

## **On the value of philosophers in the social sciences: fixing disciplinary constitutions**

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* This paper argues for the value of philosophers in a school of social sciences within a university, for fixing what I call disciplinary constitutions. A disciplinary constitution is a statement of “How our discipline works: how we achieve the ends of our discipline.” A lot of people depend on a constitution, but such a thing usually runs into problems and philosophers can identify these problems and propose solutions. I suggest that it is essential for the autonomy of an ambitious school to be able to do such work internally.

*Draft version:* Version 3 (2nd December 2022, quotation correction, “focus for”, “arenas”)

*“Endless are these seas*

*Like honorary degrees”*

Once in the last decade, I saw different lecturers address the value of their discipline to the school of social sciences at the University of Manchester. It was quite an overwhelming experience. Reflecting on the matter, I can see a value for philosophy in the school of social sciences, which I describe as fixing disciplinary constitutions.

A disciplinary constitution is a statement, typically by a member of a discipline, regarding “How our discipline works: how we achieve the ends of our discipline.” If you go to economics or if you go to anthropology, for example, you can find such things. The average worker in a discipline which is not philosophy does not want to be preoccupying themselves with these matters, and maybe even within it. They want a relatively simple statement that they can refer to, including to novices and outsiders. But a constitution can run into trouble, when it needs a bit of fixing, surgery even, constitutional surgery, or something

needs to be said about how it applies to new circumstances. Throwing away a constitution which has worked quite well is extremely stressful for various people, and if it can be fixed it is likely to persist somewhere.

We like to think of philosophers as coming up with grand visions, but one of the ways in which a philosopher can help is by identifying these problems and solutions to them. Here is something that anthropologist Jeanette Edwards says:

I am often asked, ‘Why Bacup?’ A question which requires me, I always think, to identify some significant or special feature that makes it a suitable focus for anthropological interest... perhaps the question, ‘Why Papua New Guinea?’ is asked but it seems peculiarly irrelevant to anthropologists. Non-Western localities are deemed axiomatically of anthropological interest and legitimate arenas of study. (2000: 8)

She is repeatedly faced with a challenging question and she is presumably interested in solutions. A problem she faces is that a familiar account of how anthropologists acquire knowledge does not transparently apply to anthropology in an English town, such as Bacup. Put crudely, “The anthropologist makes one set of assumptions, the exotic people studied make another set, the anthropologist is struck by the differences, which they report, e.g. these people see no alternative to kingship. How do you apply this theory of how anthropology achieves knowledge to anthropology at home?”

We can present this as a philosophical puzzle:

- (1) Anthropologists achieve knowledge by starting with different assumptions from those studied, leading them to be struck by the differences and report them.
- (2) There can be anthropology at home.
- (3) Anthropology at home is anthropology amongst people who share one’s assumptions.

Once the puzzle is stated, we can look for solutions (and sometimes better formulations). Which proposition is one abandoning or can one somehow keep them all?

But I think identifying and addressing this puzzle I have presented is more difficult than it looks. I spoke of a constitution statement and I think many anthropologists in Britain will be familiar with the theory of knowledge presented above, but finding a clear statement in the literature is not so easy! Some of these statements are more oral than written, or one has to look beyond the standard literature, into course guides and the like. And latching onto these words by Jeanette Edwards, which I have quoted quite a few times now, is not such an obvious move; there are various things going on in her book. Probably the puzzle is close to being stated in the writings of Marilyn Strathern (1987; 1992 prologue; see also Edward 2022), whom I think would be the main person with solutions as well.

The cost of not being able to fix these problems is that one's department is partly managed by someone else, or at least that is a risk.<sup>1</sup> They realize what your problems are and come up with solutions, which they share if it is in their interests. Probably the University of Manchester's project of becoming an elite university depends on being able to solve constitutional problems internally. Otherwise University of Cambridge management or the government perhaps (?) or just a restless person in an apartment somewhere!

## References

Edward, T.R. 2022. Why Bacup? A boring standard answer. Available at:

<https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWWBA>

Edwards, J. 2000. *Born and Bred*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Strathern, Marilyn. 1987. The limits of auto-anthropology. In A. Jackson (ed.), *Anthropology at home*. London: Tavistock.

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<sup>1</sup> Is it different in large disciplines? I wonder whether even in mainstream economics solutions regarding what to say to various troubling foundational questions come from very few sources.

Strathern, Marilyn. 1992. *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.