The Normative Case Study[1]

David Thacher
University of Michigan

The case study is one of the major research strategies in contemporary social science. Although most discussions of case study research presume that cases contribute to explanatory theory, this article draws from recent literature about ethical reasoning to argue that case studies can also contribute to normative theory—to theories about the ideals we should pursue and the obligations we should accept. This conclusion suggests that contrary to some views (notably Max Weber's) social science has a vital role to play in the prescriptive study of values, particularly so-called "thick ethical concepts" like "leadership," "courage," and "neighborhood vitality."

> Where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we
> clearly understand and *grow by looking*.—Iris Murdoch, 1971

The case study is one of the major research strategies in contemporary social science—or more exactly, in contemporary sociology and political science, as well as social science–oriented professional fields like social work, education, public affairs, and business.[2] What are cases good for? Social scientists have traditionally given two overlapping answers to that question: case studies can help to identify causal relationships, and case studies can help to understand the worldview of the people they study. The first view, which I will call the "causal case study," has recently been

[2] I will not dwell on the proper definition of "case study" in this paper (see Ragin and Becker 1992; Gerring 2004). I aim to say something new about the uses of case studies rather than something new about their form, and for that purpose it is not necessary to go beyond an intuitive definition—roughly, a piece of qualitative research (often historical) that portrays a more or less well-defined event, organization, individual, group, or culture.

associated mainly with comparative case study research (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Ragin 1987), but it also underlies alternative approaches like the extended case method (Burawoy 1998) and the search for mechanisms (Lin 1998; Mohr 1997; George and McKeown 1985). The second view, which I will call the "interpretive case study," is associated with the hermeneutic strand of social science, which aims to illuminate the subjective meaning that people's actions have for them (Geertz 1973). In terminology borrowed from Max Weber, the causal case study contributes to instrumental rationality (*zweckrationalität*) by identifying the consequences actions will have (Weber 1949, p. 26; 1958, p. 151), while the interpretive case study contributes to understanding (*verstehen*) by identifying the motivations and worldview that inform social action (Weber 1978, pp. 7–8).

This article advances a third answer to the question of what case studies are good for that I will refer to as "the normative case study"—an approach that contributes, as Weber (1958) himself thought social science could not contribute, to value rationality (*Wertrationalität*).[3] Briefly, normative case studies aim to contribute to our understanding of important public values—to ideas, for example, about what a good city neighborhood should provide (Jacobs 1961), what responsibilities organizational leaders should attend to (Selznick 1949, 1957), or when military intervention is justified (Walzer 2000). They make these contributions by bringing into view situations we had not previously envisioned, since normative reflection about such cases can lead us to rethink the ideals to which we are committed if the ideals advise counterintuitive judgments about the case. Because normative case studies combine empirical observation with normative assessment, they are particularly useful for analyzing so-called "thick ethical concepts"—concepts like "courage" that have both descriptive and evaluative dimensions that cannot be disentangled (Williams 1986, pp. 129–30, 140–44).

As the citations I just gave suggest, this idea is not unprecedented: some social scientists already use case studies to investigate the proper meaning of values. Indeed, Bent Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 57) recently defended this practice at length in a widely discussed book, championing a phronetic social science that investigates "things that are good or bad for man" by

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[3] Throughout I use "value rationality" to refer not only to judgments about the intrinsic value of an action (Weber 1978, pp. 24–25) but also to judgments about the value of its consequences (Weber 1978, p. 26, 1949, pp. 52–57; cf. Brubaker 1984, pp. 108–9; Elster 2000, pp. 36–37). Thus where instrumental rationality identifies the best means to given ends, value rationality determines what the ends themselves should be. Obligatory action—value rational action in the narrowest (and commonest) sense that Weber gives to that term, exemplified by duties—is a limiting case where the actor places no value on the action's consequences.

analyzing particular cases. But despite these contributions, the use of case studies for normative inquiry is not yet respected or even recognized in many quarters, and prominent discussions of case study research have ignored it (Gerring 2004; Burawoy 1998; Yin 1994; King et al. 1994; Ragin and Becker 1992). In this article I will argue for the legitimacy and importance of the normative case study by explicating its logic, drawing from recent philosophical literature about ethical reasoning to do so. This philosophical grounding has been missing in the few works that have discussed how social science cases might illuminate values, and that gap may explain why leading discussions of case study research have ignored this possibility.

This enterprise is important for several reasons. Most simply, efforts to clarify the logic behind the normative case study can help to legitimize and improve a poorly understood type of social research—one that can make significant contributions to human understanding by mobilizing distinctive skills of social science inquiry (Flyvbjerg 2001). This approach to social research has special relevance at a time when calls for "value discussion" (Burawoy 2004, p. 1606) and "a turn to moral reasoning" (Seidman and Alexander 2001, p. 9) have become common in sociology. The normative case study offers a viable method sociologists can use to answer those calls, and to do so in a manner that mobilizes their empirical skills rather than setting them aside. The normative case study also holds special promise for policy-oriented research. It is a common misconception that policy experts are technical experts, so that scholarship primarily contributes to policy expertise by developing instrumental knowledge (e.g., Burawoy 2004). To the contrary: in fields as diverse as forestry, education, social work, and criminal justice, one of the most significant tasks policy experts perform is "setting criteria for the definition of public objectives" (Anderson 1979, p. 714)—that is, determining the ends, not just the means, of government action (Thacher 2005, 2001c). Normative case studies can help professional communities to clarify, elaborate, or even fundamentally revise the way they define these ends. Indeed, many seminal social science studies have already taken this approach, at least in part (e.g., Selznick 1949; Gans 1959; Jacobs 1961; Hochschild 1984; Flyvbjerg 1998). Clarifying the logic behind this approach can help to improve this tradition of research in the same way that clarifying the logic behind interpretive understanding and causal analysis have helped to improve explanatory research.

A clear understanding of the normative case study also has implications for our views about the relationship between social science and ethics. Social scientists have recognized for a long time that values inform their research—for example, that normative considerations guide them to study some topics rather than others because some topics are more important

than others (Zald 1991; Weber 1949) or that normative analysis helps to define social science concepts (Selznick 1961; Miller 1999). But these views describe dialogues that only run in one direction: ethics help set the agenda for social science, but social science contributes little or nothing to ethics. Weber, for example, wrote that "empirical data are always related to those evaluative ideas which alone make them worth knowing and the significance of the empirical data is derived from these evaluative ideas. *But these data can never become the foundation for the empirically impossible proof of the validity of the evaluative ideas*" (Weber 1949, p. 111, emphasis added). The besieged but persistent notion that it is impossible to derive "ought" from "is" seems to ensure that that will be the case. But the normative case study challenges that conclusion by claiming that social science can make fundamental contributions to ethics (cf. Doris and Stich 2005; Miller 1999; Taylor 1985, pp. 58–90).

How is that possible? It is possible because the normative case study rests on epistemological foundations whose basic tenets have been accepted widely in social science but whose full implications have not been made clear. Briefly, knowledge is the product of reflection as well as observation (for example, we may revise our views without new empirical observations by considering the implications of one conviction for others to which it has not previously been connected), and observation itself may have implications that ripple through our network of convictions to reshape beliefs that are not themselves directly empirical (Goodman 1955; Rawls 1951, 1971, 1999; Føllesdal 1988; Harman 2001). Once we understand the nature of knowledge in this way, as many social scientists have (Calhoun 1998, p. 847), the long-standing dichotomy between fact and value that has dominated the social scientific worldview becomes problematic (Putnam 2002). *Pace* Weber, social science can investigate values as well as facts.

In these respects, the normative case study has wide-ranging implications. It asks us to rethink our methodological possibilities, our views about how social science relates to ethics, and the implications of our philosophy of science. To demonstrate that it describes a viable possibility for research, this article proceeds in three steps. First, I explain more precisely what the normative case study is by clarifying how it differs from causal and interpretive case studies and describing two examples of this genre. Second, I defend my claim that case studies can contribute to normative theory as well as explanatory theory by summarizing recent discussions of ethical reasoning in philosophy, indicating how they parallel recent discussions of theoretical reasoning in the philosophy of science. Finally, I examine the practice of normative case study analysis and consider its relationship to its causal and interpretive cousins.

WHAT IS A NORMATIVE CASE STUDY?

Normative case studies differ from causal and interpretive case studies because they contribute to a different kind of theory. To explain this contrast, I need to discuss the forms that social theory can take at a relatively general level, since case studies are not the only research method that can contribute to each form of theory.

By way of contrast, I claimed earlier that causal and interpretive case studies both contribute to explanatory theory. That is obvious for causal case studies, which "explain" events by identifying their causes and (controversially) identifying the mechanisms by which those causes exert their influence. But interpretive case studies can also offer explanations, since identifying the worldview or motives that lead people to behave in a particular way is also arguably a way of explaining their behavior (Berlin 1960, pp. 20–21; Calhoun 1998, pp. 864–66); indeed, there are many different senses in which we "explain" actions and events (Searle 2001, p. 105). Interpretive work can also contribute to more conventional causal explanations. Having used hermeneutic analysis to identify the subjective meanings an action has for the person who performed it, a researcher can investigate the causes and consequences that these subjective meanings have (Weber 1949, pp. 76–84, 1978, p. 18; Swidler 1986; Little 1991, p. 85; Roth and Mehta 2002).

The normative case study does not contribute to explanatory theory in any of these senses. Instead, it contributes to normative theory—to views about the ideals and obligations we should accept, or, using language Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 57) adopted from Aristotle, about "the things that are good and bad for man." Of course, taking this phrase literally, explanations already contribute to knowledge about "things that are good or bad for man." For example, if causal research concludes that a nation's economic growth resulted from its liberalized trade policies, and we value economic growth, then we have learned that liberalized trade policies are among the things that are good for humans (leaving aside some qualifications that do not affect the point I am making). But here I have in mind a narrower sense of "the things that are good or bad for man," namely, things that are *intrinsically* valuable, in that we value them because they are desirable in their own right, not just as means to some other objective, so we would pursue them even if no other good consequences followed from their achievement. On most views, explanatory theory does not lead to conclusions about the things that are intrinsically valuable but to conclusions about the things that have consequences we value on other, nonempirical, grounds.

Since Weber is the fount for so much thinking about this topic, it is worth examining his views briefly. Using language that has become second

nature in the contemporary world, Weber drew the distinction between intrinsic values and merely instrumental factors like this: "All serious reflection about the ultimate elements of meaningful human conduct is oriented primarily in terms of the categories 'end' and 'means.' . . . We desire something concretely either 'for its own sake' or as a means of achieving something else which is more highly desired" (Weber 1949, p. 52).[4] From this perspective, explanatory theory can contribute to decisions about what to do by identifying the best means to given ends (Weber 1949, pp. 52–53), but the ends themselves are not open to empirical analysis. Thus Weber insisted: "It can never be the task of an empirical science to provide binding norms and ideals from which directives for immediate practical activity can be derived" (Weber 1949, p. 52).

Unlike some of his followers, Weber did recognize that social science contributes to normative insight even when it only identifies causal relationships. By demonstrating "that if you want such and such an end, then you must take into the bargain the subsidiary consequences which according to all experience will occur," science served "moral" purposes by bringing about "self-clarification" and "a sense of responsibility" and drawing attention to the moral choices we must confront (Weber 1958, pp. 151–52). (For example, Weber's own research on Western rationalization showed how its spread threatened other values—how formal rationality threatens substantive rationality, how formal justice crowds out religious ethics, etc.—and thereby called attention to a central dilemma posed by modernity [Brubaker 1984, pp. 8–45].) Nevertheless, although Weber allowed that social science could serve moral purposes by *identifying* moral questions in this way, he denied that empirical knowledge could help to *answer* those questions.[5] In this sense, Weber held that explanatory research cannot contribute to knowledge about things that are intrinsically good or bad for man.

[4] Not everyone agrees with this conceptualization of action; John Dewey (1957, p. 170), for example, famously wrote about the interdependence of ends and means. If ends and means cannot be disentangled in the way Weber suggests, then it is all the more important to determine how social science can investigate values.

[5] Weber did allow that science could help to answer ethical questions in one, relatively limited way: he argued that empirical knowledge could rule out some ideals as utopian, i.e., show that it is simply impossible to achieve them (Weber 1949, pp. 52–53). Stephen Turner convincingly interprets the "vocation" essays—Weber's most direct contributions to practical ethics—along these lines. Observing that each essay begins with an extended analysis of the institutional environment within which scientists and politicians work, Turner argues that these descriptions serve an important ethical purpose: "Simply by identifying the actual institutional structures of politics and university life, Weber eliminated as unachievable and practically meaningless many of the idealistic value sentiments that his audiences had been exposed to" (Turner 2000, p. 17). This kind of contribution to ethics, while potentially quite important (cf. Taylor 1985, p. 65), is more limited than (and in any case different from) the one described here.

Weber held this position not only for causal explanations but also for interpretive explanations. Since Weber associated interpretation with the study of the values that members of a culture hold, it is easy to confuse his version of interpretive analysis with normative analysis.[6] But values can be analyzed in two different senses: the detached, third-person sense in which anthropologists analyze them, and the committed, first-person sense in which ethicists do. Like scholarship about ethics, the normative case study strikes the committed pose; it typically tries to convince its readers that they should *change* the way they think about their values. By contrast, the interpretive case study typically strikes the detached pose; insofar as it focuses on values, it aims to *describe* the values currently held by the subjects of research. Weber made this distinction himself in his discussion of *verstehen*. After arguing that social science should try to understand the meaning action has for the people who engage in it, he clarified that "meaning" in this context referred to subjective meaning— most commonly, "the actual existing meaning in the given concrete case of a particular actor." Regardless, "in no case does it refer to an objectively 'correct' meaning or one which is 'true' in some metaphysical sense. It is this which distinguishes the empirical sciences of action, such as sociology and history, from the dogmatic disciplines in that area, such as jurisprudence, logic, ethics, and esthetics, which seek to ascertain the 'true' and 'valid' meanings associated with the objects of their investigation" (Weber 1978, p. 4). In that sense, the interpretive case study shares the causal case study's focus on how the world is rather than how it ought to be.

The claim that social science cannot contribute to these "dogmatic" analyses of "correct" meanings is precisely what the normative case study denies. Each of us in our personal and professional lives must arrive at some view, however tentative and revisable, about how we should understand our ideals and obligations—about the ends we should pursue and the duties we should observe. (Even the belief that no ideal is superior to any other is itself a substantive ethical judgment: it is a negative judgment that particular ideals lack the force other people ascribe to them.) Where Weber believed that empirical social science had little to contribute to these judgments, the normative case study rests on the assumption that we can make better judgments about values by reflecting on actual cases, and indeed that such reflection is indispensable for ethical growth. Just as causal and interpretive case studies can contribute to explanatory the-

[6] Recent scholarship has moved beyond the "norms and values" approach to examine more complex cultural resources (e.g., the symbolic codes, classification systems, and stories people use to think and communicate [Geertz 1973; Swidler 1986; Sewell 1999]). I discuss how these approaches can contribute to normative analysis below.

ory, normative case studies can contribute to normative theory—to the more-or-less integrated networks of normative convictions that we rely on when we try to answer the difficult ethical questions we encounter in our personal and professional lives.

In drawing these distinctions I do not mean to imply that explanatory social science cannot contribute to normative theory, or that research methods other than case studies cannot contribute to it (for arguments that they can, see Doris and Stich [2005]). I will examine some of the links among causal, interpretive, and normative case studies toward the end of this article. For now it is enough to observe that when causal and interpretive case studies contribute to normative understanding, they go beyond the role that social scientists like Weber assign to them, so they go beyond existing philosophical foundations for social science practice. The defense I will provide for the normative case study is equally needed, and equally applicable, to explanatory case studies insofar as they contribute to normative theory.

The Normative Case Study in Practice

Abstract distinctions can only go so far in describing and situating the normative case study; eventually, it is best to turn to examples. In this section I do that by examining Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities* (Jacobs 1961), explaining the sense in which it is partly a normative case study. I will argue that Jacobs's descriptions of neighborhood life made contributions not only to explanatory theory about the consequences of city form, but also to normative theory about the features of neighborhood life that are intrinsically desirable (and, later, to more general issues in political theory). I then briefly discuss another example of a social science case study that had a significant normative dimension (Philip Selznick's *TVA and the Grassroots* [1949]) to demonstrate that Jacobs's book is not an isolated case. In later sections of the article I will add to this list with several shorter examples.

The Death and Life of the Great American Cities presented case study material about urban life in several neighborhoods, particularly New York's Greenwich Village, and in places the book relied on the familiar logic of the causal case study. For example, Jacobs developed her famous concept of "street eyes"—the informal surveillance that operates in some urban neighborhoods—by examining a variety of scenes of urban life. By investigating both dense, mixed-use blocks and sparse, single-use blocks, Jacobs identified mechanisms by which urban form may prevent crime and facilitate the supervision of children's play. Her key observation was that in dense, diverse, mixed-use blocks, a variety of people are present during most times of the day, so when disorder threatens to break out on

their sidewalks, not just residents of the adjacent apartment buildings, but also shopkeepers, their customers, and even bar patrons are there to observe and potentially intervene (Jacobs 1961, pp. 38–39). This analysis led to Jacobs's famous conclusion that urban form has consequences for neighborhood safety, which subsequent literature has supported (Taylor 2002). In that way, Jacobs's book illustrates the use of case studies to identify causal mechanisms.

The first several chapters of *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*, however, were not primarily about causation at all; that came later, in her analysis of the way four "generators of diversity" worked together to sustain vibrant neighborhood life. Jacobs herself described the book's first part as an attempt "to know the general results we want . . . to know, for instance, that we want lively, well-used streets and other public spaces, and why we want them" (Jacobs 1961. p. 140). To that end, she offered descriptions of urban life not only to understand the consequences of urban form, but also to reflect on what it is that we find valuable in our day-to-day experiences of living in cities. One example is her famous account of the Hudson Street Ballet (Jacobs 1961, pp. 50–54), which portrays the artful exuberance of well-functioning city streets. Jacobs did hope the ballet would make a causal point: that diverse, vital neighborhoods are filled with continual activity and, consequently, the potential for informal social control. But the vignette also calls attention to something intrinsically attractive about successful big cities. Like a real ballet, this daily bustle's value lies partly in its sheer vitality and intricacy. Jacobs described the scene affectionately, mentioning that "I enjoy my part, my little clang" just in bringing out the garbage each morning at 8 a.m. (Jacobs 1961, pp. 50–51). She seemed to hope the ballet would remind her readers about the energy and vitality that healthy neighborhoods offer, and that this energy and vitality is part of what makes them attractive. That, at least, is one of the main lessons the book's readers have drawn from it (e.g., Montgomery 1998).

Vitality and exuberance were only the simplest of the neighborhood qualities that Jacobs hoped to highlight. In chapter 7, she described how the sidewalk life of dense mixed-used areas involves a delicate balance between sociability and privacy. "A good city neighborhood," she wrote, "achieves a marvel of balance between its people's determination to have essential privacy and their simultaneous wishes for differing degrees of contact, enjoyment or help from people around" (Jacobs 1961, p. 59). Jacobs developed this idea with the aid of several vignettes. In one, she described how residents in her own Greenwich Village neighborhood often left keys for their visitors with corner shopkeepers. Why with the shopkeeper? "Because we trust him, first, to be a responsible custodian, but equally important because we know that he combines a strong feeling of

goodwill with a feeling of no personal responsibility about our private affairs. Joe considers it no concern of his whom we choose to permit in our places and why" (Jacobs 1961, p. 60). She went on to describe "an ordinary morning" for another shopkeeper named Bernie, who, among other things, lent an umbrella to one customer, set aside newly arrived magazines for others, received packages for residents in the next building who were out of town, advised a woman not to buy a model ship as a birthday present because someone else going to the same party had already bought one, "took custody of a watch to give the repair man across the street when he opened later," and chatted informally with many of his customers (Jacobs 1961, p. 61). Despite his acquaintance with so many of the people who came through his store, Bernie seemed surprised when Jacobs asked him whether he ever introduced them to each other, reflecting, "that would just not be advisable" (Jacobs 1961 p. 61). In his reluctance Jacobs perceived "that almost unconsciously enforced, well-balanced line . . . the line between the city public world and the world of privacy" (Jacobs 1961, p. 62). She elaborated:

> This line can be maintained, without awkwardness to anyone, because of the great plenty of opportunities for public contact in the enterprises along the sidewalks, or on the sidewalks themselves as people move to and fro or deliberately loiter when they feel like it, and also because of the presence of many public hosts, so to speak, proprietors of meeting places like Bernie's where one is free to either hang around or dash in and out, no strings attached. Under this system, it is possible in a city street neighborhood to know all kinds of people without unwelcome entanglements, without boredom, necessity for excuses, explanations, fears of giving offense, embarrassments respecting impositions or commitments, and all such paraphernalia of obligations which can accompany less limited relationships. (Jacobs 1961, p. 62)

Jacobs went on to examine what city life is like without these opportunities, describing a Baltimore street that had been "experimentally equipped with a charming sidewalk park" in a troubled attempt to implant sidewalk life artificially. Though the park had narrow streets to discourage cars, and attractive gardening, fences, and playgrounds, it lacked the stores that played an essential role in her own neighborhood. As a result, mothers who visited the park with their children imposed on nearby acquaintances, entering their homes for phone calls, coffee, emergencies, and warmth. "Much is shared," Jacobs wrote. "There is no public life here, in any city sense. There are differing degrees of extended private life" (Jacobs 1961, pp. 63–64).

This neighborhood's lack of public life presented its residents with a difficult choice. "When an area of a city lacks sidewalk life, the people of the place must enlarge their private lives if they are to have anything

approaching equivalent contact with their neighbors," Jacobs wrote. "They must settle for some form of 'togetherness', in which more is shared with one another than in the life of the sidewalks, or else they must settle for lack of contact" (Jacobs 1961, pp. 62–63). In the first case, people "become exceedingly choosy as to who their neighbors are" (Jacobs 1961, p. 63); thus in the Baltimore neighborhood, Jacobs observed that "when mothers of different income or color or educational background bring their children into the street park, they and their children are rudely and pointedly ostracized" (Jacobs 1961, p. 63). In the second case, people withdraw from sociability altogether, "afraid of a possible entanglement that might not be kept easily on a public plane" (Jacobs 1961, p. 66). What is missing from places like this is the noncommittal, even shallow sociability that Jacobs identified in Greenwich Village. She named that type of interaction "contact," a term that captures the pleasant superficiality of public interactions in successful city neighborhoods and distinguishes it from the less limited "togetherness" with which social life in the city is often confused (cf. Sennett 1977).

What is there to learn from Jacobs's descriptions? It is tempting to say that she showed us how cities could help us satisfy our desire for sociability without undermining our privacy, but to put it that way is to engage in a kind of revisionism. It is revisionist because the ideal of public sociability was not something that city planners already strove consciously to provide. Jacobs did not identify an unnoticed means to a recognized end; instead she picked out an important component of the good neighborhood—an aspect of everyday life in neighborhoods like Greenwich Village that, on reflection, seems valuable, though we had not given it a name and so at best we pursued it incoherently.

In these ways, Jacobs's descriptions of city life helped to clarify the things that are intrinsically good or bad for humans—features of city neighborhoods that are attractive not just because of the consequences they have for values we already understand clearly (as in the case of street eyes) but also because they reflect values we previously perceived only dimly, if at all (as in the case of the vitality of cities and the opportunities for contact they offer). Jacobs herself framed her conclusions by opposing them to the modernist ideals of urban form that dominated city planning at the beginning of the 1960s. On her view, those ideals focused too narrowly on purely formal and aesthetic considerations, such as the symmetry, orderliness, rationality, and grandiosity of great architecture in the modernist spirit, and they neglected the quality of everyday life. (Herbert Gans captured this critique nicely in an early review of Jacobs's book, writing that the modernist city planner Jacobs meant to criticize "is an artist who wants to restructure life by principles applicable only to art" [Gans 1962a, p. 27].) For example, Jacobs argued that this overly aesthetic

approach to urban design misunderstands the nature of privacy: "Architectural and planning literature deals with privacy in terms of windows, overlooks, sight lines. The idea is that if no one from outside can peek into where you live—behold, privacy." She went on to call this view "simple-minded"; it captures only "window privacy" (Jacobs 1961, p. 59), not privacy *in toto*, and certainly not the subtle form of privacy she identified in public interactions in Greenwich Village. In this way, Jacobs tried to remind planners that it is important to pursue daily livability in all its complexity, not just the artistic ideal of aesthetic beauty or the rationalist ideals of efficiency and order. Surely many of them did not need the reminder—the most compelling criticism of Jacobs points out the polemical way she oversimplified existing planning ideas—but even her critics have recognized that no one before her had brought the often chaotic but also vibrant workings of everyday city life so clearly into focus (e.g. Gans 1962*a*; Montgomery 1998). She taught us "how to love cities" (Montgomery 1998, p. 271), articulating with more clarity than anyone before her had what it is in the best of them that we *do* love.

As I have described it, the normative theory to which Jacobs's case studies contributed was the set of standards that urban planners relied on, at least implicitly, to evaluate neighborhood form. This contribution had an important influence on urban planning, but it offers only the simplest example of how case studies can advance substantive normative theory. Jacobs clarified a new, nonaesthetic principle planners ought to care about, and her vignettes helped to articulate its meaning, but she did not offer an especially detailed conceptualization of it. To see how reflection on cases can lead to a more familiar kind of normative theory, we can turn to the use that political theorist Iris Young made of Jacobs's work.

Years after *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities* appeared, Young drew on it to help challenge existing theories of justice. Young argued that although analyses of city life might seem distant from political theory, philosophers had often relied on prepolitical ideas about human interaction; in particular, communitarian theory often envisioned political interaction on the model of small-town community life. Young went on to argue that the descriptions of city life given by Jacobs and others offered a more useful model of political interaction. Conceptualizing city life as "the being together of strangers" (Young 1990, p. 237), she claimed that it illustrates "a normative ideal [that offers] an alternative to both the ideal of community and the liberal individualism it criticizes as asocial."

The need for such an ideal was pressing, Young argued, because liberal and communitarian theories tended to exclude oppressed groups from full participation in political life by denying social differences and striving "to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity" (Young 1990, p. 237, cf.

pp. 97–121, 226–36). She particularly took aim at communitarian theory, arguing that it relies on an image of small-town life that requires and enforces homogeneity and ignores the need to bridge the different values that groups bring to the public sphere. City life, she argued, offers a more appropriate image for political theory because at its best, it displays a model of interaction suited to conditions of diversity.[7] "Because by definition a public space is a space accessible to anyone, where anyone can participate and witness, in entering the public one always risks encounter with those who are different," she wrote (Young 1990, p. 240). Thus "persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness" (Young 1990, p. 237).

Young argued that this feature of city life holds the key to understanding why we find it valuable, writing:

> What makes urban spaces interesting, draws people out in public to them, gives people pleasure and excitement, is the diversity of activities they support. . . . We spend a Sunday afternoon walking through Chinatown, or checking out this week's eccentric players in the park. We look for restaurants, stores, and clubs with something new for us, a new ethnic food, a different atmosphere, a different crowd of people. We walk through sections of the city that we experience as having unique characters which are not ours, where people from diverse places mingle and then go home. (Young 1990, p. 239)

This attraction to diversity, she continued, "is precisely the obverse of community." Where the ideal of community derives its value from the affirmation of shared experiences, "there is another kind of pleasure . . . in being drawn out of oneself to understand that there are other meanings, practices, perspectives on the city, and that one could learn or experience something more and different by interacting with them" (Young 1990, pp. 239–40). Young went on to argue that city life shows how different groups can share and interact in a common public space without leaving their particularistic identities behind—a crucial requirement for any politics in which groups must learn from one another (Young 1990, pp. 106, 116, 156–91).

In this way, Young drew on descriptions of city life to clarify the "politics of difference" she proposed as an alternative to both communitarianism

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[7] Young introduced this analysis by quoting directly from Jacobs: "The tolerance, the room for great differences among neighbors—differences that often go far deeper than differences in color—which are possible and normal in intensely urban life, but which are so foreign to suburbs and pseudosuburbs, are possible only when streets of great cities have built-in equipment allowing strangers to dwell in peace together on civilized but essentially dignified and reserved terms" (Jacobs quoted in Young 1990, p. 226).

(which suppresses difference) and liberalism (which abstracts from it). Like Jacobs—and indeed drawing directly from her analysis—Young (1990, p. 238) proposed to examine "our given experience of cities" in search of "the virtues of this form of interaction."

My point here is not to endorse Young's analysis, which might be criticized for failing to examine Jacobs's descriptions of city life in sufficient detail. On one interpretation, Jacobs's vignettes reflect liberal ideals more than Young acknowledges. As the story of Bernie the grocer illustrates, city dwellers often interact on a fairly superficial plane, carefully avoiding any encroachment on each other's private lives in order to respect "that almost unconsciously enforced, well-balanced line . . . between the city public world and the world of privacy." Do norms like this one really allow for "a public interaction that expresses rather than submerges particularities" (Young 1990, p. 119)? Although Young is clearly right that "in entering the public one always risks encounter with those who are different," it is less obvious that those people "demand that their needs, desires, and perspectives be recognized" (Young 1990, p. 240). If they do not, then city life resembles the impersonal dialogue envisioned by liberalism, which demands that people leave their private commitments behind before they enter the public square, rather than Young's politics of difference. Indeed, Thomas Nagel (1998) has argued that everyday rituals of politeness like those described by Jacobs are essentially liberal commitments—the *social* analogue to the calls for restraint made by *political* liberalism. If Nagel is right, Young's politics of difference begins to look chimerical, collapsing into conventional liberalism.

There is no need to resolve this dispute here, since the dispute itself illustrates how empirical case studies can make important contributions to normative political theory. Indeed, it illustrates that for normative theory as well as explanatory theory, close analysis of the empirical record is essential, since the choice between competing normative theories may turn partly on which fits better with our best interpretation of the empirical record. In this case, those who hope to defend the politics of difference as an alternative to liberalism need to clarify how the public life of cities described by Jacobs differs from traditional liberal ideals or identify a new model of interaction that instantiates the politics of difference.[8]

[8] For the reasons I just gave, I find it unlikely that Jacobs's descriptions of city life can bear the weight Young places on them. To clarify what the politics of difference involves and to distinguish it from liberalism, I think it would be necessary to undertake new case study research of city life or (preferably) political action itself. In this respect, Young's use of Jacobs illustrates the challenges facing attempts to use preexisting case study material to advance normative theory. In both the normative and explanatory realms, theorists have much to gain by undertaking their own empirical work, which allows them to develop descriptions that bear directly on the crucial questions that concern them.

A Further Example of the Normative Case Study

Jacobs has not been alone in using case studies to analyze values. Another example of the normative case study is Selznick's *TVA and the Grassroots* (Selznick 1949), which contributed to his normative theory of organizational leadership in *Leadership in Administration* (Selznick 1957). At the time Selznick wrote these books, many scholars conceived management's role as a technical one, a matter of searching for greater organizational efficiency. Selznick demonstrated in the TVA case that this conception was irrelevant to many of the critical decisions managers face. "The critical decisions taken here—not necessarily consciously—had little to do with efficient operation," he wrote (Selznick 1957, p. 44). I cannot describe these critical decisions fully here, but Selznick's own account 40 years later in *The Moral Commonwealth* suggests some of them:

> "Grass roots democracy" came to mean that the TVA would channel its services through a privileged instrument, the land-grant colleges. In effect the Agricultural Extension Services of the colleges became a close collaborator—virtually an operating arm—of the TVA in the agricultural field. The agency thereby accepted a number of commitments that reflected the character of the extension services in those days, most prominent among which were an intimate relation with the American Farm Bureau Federation, a disposition to deal mainly with relatively prosperous elements of the local farm population, and a tendency to reflect dominant attitudes towards blacks and farm tenants. In practice, therefore, the "grass roots" doctrine masked a selective strategy of responsiveness. Furthermore, the alliance created a group *inside* the TVA that vigorously defended the interests and perspectives of the extension services and exerted pressure on other TVA programs affecting forestry, recreation, and conservation. . . . This political bargain had a peculiar aspect. It was implemented by permitting a part of the TVA, its Department of Agricultural Relations, to become the direct agent of an external constituency. The group became a dynamic force within the authority, able to influence programs that were marginal to its agricultural responsibilities but significant for conservation and rural life. As a result, the agency was not able to retain control of the basic compromise. (Selznick 1992, pp. 340–41, cf. 1957, pp. 42–45)

Selznick's point was that these crucial decisions could not be made or evaluated within the technical framework of administrative efficiency because they raise fundamentally normative questions about the TVA's purpose. "So much of administrative analysis takes the goal of the organization as given, whereas in many crucial instances this is precisely what is problematic," he wrote (Selznick 1957, p. 26).

This critique led Selznick to his theory of organizational leadership, which held that "the institutional leader . . . is primarily an expert in the promotion and protection of values" (Selznick 1957, p. 28), and he developed a complex account of what it meant to do that. Summarizing

how his conception of the leader's duties differed from others, he wrote: "The executive becomes a statesman as he makes the transition from administrative management to institutional leadership. This shift entails a reassessment of his own tasks and of the needs of the enterprise. It is marked by a concern for the evolution of the organization as a whole, including its changing aims and capabilities. In a word, it means viewing the organization as an institution" (Selznick 1957, p. 5). To be sure, the normative force of *TVA and the Grassroots* itself is equivocal, as Selznick mentioned but did not emphasize these normative implications in that book (Selznick 1949, pp. 249–59). Even *Leadership and Administration* was often framed in functionalist rather than normative terms (though Hugh Heclo [2002, p. 299] has recently argued that this emphasis was halfhearted, describing *Leadership* as "a moral study in sociological dress"). Four decades later, however, Selznick's account of the TVA in *The Moral Commonwealth* had become thoroughly normative, framed by statements about the ethical responsibilities of leadership. For example, he introduced the TVA as a case study in "the perils of responsiveness," describing the responsibilities its managers neglected like this: "Responsiveness entails reconstruction of the self as well as outreach to others. Established structures, rules, methods, and policies, are all open to revision, but revision takes place in a principled way" (Selznick 1992, p. 338).

In short, Selznick used the TVA case partly to call attention to poorly appreciated obligations of organizational leadership, just as Jacobs used her case studies to call attention to poorly appreciated dimensions of healthy neighborhood life. In this sense, Selznick's study of the TVA illustrates why some of his interpreters celebrate the work he has done "demonstrating how to derive ideal states out of reports of actual experiences" (Lacey 2002, p. 74)—a task whose importance Selznick himself has stressed elsewhere (Nonet and Selznick 1978).

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE NORMATIVE CASE STUDY

I have claimed that each of these cases can teach us something about values. Jacobs's descriptions of life in Greenwich Village and other urban neighborhoods support the idea that good cities are defined by their vitality and by a particular kind of sociability, not just their aesthetic beauty, and in Young's hands, they arguably help to clarify an important political ideal. The TVA case shows that managers have moral responsibilities, not just technical ones. Can such claims be defended?

In the face of a long tradition that insists that you cannot derive "ought"

from "is," it is not clear how they can. Recent literature that supports something like the view I am defending has not addressed this challenge in detail. Flyvbjerg's *Making Social Science Matter* (2001, p. 130) rightly rejects the relativistic idea that "one set of values is just as good as another," insisting that normative interpretations "must be built on claims of validity, and the procedures ensuring validity are as demanding for phronetic research as for any other activity in the social and political sciences." The task that remains is to elaborate on what those validity claims involve and explain how they support their normative conclusions. In this section, I will do that by showing that plausible and well-established views about ethical reasoning make it clear how cases can inform judgments about values. To make this argument, I need to leave case studies behind temporarily to examine the more abstract topic of justification in ethics.

Reflective Equilibrium

More than a half century after its basic elements were introduced (Rawls 1951), the most widely endorsed view about ethical reasoning (though of course not a unanimously endorsed one) remains John Rawls's notion of "reflective equilibrium" (Rawls 1971, 1999; Daniels 1996). The method of reflective equilibrium rests on the idea that we try to criticize, clarify, and improve our existing views about normative ideals by reflecting on the implications they have for other convictions. In the process, we try to bring everything into harmony by modifying convictions that come to seem misguided once we have examined them in the light of other commitments. Rawls explains:

> People have considered judgments at all levels of generality, from those about particular situations and institutions up through broad standards and first principles to formal and abstract conditions on moral conceptions. One tries to see how people would fit their various convictions into one coherent scheme, each considered conviction whatever its level having a certain initial credibility. By dropping and revising some, by reformulating and expanding others, one supposes that a systematic organization can be found. Although in order to get started various judgments are viewed as firm enough to be taken provisionally as fixed points, there are no judgments on any level of generality that are in principle immune to revision. (Rawls 1999, p. 289)[9]

[9] Rawls says judgments are "considered" if they avoid obvious sources of "distortion"; in particular, we should emphasize the judgments about which we are most confident and downplay those clearly shaped by self-interest or made when we are "upset or frightened" (Rawls 1971, p. 47). His position has inspired some controversy. Henry Richardson (1997, pp. 187–89) and Martha Nussbaum (1990, pp. 174–75) have objected

Rawls developed this idea in the context of his theory of justice. He argued that to assess his conception of justice as fairness and his claim that fair principles are those the contractors would choose in the original position, we should work through the process just described. Doing that would mean (in part) asking "whether applying these principles would lead us to make the same judgments about the basic structure of society which we now make intuitively and in which we have the greatest confidence" (Rawls 1971, p. 19). He went on to give examples: "We are confident that religious intolerance and racial discrimination are unjust. We think that we have examined these things with care and have reached what we believe is an impartial judgment not likely to be distorted by an excessive attention to our own interests. These convictions are provisional fixed points which we presume any conception of justice must fit" (Rawls 1971, pp. 19–20). In cases where the proposed theory of justice is incompatible with these provisional fixed points, one must consider whether the account of justice or the initial judgments should be revised (Rawls 1971, p. 19).

Despite its origins in the theory of justice, the method of reflective equilibrium applies equally well to a variety of normative ideals. Indeed, Rawls's student Henry Richardson (1997) has explained how a similar process of reflection applies to essentially all practical ideals. In the same way that Rawls searched for the best understanding of justice, one can search for the best understanding of other normative ideals, such as neighborhood livability or the obligations of leadership.

At this more general level, the method of reflective equilibrium counsels us to examine each of our normative convictions in the light of the others, asking whether other commitments offer reasons to change the conviction in question. In Gilbert Harman's words: "One starts with one's current beliefs and inferential practices, using some parts to criticize others, with an ideal goal of arriving at a result in which all parts of one's view are in equilibrium with each other" (Harman 2001, p. 658). If this process leads someone to revise a conviction she began with, the change is rational for her because she had good reasons to make it—because other commitments she held more strongly supported the change, though she had not noticed those reasons before undertaking the effort to find a reflective equilibrium. Relying on reasons in this manner is the essence of rationality

to Rawls's distaste for emotional judgments; on their view, emotion can sometimes focus and sharpen reason rather than cloud it. David Miller (1999, pp. 54–56) has argued that introspection alone cannot determine whether judgments are "considered"; to know whether self-interest colors a judgment, it helps to examine survey evidence that investigates whether such judgments vary according to class position. I will not say much about when a judgment counts as "considered" because, as these disputes illustrate, answering that question is part of reflection, not a prerequisite to it (Nussbaum 1990, p. 174).

in many spheres of thought (Richardson 1997, pp. 175–90; Scanlon 1998, chap. 1; Harman 2001). In this sense, the pursuit of reflective equilibrium is a process of searching for reasons in areas of our thought that we have not yet brought to bear on the issue at hand. Richardson (1997, p. 178) aptly describes the whole process as an "an exercise in self-examination."

There is nothing rigid about this process: no formula can say definitively how someone should resolve the conflicts that reflection will invariably uncover. If I discover that two of my convictions conflict, it is up to me to decide which one should be revised, and I may also choose to let the conflict stand if I judge that decision better (Richardson 1997, p. 179). As Richardson puts it, "the question of what does and does not remain fixed is ultimately a matter of what seems acceptable to the agent," and he acknowledges that this means reflection typically has a "nondiscursive layer" (Richardson 1997, pp. 178, 189).

Nevertheless, the indefinite quality of Rawls's method (Richardson dubs it "reflective sovereignty") should not be mistaken for a weakness: it is an essential feature of all effective reasoning, including scientific reasoning. Rawls developed his account of reflective equilibrium with inspiration from Nelson Goodman's analysis of inductive and deductive reasoning in science, and the same indefinite quality appears in Goodman's influential claim that "rules and particular inferences alike are justified by being brought into agreement with each other"—that "a rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend" (Goodman 1955, p. 64; cf. Quine 1961, p. 43). Since everything turns on the imprecise notion of what we are "unwilling" to do, the whole enterprise resists formalization. But the foundationalist alternative—setting out an unrevisable principle that must always govern reasoning, regardless of the reflective understanding of the person whose reasoning it is—is inconsistent with the spirit of open inquiry (Rawls 1971, pp. 21, 578–79; Harman 2003). In this respect, all human rationality—both factual and normative—involves volition. Beliefs, like desires, obligations, and other normative commitments, require *assent* from reasoning agents in a way that perceptions, urges, and sensations do not (cf. Searle 2001, pp. 67–68, 90–91).

The account of ethical reasoning I just described resembles influential accounts of scientific reasoning in another, related way as well. In the heyday of logical positivism, many philosophers of science counted as "facts" only those things that could be observed directly (or at least using some fairly simple observation procedure). On that rigid standard, electrons, energy, social classes, power, gravity, causal mechanisms, and many other things that scientists wanted to say are real, objective facts about the universe failed to qualify for that honor. Partly to rescue such things

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from ontological exile, many philosophers of science allowed that beliefs could find support not only from direct observations but also from their consistency with other beliefs that are not in question in the current controversy (Putnam 1987, pp. 65–75, 2002, pp. 21–26, 103–4; Quine 1961, pp. 42–43; Berlin 1960, pp. 9–11; in ethics, cf. Millgram 1997, pp. 11–42; Richardson 1997, pp. 143–90; Rawls 1971, pp. 578–79; Larmore 1987, p. 29). W. V. O. Quine (1961, pp. 42, 46) expressed this view metaphorically by referring to the "web" or "fabric" of belief and knowledge. As Morton White (2002, pp. 153–77) and Gilbert Harman (2003, pp. 25–26) have recently observed, this image of scientific inquiry closely resembles Rawls's description of ethical inquiry as the pursuit of reflective equilibrium, and indeed Rawls (1971, p. 579) referred explicitly to Quine's views in his discussion. In both enterprises, each of our individual convictions is unavoidably entangled in a web of other convictions, and rational inquiry is a matter of examining this web to determine as best we can whether each conviction stands in a suitable relationship of mutual support with the others. Neither scientific nor normative conclusions either admit to or require a firmer justification than this process provides.[10] Moreover, the two webs are entangled with one another, since all nontrivial scientific conclusions must appeal to epistemic values such as "coherence," "plausibility," and "simplicity" (Putnam 2002, pp. 135–45). For that reason, the claim that value judgments are ultimately nonempirical and arbitrary in a way that scientific judgments are not rests on an untenable dichotomy because, as Hilary Putnam put it, "value judgments

[10] In this connection, it is worth considering a common objection to the method of reflective equilibrium, which is sometimes criticized as a "coherence" view of reasoning—a view that pursues some aesthetic ideal of consistency to no useful end, organizing existing prejudices into a self-supporting whole while leaving unwarranted normative convictions untouched. Regardless, coherence among one's moral beliefs does not indicate that those beliefs rather than others deserve to be accepted, since different sets of beliefs may all be coherent (Brandt 1979, p. 22). This objection miscasts the purpose of reflective equilibrium, and it relies on a contrast with an unspoken alternative that turns out to be chimerical. The point of reflective equilibrium is not to favor coherence in the abstract. The point is that when one of our convictions conflicts with the others, we have a reason to revisit it. I just conceded that this process is an art rather than a science, since it relies on hard-to-articulate judgments about which convictions are most reliable and firm and which (if any) should be abandoned when different convictions conflict. But those who object to this informal method need to explain what else we could rely on besides other convictions when we reason about values. As T. M. Scanlon put it, "any way that I can imagine of criticizing these judgments and arriving at others would amount to an instance of this same general method" (Scanlon 1998, p. 70; cf. Dworkin 1996, p. 118).

are essential to the practice of science itself" (Putnam 2002, p. 135; cf. Searle 2001, p. 182).[11]

Against this background, Weber's claim that empirical evidence "can never become the foundation for the empirically impossible proof of the validity of evaluative ideals" (Weber 1949, p. 111) poses a dilemma for him. He might stand by it by insisting (rightly) that empirical cases cannot offer knock-down "proofs" for normative ideals that all rational beings have no choice but to accept. But if he takes that route, he risks undermining the possibility of scientific knowledge as well, since recent developments in the philosophy of science show that scientific beliefs also do not admit to knock-down proofs of the sort his claim seems to envision. Put sharply, Weber must either be a skeptic about all knowledge or allow that empirical evidence can often contribute to normative theory in roughly the same way it contributes to explanatory theory.

To the extent that they accept something like the picture of scientific inquiry I just described, contemporary sociologists confront the same dilemma as Weber. In fact, it appears that many of them do accept that picture. For example, despite deep differences on other issues, the contending parties in a recent debate about the nature and role of theory in historical sociology all described themselves as "realists" who reject logical positivism's restriction of knowledge to things that can be observed (Somers 1998; Kiser and Hechter 1998), agree that "progress in knowledge is held to depend on both new observations and new thought about available observations" (Calhoun 1998, p. 847), and recognize that science presupposes values (Somers 1998, p. 733; Kiser and Hechter 1998, p. 795; Calhoun 1998, pp. 856, 862). The implications of this position reach farther than most sociologists have recognized. If the pursuit of knowledge is understood in the way I just summarized, any strong form of the traditional dichotomy between facts and values collapses (Putnam 2002), and with it the Weberian insistence that social science cannot study values. Indeed, the logical positivists expelled ethics from the set of fields that admit to rational study precisely because values are not directly observable (Carnap 1934, pp. 22–27; Putnam 2002, pp. 17–26). But once we discard criteria like "directly observable" as defining features of things we can know, we need not follow positivists like Carnap in relegating ethics to

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[11] For arguments in support of this conclusion, including rebuttals of attempts by several philosophers of science to deny it, see Putnam (2002, pp. 30–33, 135–45; 1981, chaps. 6, 9) and the references cited therein. Note that although I have relied mainly on analytic philosophers to develop this account of scientific and ethical rationality, many continental philosophers hold similar views. For example, Føllesdal (1988) argues convincingly that Husserl's views about justification in science and ethics closely resemble those of Rawls, Quine, and Goodman (notwithstanding some foundationalist-sounding statements in Husserl's writing).

the realm of irrationality. In this sense, the philosophy of science that many sociologists have embraced has a largely unrecognized implication: it opens up the possibility that values can be the object of social science inquiry—not just in the third-person, detached mode found in anthropology, but in the first-person, committed mode found in ethics.

Who Is the Subject of Reflective Equilibrium?

It might still be objected that scientific beliefs differ from ethical beliefs because values typically belong to groups, while scientific facts are valid regardless of perspective. The language I have used invites this objection: in speaking of the convictions "we" bring to reflection, and "our" or "the agent's" decisions about how to resolve the conflicts among them, I and the philosophers I have cited (like many practitioners of the normative case study) gloss over considerable potential for disagreement about those convictions and decisions.[12] Who is the "we" who is the subject of these judgments? Is it really possible to talk about such universal ideals as "the things that are good or bad for man"?

Flyvbjerg's phronetic social science invites similar questions because it aims to answer questions like "Where are we going?" "Is this desirable?" and "What should be done?" In a recent essay extending the phronetic approach to organizational research, Flyvbjerg defined the subject of these judgments like this:

> The "we" here consists of those organization researchers asking the questions and those who share the concerns of the researchers, including people in the organization under study. . . . The questions are asked with the realization that there is no general and unified "we" in relation to which the questions can be given a final, objective answer. What is a "gain" and a "loss" often depends on the perspective taken, and one person's gain may be another's loss. Phronetic organization researchers are highly aware of the importance of perspective, and see no neutral ground, no "view from nowhere," for their work. (Flyvbjerg 2003, pp. 364–65)

This answer can be extended by distinguishing two different claims about the "importance of perspective" in the study of values: first, the claim that different groups *have* different needs, interests, and obligations; and sec-

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[12] Rawls explicitly bracketed this problem when he discussed reflective equilibrium: "I shall not even ask whether the principles that characterize one person's considered judgments are the same as those that characterize another's. For the purposes of this book, the views of the reader and the author are the only ones that count" (Rawls 1971, p. 50). He went on to argue that his approach would make an important contribution even if it did turn out that people hold different convictions about justice: "If men's conceptions of justice finally turn out to differ, the ways in which they do so is a matter of first importance" (Rawls 1971, p. 50).

ond, the claim that different people may *disagree* about what the needs, interests, and obligations of each group are.

The first claim is that different groups often have reasons to value different things. For example, business owners may have reasons to support or oppose the kind of neighborhood Jane Jacobs celebrates that differ from those that residents have.[13] Normative analysis can help members of each group refine their views about how well different kinds of neighborhoods meet their needs, interests, or even obligations, but the answers for one group may differ from those for other groups. Of course, not all normative claims refer to specific groups. Moral claims, in particular, often aim to identify norms that *everyone* ought to abide by, and political philosophy also tends to make ambitious claims about the proper design of institutions for a whole polity rather than limited claims about the kind of institutions a particular group should prefer. (For example, Young argued not just that political institutions that embody a politics of difference serve the needs or interests of particular groups but that they are the right political institutions for a society composed of many groups.) Nevertheless, these claims just illustrate a special case of the idea that values belong to groups, namely, the case where the relevant group is humankind as a whole, or some other large aggregation such as a nation. In all cases, it is important to be clear about the group to which values are being attributed.

The second claim is that different people may *disagree* about the answer to normative questions, whether they are questions about the needs, interests, or obligations of a particular group or one of the more ambitious normative questions I mentioned. As I just argued, "we" try to answer these questions by examining "our" web of normative belief and trying to resolve any conflicts "we" identify, but as each of us does so we must

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[13] Jacobs herself seemed to want to frame her analysis in more universal terms, as an analysis of the characteristics of good city neighborhoods, period. Indeed, normative arguments often aim to establish the goodness of things without reference to the interests or needs of any observer; for example, aesthetic claims that a work of art is "beautiful" sometimes fall into this category. Obviously many people will consider such claims too ambitious, insisting that things like aesthetic beauty or neighborhood quality are always defined from the perspective of some group or culture. In doing so, however, they cannot just *assume* that, say, aesthetic beauty is really only defined from the perspective of some group or culture, since that is exactly what is in dispute (Dworkin 1996, pp. 131–36). If an aesthete claims that there are nonperspectival standards of beauty, anyone who wants to rebut that claim needs to explain why we should think that all reasons for valuing art are relative to the interests or needs of a particular group. Like the claim it opposes, that claim is a statement about the kinds of reasons to value art that do and do not exist. It is not clear that no such nonperspectival standards exist. If they do not, it is hard to understand how statements like "I do not like X any more than you do, but I recognize that it is good" are possible (Taylor 1985, p. 84).

rely on intuitions that may not be widely shared. Some observers believe that these disagreements are a fundamental obstacle to rational analysis of values (Mackie 1977). The challenge posed by disagreement is significant, but for reasons I gave earlier, it plagues the study of facts as well as the study of values—scientific arguments, too, must rely on potentially controversial statements about what "we" have reason to conclude from evidence that can never be absolutely conclusive—so those who place great emphasis on it lend their support a more thoroughgoing skepticism than they probably intend. In practice, scientific judgments about which explanation best fits the facts are often hotly disputed, and even the facts themselves can inspire controversy (particularly in the human sciences, which deal heavily with institutional facts [Searle 1995] that only exist by virtue of human agreement). Indeed, there is sometimes more consensus about values than facts (White 2002, pp. 160–62; Putnam 2004, pp. 74–77, 1987, pp. 63–71; Dworkin 1996, pp. 113).[14] Consequently, it seems reasonable to treat the extent to which disagreement will paralyze a particular area of normative or explanatory inquiry as an open question. In the meantime, a priori claims that disagreements about values are intractable look suspiciously like an avoidance tactic. In Putnam's words: "It is much easier to say, 'That's a value judgment', meaning, 'that's just a matter of subjective preference', than to do what Socrates tried to teach us: to examine who we are and what our deepest convictions are and hold those convictions up to the searching test of reflective examination. . . . The worst thing about the fact-value dichotomy is that in practice it functions as a discussion-stopper, and not just a discussion-stopper, but a thought-stopper" (Putnam 2002, p. 44).

   None of this implies that disagreement about values is unimportant. Perhaps the most significant difference between facts and values is institutional, in that many contemporary societies defer more readily to claims of expertise about facts than claims of expertise about values. If an analyst makes *factual* claims about a group (e.g., about the consequences a policy will have for that group), policy makers and other decision-making authorities are often willing to defer to the analyst even if members of the group dispute her convictions (though there are signs that even this tendency may be changing). But if the analyst makes *normative* claims about a group (e.g., about what that group has reason to value),

[14] Some argue that the difference is that scientific disagreements are *in principle* resolvable in a way that ethical disagreements are not, but it has proven very difficult to make sense of this claim (Putnam 2002, pp. 123–29). Moreover, if that claim *were* viable, the Peircian theory of truth on which it typically rests would arguably apply to ethics as well as science (Apel 1981). Finally, the claim that normative statements are intractably controversial is itself controversial—at least as controversial as many of the normative claims it purports to judge (Putnam 2004, p. 30).

decision makers may be less willing to defer to the analyst when members of the group disagree. That difference suggests that there is a special need to develop normative analysis in dialogue with members of the group whose values it concerns, in ways that Flyvbjerg describes in detail (Flyvbjerg 2003, pp. 378–79, 2001, pp. 61, 139–40; cf. Taylor 1985, pp. 91–115). But it is no reason to conclude that each participant in that dialogue and the group as a collectivity cannot benefit from the kind of reflective inquiry I have described.

Reflection and Observation

Returning to the substance of this reflective inquiry, I need to add one more element to the picture presented so far. Following Richardson, I described the pursuit of reflective equilibrium as an "exercise in self-examination," but to be successful it must go beyond that. Elijah Millgram has defended this view at length, arguing that practical reasoning cannot restrict itself to introspection alone but must also extend to new observations. Each of us carries with us a number of relatively general normative judgments that we consult to help decide how we should act in new situations, such as judgments that a good neighborhood is defined by its aesthetic qualities or that good organizational leaders are defined by their efficiency. But there is no reason to think these judgments are ever fully formed—that at any point in our lives we already possess general normative principles that yield appropriate advice in every situation we will encounter (Millgram 1997, pp. 67–103). "Our world is full of new and surprising things," Millgram writes, and "the only way to come to understand how they matter for us is to let experience teach us. . . . [As] new and unanticipated domains of activity open themselves up to us, . . . we cannot be expected to have guiding desires of the degree of generality requisite to organize our plans, decisions, and actions. After all, we have had no opportunities to come to have them. . . . And so, instead of forming plans and policies that project coherent patterns of agency into the barely explored sphere of activity, we will simply be brought up short" (Millgram 1997, p. 103). Millgram concludes that the effort to achieve anything like coherence among one's commitments can never be enough; it must work in tandem with a parallel effort to learn what matters from unfamiliar situations. Indeed, pursuit of coherence alone may actually be counterproductive: "Sooner or later, my plans and policies are going to need revision, [so] increasing the coherence of my decisions, plans, and policies [without new observations], will ultimately make the required revisions more rather than less drastic" (Millgram 1997, p. 84). Thus rational inquiry must regularly reach beyond introspection to incorporate judgments about new situations. Millgram himself con-

ceives that effort as "practical induction," roughly, developing normative principles by generalizing from normative judgments about particular situations.

Millgram argues convincingly that we should "let experience teach us" what matters in novel situations, but his claim that it must do so via practical induction, and his skepticism about the search for anything like coherence among our convictions, are not necessary to this point.[15] Whether or not we often use induction to generalize judgments about novel situations, the judgments (and any generalizations about them) need to be integrated with the web of belief we bring to them through a process of reflection like the one I just outlined. Observation is essential, but it must be followed by reflection (Richardson 1999). To fail to ask whether a new normative observation casts doubt on existing normative convictions, and whether those existing convictions cast doubt on the observation, is irrational for the reasons already given. Still, Millgram calls attention to a crucial issue: in our pursuit of reflective equilibrium, we need to receive continual input from normative judgments about previously unforeseen situations.

CASES AND REFLECTION

With this background, the rationale behind the normative case study is not difficult to develop. When we read case studies like Selznick's or Jacobs's, we are in all likelihood considering situations we have not considered before. Often we will have intuitive reactions to these situations— an intuitive judgment that there is something valuable about the scenes that Jacobs depicts, or an intuitive judgment that the TVA has lost its way.[16] These judgments are important, but always revisable, elements of our web of normative belief. As Rawls and his interpreters suggest, the fact that they are concrete does not mean they are less fundamental (Rawls 1999, p. 239). Indeed, we are often more certain about concrete judgments about what should be done in particular cases than we are about the abstract principles that purportedly justify them (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988; Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 58). As Richardson put it, "among moral judg-

[15] Millgram argues that induction is indispensable to practical reasoning because it is the only way to learn from experience, but influential accounts of theoretical reasoning have dispensed with induction altogether while retaining a central place for empirical observation. Most prominently, Karl Popper (1972) rejected inductive reasoning entirely, believing that science could learn from experience through deduction and observation alone.

[16] Millgram (1997, pp. 105–40) and White (2002, pp. 158–69) offer intriguing, albeit controversial, accounts of what is going on when we make these judgments.

ments that stand most firm are some quite concrete, even particular ones—about the evil of the Holocaust and of the My Lai massacre, about the admirable character of Mother Theresa's work with the poor and sick of Calcutta, about the injustice of Idi Amin's rule, and so on. . . . Conversely, it is so difficult to frame satisfactory general principles for ethics or for practice that we are constantly indicating our doubts about them by hedging them in one way or another" (Richardson 1997, p. 138). Our knowledge of what is good and bad for humans does not consist only in abstract principles. It also inheres in judgments about particular situations, and there is no a priori reason to privilege one level of abstraction over the others.

Whatever their provenance, judgments about particular situations can often expand normative understanding because, as I just emphasized, judgments at each level of abstraction typically have implications for judgments at other levels. In some cases, concrete judgments about particular cases may fit easily into our existing web of normative beliefs. For example, we probably learn little about morals when we read about the Abner Louima case in New York City. The police treatment of Abner Louima violates clear principles of professional and personal ethics that most people already hold: there is no need to revise our normative understanding to account for our intuitive sense of outrage about what the police did in that case. But sometimes our tentative judgments about an unfamiliar case may be harder to square with the web of belief we bring to them.

The tension that results is a creative tension: it generates moral knowledge. Considering an unfamiliar, hard case leads to reflective *dis*equilibrium, so it should stimulate us to search for ways to right the balance. In the process we may discover reasons to revise our understanding of core values like the responsibilities of organizational leadership or the characteristics that make neighborhoods attractive. (We may also, of course, revise our initial judgment about the case, or conclude that we should let the conflict stand.) The case itself may not *be* a reason to change our views. It may simply generate a moral tension that drives us to reflection, and in the course of that reflection we may discover reasons to change our views that, in our dull complacency, we had not noticed before.

In this way, consideration of new cases can deepen understanding not only of the grand ideals of social life like justice and equality that Rawls emphasized but also a variety of less rarefied social ideals. For example, Jacobs's and Selznick's cases destabilize existing conceptions of good neighborhoods and good leadership by showing that they cannot account for considered judgments about particular cases. Jacobs's descriptions of vital neighborhoods called attention to valuable aspects of neighborhood life that had no place in the thoroughly æsthetic conceptions of good city

form she opposed, and Selznick's account of the TVA described a troubled organization—a "conservation" agency that began eroding hillsides and polluting streams by strip-mining coal in the Tennessee Valley, and that repeatedly resisted new environmental regulations on its activities—whose failures could not be understood from the viewpoint of administrative efficiency that dominated the study of organizational leadership at the time. Many other case studies deepen our understanding of important values by confronting established ideals with dissonant cases. A case study of World War II can help us to understand when war is justified and what rules should govern its conduct (Walzer 1971). An account of the Copernican Revolution can deepen our views about the right approach to scientific inquiry (Kuhn 1957, 1970). A description of how a Danish transportation project unfolded may shed light on the ideal of rationality in urban planning (Flyvbjerg 1998). An examination of neighborhood life in Boston's West End may increase our respect for the value of community ties and our desire for public policy to protect them (Gans 1959, 1962b), while a case study of community activism in New York's Forest Hills neighborhood may caution us against uncritically embracing the value of tight-knit communities (Sennett 1977). Case descriptions of New England town meetings and workplace democracy can help to clarify our democratic ideals (Mansbridge 1983), while studies of the community action programs in the 1960s can advance our conception of the ideals that should guide social reform (Marris and Rein 1982). Case studies of community policing reform may deepen our understanding of how police should hold themselves accountable to local communities (Thacher 2001b) and call attention to the necessary contradictions in the police mandate (Thacher 2001a), while case analysis of order maintenance policing can clarify the intrinsic importance of police efforts to control neighborhood disorder (Thacher 2004b). These examples are grossly oversimplified: I have given only a sound-bite summary of the normative issues raised by each study, and many contributed to explanatory theory as well as normative theory. Nevertheless, the examples illustrate how widespread the normative case study already is in social science. The list could easily be extended.

In the remainder of this section I will clarify the process used to analyze cases like these by describing the analytic approaches it relies on, the contributions that causal and interpretive analysis can make to it, and some special features of the thick ethical concepts to which it typically contributes. In effect, these discussions will itemize several kinds of convictions and several kinds of relationships among those convictions that have special importance for the normative case study.

Analysis in the Normative Case Study

One common version of the process I just described pits a clear initial judgment about a case against a clear contrary implication from existing normative ideals. Jacobs herself described this kind of conflict as she recounted a discussion of Boston's North End with an urban planner. When Jacobs asked the planner about the neighborhood, he classified it as a slum because it ran afoul of widely accepted planning standards for characteristics like density (Jacobs 1961, pp. 16–25). But after Jacobs mentioned her own admiration for the neighborhood, the planner sheepishly agreed.

> "I know how you feel," he said. "I often go down there myself just to walk around the streets and feel that wonderful, cheerful street life. Say, what you ought to do, you ought to come back and go down in the summer if you think it's fun now. You'd be crazy about it in the summer. But of course we have to rebuild it eventually. We've got to get those people off the streets." Here was a curious thing. My friend's instincts told him the North End was a good place, and his social statistics confirmed it. [Jacobs had just quizzed him about topics like delinquency, rents, disease, and infant mortality.] But everything he had learned as a physical planner about what is good for people and good for city neighborhoods, everything that made him an expert, told him the North End had to be a bad place. (Jacobs 1961, pp. 10–11)

This conflict is a straightforward example of the creative tension I just mentioned. It should spark an analysis that considers the web of normative commitments relevant to judgments about what is valuable in neighborhood life—among other things, our initial judgments about the vignettes that Jacobs describes, our judgments about other paradigm cases of attractive neighborhoods, our prior commitment to the aesthetic principles Jacobs opposes, our reasons for having those commitments, and our reasons for believing that neighborhood livability is an important social ideal. In considering these provisional fixed points of our normative understanding, the goal must be to recraft the planning literature's vision of good neighborhood form (Jacobs 1961, pp. 16–25) in a way that can accommodate all the convictions I just mentioned, allowing, of course, for the possibility that we may revise some of them on reflection.

This process closely resembles the one Burawoy (1998) described for causal case studies, which asks social scientists to identify cases that existing explanatory theory finds anomalous and revise the theory to resolve the anomaly. The difference here lies only in the kind of theory and observation involved. The extended case method relies on and contributes to an existing body of explanatory theory, and it does so by drawing out

the implications of factual observations. The normative case study relies on and contributes to an existing body of normative theory, and it does so by drawing out the implications of normative observations. To do that, it is obviously necessary to begin with an existing normative theory—an existing view about, say, what good neighborhood form consists in or what the obligations of leadership are. Cases should then be selected for analysis from the innumerable possibilities the world serves up precisely because they challenge this view—because they evoke judgments that our existing normative ideals cannot account for.

This analytic strategy requires clear and immediate (though always revisable) judgments, but some cases are more complicated: figuring out whether anything is amiss itself requires analysis. One approach turns to analogies. If one's direct normative judgment about a case is not clear, it may help to examine it indirectly by asking whether it is similar to or different from other cases in which our judgments *are* clear (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988; Thacher 2004*a*). This analogical approach, of course, is a core strategy of case analysis in law. If successful, the comparison has two benefits: it clarifies our intuitions about the original case, and it generates normative principles in the process. As legal scholar Cass Sunstein explains, we conclude that two cases are similar or different *for a reason*, and that reason points toward a normative principle that summarizes our intuitions about this class of cases. That does not mean that analogical reasoning is really deductive reasoning in disguise. "The governing idea is not given in advance and applied to the new case," Sunstein writes. "Instead, analogical reasoning helps identify the governing idea and is indispensable to the identification; we do not know what the idea is until we have assessed the cases. Analogy and disanalogy are created or discovered through the process of comparing cases, as people discern a principle that makes sense of their considered judgments" (Sunstein 1996, pp. 65–66). The Rawlsian reference to considered judgments is not accidental. The analogical approach is a specific version of reflective equilibrium that relies on specific kinds of (relatively concrete) convictions: judgments about the paradigm cases and judgments about similarity and differences (Sunstein 1996, pp. 17–19). Moreover, once judgments about particular cases have been clarified analogically, they can inform the pursuit of a wider reflective equilibrium that also considers more general judgments.

Description, Causation, Interpretation, and Values

Regardless of the analytic approach, social science cases bring several distinctive advantages to this endeavor. The simplest is verisimilitude. This characteristic may seem obvious but it does not reflect standard

practice in moral philosophy, which often relies on hypothetical or even deliberately unrealistic cases—"the more preposterous, the better," political theorist Robert Goodin (1982, pp. 8–12) once complained. Goodin argued that such cases are too tenuously related to real dilemmas to offer practical guidance, and that is an important consideration, but my account of normative inquiry suggests another problem. Millgram (1997, p. 92) put the essential point succinctly when he wrote that philosophers' emphasis on hypothetical cases reflects "overconfidence in the powers of the imagination." As pure products of our own minds, hypothetical cases do not move beyond introspection, but cases are important precisely when and because they bring us into contact with the unfamiliar (or simply unnoticed) experiences that we need to confront in order to cope with a continually surprising world (Millgram 1997, pp. 139–40). That is why verisimilitude is an essential principle for the normative case study—why social science skills for documenting real social life, in all its complexity, have great value for normative inquiry. Empirical cases are important because, as the saying goes, truth is stranger than fiction. Rawls (1951, p. 182) himself agreed with this conclusion ("All judgments on hypothetical cases are excluded," he insisted), but not, I think, for the right reasons. Rawls wrote that it was desirable to restrict attention to real cases "in order that the judgments in question be made in the effort to settle problems with which men are familiar and whereupon they have had an opportunity to reflect" (Rawls 1951, p. 182). But if cases present familiar problems on which we have already had an opportunity to reflect, then considering them does not improve on the self-examination that, while important for normative understanding, is precisely what we should look to real experience to augment. Obviously this is not to say that we should not reflect on the cases deeply in the way Rawls indicates, nor that fiction cannot play a role in normative inquiry.[17] It is only to say that factual cases are a necessary, not a sufficient, ingredient of a complete program of normative inquiry.

Social science cases have another distinctive advantage. Where necessary, social science cases can incorporate the causal and interpretive analyses that may be necessary to establish ethically relevant facts. Interpretation and causal analysis can contribute to normative analysis in the same way that interpretive analysis and causal analysis can contribute to one another (Roth and Mehta 2002; Lin 1998).

The importance of causal analysis in this regard is clear. Often it is not

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[17] Indeed sometimes it may be essential. For example, when technological change poses new normative questions on the horizon, we must rely on imagination to anticipate *future* cases; today biotechnology raises many issues of this kind. Nussbaum (1990) describes the contributions that fiction can make to ethics lucidly.

possible to judge whether an action, event, or situation is praiseworthy without considering *both* its intrinsic features *and* its consequences, and doing so in a way that integrates rather than separates these two kinds of considerations (Larmore 1987, p. 144). As Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel (2002, p. 4) recently observed, philosophers often avoid analyzing such topics because they have little expertise for assessing consequences (cf. Goodin 1982, p. 13). The normative case study enjoys a major advantage over conventional philosophical practice in this regard. Empirical cases offer at least some modest ability to trace causal relationships and, as a result, the consequences that actions and events have. At the same time, they offer a detailed description of both what the action involves and what its consequences look like. By establishing these causal relationships and descriptions, case studies make it possible to integrate consequentialist judgments with deontological judgments, opening a window to the investigation of a variety of normative issues less deontologically pure than those most philosophers have emphasized.

The role of interpretive analysis in normative case studies is more complex. Interpretive work in the *verstehen* mode can make fairly straightforward contributions to normative understanding, since the attempt to understand the motivations and worldview that lead people to behave the way they do is a way of identifying reasons and values that inform their choices that have not yet been appreciated fully, and on reflection we may find those reasons and values justifiable. Thus *verstehen* may sometimes vindicate the actions of others, not just explain them (Duneier 2002, p. 1575; Scanlon 1998, pp. 67, 74–75). But as interpretive social science has broadened its reach beyond *verstehen*'s norms and values to investigate more complex aspects of social meaning (e.g., symbolic codes, classification systems, and practices), it has paved the way for more complex contributions to normative theory.

The crucial point is that ethically relevant facts often inhere in complex features of social reality whose nature is such that they can only be understood with the aid of post-*verstehende* interpretation. In particular, the features of social reality that John Searle (1964, 1995) baptized "institutional facts" are often relevant to our normative judgments.[18] The institutional fact that a man is a police officer gives him rights and obligations that other people in the same situation would not have, and the institutional fact that I made a promise gives me reasons for action that I

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[18] I rely on Searle's theory because he recently discussed its implications for normative reasoning explicitly (2001), but I suspect that my argument could be translated into other theoretical languages. Taylor (1985, pp. 34–37) argues that (an earlier version of) Searle's theory of institutional facts applies to a broad range of social practices, not just the formal institutions Searle emphasized.

would not otherwise have. To be precise, the institutions themselves do not create the reasons; people create the reasons when they invoke and otherwise rely on the institutions (Searle 2001, pp. 206–8). Making a promise, entering a marriage, enrolling in college, and many other social actions create obligations and other reasons for action that bind the person who performs them (though of course those reasons are typically defeasible, and a person can always just act irrationally). Consequently, it is often impossible to arrive at justifiable normative conclusions about a case without establishing the existence and meaning of relevant institutional facts.

On Searle's (1995, pp. 60–63) account, a key feature of institutional facts is that they exist partly in our minds. (For example, the institutional fact that I am a professor is partly constituted by a complex network of beliefs and other attitudes that I and other people hold.) Facts like these can only exist if people represent them as existing—the facts are partly *constituted* by the representations—so to discover and understand an institutional fact one must make sense of these representations. Interpretation is the name we give to this process of sense making—in this case, making sense of the potentially opaque social meanings that constitute social institutions (Taylor 1985, pp. 15, 34). It would be pedantic to demand a detailed interpretation of every aspect of social reality, since many institutional facts essentially wear their meanings on their sleeves. But if the meaning of the relevant representations are unclear or contested— and such cases seem especially likely to harbor normative lessons—interpretation will be essential.

For that reason, normative analysis often cannot even get started without help from interpretation. For example, to develop an adequate theory of distributive justice, it would be necessary to clarify the social meaning and significance of many of the goods being distributed. As Michael Walzer argued, most things people value are social goods—goods that "come into people's minds before they come into their hands" (e.g., careers, honor, and political power)—so normative judgments about their allocation "are patterned in accordance with shared conceptions of what the goods are and what they are for" (Walzer 1983, p. 7).

I have described this connection between normative and interpretive analysis abstractly, but Selznick's study of the TVA can serve both to illustrate it briefly and to flesh out some of its key concepts, since Selznick himself made significant contributions to institutional theory. Selznick's analysis of institutions connects easily with Searle's: on both accounts, institutions entangle their participants in a range of commitments that the participants cannot just disclaim at will. Studying the institutional dimensions of organizations, Selznick declared that "'to institutionalize' is to *infuse with value* beyond the technical requirements of the task at

hand"—that is, to develop "commitments" that "bind the organization to specific aims and procedures" and specific "ways of acting and believing" (Selznick 1957, pp. 17–18, 21, original emphasis). Consequently, the participants in an institution become at least tentatively bound by these commitments, which can be revised only "in a principled way" (Selznick 1992, p. 338).

Such commitments figure prominently in Selznick's analysis of the TVA. By entering into partnerships with the land grant colleges, Selznick argued, TVA leaders accepted a range of institutional commitments (such as the college extension services' negative attitudes toward blacks and tenants, favoritism toward wealthier farmers, and support for the American Farm Bureau Federation), and by doing so unreflectively they violated other obligations they had already assumed by virtue of their role as agency managers. Selznick's conclusion here was normative—he concluded that the TVA's leadership had failed and that existing theories about good leadership ignored the key considerations that underlie this judgment—but to establish it he first needed to interpret the social reality within which the TVA managers acted. Specifically, he needed to explicate the nature of the extension service's "commitments" (Selznick 1949, pp. 117–24), demonstrate how the TVA "accepted" those commitments by partnering with the land grant colleges (Selznick 1949, pp. 124–53), and clarify how they conflicted with the TVA's own institutional commitments (which Selznick [1949, pp. 186–213] conceptualized as its "character"). With these institutional facts established, the normative verdict on the TVA leadership was all but established. All that remained was to draw out the implications of this judgment about the TVA case for more general convictions about the nature of good organizational leadership (Selznick 1949, pp. 181–85; 1957, pp. 1–5, 42–45, 79–82).

In a case like this, the distinction between interpretation and normative analysis arguably breaks down altogether, since the institutional facts Selznick sought to establish (e.g., the nature of the TVA's character, and the idea that its character had changed in a way that amounted to "co-optation" by local forces) are thick ethical concepts—descriptions that already imply evaluations. (On Searle's account, institutional facts almost always combine description and evaluation in this manner; indeed he introduced the concept to explain how it was possible to derive "ought" from "is" [Searle 1964, pp. 54–56].) If Selznick shrank from this implication in *TVA* itself (Selznick 1949, p. 202), he soon acknowledged it more explicitly in a paper that derided the "quasi-metaphysical dogma . . . that fact and value belong to alien spheres" (Selznick 1961, p. 86).

From this perspective, it seems misleading to say that neutral interpretation is a separate step that merely contributes to normative analysis— that an analyst can first identify the meaning of social reality for the

people studied without passing any judgment on it ("the TVA became what they call 'co-opted'") and only then examine the situation from a normative perspective—because the interpretation will remain incomplete until it incorporates normatively engaged concepts. In Ronald Dworkin's words:

> A social scientist who offers to interpret [a] practice . . . can, if he wishes, undertake only to report the various opinions different individuals in the community have about what the practice demands. But that would not constitute an interpretation of the practice itself; if he undertakes that different project he must give up methodological individualism and use the methods his subjects use in forming their own opinions about what [the practice] really requires. He must, that is, *join* the practice he proposes to understand; his conclusions are then not neutral reports about what the citizens [engaged in the practice] think but claims about [it] *competitive* with theirs. (Dworkin 1986, p. 64, original emphasis)

Dworkin is not alone in this judgment; indeed, in this quotation he is mainly explicating the views of Jürgen Habermas (1983, pp. 102–41), and Charles Taylor (1985, pp. 91–115) has endorsed a similar conclusion.

In the space that remains, I will explore this issue in more detail by investigating how case study analysis contributes to understanding of thick ethical concepts. I cannot develop a full-blown alternative to the ideal of neutral interpretation here (see Habermas 1983; Taylor 1985; Dworkin 1986). Instead I will pursue a more modest aim that has more direct relevance to my analysis of the normative case study: to explain how it is *possible* to clarify concepts that combine description and evaluation (i.e., without arguing that social interpretation should always take this route). In any case, as I noted in the introduction, the normative case study is especially valuable for analyzing this category of normative ideals, so it will be useful to describe its distinctive features.

Thick Ethical Concepts and the Normative Case Study

In the discussion that introduced the term "thick ethical concepts," Bernard Williams contrasted it with the thin ethical concepts that philosophers often emphasize. On his account, thin ethical concepts are very general notions like "right," "good," and "virtuous," which are purely normative ideals abstracted from any empirical content (they are not "world-guided," in Williams's terms). Thick ethical concepts, by contrast, are more specific ideals like "courage," "friendship," and "cruel," which have both descriptive and evaluative dimensions that cannot be disentangled (Williams 1986, pp. 129–30, 140–44, 152; Putnam 2002, pp. 34–40, 2004, pp. 73–74). Williams implied that if we apply a thin ethical concept to

an event, person, or action, we only evaluate it, but if we apply a thick ethical concept, we describe and evaluate it simultaneously (indeed we evaluate it *by* describing it). For example, if I say "capital punishment is wrong," I condemn it but make no substantial descriptive claims about it; but if I say "capital punishment is cruel," I simultaneously make a descriptive claim about it and (*pro tanto*) condemn it.[19] The descriptive dimension of thick ethical concepts explains why they often appear in fields like history and sociology, as when a historian writes that "Vlad the Impaler was an exceptionally cruel monarch" or "the cruelties of the regime provoked a number of rebellions" (Putnam 2004, p. 73), or a sociologist describes the causes and consequences of "friendship," "statesmanship," or "democracy" (Selznick 1961, pp. 85–91).

Philosophers and social scientists hoping to preserve a clean dichotomy between facts and values have insisted that thick ethical concepts can always be factored into separate descriptive and evaluative elements. On that view, "for any concept of this sort, you could produce another that picked out just the same features of the world but worked simply as a descriptive concept, lacking any prescriptive or evaluative force" (Williams 1986, p. 141). The evaluative dimension, in turn, would be given by a purely normative standard, such as Kant's categorical imperative or Rawls's two principles of justice. These attempts at factoring have not been very successful.[20] In Putnam's words:

> The attempt . . . to split thick ethical concepts into a "descriptive meaning component" and a "prescriptive meaning component" founders on the impossibility of saying what the "descriptive meaning" of, say, "cruel" is without using the word "cruel" or a synonym. For example, it is certainly not the case that the extension of "cruel" (setting the evaluation aside, as it were) is simply "causing deep suffering," nor . . . is "causes deep suffering" itself free of evaluative force. . . . Before the invention of anesthesia at the end of the nineteenth century, any operation caused great pain, but the

[19] More precisely, "capital punishment is wrong" makes no descriptive claims other than those needed to pick out capital punishment as a subject of evaluation, but "capital punishment is cruel" makes additional descriptive claims about it (Sen 1967, p. 46; Putnam 2002, pp. 68–70). (It is worth noting that some philosophers have argued that even "good" and "right" fail to qualify as thin in Williams's sense [Tappolet n.d.], but since I will focus on the thick half of this distinction, there is no need to enter that debate here.) The *pro tanto* qualifier in the text is necessary because, as is often the case in ethics, something might be bad in one way but still appropriate, all things considered. For example, it is perfectly intelligible to say, "capital punishment is cruel; all the same, it is a necessary evil."

[20] Some philosophers (notably R. M. Hare) have tried to develop general arguments that thick ethical concepts can always, in principle, be factored into descriptive and evaluative components, but John McDowell has demonstrated that the arguments presented so far either beg the question (McDowell 1998, p. 83) or fail (McDowell 1998, p. 202).

surgeons were not normally being *cruel*, and behavior that does not cause obvious pain at all may be extremely cruel. Imagine that a person debauches a young person with the deliberate aim of keeping him or her from fulfilling some great talent! Even if the victim never feels obvious pain, this may be extremely cruel. (Putnam 2002, p. 38)

Putnam went on to relate this dispute to broader questions in the philosophy of mind. On his account, the philosophers who hope to factor thick ethical concepts into separate descriptive and evaluative components "share a picture of the mind as divided into discrete 'faculties,' a picture in which perception supplies 'neutral' facts and values come from the will" (Putnam 2002, p. 118). Drawing on arguments by John McDowell and Iris Murdoch, Putnam concluded that this picture is faulty.

> Terms like "kind," "sensitive," "cruel," "humiliated," "impertinent" . . . do not stand for neutral descriptive properties, properties that our "natural psychological impulses" encounter without benefit of what McDowell, reviving Aristotle's notion, calls an acquired "second nature." The fact that an act is cruel or kind, sensitive or insensitive, pert or refreshingly spontaneous, is available only through the lenses of *value concepts*. Contrary to the Kantian picture, in our moral lives we cannot and do not get by with a vocabulary obtained by supplementing a starkly naturalistic vocabulary with a single moral notion. (Putnam 2002, pp. 118–19)

This account replaces a picture of the mind that separates perception from will with a more integrated picture in which perception and evaluation are intertwined (just as perception and conceptualization are intertwined outside the domain of ethics [McDowell 1998, pp. 51, 192–93; Murdoch 1971, pp. 30–33, 39]).

If this account is correct, one cannot master thick ethical concepts without considering empirical and normative input together. That is, it is not possible to learn everything there is to know about values by reasoning abstractly from first principles—for example, by building on Kant's effort to think through the unavoidable requirements of reason (McDowell 1998, p. 196)—but it *is* possible to develop a better understanding of thick ethical concepts by examining new cases from a perspective that is simultaneously descriptive and evaluative. McDowell suggests how such a perspective can be achieved by explaining how a would-be moral educator might try to help others understand a case in a more sophisticated way: "Conveying what a circumstance means, in this loaded sense, is getting someone to see it in the special way in which a virtuous person would see it. In the attempt to do so, one exploits contrivances similar to those one exploits in other areas where the task is to back up the injunction 'see it like this': helpful juxtapositions of cases, descriptions with carefully

chosen terms and carefully placed emphasis, and the like" (McDowell 1998, p. 85; cf. Murdoch 1971, p. 31). Here McDowell alludes to two strategies for clarifying thick ethical concepts like "cruelty" by examining unfamiliar cases: first, comparing the new case to an established paradigm case of "cruelty" or its absence (his "helpful juxtaposition of cases"); and second, describing the new case using *other* thick ethical concepts to which "cruelty" can be related (his "carefully chosen terms" and "carefully placed emphasis"), as when Putnam uses the thick ethical concept "debauch" to explain how actions that cause pleasure might, counterintuitively, be cruel.

Jacobs's analysis of neighborhood livability illustrates both strategies. First, when she described life in Greenwich Village, she did not pause to separate fact and value; if she had, it would have been impossible to describe the situation adequately. For example, when she used Bernie's grocery to help develop her notion of "contact," Jacobs hardly used value-neutral terms: the shop is a place "where one is free to either hang around or dash in and out, no strings attached. Under this system, it is possible in a city street neighborhood to know all kinds of people without unwelcome entanglements, without boredom, necessity for excuses, explanations, fears of giving offense, embarrassments respecting impositions or commitments, and all such paraphernalia of obligations which can accompany less limited relationships" (Jacobs 1961, p. 62). This passage, like the rest of *The Death and Life*, is shot through with thick ethical terms—"unwelcome entanglements," "excuses," "offense," etc.—and the same could be said about other normative case studies, as my discussion of Selznick suggested. The key point is that an interpretation of a thick ethical concept (e.g., "contact") can be established in part by connecting it to other thick ethical concepts (e.g., "unwelcome entanglements").

Second, Jacobs used case comparisons to clarify further what makes a neighborhood livable. For example, having described how everyday life in Greenwich Village illustrates the nature and value of contact, she compared it with the more strained social life she found on the ill-fated Baltimore street described earlier. In doing so, she tried to communicate her judgment about the Baltimore street by calling attention to its lack of the pleasantly superficial public life she found in stores like Bernie's (Jacobs 1961, p. 63). This approach to ethical inquiry is, of course, just the analogical approach I introduced above, but it is worth adding one further point attributable to Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin. In a detailed discussion of analogical reasoning, Jonsen and Toulmin argued that the content of an ethical concept partly *consists of* our understanding of particular illustrations of its proper application. To a first approximation, we understand ethical concepts "because, and to the extent that, we are familiar with the central unambiguous kinds of cases (the 'paradigmatic cases') that [they] are commonly understood to cover" (Jonsen and Toul-

min 1988, p. 8). When more complicated cases arise, we can try to determine whether an ethical concept fits them by using the tools of analogical reasoning I described earlier. The always-evolving result is what Jonsen and Toulmin call a "moral taxonomy"—"a detailed and methodical map of morally significant likenesses and differences" (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988, p. 14; Thacher 2004*a*). On this view, an adequate interpretation of a thick ethical concept partly consists of this kind of taxonomy. The vignettes assembled in *The Death and Life* serve as the beginnings of such a map for the thick ethical concept of a "livable neighborhood."

These two strategies can be used to achieve thick ethical knowledge because they both examine new cases from a perspective that is simultaneously descriptive and evaluative. They are not alternatives to the method of reflective equilibrium but specific interpretations of that method appropriate to the analysis of thick ethical concepts. Each approach aims to triangulate a better understanding of a thick ethical concept by relying on apt elements of our web of normative convictions that are not currently in question (e.g., our understanding of other thick ethical concepts or our convictions about a paradigm case).

CONCLUSION

Case study research is a central part of social science analysis, and its contributions to causal explanations and interpretive understanding are well known. This article has argued that social science cases can legitimately make contributions to normative understanding as well, and that many already have. They do so by presenting us with unfamiliar situations that inspire tentative moral judgments, which may destabilize the web of normative conviction we bring to them when we examine the connections among its elements. As I have argued, we examine these connections in a number of different ways—by examining the consistency of general principles with judgments about specific cases, by juxtaposing cases and reflecting on the analogies between them, or by describing the features of a case using thick ethical concepts. In this respect, the normative case study represents a viable method that social scientists can use to answer the calls for normative study that have become common in sociology and other fields (e.g., Zald 1991; Seidman and Alexander 2001; Burawoy 2004; Thacher 2001*c*, 2005). Moreover, it enables them to do that in a way that mobilizes their empirical skills for new purposes rather than treating normative analysis as an add-on to otherwise unchanged empirical practice.[21]

[21] By contrast, Burawoy seems to treat the normative aspect of his "public sociology" as disconnected from social science practice: "Empirical science can only take us so far: it can help us understand the consequences of our value commitments and inform

In making this argument, I have left many questions unanswered. Believing that the first order of business is to establish the philosophical basis of the normative case study, I have only scratched the surface of its methodology and its distinctive dilemmas. For example, more clearly needs to be said about the connections between causal, interpretive, and normative analysis in case study research. It is not only that my brief discussion of the contributions that causal and interpretive analysis make to normative study needs elaboration (which it surely does, particularly through more extended analysis of concrete examples). Attention should also be paid to the opposite connection—the contribution that normative case study inquiry makes to causal and interpretive studies, which regularly traffic in normative concepts.

By way of conclusion, I will consider an objection that my argument may provoke, since the response will help to draw out the implications of my argument for the relationship between social science and ethics. Presented with the conclusion that case studies can contribute to normative understanding, some social scientists may respond that that conclusion is important for ethicists but not for them. Normative theory has traditionally been the province of ethicists rather than social scientists, so if normative case studies can contribute to it, is that not an argument that ethicists should carry these studies out? It is, and in recent years case ethics has taken off in some areas of philosophy, particularly in the philosophical ghettos of "applied ethics." (It is telling, incidentally, that an interdisciplinary approach to moral thinking has taken root in these areas; medical ethicists, in particular, have sometimes recognized the close link between social scientific and ethical inquiry [Hoffmaster 1992].) But case ethics has not taken hold of the philosophical mainstream, and a brief examination of the reasons for that neglect will clarify why social scientists should care about the normative case study.

Academic enterprises are defined as much by their methods as their content, partly because the nature of their methods shapes the possible scope of their substantive contributions. King et al. (1994, p. 9) go so far as to say that "the content of 'science' is primarily the methods and rules, not the subject matter, since we can use these methods to study virtually anything." Of course, King et al.'s definition of "scientific methods" differs from mine, but it is clear that social scientists are skilled at distinctive kinds of research methods (e.g., the use of interviews, observation, and document review to find out how certain contemporary and historical events transpired) that generate evidence relevant to normative questions

our value discussions, but it cannot determine those values. Determining values should take place through democratic and collective deliberation" (Burawoy 2004, pp. 1606–7). This perspective leaves public sociology open to the charge that sociologists have no distinctive contribution to make to it (Tittle 2004).

as well as explanatory questions; moreover, explanatory knowledge itself opens up new vistas for normative inquiry. Indeed, the institutional makeup of social science—its formal and informal training, its organization and incentives, and its financial resources, among other characteristics—offers a structure of support for scholars to make these contributions that rarely exists in philosophy. If social scientists abdicate the normative case study, an important aspect of ethical inquiry will remain underexplored because few philosophers will pursue it.

The aspect that will be neglected centers on a particular class of social ideals. For better or worse, moral and political philosophers have mainly emphasized the grand ideals of social life like justice, equality, and liberty, avoiding the more grounded ideals analyzed in many of the normative case studies I cited. Put in terms of the distinction between thick and thin ethical concepts, it is only a modest exaggeration to say that the thicker an ethical concept is, the less attention philosophers have paid to it. As Williams observed, "[Ethical] theorists have particularly tended to favor the most general expressions used in ethical discussion—*good, right, ought*, and the rest" on "the reductionist belief that those notions were contained in more specific ethical conceptions" (Williams 1986, p. 128; cf Murdoch 1971, pp. 8, 40). As I have already indicated, significant barriers prevent philosophers from examining thicker concepts. When the empirical and the normative are entangled, scholars who lack expertise and support for empirical inquiry will have difficulty making a contribution, so it is not surprising that very thick ethical concepts like "leadership" and "neighborhood livability" are typically understudied in philosophy.[22] In that sense, many of the ideals open to investigation through normative case studies do not need to be "taken away" from philosophy: they have not been claimed by any field. When they are studied at all it is typically by interdisciplinary thinkers like Richard Sennett, Michael Walzer, and Philip Selznick, or relative outsiders to the academy like Jane Jacobs. Because these concepts are a hybrid of fact and value, they simply do not fit neatly into existing academic divisions.

There is, moreover, a final reason why social scientists should care about

[22] Even secondary analysis of cases written by others will often be inadequate, for reasons I suggested in my critique of the use Young made of Jacobs: case material will rarely speak precisely to the normative questions of interest unless it is gathered with exactly those questions in mind. Moreover, these difficulties confront not only philosophers but also those social theorists who forgo their own detailed empirical research. For example, Zygmunt Bauman (1993)—a notable example of a sociologist who has contributed to ethical theory, mentioned prominently in Seidman and Alexander's (2001) discussion of sociology's "turn to moral reasoning"—has not, to my knowledge, examined the kinds of thick ethical concepts I have emphasized. As a result, his work is hard to distinguish from more conventional philosophical study (albeit of the continental rather than the analytic variety).

the philosophical basis for the normative case study: because many of its most celebrated achievements already reflect this approach in significant respects (e.g., Selznick 1949; Kuhn 1957; Gans 1959, 1962b; Jacobs 1961; Marris and Rein 1982; Skolnick 1975; Foucault 1977; Sennett 1977; Hochschild 1984; Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Flyvbjerg 1998). Social scientists are already doing normative case studies—practice often outruns theory like this—and its logic should be of concern to them, both to build on this distinguished line of research and to understand the nature of the contributions it has made more clearly.

In the end, the instinct to turn the normative case study entirely over to ethics (assuming that anyone but my imaginary interlocutor holds it) bespeaks a commitment to an increasingly artificial and anachronistic distinction between academic fields. The divide between the sciences and the humanities partly reflects the supposed divide between fact and value, and as the fact/value dichotomy collapses in response to the changes in our understanding of knowledge that I have discussed, we should not cling rigidly to the organization of academic life that it once inspired. Already when Weber put forward his seminal argument for a value-free social science, he admitted that the effort was a delicate one, describing it eloquently as an attempt to "trace the course of the hair-line which separates science from faith" (Weber 1949, p. 110). In the hundred years since Weber wrote these lines, our understanding of human rationality has changed considerably. It should not be surprising if these upheavals have shaken our conception of rational inquiry so drastically that this particular hairline is no longer visible at all.

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