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DESCRIPTION AS CHOICE*

By AMARTYA SEN

1

DESCRIPTION is sometimes contrasted with prescription, and at other times with prediction. While the former differentiates descriptive statements from value judgments and imperatives, the latter differentiates it from predictive statements. Philosophical discussions in the social sciences have tended to concentrate on prescriptive and predictive exercises, and as a consequence the methodological issues involved in description have remained largely unexplored. The object of this paper is to take up some of these issues.

Boundaries are not always clear-cut between prescription and description, nor between prediction and description. The ambiguities have given philosophers scope for interesting and amusing arguments, while bemusing and befuddling the no-nonsense practical man eager to get on with the job. Some of the discussion in this paper will touch on these boundary questions, but I shall not be directly concerned with these classificatory problems.

I believe that boundary questions are sometimes taken to be more important than they are. Intellectual interest in these issues may distract attention from the fact that imprecision of boundaries can still leave vast regions without ambiguity. It is indeed possible to say a good deal about China and India without asserting that there are no ambiguities as to where the boundary between the two countries lies.

2

It is fair to say that description as an intellectual activity is typically not regarded as very challenging. To characterize a work in the social sciences as “purely descriptive” would not normally be regarded as high praise. The reason for this—at least in part—must rest in the idea that description is largely a matter of mere observation and reporting, or reading other people’s reports and summarising—at best systematizing. Whether a descriptive statement is acceptable could be thought to be dependent on its correctness, and that could be resolved simply by observing.

I would like to begin with what I think is a moderate claim, reserving the right to be controversial later on. Description isn’t just observing and reporting; it involves the exercise—possibly difficult—of selection. For example, in judging F. M. Eden’s 1797 study *The State of the Poor*, or

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Frederich Engel's *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, or John and Barbara Hammonds' *The Village Labourer 1760–1832*, a good deal more is involved than just checking the truth of the individual facts recorded. In fact, description can be characterized as choosing from the set of possibly true statements a subset on grounds of their relevance. Truth is—at best—a necessary but not sufficient condition for good description. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that any conscious act of description contains some theory—usually implicit—about the relative importance of the various statements dealing with the subject matter.¹ I shall call this the “choice basis of description”. I might add in passing that recent developments in formal choice theory can be fruitfully used for studying the regularities of description, but I shall not pursue this suggestion in this lecture.²

3

A description can be accurate without being a good description. It could be unhelpful, even useless. We question the expert on the level of factory wages in India. He answers: “Oh, it varies from place to place.” True enough, of course. We ask for more description, demanding precision. The expert now goes into details. “The integer approximation of the national average wage in rupees,” he says, “is a prime number”. I won't belabour the point further. Clearly, truth isn't a sufficient condition for a description to be good.

Is it a necessary condition? It might appear that the answer must be yes. How can a false description be good? The issue is, however, more complex than that, and there are at least two distinct sources of difficulty.

First, departures from literal truth may not be immediately dismissable as untrue. Indeed, approximations, metaphors, simplifications, etc., have important roles in conveying the truth. Your child asks you: “How large is China?”, and you reply: “Very large—it has 900 million people”. You may have enlightened him, but you have also almost certainly made a statement that is untrue in terms of the exact number. 900 million may convey the size more efficiently—shorn of unimportant detail—than 876,493,179, even if that happens to be the exact number at the moment you spoke. Even that old summary statement: “Every fifth person born on earth is Chinese” has communicated something about the size of China in the past, despite pitfalls in the literal interpretation of that statement and feeble jokes about the fifth

¹See Koopmans (1947) and Hicks (1979), p. ix.

²The literature on general choice theory is quite vast. Discussion of some of the main issues can be found in Herzberger (1973) and Sen (1977b, section 4). Herzberger's recent concern with choice-theoretic approaches to semantics relates closely to the choice basis of description, as defined here.

child in an English family being called Chang. Insofar as truth is a necessary condition of good description, the concept of truth must be a broad one.

The second problem is, I think, a good deal more complex. Description may have objectives the pursuit of which can be helped by departures from truth—even in the broad sense. Milton Friedman (1953), in particular, has argued powerfully in favour of departing from truth in describing reality in the context of economic models, judging the merits of the assumptions not in terms of accuracy but in the light of their predictive usefulness. I shall have something to say presently on Friedman's methodological observations, and on Paul Samuelson's critique of Friedman and the "*F*-twist",³ but at this stage I would simply note that Friedman has drawn our attention to the important possibility that an unrealistic assumption giving an inaccurate description may nevertheless be a useful one for the purpose for which the description is intended. Friedman restricts his attention to predictive usefulness only, but the point can be generalized, and objectives other than predictive success might also lead to a case for departing from the truth. Examples can be constructed such that truth of descriptions conflicts with usefulness for prescriptive exercises, or even for communication.

4

A distinction must, however, be made between a description of something being good in the sense of being a good one *to give* and it being a good description of *that* thing. The aspiring murderer demands from you a description of where his would-be victim has gone, and as you point at the wrong road he proceeds in that direction with a roar. That description of where the would-be victim has gone is, I would agree, a good one to give, but it can hardly be accepted as a good description of where the would-be victim has gone. The goodness of a description can be judged in terms of many alternative criteria, but in calling a description a good description of something, truth—in the broad sense—would seem to be a necessary condition.⁴

There isn't anything very puzzling here, even though the distinction has been frequently overlooked. A good description of something reflects reality about that thing in some straightforward sense, rather than distorting it. This is so even when distortion is a commendable activity in terms of some *other* objective, and furthermore also commendable taking *everything* into account. A cook who helps the arrest of a mass murderer by mixing a sleeping drug with his food might well be doing good, but that does not make his cooking good, nor does it make him an outstanding cook.

³Samuelson (1963), pp. 231–6; reprinted in Stiglitz (1966), pp. 1772–8.

⁴In terms of M. A. Slote's (1966) "theory of important criteria", truth can be seen to be an important criterion of a description being a good description of something.

5

I turn now to the methodological dispute between Friedman and Samuelson.⁵ Friedman argued that the appropriateness of an assumption must be judged not by its realism but by its predictive usefulness. Furthermore, Friedman saw an inverse relationship between realism of assumptions and its predictive contribution.

Insofar as a theory can be said to have ‘assumptions’ at all, and insofar as their ‘realism’ can be judged independently of the validity of predictions, the relation between the significance of a theory and the ‘realism’ of its assumptions is almost the opposite of that suggested by the view under criticism. Truly important and significant hypotheses will be found to have ‘assumptions’ that are widely inaccurate descriptive representations of reality, and, in general, the more significant the theory, the more unrealistic the assumptions (in this sense).⁶

Characterizing the approach as “*F*-twist”, Samuelson has attacked Friedman’s position sharply. “If the abstract models contain empirical falsities, we must jettison the models, not gloss over their inadequacies.” “The empirical harm done by the *F*-twist is this. In practice it leads to Humpty-Dumptyness. Lewis Carroll had Humpty-Dumpty use words any way he wanted to. I had in mind something different: Humpty-Dumpty uses the *F*-twist to say, ‘What I choose to call the admissible amount of unrealism and empirical invalidity is the tolerable amount of unrealism’”.⁷

I am not presently concerned with whether Friedman is correct in thinking that an inverse relationship tends to exist between accurate assumptions and predictive success. The important point to note is that if such an inverse relationship were to obtain, Friedman would be quite willing to sacrifice accuracy.

Stanley Wong (1973) has pointed out that Samuelson’s critique takes insufficient note of the “instrumental” nature of Friedman’s methodological position, and the latter’s overriding concern with prediction.⁸ This, I believe, is indeed the case, but the two views of description differ on an issue that goes well beyond the question of the predictive focus. No matter what the aim happens to be, as long as it is not—or does not include—making only accurate statements about observed facts, a conflict can conceivably arise between descriptive accuracy and the aim of the description. The issue is a good deal more general than the so-called “*F*-twist”, and concerns the conflict between aims of description and the truth of statements that can be used to further these aims.

⁵See also Nagel (1963).

⁶Friedman (1953), p. 14.

⁷Samuelson (1963), p. 236.

⁸See also Boland (1979).

6

Another different motivation is involved in Nicholas Kaldor's⁹ advocacy of departure from truthful description, in favour of what he calls "stylized facts". These aren't facts in the sense of being true, but they communicate rapidly certain things that are close enough to being true, but avoid a plethora of details. An example: that in the Western economies the capital-output ratio remained stationary over many decades and so did the share of wages in national income. Not exactly true for *all* the alluded economies. In fact, not exactly true for *any* of the alluded economies. Still, if the variations are relatively small in comparison with other, related variables, the simplification will have certain obvious advantages.

I have to report that in this case the advantages were probably rather unequally shared, with the biggest share going to Kaldor himself, who used these stylized facts to illustrate his well-known models of growth and distribution. But that wasn't all there was to it, and some of the stylized facts undoubtedly succeeded in enhancing comprehension, drawing attention to important observed regularities, even though they were not quite accurate. However, the important issue here isn't whether these particular simplifications were all informative without being misleading but that the method of using "stylized facts" can indeed have this property.

There is nothing exceptional to economics in making stylized facts a possible and potentially efficient method of understanding reality. Fiction is a general method of coming to grip with facts. There is nothing illegitimate in being helped by *War and Peace* to an understanding of the Napoleonic wars in Russia, or by *Grapes of Wrath* to digesting aspects of the Depression. There is no reason why descriptive statements in economics have to aspire after mechanical accuracy even when it conflicts with comprehension and absorption. There is, of course, an obvious objection to presenting non-facts dressed up as facts, but there is no need to do this once non-facts are accepted as legitimate descriptive instruments themselves. Such a description of something will be good in the sense of being useful, but—as already explained—must not be confused with its being a good—or realistic—description of that thing.

7

Samuelson's argument that "we must jettison the models" that "contain empirical falsities" seems to be based on a very narrow view of objectives of description. However, Samuelson wasn't only objecting to the use of empirical falsities in models, but also disputing Friedman's use of words. The reference to Humpty-Dumptyness deals with this. This relates closely to our

⁹See Kaldor (1960a, 1960b).

distinction between a description that is good and a good description of something. Friedman not only defends the use of inaccurate assumption in predictive theory, but also employs a new concept of realism. It is “the test by prediction” in classifying alternative assumptions “as more or less realistic” that Friedman embraces and which he sees others being “necessarily driven” to accept (p. 33).

The predictive usefulness of an inaccurate description may well justify the choice of that description, but why does it make it a more *realistic* description? The “instrumental” nature of Friedman’s position may be adequate in defending the choice of such an assumption, but to call it “realistic” is a separate assertion, violating the important criterion that a description must be true, in the broad sense, to be realistic. Samuelson’s objection to this violation cannot be dismissed by a pointer to the “instrumental” character of Friedman’s economic methodology.

The defence that Friedman provides of this characterisation of “realism” mainly takes the form of denying the viability of any alternative conception.

A theory or its “assumptions” cannot possibly be thoroughly “realistic” in the immediate descriptive sense so often assigned to this term. A completely “realistic” theory of the wheat market would have to include not only the conditions directly underlying the supply and demand for wheat but also the kind of coins or credit instruments used to make exchanges; the personal characteristics of wheat-traders such as the colour of each trader’s hair and eyes, his antecedents and education, the number of members of his family, their characteristics, antecedents, and education, etc.; the kind of soil on which the wheat was grown, its physical and chemical characteristics, the weather prevailing during the growing season; the personal characteristics of the farmers growing the wheat and of the consumers who will ultimately use it; and so on indefinitely. Any attempt to move very far in achieving this kind of “realism” is certain to render a theory utterly useless.¹⁰

In assessing this objection it is necessary to consider the distinction between realism in the sense of “nothing but the truth” and that in the sense of “the whole truth”. An assumption can be realistic in that it is true without the claim being made that it is exhaustive in capturing all aspects of the reality. Advocates of realism in the sense of “nothing but the truth” need not demand “the whole truth”. The dissatisfaction with Friedman’s position on the part of critics such as Samuelson does not arise from Friedman’s rejection of “the whole truth”, but from his rejection of “nothing but the truth”.

The distinction is important for Friedman’s discussion of departures from realism and the criteria of acceptability of such departures.

What is the criterion by which to judge whether a particular departure from realism is or is not acceptable? Why is it more “unrealistic” in analysing business behaviour to neglect the magnitude of businessmen’s costs than the colour of their

¹⁰Friedman (1953), p. 32.

eyes? The obvious answer is because the first makes more difference to business behaviour than the second; but there is no way of knowing that this is so simply by observing that businessmen do have costs of different magnitudes and eyes of different colour. Clearly it can only be known by comparing the effect on the discrepancy between actual and predicted behaviour of taking one factor or the other into account. Even the most extreme proponents of realistic assumptions are thus necessarily driven to reject their own criterion and to accept the test by prediction when they classify alternative assumptions as more or less realistic.¹¹

I shall have something to say presently on the predictive focus. What is, however, more important in the present context is to note that “to neglect” the colour of businessmen’s eyes need not involve any departure from “nothing but the truth”. The fact that a model does not bring in the colour of businessmen’s eyes does not imply that it is being assumed that businessmen have eyes of the same colour. This neglect would not, thus, be a “departure from realism” in the sense of making untrue statements. The need to neglect some aspects of the truth and thereby departing from the whole truth does not establish the necessity of departing from nothing but the truth, and Friedman’s dismissal of the viability of the traditional view of realism seems over-hasty.

8

While the preceding argument disputes Friedman’s treatment of realism, it does not disestablish Friedman’s rejection of truth as a necessary condition of acceptability of a description. An untrue description of something may not be a good description of that thing—nor a realistic description. But it can serve some other objective efficiently, and if so, could well be chosen on that ground.

However, Friedman’s concentration on predictive success as the only objective he considers, also makes his treatment of the choice basis of description a very limited one. Description may well be geared to some objective other than prediction, e.g., normative analysis, or efficient communication, or even satisfying idle curiosity. Even the preference for concentrating on businessmen’s costs rather than on the colour of their eyes—to return to Friedman’s example—may arise from some non-predictive motivation. For example, within the normative perspective, the businessmen’s costs might be relevant to some notion of desert, e.g., a person deserves to get a reward for the costs he has undertaken, and this may give no place at all to the colour of the person’s eyes.

The nature of economic questions reflects a variety of interests that the subject has to cater to. Has the distribution of income turned more unequal in country x? Are the residents of country y better fed today than before? Is

¹¹Friedman (1953), pp. 32–3.

modern technology getting easily absorbed in country z? Has trade unionism influenced the distribution of income under capitalism? Are there business cycles still in the Western economies? How large is the Soviet Union's international trade? How should we plan the use of exhaustible resources? Does progressive taxation affect incentives? Will the expansion of money supply—this one in honour of Milton Friedman—expand prices proportionately? This bag of assorted questions reflects a plurality of motivation that is not reducible to some kind of single "ultimate objective". They represent predictive investigation, normative concern as well as curiosity related to a variety of interests from sympathy to satisfying one's spirit of inquiry. A monolithic characterization of the objective of description will leave us with a methodology ill-suited to the subject.

9

The multiplicity of motivation has been discussed so far in the particular context of departures from accuracy, but it is of course a much more central issue than this particular context might suggest. Even when no departures from truth are involved, there is—as already discussed—the problem of selection, choosing from the set of true statements a subset of relevant ones. Criteria of relevance are crucial to this choice basis of description going well beyond the issue of truth.

Methodological discussions in economics have tended to concentrate on predictive and prescriptive concerns, and seem to have had the effect of ignoring other motivations that stimulate inquiry.¹² This bias has had a rather impoverishing role on the descriptive traditions in economics.

The choice basis of description may relate to the curiosity that precipitates inquiry, and this curiosity need not reflect predictive or prescriptive interests. Indeed, even the use of language can relate to selection based on other types of curiosity. In response to the question: "Is China a large country?", we accepted the answer: "Yes, it has 900 million people", basing the notion of the size of country on the size of its population. However, China has less surface area than Canada, fewer tigers than India, fewer polar bears than the Soviet Union, and—according to some early enthusiastic accounts—no flies at all. The case for describing China as larger than Canada, India or the Soviet Union clearly rests in our greater interest in human beings than in square miles, tigers, polar bears and flies. But it is *not* a reflection of some greater predictive merit, *nor* of some obvious prescriptive interest. The view of human beings having no interests whatever other than predictive and prescriptive concerns does some injustice to the species.

¹²In this there is unity between members of widely different schools of economic philosophy, e.g., Milton Friedman (1953), Gunnar Myrdal (1954), Joan Robinson (1964).

The non-predictive, non-prescriptive motivations are particularly important to bear in mind in understanding the role of “theories of value” in economics, particularly the labour theory of value. The labour theory can, in fact, be given various interpretations related to the motivations involved. One is that of a predictive theory—in particular that of relative prices and distribution, and it encompasses the so-called “law of value”. Another is normative, providing a theory of entitlements. A third, which is frequently missed, is a way of discriminating between different features of production and exchange by focussing on elements of human involvement.¹³ Value, in Marx’s (1887) words, is “a relation between persons expressed as a relation between things” (p. 45).

The last interpretation is frequently taken to be “metaphysical”, as Joan Robinson (1964) puts it, describing it also as “a mere rigmarole of words” (p. 39). Why so? Because it picks up from the description of production and exchange only some features as being specially significant, leaving the rest untouched? The discrimination makes the description arbitrary, as many critics have seen it. But, as I have already tried to argue, any description involves discrimination and selection, and the real question is the relevance of the selection process to the objectives of description.

I have claimed elsewhere¹⁴ that the methodological issue can be more easily understood by looking at other descriptive statements in which the discrimination involved cannot be reduced entirely to predictive or prescriptive interests. Consider the statement “Michaelangelo produced the statue of David”. There is an obvious sense in which this would be accepted as a realistic description, despite its being informationally selective and the selection process not being primarily motivated by prediction or prescription. The production process in making the statue actually involved not merely Michaelangelo, but his helpers, a huge block of stone, chisels, scaffoldings, etc., but the description quoted focusses on Michaelangelo only as the most relevant bit of information. Note that the discrimination cannot be based on any marginal productivity consideration in the usual neo-classical sense. Without Michaelangelo, no statue, but without stone, no statue either! But this does not give the same status to the two statements “Michaelangelo produced the statue of David” and “this stone produced the statue of David” (or “this stone quarry produced the statue of David”). The selection process reflects other motivations, in particular, that of capturing the source of the imagination displayed in the statue.

The labour theory of value, in its descriptive interpretation, shows a similar—but not the same—type of discrimination, focussing—in this case—on the human effort directly and indirectly involved in the process of

¹³This has been best discussed by Maurice Dobb (1937).

¹⁴Sen (1978a) pp. 176–8.

production and exchange of commodities. In assessing the labour theory of value as a description of production and exchange, it is the cogency of this focus that has to be assessed, including its ability, if any, to capture our interest compared with other methods of discrimination. Examining only the theory's predictive success, or its normative relevance, will not even begin to provide a complete assessment of the labour theory of value. And to call it metaphysical because it is informationally discriminating involves a total failure to perceive the nature of description as an activity.

10

I turn now to the other of the two great theories of value, viz., the utility theory. Again, utility descriptions have predictive and normative interest, but once again they do not exhaust the descriptive motivations. The joys and sufferings of human beings and their deprivations and fulfilments have interest of their own. Even classical political economists were much concerned with related—though not identical—features in their interest in use value.¹⁵ It is this part of the descriptive motivation that has been least well served by recent developments of utility theory, most notably by the theory of revealed preference. Focussing only on predicting behaviour, the richness of human psychology has been substantially ignored, refusing to see anything in utility or happiness other than choice. As the “father” of revealed preference theory, Paul Samuelson, puts it: behaviour is to be “explained in terms of preference, which are in turn defined only by behaviour.”¹⁶

This has led to an approach that is—despite some predictive merits—remarkably mute about human joys and sufferings in which economics used to take a lot of interest. The result is a descriptive impoverishment from *many* perspectives, *including*—among others—normative relevance, since many of the common norms do relate precisely to the ignored descriptive features.¹⁷ Attempts at overcoming this lacuna by defining utility not in terms of choice but independently, say, as a person's own concept of his own well-being, but assuming that people do *in fact* choose according to their respective utilities, raise other difficulties. In particular, this yields a view of man totally uncommitted to anything other than maximizing his own well-being irrespective of political values, class interests, community spirits and social conventions, except insofar as these things affect his perception of

¹⁵This is especially true of Karl Marx, and as he himself puts it: “use-value plays a far more important part in my economics than in economics hitherto” (Marx (1879–80, p. 39)). In the subject index of volume I of *Capital* (Marx (1887)), edited by Engels, the first reference to “use value” is to pages 1–114. This aspect of Marx's concern seems to be frequently overlooked in characterisations of Marx's “treatment of value”.

¹⁶Samuelson (1947), pp. 90–1.

¹⁷See Hicks (1958, 1974). Also Sen (1979).

his own well-being. This extraordinary model of man—the “rational fool”¹⁸—has been widely used in economics with very little empirical testing.

Insularity has permitted this theory to remain in vogue, despite conspicuous failure to account for many types of human behaviour, e.g., why people vote in large elections, why people are ready to fight for and even die for a cause, or why so many seem convinced that they do many things out of a sense of commitment rather than pure pursuit of self interest. Predicting future choice on the basis of past choice is not in itself a bad predictive strategy (despite some well-known problems). But if that is used as the only focus of the theory of utility, then there is *either* silence on many important issues (when “utility” is treated as just another name for a numerical reflector of choice), *or* there is a good deal of senseless noise.

While there have been some attempts recently to break away from this highly limited model, e.g., in the works of Hirsch (1976), Hirschman (1977), Leibenstein (1976), Scitovsky (1976), and a few other authors, the dominant tradition of behavioural studies in economics remains largely shackled to that model. We have, thus, the strange spectacle of two great theories of “value”—each rich in descriptive features in their original formulation—reduced to descriptive penury or to factual irrelevance. The labour theory of value is dismissed as “metaphysical”, or at best an imperfect intermediate product in a theory of price and distribution. The delimitation of utility theory to one of silent choice—no questions asked as to what lies behind choice—stifles descriptive inquiry into human joys and sufferings. The dominant methodology in economics with its extraordinarily narrow interpretation of objectives of description has produced molehills out of mountains.

11

Descriptive economics has suffered for a long time from the imperialism of *predictive* economics. Recently it has suffered a certain amount also from the new and expanding empire of *prescriptive* economics. Prescriptive economics had itself a rather hard time earlier in the positivist heyday. The debunking of welfare economics that can be seen in such works as Lionel Robbin’s *The Nature and Significance of Economic Science*¹⁹ kept prescriptive studies somewhat immersed in a pool of apology from the mid-thirties until relatively recently. Welfare economics was for a long time the “untouchable” in the community of economics and when economists spoke “qua economist”—to use that lovely expression brought into circulation by

¹⁸For a critique of the propensity of economic theory to rely on the “rational fool”, see Sen (1977a). For a “balanced” account of the issues involved, see Hahn and Hollis (1979), “Introduction”.

¹⁹Robbins (1932).

positivism—they tried to speak in a value-free “scientific” language, with “expletives” deleted. Welfare economics was seen as the subject, if not of expletives, at least of emotive utterances, which the cool positivist scientists found “meaningless” in terms of their narrow theory of meaning.

The balloon did ultimately burst, and prescriptive economics has certainly emerged in recent years as a vigorous field—both in the traditional forms of welfare economics and political economy as well as in the shape of the new discipline of social choice theory. Debates on prescriptive matters are no longer treated as just a case of “thy blood or mine”, to quote Lionel Robbin’s influential characterization. But while freeing itself from the positivist prison, prescriptive economics has, I would now like to argue, quite often imposed its own shackles on the discipline of description.

There has been the proposition that every factual statement involves implicit values. In its original formulation and use, this claim, which I believe is false, may have played a challenging part in the dialectics with positivism. “So you want facts only, no values, because they are illegitimate,” the argument ran, “but you can’t have facts without values. Touché!”

But why must every factual statement involve values? The basis of the claim seems to rest uneasily on the belief, which is correct, that any description involves some selection. What is not correct is the further belief that the selection must be based on some explicit or implicit prescriptive criterion. The criteria used for selection, as I have been arguing, may be aimed at objectives *other than* prescription, e.g., catering to curiosity. Cosmologists or historians take this for granted. There is, of course, a sense in which this too involves a judgment, to wit, it is right to cater to people’s curiosity in the choice basis of description.²⁰ But this does not imply that the selection has to be done in terms of normative interests. Prescription is one of several possible objectives of descriptive selection, and to assert its omnipresence is to replace the imperialism of predictive economics by that of prescriptive economics.

12

The enormous success of Gunnar Myrdal’s *Political Elements in the Development of Economic Theory* owes not a little to this spirit of hunting for values in factual statements. While Myrdal entered the exercise as a positivist, looking for contraband values, he ended up asserting something close to the impossibility of prescription-free descriptive statements (see Myrdal (1958)). There was, however, some haste and a good deal of

²⁰Even the choice of words reflects judgments, when “a cluster term” is used, as to “what is or is not important” (Slote (1966), p. 223).

unestablished assertion in detecting underneath each bed a surreptitious prescriptive head.

The chief source of confusion here rests in confounding the need for *selection* in the choice basis of description with the need to cater to *prescriptive* ends in particular. One consequence of this illegitimate identification is the growth of the recent tendency to convert descriptive questions into *as if* prescriptive ones. To take an example, consider the question of measurement of inequalities of income. While there is little doubt that prescriptive interest provides one reason for inquiring into economic inequality, the question "How much inequality of incomes is there?" cannot be fully captured by a prescriptive interpretation. But in a paper published in 1920, Hugh Dalton,²¹ in effect, reinterpreted the question in ethical terms to mean: "How much loss of social welfare is there from inequality?"

This prescriptive re-interpretation remained subdued under the positivist hegemony established shortly after Dalton's paper was published, but with the prescriptive backlash, this has now re-emerged in the front line. Tony Atkinson's (1970) ethical index of economic inequality measures inequality in terms of the same approach as that of Dalton, but does it more elegantly and more economically through measuring the social welfare loss in terms of equivalent income. This has the consequence that the descriptive features of income inequality are all drowned in a normative flood, producing some rather extraordinary consequences. An income distribution of (99,1) has to be declared as perfectly equal if social welfare is taken to be the sum of individual utilities given by a linear function of individual incomes, since there is no social welfare loss from inequality in this case. Other odd consequences—some more serious than others—have been pointed out.²²

A hard-headed prescriptivist would perhaps remain unaffected by these consequences if he really does believe that income inequality has no independent descriptive meaning at all, and would probably say something like: "Why not describe (99,1) as equal if there is no social welfare loss from this inequality, I mean, discrepancy?" But inequality does seem to have descriptive meaning too which people acknowledge,²³ and to jettison all that impoverishes the subject. One of the ironies of the situation is that Tony Atkinson's own works on descriptive features of inequality in Britain (works which in depth and relevance remain, in my opinion, quite unexcelled

²¹Dalton (1920). For an uncompromising and forceful rejection of this approach, see Wiles (1974).

²²See Hansson (1977) and Sen (1978b).

²³This is, however, not the same as asserting that there are no ambiguities in the descriptive meaning, nor that it must yield a *complete* ordering. These issues have been discussed in Sen (1978b), which shows, among other things, that the partial ordering of unambiguous ethical ranking (given the commonly used value frameworks) is *not* more extensive than the partial ordering of unambiguous descriptive ranking (in terms of the commonly accepted descriptive criteria).

anywhere), cannot be captured at all within the arena of the Dalton-Atkinson measures. Nor can ethical measurement provide the appropriate background for checking such relations as that between inequality and crime.

We are back again at the question of realism. Friedman dismissed its claim on the ground that the only way of telling realism is *predictive* relevance; the Dalton-Atkinson approach to the measurement of inequality amounts to dismissing it on the ground that the only criterion is *prescriptive* relevance. Neither seems correct, but both have a good deal of following.

There are two distinct objections to the ethical indexes of inequality. First, ethical concern is not the only motivation behind measuring inequality, and might not even be the most important motivation in many cases. Second, even if ethical concern were the dominant motivation, a distinction still has to be made between a description of inequality that is useful and a good description of inequality (as discussed in section 4). Even if we are interested in inequality primarily because of the loss of social welfare from it, the questions “How much inequality is there?” and “How much *loss of social welfare* is there from inequality?” are not identical queries. There may be no loss of social welfare from a distribution (99,1), but it is absurd to call it an equal distribution.

13

A related, though not exactly parallel, problem has arisen in the conceptualization of poverty. The distinguished American sociologist Mollie Orshansky (1969) has not been alone in arguing that “poverty is a value judgment”, and the approach is well-reflected by her often-quoted aphorism: “Poverty, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder” (p. 37). Does it really? Orshansky’s view is an amalgam of taking a prescriptive view of description (of poverty, in this case), and—additionally—a subjectivist view of prescription. Both assertions have superficial plausibility, but neither claim is, I believe, easy to sustain.

Here we are really concerned with the former claim, viz., that poverty is a value judgment. This assertion suffers from difficulties rather similar to those that apply to ethical measurement of inequality. Poverty description—like any description—involves selection, but value interests may not provide the only motivation underlying selection. Furthermore even if prescription were the only reason for which people take an interest in poverty—this I believe is not the case but assuming that this were the case—poverty description will then *reflect* socially held value judgments rather than *be* value judgements themselves.

As Marx (1887) had argued, discussing the concept of “subsistence”, while the notion of “the so-called necessary wants” have “a historical and

moral element”, “nevertheless in a given country, at a given period, the average quantity of the means of subsistence is practically known” (p. 150). For the social scientist studying poverty, the exercise is not one of unleashing one’s morals on the statistics of deprivation. Rather it is the exercise of assessing these statistics in line with socially held views as to what counts as poverty. These views may or may not themselves be moral ones, but even when they are moral, for the person *studying* these views, they are matters of fact, viz., that such views are held.²⁴ To describe what prescriptions are made is a description, not a prescription.

14

The view that poverty is a value judgment has often had the peculiar consequence of leading to attempts to avoid the use of the word “poverty” in social communication. In Indian official documents—including planning papers—the words “poor” and “unemployed” have been replaced fairly uniformly by the expression: “the weaker section of the Indian population”. This may have been morally well-motivated, but it has not been descriptively very illuminating. As it happens, people drawn from this “weaker section of the Indian population” do the heavy work in India, varying from breaking stones and bending iron to carrying heavy loads on their heads. However, it has been possible to avoid being constantly reminded of the facts of overwhelming poverty in India by the peculiar terminology. Of course, this practice has to be distinguished from the spirit of Mollie Orshansky’s claim, but the view that poverty is nothing but a value judgment does open up many possibilities. It also eases the way to achieving what the late Daniel Thorner (1956) had characterised—in a paper on Indian censuses—as “Agrarian Revolution by Census Redefinition”. Indeed, we have very little hard facts about, say, the plight of the “untouchables” in India because not content with calling them by the morally superior name “Harijan”—“children of God”—as Mahatma Gandhi had renamed them, the census authorities proceeded to discontinue data collection on the morally offensive subject of the practice of untouchability.

To return to my general theme, the prescriptive tradition in the social sciences—freed at last from the shackles of positivist dismissal—has started exercising an imperialism of its own.

15

Finally, a few concluding remarks.

First, description inevitably involves selection. It can be usefully seen as a choice of a subset from a set of possible statements.

²⁴While typically the exercise may be concerned with views held in the community in which poverty is being measured, this need not always be the case. For example, “international standards” are sometimes used for the measurement of “national” poverty.

Second, truth is clearly not a sufficient condition for a description to be good.

Third, nor is it a necessary condition. Friedman's defence of departures from truth in choosing factual assumptions is a special case of a general argument in favour of judging description by its usefulness. Friedman considers only predictive usefulness, but there are other objectives which lead to the same conclusion. Samuelson's assertion of the need to "jettison" models that contain "empirical falsities" seems to take a very narrow view of description as an activity.

Fourth, Friedman's attack on traditional notions of realism is based on a misunderstanding. His own suggestion about judging realism by "the test by prediction" seems to confound usefulness of a description with its realism. A description of something can be a good one to give without being a good description of that thing.

Fifth, description can be motivated by predictive interest or by prescriptive interest, but it may also have other motivations, and to confine attention only to predictive or prescriptive interest impoverishes the traditions of descriptive economics.

Finally, such impoverishment can be seen in recent developments in many different fields of economics, varying from interpretations of theories of "value" to the measurement of inequality and poverty. The richness of descriptive motivations seems to have been sacrificed for consistency within an arbitrarily narrow conception of these motivations, or—to be more exact—for consistency respectively within *two* arbitrarily narrow conceptions of motivations. This, I have argued, has been an unequal exchange: confounding the nature of description as an activity and unnecessarily weakening the theoretical underpinning of many legitimate and useful activities in the social sciences.

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