

Objectivity and values of the concept of health from a contextualist empiricist point of view

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In philosophy of medicine, a longstanding debate has concerned the definition of health and disease. At the heart of the controversy is the issue of the place and role(s) of values in this definition, where the different definitions can be represented through a spectrum of “value(s)-involvement”. Extremes on the spectrum have revealed inadequate to account for the complexity of the phenomenon of health, which led to more nuanced views whereby both values and scientific facts are included (e.g. De Vrees 2016; Ereshefsky 2009; Kingma 2013, 2014, 2017; Lemoine 2015). Although this acknowledgment appears to be a promising way to a better understanding of health, the exact way in which facts and values interact needs further clarifications.

The first aim of this paper is to defend an epistemological framework that could allow such clarifications. Following some suggestions made by Kincaid (2007), I will defend the contextualist empiricist approach put forth by Longino (2001, 2015) as a way that could make sense of the interaction between facts and values in the case of health. Longino’s contextualist empiricism is grounded in the idea of the underdetermination of theories by evidences: more than one theory are compatible with the available evidences, and values, both epistemic and nonepistemic, come to fill this semantic gap. It then becomes interesting to ask, in the specific case of health, where and how values come into play, but also to ask the reverse: what about the possibility of objective knowledge about health?

The second aim of this paper is to argue for an objective concept of health from the contextualist empiricist approach. While considerable attention has been paid to the way social factors intervene in health from different perspectives, I want to focus on the way we can still talk about an objective meaning of the concept of health from the point of view of contextualist empiricism. I believe this angle has been overlooked so far. Regardless of the value-ladenness of the definition, I want to argue that it is legitimate to

conceive health as an objective concept. This is where my proposition diverges from the recommendations made by Kincaid (2007). To illustrate the way contextualist empiricism can shed light on the objectivity of the concept of health, I will argue that the value-free account of health defended by Boorse, the Biostatistical Theory of Health (BST), can be reinterpreted in a contextualist empiricist framework. For many authors, Boorse's BST, which states that health is the species statistically typical functioning, is the best available reconstruction of the theoretical concept of health. I will focus on three aspects of the BST, where contextualist empiricism can be useful: (1) the notion of normal function; (2) the notion of a pathological threshold; (3) the notion of the reference class. In each case, I will show that (A) We can talk of underdetermination of theory/hypotheses by evidence, where epistemic and non-epistemic values fill the gap between theory and evidence; (B) It is however legitimate to talk about an objective concept of health focusing on the process of *idealization* used by Boorse. This can be done by building on the work of Douglas (2004; 2009) about objectivity in science, using "manipulable objectivity" and "convergent objectivity", those meanings of objectivity that concerns the relationship between scientists and the world, and the epistemic value of "empirical success" defended by Longino. In this paper, I hope to open a space to think about an objective concept of health that acknowledges both the value-ladenness and the fact-ladenness of this concept using a contextualist empiricist approach.

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