

Alfred Schutz and the values of the “well-informed citizen”

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Philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) has been criticized early on for the absence of objective values in his theory. Some philosophers attacked him for reducing values to the standards of different social groups (Eric Voegelin, Aron Gurwitsch), others for reducing values to the interests of different individuals (Bernhard Waldenfels). But can both lines of criticism be accurate? Or did Schutz just naively follow Weber’s idea of a “value-free” social science? While Schutz did not present a theory of value, I would like to argue that a Schutzian account of valuing could build precisely on the assumption that we cannot reach objective values.

According to Schutz, our knowledge and action is always highly “selective”. We can weigh a limited number of options, but the vast majority of possible alternatives never even enters our consideration. This implies that we can never be sure that we escape the bias of our individual viewpoint, or the bias of the standards we find in the social group we live in. Hence, we can never be sure to reach values which are objective (free from subjective bias) or universal (free from social bias). The same is true even of philosophical knowledge, which is produced by individual philosophers growing up in specific social groups.

However, we have a choice as to how to deal with this situation. Schutz (1946) presents this choice in the form of three types of person. (1) The “man in the street” accepts without question whichever values predominate in his social group, and he forces these values upon other people with the same indifference. (2) The “expert” knows her way only in her individual field of expertise and remains ignorant about the rest of the world. (3) If we find these two ways of living problematic, as Schutz clearly does, a third option remains. We can strive to be “well-informed citizens”. This means, first of all, acknowledging the fact that our values are always “selective” in the sense outlined above. Against this background, the “well-informed citizen” is ready to question the values she has followed so far. In order to do so, she tries to monitor her actions and to extend the knowledge which informs her decisions. She is prepared to adjust her values if good reasons for doing so come to light in the process.