**The Normativity of Resilience**

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**Summary**

This presentation asks whether resilience is a normative term, and answers this question in the affirmative. I start by explaining two arguments that have been offered in favour of the ‘resilience-as-descriptive’ thesis (RD). Then I criticize this view by advancing five reasons why resilience should be considered a normative term (RN).

**Keywords**

Resilience; normativity; metaethics; instrumental values; normality.

1. **Introduction**

While there is much disagreement among scholars and practitioners on whether resilience is a desirable goal, and to what extent, an emerging consensus seems to be that resilience-is-normative (RN), meaning that it provides new orientations for acting in various kinds of complex systems (Pelling 2010; Walker et al. 2011; Joseph 2013; Meerow et al. 2016; Kolers 2016). Yet, interestingly, authors linked to the Resilience Alliance have rejected this view to hold the opposite thesis: that resilience-is-descriptive (RD). Here I discuss the normativity of resilience by engaging resilience research and metaethics, the area of philosophy most directly concerned with normativity. I start by presenting the two main arguments advanced in favour of RD. Then I turn to offering five reasons in support of the alternative view, that resilience is normative (RN).

1. **Resilience-is-descriptive (RD): pro-arguments**

The Resilience Alliance seems ‘officially’ committed to the view that resilience is descriptive or non-normative (Carpenter et al. 2001; Holling & Walker 2003; Walker et al. 2004; Brandt & Jax 2007; Anderies et al. 2013; Thorén & Olsson 2017; Elmqvist et al. 2019). Two arguments have been offered in support of this view, each of which implies one distinct criterion for ascribing normativity.

1. A normative concept must entail “specific choices about performance measures”. Yet, resilience cannot be a goal or convey prescriptions, because it is not a precise concept. So, etc. (Anderies et al. 2013).
2. A normative concept cannot be ambivalent: it must **either** imply something positive (desirable), **or** negative (undesirable), in the following way.

**intrinsically**, e.g. good as an end/as such, as opposed to “good as X”, “good for X”, etc.: for example, dictatorships are undesirable as such, and sustainability is desirable as such; whether resilience is desirable depends on the system in question.

**consistently**: it is desirable OR undesirable, always and under any circumstance. Resilience can be desirable or undesirable: poverty traps and rigidity traps are, by definition, very resilient, and there exist both resilient democracies and resilient dictatorships.

**exhaustively**: captures everything good/bad: e.g. something sustainable cannot be bad in some way. Resilience is “distinct from sustainability [in that we] seldom hear of sustainable dictatorships, but there are resilient dictatorships.” (Anderies et al. 2013, 5).

Resilience is ambivalent, and so it is not normative.

Given these considerations, for example, Derissen et al. (2011) claim that sustainability is a moral (normative) concept, while resilience, in contrast, is a complex systems theory concept, or an ecological concept. One consequence of this view of resilience is that, although managers and policy-makers need to take resilience into account, resilience cannot be a design or management goal. Sometimes we might want to improve resilience, but, if the system is in an undesirable state, we want to fight resilience and ultimately erode it. In other words, we should not “manage for resilience”, but “manage resilience”. For example:

“Governance for sustainability will require active management of resilience by either reducing or strengthening resilience” (Elmqvist et al. 2019, 5).

This view does not deny that managing resilience involves making normative choices. This is unavoidable in operations such as selecting a system, a social theory, a disturbance of interest or a critical property to maintain after disturbance (Brandt & Jax 2007; Thorén & Olsson 2017). However, normativity is not implied by resilience per se, but in applying resilience as part of management or design interventions.

1. **Criteria pro-RD are not metaethically sound**

One reason why RD is wrong is that the two arguments pro-RD are not metaethically tenable.

1. This criterion is absurdly wrong. If resilience was not normative for this reason, then concepts like “good” or “justice” could not be normative either.
2. The three requirements are wrong (sufficient but not necessary).

**(i, ii)**. **Counterexample: efficiency.** Consider the intrinsic/instrumental distinction. **Intrinsic values** (goods) are ends that are desirable for themselves: **e.g. equality** is an intrinsic value regarding wealth distribution. **Instrumental values** (goods), in contrast, do not qualify ends, but only means or processes by which other ends are attained. These values are desirable insofar as they warrant, or enhance, the satisfaction of intrinsic values, but can also be undesirable if put to ill-chosen ends (van de Poel 2018): **e.g. efficiency.** Sharing riches efficiently improves equality, which makes efficiency instrumental to equality. But efficiency aggravates outcomes when it serves wrong ends, e.g. efficient killing machines are worse than regular killers. **Conclusion:** *efficiency is not consistently or intrinsically (un)desirable. Still, it remains a value, and so a normative concept. Something similar applies to resilience.*

**(iii)**. **Counterexample: Cuba is a sustainable dictatorship.** Sustainability concerns distributive justice within and across generations, i.e. justice in the allocation of goods. In the last decade, Cuba featured as **one of the countries with the highest rates in human development (HDI) for an acceptable ecological footprint** (EF) (Cabello et al. 2012; Niccolucci et al. 2012). Still, Cuba does not grant equal opportunity of access to political office (Rawls 1999): it is **procedurally unjust (and a dictatorship)**. But that does not make sustainability any less normative. Sustainability just cannot capture everything good: sustainable regimes can still be unjust. **Conclusion**: *a concept can be worth realizing and still not capture some desirable things; in other words, desirable ends/values can still carry value tradeoffs.*

1. **Some resilience concepts are clearly normative**

The articles that see resilience as descriptive, or non-normative, tend to think of resilience as monosemic, and to frame it as a close surrogate of **LOCK-IN (table 1):**

**Lock-In:** “state where path-dependent and **positive feedback processes** **create and reinforce systemic barriers to alternative pathways**” (Unruh 2000).

Another objection against RD, then, is that it pushes for a peculiar and idiosyncratic concept of resilience, whereas resilience is polysemic (it designates at least various distinguishable concepts), and some of the concepts it designates are clearly normative. For example, adaptation research is influenced by psychology and community psychology research, and, here, resilience definitions stress the positive character of adaptation and/or recovery **(table 1).** Also, in his 1978 monograph on Adaptive Management, Holling holds that resilient systems do not merely persist. In addition, when decline is inevitable, they can decline gracefully, and besides they are opportunistic: they can use change to become better. In other words, resilience can be a surrogate of **ANTI-FRAGILITY**:

**Anti-Fragility:** “property of systems that **benefit from shocks** and that thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors” (adapted from Taleb 2012).

1. **Resilience is linked to various classes of thick terms**

Thin terms are terms that only have normative content. Example: paradigmatic normative terms like *good, right, should,* etc. Thick terms, in contrast, have *descriptive* as well as *normative* content. Table 2, below, contains some examples of thick terms, divided in classes. This is a sample: there are many more classes.

Philosophers have discussed a variety of criteria for assessing whether an allegedly thick term is normative. RD has been defended (2nd argument) with:

* **Consistency (ConC):** a term is thick *iff* it consistently implies a positive (negative) valence. Examples: *cruel, painful, happy.* **Sufficient, not necessary.**

However, there are two other criteria:

* **Separability (SC):** a term is thick *iff* we can disentangle its normative and descriptive aspects. e.g.: *murder* is “*wrongful* deliberate killing”*, knowledge* is “*justified* true belief”. **Sufficient, not necessary.**
* **Membership (MC):** a term is thick iff it meets the criteria for being considered a member of a class of terms that are widely regarded as thick. **Sufficient…necessary?**

By using the separability criterion (SC) and the membership criterion (MC), resilience can be linked to various classes of thick terms, and so, qualified as normative.

* **Minimally, resilience is an instrumental value**. “Lock-in” resilience is closely linked with **efficiency** or **robustness**. As is already implicit in 2nd argument pro-RD: poverty traps, rigidity traps make resilience undesirable, but applied to other ends or patterned states (e.g. virtuous cycles), resilience is desirable.
* **Moreover, resilience is plausibly a virtue.** Virtue terms like e.g. **generosity** express (Battaly 2015):

(1) acquired character traits (in social terms: learned, not transcultural) – MERIT

(2) that involve performing RIGHT actions;

(3) that (tend to) produce GOOD OUTCOMES;

(4) and that involve GOOD MOTIVES.

At least some resilience concepts pass this test (e.g. adaptation, anti-fragility). In fact, resilience is **often seen as a virtue:** an ability that persons and/or organizations would like to have and/or promote.

* **Resilience is closely linked with achievement verbs.** These verbs imply success and/or conduct appropriately oriented to certain ends: success therefore carries merit, and one deserves credit for it: e.g. **to know** is to be successful in being true and appropriately justified; one is owed some credit for knowing. Similarly, being resilient denotes that one persists **due to** some peculiar traits and merits. This classification is indisputable when we talk about resilience in human contexts.
1. **Resilience is a naturalness/normality concept**

Concepts implying a “relation of conformity to norms” (e.g. normality, obsolete, deviant, disturbance, critical, naturalness, etc.) broaden established views on normativity. They are not prescriptive (e.g. *must, justified, right, permissible*) in the sense of directly expressing an obligation; nor are they evaluative (e.g. *praiseworthy, admirable, bad),* in the sense of conveying positive, critical or negative appreciations. But Wittgenstein once claimed that we do many things that cannot be justified except by appeal to “what we normally do in such circumstance”, that is, by appeal to conformity to norms and expectations, or deviation from them (Eldridge 1986). Resilience denotes maintaining or returning to standards, or developing new ones, and so is normative in this way (VI).

**Tables and figures**

Table 1. Resilience concepts

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Concept** | **Source** | **Definition** | **Change of trajectory** |
| LOCK-IN | Elmqvist et al. 2019 | “Capacity… to absorb disturbance, **reorganize**, maintain essentially the same functions and feedbacks over time and **continue to develop along a particular trajectory**.” | No (+graceful decline) |
| ADAPTATION | Norris 2008 | Ability to show a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after an initial disturbance, [as the] result of adequate adaptive capacities | Yes, positive |
| ANTI-FRAGILITY | Holling 1978 | “[Ability] to absorb and **utilize (or even benefit from)** change.” | Yes, positive(+ graceful decline) |

Table 2. Classes of thick terms

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Type/domain of application** | **Examples** |
| THICK **⬅**  | Paradigmatic | *Good/bad, beautiful/ugly* |
| **Values** | *Freedom, love, autonomy, health, self-respect,* ***efficiency, robustness*** |
| **Achievement** **verbs** | ***Know****, learn, produce, understand* |
| **Virtues**/vices | *Courageous,* ***generous****; foolhardy, arrogant, stupid* |
| Political/economic/religious | *Utility, progress, sustainable development, God, sacred, democracy* |

**Conclusion: other morally problematic aspects of RD?**

Incongruence with resilience thinking? The Resilience Alliance often stresses the progressive potential of resilience thinking: e.g. by criticizing rigid distinctions between society/culture and nature, by speaking of socio-ecological systems, by denying that humans can set themselves goals independently of nature, etc. It seems incongruent, then, that they commit to a descriptive/normative dichotomy (which validates those ‘old’ distinctions they criticize), and further, that they push for RD. Here I have argued that resilience is best seen as a descriptive and normative term (a thick term).

Disciplinary imperialism? Further, it is crucial to first decide which resilience concept we are going to use: for example, the RA insistent push for a lock-in concept could be considered an exercise of academic imperialism (e.g. it disregards the psychology concept).

Positivistic and depoliticizing?One way of interpreting the effects of modern science is that it politicized many aspects of the world by naturalizing what religion had previously thought supernatural (and thus, depoliticized). However, science can be depoliticizing: positivistic ideology consists in naturalizing problems that are social or have a social dimension; likewise, neoliberal economic ideology naturalizes economic injustice, not just by idealizing market competition but, more precisely, by identifying society with a (distorted) view of nature as “red in tooth and claw”, whereby market competition is natural, and therefore good. My arguments demonstrate that it is at least very plausible that resilience has embedded values, and so, the RD view would obscure these values and hide them from public discussion. I think that this constitutes a form of positivistic ideology that could have a depoliticizing effect on policies and agendas of resilience building.

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