – but simply other human individuals. From the subjectivist point of view, this story can be retold as one in which individuals put normative pressure on other individuals, who consequently choose to act in ways that avoid negative sanctions.

One part of Durkheim’s response, which is the argument I wish to develop here, would be to argue that although these social pressures are exercised by individuals, these individuals act as “representatives and intermediaries” in doing so (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: 6). For Durkheim, they act as representatives of “the social milieu” (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: 6) or of “society” (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 155), but I want to be more specific than this: in acting to endorse and enforce a particular norm, an individual acts as the representative of the norm circle for that norm.

My claim, then, to be justified below, is that norm circles as such make a causal contribution to the development and maintenance of culture: that the individuals who endorse and enforce the norms that constitute culture act differently in doing so than they would if those norm circles did not exist, or in other words that they act as they do at least partly because they are parts of such norm circles.

This claim in turn rests on a specifically emergentist and critical realist understanding of causality in the social, as well as the natural, world. On this account, all events are the causal outcome of interactions between the causal powers of things (known more formally as *entities*), and these causal powers are emergent properties of the entities concerned. They are emergent in the sense that (i) they are properties of the entity that depend upon the composition and structure of the entity – its parts and the relations between them – but (ii) they would not be possessed by those parts if they were not organised into the form of such an entity. Hence they are properties of the whole entity and not of the parts.⁸

In the critical realist model, any given event is caused by the interaction of multiple emergent causal powers, and hence no individual causal power produces the exceptionless regularity of outcomes that is posited in some empiricist theories of causality (Bhaskar 1975). The outcome on any given occasion is never completely determined by a single causal power, and therefore always depends contingently on what other causal powers also exert an influence on the event concerned. Any given causal power, therefore, only has a *tendency* to produce a certain sort of outcome.

This paper argues that a norm circle is an entity with the emergent causal power to increase the dispositions of individuals to conform to the norm endorsed and enforced by the norm circle concerned. In the simple version of the norm circle model discussed so far, the parts of this entity are the individual human agents who are committed to endorsing and enforcing the norm in their personal relationships with

⁸ This is therefore what Stephan has called a *weak* conception of emergence, since unlike *strong* conceptions of emergence, it is compatible with the possibility that emergent properties can be explained (Stephan 2006, pp. 486-7). I argue, however, that although such properties can be explained, they cannot be *explained away*; and thus they cannot be eliminated from causal explanations (Elder-Vass 2005; Elder-Vass 2010). They are, therefore, strong enough to justify the argument of this paper. There is a substantial literature on emergence and considerable controversy over the subject; see the sources cited in this note for further discussions of how the perspective advocated here relates to that literature.

others. But this is more than just a personal commitment: members of a norm circle are aware that other members of the circle share their commitment, they feel an obligation to them to endorse and enforce the norm concerned, and they have an expectation of others that they will support them in that endorsement and enforcement. In other words, the members of a norm circle share a *collective intention* to support the norm, and as a result they each tend to support it more actively than they would if they did not share that collective intention.⁹ Of course, an individual who was not part of a norm circle might develop a belief that a certain practice was desirable, and might start to encourage others to follow it, but (i) this wouldn't be *culture* unless and until others started to share that belief, since culture is inherently shared; and (ii) by comparison with this individual, any individual who had an equally strong personal belief in the norm but *also* had a sense of being committed to its collective endorsement would tend to endorse and enforce it more strongly. It is this additional tendency to endorse and enforce that shows most clearly the causal influence that the norm circle has over and above any influence of the independent individual. Of course, such influences always operate *through* the actions of individuals, and thus from a superficial empirical perspective the influence of the group is invisible, but this is no guide to the causal powers that are really at work.

Durkheim himself saw the relation between individuals and the collective in essentially emergentist terms (Sawyer 2005: chapter 6). He argued, for example, that “Whenever certain elements combine and thereby produce, by the fact of their combination, new phenomena, it is plain that these new phenomena reside not in the original elements but in the totality formed by their union” (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: xvlii). Although here he is writing about chemical elements, the argument applies equally to the social world:

If, as we may say, this synthesis constituting every society yields new phenomena, differing from those which take place in individual consciousness, we must, indeed, admit that these facts reside exclusively in the very society itself which produces them, and not in its parts, i.e. its members (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: xvliii)

⁹ For a very clear introduction to the concept of collective intentionality, see (Gilbert 1990).

And indeed Durkheim makes almost exactly the argument I have just offered: “The group thinks, feels, and acts quite differently from the way in which its members would were they isolated” (Durkheim 1964 [1901]: 104).¹⁰

Durkheim’s error, however, was to assume that the representations themselves, the ideas that form the *content* of our culture, could exist in a collective form. In the norm circles model, by contrast, those ideas exist only as the mental properties of individuals, but it is their *endorsement by a collective* that makes them culture. Only individuals have the power to hold beliefs; but only groups have the power to designate those beliefs as elements of shared culture. Culture is not simply belief, but socially endorsed belief, and that social endorsement can only be brought about by the group.

Now it might seem that the group as such can only endorse beliefs if the group as such ‘knows’ them, but this is not the case. All that is necessary is (i) that the members of the group are able to recognise whether any given action conforms to their understanding of the norm; and (ii) that their understandings of the norm are reasonably closely consistent with each other. This does not depend on group knowledge, but it *does* depend on the existence of communication processes within the group that are sufficiently reliable to make such consistency possible. In relatively small isolated groups verbal communication may be adequate to this task, but today we also depend heavily on the material carriers of culture invoked by Popper and Archer (but in their World 1 sense, not their World 3 sense), and the connected skills of decoding them.

Although this paper has focussed on the role of groups of people in institutionalising our cultures, Popper and Archer’s work points to a profoundly important feature of the cultural systems of literate societies: the central role played by intelligibilia in the communication, reproduction, and transformation of culture. We take not only the people around us, but also the texts that we consult, as sources of both knowledge and normative guidance. One implication is that the norm circles that influence us in effect consist not just of people but are instead hybrid entities, composed of both people and intelligibilia. Christians, for example, may see not only

¹⁰ Although these quotes are from the *Rules*, I agree with Sawyer that this invocation of emergence was no youthful aberration of Durkheim’s but a commitment that we can still trace even in his later work – see, for example, (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 342).

fellow Christians but also the bible as sources of moral guidance. Similarly, sportspeople may take not only fellow players and referees but also rulebooks as authoritative guides to the rules of their game. In literate societies, it is the combination of the influence of people and texts that produce tendencies for individuals to live according to particular cultural standards.

The ideas that people decipher from intelligibilia may thus support a norm, just like those that are communicated to them verbally. But a further qualification is required here, because of the radically different degrees of trust placed in different intelligibilia. Different texts have very different degrees of influence, and this in turn depends, I argue, on the different levels of endorsement they receive from what we may call epistemic norm circles.¹¹ Contemporary culture may thus depend on the documentary archive, but it is not enough for an idea to be decodable from a text for it to be part of a culture, at least in the sense of culture at issue here; it is only those ideas that are also collectively endorsed that shape our practices, rituals, and institutions. To return to Popper's discussion of the destruction of our libraries: we could only reconstruct a culture if we had, not only readable texts containing the ideas at large amongst the members of that culture, but also information about which of those ideas were endorsed within the culture, and how widely, and indeed how those patterns of endorsement varied and interacted across the social space.

It is this last factor that makes the norm circles model of most value for the analysis of real cultures: the recognition that cultures are composed of many cross-cutting norm circles, that different norm circles may have different social significance due to differences in the social standing, power and resources of their members, and that culture is a locus of constant struggle over which norms people should observe. Cultural change occurs when some norm circles grow at the expense of others; and when innovation produces new or altered norms which develop their own norm circles and enter this fray. It is not a question of whether some norms disappear and others appear *in the archive* that matters here; it is a question of which norms can secure the allegiance of the population.

One of the best ways to understand such processes is by means of Archer's morphogenetic cycle: the constant process of interaction in which, first, individuals

¹¹ This argument is developed further in (Elder-Vass 2009b).

are exposed to normative pressures that tend to influence their dispositions; second, they act, influenced by those dispositions but also, at least sometimes, by their evaluations of their needs given the social context; and third, those actions reproduce or transform the normative environment faced by those around them. Archer's models of analytical dualism and the morphogenetic cycle remain relevant because we still have an ontological differentiation between the subjective moment and the objective. But the objective moment is no longer culture conceived of as a stock of ideas with an autonomous existence. Instead, it takes the form of a set of norm circles, composed of groups of people but also of those texts taken by such groups to be authoritative. It is these social entities that have the ability to influence our cultural practices.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that while culture depends on the beliefs and dispositions of individual human beings, we cannot understand it purely in these terms. It is inherent to the concept of culture that it is shared, and so we need to explain what it is that leads to us sharing those practices that constitute culture. This can only be done in terms of something outside any given individual, something beyond the purely subjective element of dispositions or beliefs. Traditionally, however, there has been a tendency for social theorists to argue that it is the ideational content of shared culture that exists beyond the individual, for example in the form of Durkheim's collective representations, or of Popper's objective knowledge. This paper has argued that such understandings of the objective moment in the cycle of cultural reproduction are untenable; there is no known way for ideas as such to exist except as the mental properties of individual humans. But there is a better way to conceive of the objective moment in the cycle: as groups of people, organised in the form of norm circles. These groups have the emergent causal power to influence us, to increase our tendency to conform to the norms that they endorse, and it is this power of norm circles that tends to produce and sustain shared ways of living. That emergent causal power arises from a particular sort of relation between the members of a norm circle: their collective intention to endorse and enforce the norm. While intelligibilia such as books and documents play a part in this process, and may even perhaps be

considered parts of norm circles, it is as representations of ideas, as vehicles for their communication, that they do so, and not in the form of ideas as such.

In some ways this process produces the appearance of collective representations of objective knowledge or objective culture. For many practical purposes we can talk ‘as if’ there were objective knowledge in something like Popper’s sense, and ‘as if’ it were possessed by an epistemological community in something like Nelson’s sense. But, I suggest, the reason that some knowledge and cultural practices appear to us as externally objective, as existing in their own right independently of us as individuals, is precisely that we are so accustomed to them being endorsed by those around us that the knowledge itself, and the cultural practices, take on the appearance of having an independent existence. This is an illusion; but it is an instructive illusion, because when we look behind it for its cause we find the real source of the objective moment in the cultural cycle: the groups of people that produce it.

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