Two main problems in the sociology of morality

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Abstract Sociologists often ask why particular groups of people have the moral views that they do. I argue that sociology's empirical research on morality relies, implicitly or explicitly, on unsophisticated and even obsolete ethical theories, and thus is based on inadequate conceptions of the ontology, epistemology, and semantics of morality. In this article I address the two main problems in the sociology of morality: (1) the problem of moral truth, and (2) the problem of value freedom. I identify two ideal–typical approaches. While the Weberian paradigm rejects the concept of moral truth, the Durkheimian paradigm accepts it. By contrast, I argue that sociology should be metaphysically agnostic, yet in practice it should proceed as though there were no moral truths. The Weberians claim that the sociology of morality can and should be value free; the Durkheimians claim that it cannot and it should not. My argument is that, while it is true that factual statements presuppose value judgments, it does not follow that sociologists are moral philosophers in disguise. Finally, I contend that in order for sociology to improve its understanding of morality, better conceptual, epistemological, and methodological foundations are needed.

The sociology of morality is the sociological investigation of the nature, causes, and consequences of people's ideas about the good and the right. Even though the expression "sociology of morality" designates no ASA section or academic journal, investigations of this sort stand at the core of several subfields, such as gender, culture, theory, and religion. In fact, most if not all sociologists – be their interest the family, organizations, social movements, inequality, etc. – have asked why particular groups of people have the moral views that they do, and what are the effects of these views on behavior, interaction, structure, change, and institutions.[1]

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[1]One can also give a quantitative indicator here: between 1995 and 1999, *AJS* and *ASR* published 161 articles that use the noun "morality" or the adjective "moral" (that is, about one third of all the articles they published in that 5-year period). To name but a few examples from other subfields, urban ethnographers have studied the "provincial morality of slum neighborhoods" (Suttles 1968), the "moral order of a suburb" (Baumgartner 1988), and the "moral life of the inner city" (Anderson 1999). Sociologists of crime and deviance have been interested in "moral panics," "moral crusades," and "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1963; Cohen 2002; Erikson 1966; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Gusfield 1963; Thompson 1998). One of the main insights of economic sociology is that moral values play an important role in the marketplace (see, e.g., Granovetter and Swedberg 1992; Guillén et al. 2002; Smelser and Swedberg 1994; Zelizer 1979, 1994). For its part, cultural sociology, as Wuthnow (2002:123) rightly notes, is particularly well-positioned to study "values, beliefs, moral constructs, and other normative issues."

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In this article I argue that most of this empirical research on morality is based on hopelessly bankrupt epistemological/methodological foundations. Sociologists typically rely, explicitly or implicitly, on unsophisticated and even obsolete ethical theories. Thus, they start with (or presuppose) an inadequate understanding of what kind of thing morality is; how morality can be scientifically studied; what special problems the study of morality involves; and how morality is different from other cultural objects. I further argue, however, that the sociology of morality is a defensible and valuable project. Thus, I try to reconstruct its foundations giving due consideration to the specificities of morality as an object of study, and paying due attention to recent advances in moral philosophy and epistemology. Logically, the defensibility of the sociology of morality's empirical and theoretical claims requires a defensible conception of what it is that it studies – i.e., morality, its nature, its conceptual and semantic complexities, etc.

This is how things currently stand. There is an epistemological/methodological orthodoxy in the sociology of morality, which I call the "Weberian paradigm."[2] As we shall see, this type of approach underlies some of the field's exemplars, such as Luker's (1984) *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Lamont's (2000) *The Dignity of Working Men*, Jackall's (1988) *Moral Mazes*, and Beisel's (1997) *Imperiled Innocents*. It consists of two principles, which respectively address the two main problems in the sociology of morality: the problem of moral truth and the problem of value freedom.

Principle (1) Moral judgments are not capable of objective truth or falsehood. Take a sentence like "In 1572 the King of France was Charles IX." By most accounts this sentence can be true or false, and its being true or false (as opposed to its being believed to be true or false) is not determined by who is uttering it, who is listening, or its social and linguistic context. By contrast, a sentence like "Eating people is wrong" can be believed to be true or false, but cannot *be* true or false. For moral ideas, beliefs, views, or judgments are just the upshot of social practices and accords, or, as some would prefer to put it, they are "socially constructed." Thus, they are not the kind of thing to which the concepts of truth and falsehood apply.

Principle (2) Sociology in general and the sociology of morality in particular can and should be value free. Or, at least, value freedom is an ideal that can and should be approximated. Of course, values influence one's choice of research topics and even one's choice of methodological tools. This is inevitable. But their influence should be restricted to the "context of discovery." Given a certain social phenomenon and a research question about it, one's knowledge claims – e.g., one's arguments about which theory best accounts for the facts, what are the causes of the phenomenon, the statistical relationships among the variables, the description and explanation one holds to be true, and so on – should not be influenced by one's values.[3]

Unfortunately, if one looks at the last 50 years of scholarly research on these two problems, on both counts the Weberian paradigm is on very shaky ground. Most contemporary moral philosophers believe that a certain act, view, or state of affairs may

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[2]"The Weberian sociologist/paradigm" and "the Durkheimian sociologist/paradigm" are meant to be ideal-types, which none of the contemporary writers I cite perfectly instantiate.

[3]This is, of course, one more incarnation of one of the oldest epistemological problems of the social sciences in general. However, this problem is significantly more acute and consequential in the case of investigations whose very objects are moral values (rather than, say, price elasticities or organizational dynamics).

be – and may be shown to be – objectively good, bad, right, or wrong (even though there is a great deal of variation in why they believe this to be so). In fact, many metaethicists[4] make the ontological argument that there exists some sort of "moral reality," and the epistemological argument that "is true" can be predicated of moral judgments (see, e.g., Bloomfield 2001; Boyd 1988; Brink 1984, 1989; Dancy 1993; Railton 1986; Sayre-McCord 1988). For example, one prestigious school of thought in metaethics – Cornell realism – argues that there are moral facts, and that moral truth consists in the correspondence of a moral judgment to a moral fact. Finally, the ubiquitous – and intuitively appealing – inference from the fact of moral diversity to the dismissal of moral truth has been shown to be a fallacious one (Moody-Adams 1997; but see Loeb 1998).

Likewise, with the demise of logical positivism most of the underpinnings of principle (2) have been severely undermined. Let me mention here just a few things we have learned. First, work on the thesis of underdetermination has demonstrated that empirical evidence alone is not enough to choose between some competing scientific theories (Duhem 1991; Harding 1976; Laudan 1996; Quine 1953). Second, the very sensuous perception of the empirical world ("experience," "observation," etc.) has turned out to be itself theory- or value-laden (Barnes et al. 1996; Hanson 1958; Kuhn 1970; Polanyi 1958). Third – and perhaps more importantly – it is now generally recognized that there is no dichotomy between facts and values, and hence statements cannot be readily classified as belonging to one or the other category (Machamer and Wolters 2004; Putnam 2002; Williams 1985).

In light of these arguments, it may seem that the orthodox sociology of morality – what I have called the "Weberian paradigm" – is a misguided project, which should just be abandoned. In fact, not only is this what most moral philosophers and epistemologists would contend. It is also an argument explicitly put forward by a minority of sociologists, whom I shall refer to as the "Durkheimians." The Durkheimian paradigm – espoused by scholars of the stature of Zygmunt Bauman, Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, Philip Selznick, and Alan Wolfe – is characterized by two basic points. First, it opposes principles (1) and (2) – that is, it believes in moral truth and disbelieves in value freedom. Second, it questions the distinction between the sociology of morality and moral philosophy – that is, the distinction between a "scientific," "objective," and "external" approach on the one hand; and a "philosophical," "normative," and "internal" approach on the other. Thus, writers in this tradition have argued that "social scientists are moral philosophers in disguise" (Wolfe 1989:23); that sociology is "preeminently" a "moral science" (Selznick 1992:xii); and that social science is a sort of "public philosophy" or "moral inquiry" (Bellah 1983; Bellah et al. 1985; Haan et al. 1983).

In this article I argue for a substantially revised version of the Weberian sociology of morality. I reject both the unreflective adoption of the unsophisticated version of principles (1) and (2), and the extreme reaction that would dissolve the boundary between the project of the sociology of morality and the projects of public, normative, and moral philosophy. True, the orthodox sociological understandings of morality, moral truth, and value freedom are untenable. Yet I argue that the *spirit* behind (1) and (2) can be salvaged; for the major problems lie in how sociologists *conceptualize* and *justify* these points – the concepts and

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[4]Moral philosophers distinguish among normative ethics, applied or practical ethics, and metaethics. Normative ethicists develop substantive theories about how to tell right from wrong, what justice is, what moral principles should guide our conduct, and the like. Applied ethicists study practical problems such as abortion, corporate responsibility, intergenerational justice, the rights of non-human animals, or euthanasia (see LaFollette 2003). Metaethics (or second-order ethics) deals with the nature of morality, moral theories, and moral language. For example, it asks: Are there moral facts? Is there a single true morality? Are moral judgments genuine propositions?

language employed, the reasons given in their defense, the literatures attended to, and so on. More specifically, the way sociologists think about (1) and (2) is quite similar to (and sometimes is actually derived from) Weber's own arguments. But Weber and his contemporary interlocutors, of course, lived in an intellectual world in which the underdetermination of theories by the evidence, the theory-ladenness of perception, the "thickness" of some ethical concepts, and the collapse of the fact/value dichotomy were not well-supported and widely-accepted theses. If one wants to retain something like the Weberian position, it should be able to withstand the more cogent and forceful objections that moral philosophers, epistemologists, and Durkheimian sociologists have raised against it in the second half of the twentieth century.

I begin by making two preliminary points about the problem of moral truth that are necessary for the subsequent discussion. First, I show why this is a problem for the sociologist at all. Second, I distinguish among three ethical stances vis-à-vis truth: skepticism, noncognitivism, and relativism. The following section presents the approach most contemporary sociologists have taken toward the problems of moral truth and value freedom, the Weberian paradigm. Then I present the Durkheimian paradigm – one section is devoted to Durkheim's "*science de la morale*," and the next one to his contemporary followers.[5] Lastly, I evaluate the merits of the Weberian and Durkheimian approaches, and put forward my own arguments regarding principles (1) and (2). Oversimplifying somewhat, this is what I argue. (1) Sociology should neither accept nor reject the concept of moral truth; indeed, it should not make any metaphysical judgments about truth in ethics. The problem, however, is that its very purpose of subjecting moral ideas to causal explanation implies that it cannot avoid making a metaethical assumption in this regard. Thus, I suggest that sociology should proceed as though there were no moral truths. My judgment is not principally based on an assessment of which metaethical theory is likely to be correct – given the fundamental disagreements that persist in the philosophical literature, any authoritative verdict about their worth would be questionable. Rather, my judgment is based on a pragmatic assessment of the relative costs of making a metaethical assumption that may turn out to be mistaken, and under which assumptions sociology's empirical project is practically feasible. (2) While it is true that there cannot be a value-free sociology *stricto sensu*, this does not entail that sociology and public philosophy are one and the same thing, or that sociologists are moral philosophers in disguise. The conclusion just does not follow. Then I claim that insofar as there can be a project mainly concerned with, for example, figuring out what different social groups understand by rightness and goodness, it is reasonable that sociology be asked to take it up.

Finally, while I reveal serious flaws in the contemporary Weberians' conceptions of moral truth and value freedom, I end up endorsing at least the Weberian spirit, as well as some of its methodological implications. Indeed, in a narrow practical sense, the empirical work of many Weberians is not inconsistent with my take on (1) and (2), even when they invoke flawed epistemological/methodological reasons to justify their approach. The question, then, is whether my exercise has an immediate practical payoff. I think its payoff is of a different kind. Theoretical and empirical edifices should not be built on epistemological and methodological quicksand. For the sociology of morality to be theoretically and empirically fruitful, its underlying metaethical and epistemological commitments must be clear, consistent, and solid. The logic of its empirical approach must be properly justified.

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[5]Durkheim's position on these two problems, unlike Weber's, has been either misunderstood or neglected. Therefore, a discussion of his "science of morality" is needed in order to understand why one might call the Durkheimians "the Durkheimians."

Moral truth: two preliminary points

Should sociology care about moral truth?

In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim (1966:141) argues that "[s]ociology does not need to choose between the great hypotheses which divide metaphysicians. It needs to embrace free will no more than determinism." It seems to me, though, that sociology does need to embrace certain metaphysical hypotheses. For example, sociology needs to assume that knowledge is possible, that Brain-in-a-Vatists are wrong, and that society is not really a text – these are conditions of its own possibility (or, at least, meaningfulness). It may be argued, more contentiously, that it actually needs to embrace determinism, for free will would be inconsistent with its interest in social causality.

What about the great hypotheses which divide metaethicists? As the literature on "moral explanations" (Brink 1989; Harman 1977, 2000; Sayre-McCord 1988; Sturgeon 1988, 1992, 1994) has taught us, sociology does need to choose among them as well. Any sociology of belief has to contemplate the possibility that the best explanation of "*A* believes *x*" be "*x* is in fact the case" or "*x* is true," along with some story about how *A* has found out or realized that truth. This may seem preposterous if the *explanandum* is the widespread belief in America that beer tastes better that vodka, or the widespread belief among art critics that Magritte's work is better than my little nephew's drawings. Even though you can say "beer is better than vodka," you probably do not believe that, literally, beer is better than vodka. That is, you do not believe that you could provide a rational proof that any sane person should be compelled to accept, or that your judgment corresponds to some sort of gustative fact. Rather, your belief probably is just that *you* like it better.

This line of reasoning seems more reasonable in the case of scientific, factual, and perhaps – at least, some would argue – moral beliefs. Let us assume that it is objectively true that the sky is not supported by the titan Atlas on his shoulders. Then, *part* of the explanation of why we believe that the sky is not supported by Atlas must be that the sky is in fact not supported by Atlas. At the very least, it would be an implausible argument that the correspondence of our belief to reality is just a happy coincidence (this would be a "miracle," as Putnam (1975:73) or Smart (1963:39) might say). To be sure, this non-social independent variable accounts only for part of the variance of the dependent variable "non-belief in the Greek-mythology theory of the sky." A satisfactory explanation should also appeal to social variables: that our society encourages the type of activity that has led us to find out that the sky is not supported by Atlas; that the language and concepts we happen to use allow us to articulate such a belief; that some of our institutions have countenanced and diffused it; and so on.

Now let us likewise assume that moral truths exist. Suppose it has been demonstrated that it is true that what Hitler did is morally wrong (to use the standard example). In other words, it has been demonstrated that that judgment is not a mere arbitrary social convention, but corresponds to some kind of objective reality. Under this assumption, part of the explanation of why we believe that what Hitler did is morally wrong would be that what Hitler did is in fact morally wrong. If most of us believe that Hitler was a moral monster, this is partly because that is what he really was. As in the case of scientific knowledge, social factors would be needed as well. Still, there would be an objective moral reality, which helps account for subjective moral beliefs. The bottom line is this: sociologists cannot circumvent the question of whether there are moral truths or not. This is a question we should care about *qua* sociologists. For if it turns out that there are, our scientific inquiries into morality would be profoundly affected.

Skepticism, noncognitivism, and relativism

The second task of this section is to make a conceptual distinction – which will be indispensable in the following sections – among three ethical theories that grapple with the problem of moral truth: skepticism, noncognitivism, and relativism. Both moral skepticism (Mackie 1977) and all forms of noncognitivism (e.g., Stevenson's (1944, 1963) or Ayer's (1952) emotivism, and Hare's (1952) prescriptivism) deny that moral judgments can ever be true, but they do so for rather different reasons. Noncognitivists argue that moral judgments are capable of neither objective truth nor objective falsehood, because moral judgments are not really beliefs. They assert that there is no moral knowledge, as "sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling" (Ayer 1952:108). For example, "that was a noble action" does not have truth-values in the same sense that "open the door, please" or "boo to the Brazilian soccer team!" do not. It is obvious that it does not make sense to ask whether "open the door, please" is true. Noncognitivism holds that it does not make sense to ask whether "that was a noble action" is true either; for, in fact, "that was a noble action" *means* "hurray to that action!"[6]

By contrast, moral skepticism argues that moral judgments are genuine beliefs and moral statements genuine propositions. Indeed, the assumption that there are objective values "has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms" (Mackie 1977:35). However, while moral judgments *could* be true, as a matter of fact they are all false. Philosophical analysis shows that values are not discovered, as unreflective people believe, but invented. This is why Mackie's is an "error" theory. As he says, "although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false" (1977:35).

Contrary to what some sociologists and anthropologists seem to suppose, the concept of moral truth is compatible with relativism, and it is even a constitutive component of one of its variants. The objectivity of ethics and its universality are two fundamentally different issues. In addition, "moral relativism" is a badly confused label, which conflates three distinct and independent theses: descriptive, normative, and metaethical relativism (Brandt 1967:75–76; Frankena 1973; Moody-Adams 1997). "Descriptive relativism" is the unproblematic thesis that different persons and social groups hold conflicting moral convictions. The second thesis is "normative relativism," which "asserts that something is wrong or blameworthy if some person or group—variously defined—thinks it is wrong or blameworthy." Normative relativists argue that eating people is wrong for Americans, but eating people is not wrong for the Aztecs. Or, "smoking marijuana is morally wrong" is true for Harry Anslinger, but "smoking marijuana is not morally wrong" is true for Timothy Leary. The point is not that whereas Americans believe that eating people is wrong, the Aztecs believe that it is not. Rather, the point is that it would *be* wrong to eat people if you were an American, but it would not *be* wrong if you were an Aztec. Or that whether the statement "smoking marijuana is wrong" is true or false depends on who is uttering it. Third, metaethical relativism "denies that there is always one correct moral evaluation." While metaethical relativism does hold that there are no moral truths, what in the present context is

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[6]Throughout the article I sometimes use the term "moral belief" myself. However, I do not thereby intend to endorse a cognitivist ethical theory according to which moral judgments are genuine beliefs in the sense that "snow is white" is a genuine belief. I simply take advantage of the fact that if Jones tells you "stealing is wrong," it is all right to say "Jones believes that stealing is wrong." It is all right even if your noncognitivist ethical theory argues that what Jones in fact means is "boo to stealing!" or "I disapprove of stealing; do so as well."

important is not whether values are "relative" or "universal," but whether they can ever be true. For, as argued above, it is their putative truth what may help account for belief.

Armed with these conceptual tools, let us now turn to the first type of sociology of morality I identify: the Weberian paradigm.

The Weberians

The Weberians on moral truth

According to Weber, moral statements are not capable of being true as scientific statements are. As his notions of "polytheism of values" and "struggle of gods" suggest, what is the best "attitude toward life," "value," or "god" cannot be objectively determined (see Boudon 2000; Espeland 1998; Ringer 1997). These sorts of disagreements are irresolvable in principle. Interestingly, Weber's position is not unrelated to his historical theory of rationalization. Values (and, more generally, metaphysical, mystical, magical, religious, and ethical standpoints) have increasingly been pushed into the irrational realm. Thus, they have come to stand in "irreconcilable opposition" (Weber 1946a:355) to science, as they have incompatible aims, techniques, logic, knowledge, causality, virtues, meanings, and rules. Weber (1946b:152) summarizes his main point thus:

> This proposition, which I present here, always takes its point of departure from the one fundamental fact, that so long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion.

Along these lines, the Weberian sociologist of morality typically believes that (1) the predicate "(be) true" cannot be applied to moral judgments. Take the case of Kristin Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, which tries to account for the beliefs of pro-life and pro-choice activists in the USA. One of Luker's key findings is that views on abortion are embedded in larger "world views":

> Pro-choice and pro-life activists live in different worlds, and the scope of their lives, as both adults and children, fortifies them in their belief that their own views on abortion are the more correct, more moral, and more reasonable. (Luker 1984:215)

As her implicit reference to Kuhn's (1970:150; Hacking 1993:276) "new-world problem" suggests, Luker believes that the disagreement between pro-choice and pro-life activists cannot be rationally settled. Even if they both had full knowledge of the facts, and conversed under ideal speech conditions, they would still disagree about "*how to weigh, measure, and assess facts*" (Luker 1984:5; emphasis in original). What is more, she seems to believe that, at least regarding abortion, there are no true moral judgments, as different "constructions of the world" are "equally reasonable":

> What neither of these points of view [pro-life and pro-choice] fully appreciates is that neither religion nor reason is static, self evident, or "out there." Reasonable people who are located in very different parts of the social world find themselves differentially exposed to diverse realities, and this differential exposure leads each

of them to come up with different – but often *equally reasonable – constructions of the world*. (Luker 1984:191; emphasis added)

For their part, in *Moral Panics* Goode and Ben-Yehuda contrast two approaches to morality–the "objectively given" and the "relativist" or "subjectively problematic"–and give their support to the latter:

> Morality, to repeat an oft-used cliché, is relative... To the adherent of the relativist or subjectively problematic approach, no quality of absolute evil lurks immanently or inherently in adultery, homicide, human sacrifice, pornography, or abortion. What is crucial is how the behavior is defined, judged, and evaluated in a particular context. What counts is these varying definitions and evaluations; it is they and they alone that determine the status of an act with respect to morality and immorality. (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:67–68)

From this quote the reader may conclude that, in the authors' view, adultery, homicide, human sacrifice, etc., are not really or objectively wrong. Evil does not inhere in actions; social definitions and evaluations alone determine what is right and what is wrong. However, Goode and Ben-Yehuda go on to argue that the "subjectively problematic" approach can assess the status of other societies' practices with respect to morality and immorality, and can even assess other societies' "rights." In fact, the way in which the authors themselves use terms such as "oppression" and "atrocity" is not "subjectively problematic" at all:

> Saying that values ... are relative to time and place does not condone oppressive practices. It says nothing about the right of a society, or certain members of a society, to continue practicing atrocities upon others. It simply makes an objective true statement: around the world, and throughout history, peoples, cultures, societies, and groups have defined right and wrong differently. That is a fact. (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:73)

From this quote the reader should conclude that what Goode and Ben-Yehuda actually endorse is just descriptive relativism. But if, after all, this is what relativism amounts to, it would be difficult to find a single social scientist or philosopher who is not a relativist. I take it that all social scientists and philosophers know that peoples, cultures, societies, and groups have defined right and wrong differently. What some of them further claim is that there are right and wrong definitions of right and wrong, or that some moral judgments are true and some are false. In fact, Goode and Ben-Yehuda's discussion oscillates between that innocuous descriptive relativism and a more consequential metaethical relativism. For example, they ask: "[I]n the abstract, how do we know that adultery is immoral, killing is evil, abortion is murder? According to whose perspective? What measurable criteria will allow us to establish these positions?" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:68)

Now, some Weberians do not argue for (1) but just take it for granted, perhaps as a platitude that only unreflective people are unaware of, or as a proposition that sociology, anthropology, and history have proven true. Although they might not have given much thought to the metaethical theories they are committing themselves to, their sociological intuitions can probably be associated with Mackie's (1977) moral skepticism. As we saw above, in Mackie's (1977:15) opinion "[t]here are no objective values." In other words, values – for example, "rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an action's being rotten

and contemptible" – "are not part of the fabric of the world." Right and wrong are not discovered but invented. Or, to put it in sociological jargon, right and wrong are "socially constructed."

It is then easy to understand why a good number of sociologists have leaned toward this type of metaethics. Arguably, sociology's most cherished insight is that most things around us – the Korean War, management, trust, social policy, Europe, the ocean, quarks, reality, and so on – are "socially constructed" (whatever this phrase may precisely mean – see Hacking 1999).[7] From this it seems to follow (but in fact it does not) that these things are not "real," "objective," or "out there." Moreover, one of the main findings of sociology, history, and anthropology about morality is that different societies, groups, and individuals make conflicting and even incommensurable judgments. For instance, it is an indisputable empirical fact that ancient Greeks and contemporary Americans have very different moral convictions about slavery, as it is an indisputable empirical fact that Muslims and Catholics have very different conceptions of God, or that Argentineans and Americans have very different conceptions of what a good steak is. Further, these societies, groups, and individuals normally believe that the moral views they happen to hold are not arbitrary, subjective, or culturally determined. They all talk as though they were objective, evident, or universal. As discussed above, this thesis has been called "descriptive relativism."

But some sociologists have felt entitled to think that, *therefore*, the concept of moral truth must be rejected. Thus, for example, whereas 500 years ago most people believed that the institution of slavery was not morally objectionable, today most people believe that it is. In reality, these sociologists would probably say, there is nothing inherently right or wrong about the institution of slavery. People believe that their moral judgments are true, objective, or universally valid because they have been somehow deluded into that illusion (and they ignore how much variation one can find across time and space). The truth is that moral judgments cannot be true. However, this is an obvious *non sequitur*. The reasoning seems to be that if 500 years ago people believed p, and today people believe q, therefore: (a) neither p nor q is true; and (b) neither p nor q can be true. But that there have existed several diverging views does not demonstrate that none of them is better than the others, let alone that it is just impossible that one view be better than another. As moral philosophers have shown (e.g., Moody-Adams 1997), descriptive relativism does not entail anything at all at the normative and metaethical levels. In particular, it does not entail normative relativism, which claims that there might be more than one moral truth, even if they seem to contradict one another. Nor does it entail such theories as moral skepticism and noncognitivism which, as we saw above, claim that there is none.

The Weberians on value freedom

Weber believed that science cannot tell us what to do and how to live. As he puts it in his oft-cited allusion to Tolstoi's oft-cited aphorism:

> [W]hat is the meaning of science as a vocation...? Tolstoi has given the simplest answer, with the words: 'Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: "What shall we do and how shall we live?" ' That science does not give an answer to this is indisputable. (Weber 1946b:143)

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[7]Like Hacking (1999), I draw this list of "socially constructed" things from a library catalog. As of March 2004, a search in Harvard's Hollis catalog returns 59 books entitled *The Social Construction of X*, including, of course, Hacking's own addition to the list: *The Social Construction of What?*

Weber's arguments – or, rather, the canonized readings of Weber's arguments – are quite familiar to sociologists. These readings stress Weber's (1946b, 1949a, b) distinctions between fact and value, means and ends, context of discovery and context of justification, and *Wertfreiheit* and *Wertbezogenheit*. For instance, in "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics" Weber writes:

> Even such simple questions as the extent to which an end should sanction unavoidable means, or the extent to which undesired repercussions should be taken into consideration, or how conflicts between several concretely conflicting ends are to be arbitrated, are entirely matters of choice and compromise. There is no (rational or empirical) scientific procedure of any kind whatsoever which can provide us with a decision here. The social sciences, which are strictly empirical sciences, are the least fitted to presume to save the individual the difficulty of making a choice, and they should therefore not create the impression that they can do so. (Weber 1949a:18–19).

Drawing on Weber, the Weberian sociologist makes a sharp distinction between facts and value judgments, and argues that (2) the sociology of morality can and should be value free. For example, in *Moral Mazes* Jackall (1988:4) explores "the actual evaluative rules that managers fashion and follow in their work world" and "the particular conceptions of right and wrong, of proper and improper, that underpin those rules." How the author treats the notions of morality and ethics is stated right at the beginning:

> As they are popularly used, of course, the notions of morality and ethics have a decidedly prescriptive, indeed moralistic, flavor. They are often rooted in religious doctrines or vague cultural remnants of religious beliefs, like the admonition to follow the Golden Rule. However, this book treats ethics and morality sociologically, that is, as empirical, objective realities to be investigated. Therefore, in using the terms morality and ethics, I do not refer to any specific or given, much less absolute, system of norms and underlying beliefs. Moreover, I imply no judgment about the actions I describe from some fixed, absolute ethical or moral stance, as the terms are often used in popular discourse, sometimes even by corporate managers themselves. (Jackall 1988:4)

Thus, Jackall's sociology does not want to judge those managers who lie, cheat, and steal in order to advance their careers. Unlike MacIntyre (1984) and other theorists of modernity, Jackall does not portray the manager as one of the villains of our epoch. In fact, this attitude has been praised – for example, Calhoun's (1989:544) review of the book applauds "the sort of mix of sympathy and distance appropriate to the ethnographic work," and that it is "neither apology nor diatribe." It is interesting, then, that the very last sentence of the book suggests that managers "help create and re-create... a society where morality becomes indistinguishable from the quest for one's own survival and advantage" (1988:204). Yet this sentence, it might perhaps be said, does not state a value judgment but a fact.

As suggested above, Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* "examines why persons active in the abortion debate think and feel as they do and how their thoughts and feelings are related to the larger fabric of their lives" (1984:8). Yet one question this article is interested in, which in fact arises in the preface, is how the author's thoughts and feelings are related to her account.

> [Some people] will read the first few pages [of the book], trying to determine which side I am really on. If I have done my job well, both sides will soon

conclude that I have been unduly generous with the opposition and unfairly critical of themselves...

The question of which side I am on came up frequently in the course of writing this book. Ironically, people on both sides soon came to assume that I was by natural inclination on their side. That perception was based on a certain kind of truth. This book was written to explore my own feelings about an enormously complicated topic. (Luker 1984:xiii)

It is unclear whether in the book Luker tried to conceal which side she was on (and if the reader cannot find it out it means that she did her job well), or, at least at that time, she did not really know (as the last sentence in the fragment quoted suggests). In any case, this is a textbook example of Weber's distinction between *Wertfreiheit* and *Wertbezogenheit*. Luker does not return to the issue of her values, and does not reveal what the exploration of her own feelings yielded. In fact, according to the blurbs on the back cover, presumably chosen by the editor, her impartiality is one of the main virtues of the book. For example, the *New Republic* commends that Luker "avoids moral judgments of her own," which is "the best kind of contribution that sociology can make to a politically heated situation." Similarly, the *Boston Globe* highlights that "[l]ike all good science, her book tries to enlighten rather than to persuade."

Although Luker's readers may be divided on the morality of abortion, it seems that most of Nicola Beisel's (1997) readers would find Anthony Comstock's actions and beliefs morally objectionable. Comstock's moral crusade against pornography, masturbation, abortion, free love, and "immoral" art is at odds with the view of sexuality, liberty, and rights that prevails in the contemporary Western world. Second, he did not hesitate to resort to whatever means seemed to be effective, including anti-immigration rhetoric, deceptive arguments, and the coercive powers of the State. Third, at least some readers may not sympathize with Comstock's mobilizing "privileged people, many of them wealthy and highly respected, into a campaign to ensure the reproduction of the families and the social world of the upper and middle classes" (Beisel 1997:49). Finally, that Comstock appears to have been dogmatically committed to his worldview may not be well taken by argumentative, scientific, and indeed modern sensibilities.

From the perspective of this article, it is interesting that Beisel takes great pains not to say what kind of a person *she* takes Comstock to be. By means of a careful choice of words, most of the book confines itself to the world of facts. The first few pages of the conclusion are an exception, however. There Beisel uses value-laden language to talk about "racist and classist social movements," and how to "distinguish actual concerns about children from the cynical use of rhetoric about children, often employed to justify reactionary or self-interested actions" (1997:201–202). Still, she does not explicitly condemn (or, for that matter, commend) Comstock. Even when she notices "the echoes of Comstock's arguments in contemporary political rhetoric" (1997:200), Beisel's discussion can be read as an objective account of the similarities between two sets of arguments.

A final example comes from Steven Tipton's *Getting Saved from the Sixties* (1982:xiii), which is introduced as "an inquiry into the ways Americans understand right and wrong, into how they think their morality and how they live it out." Tipton studied three "alternative religions": a millenarian Pentecostal sect, a Zen Buddhist meditation center, and Erhard Seminars Training (*est*). Tipton was later to coauthor *Habits of the Heart*, and, indeed, *Habits of the Heart* took *Getting Saved from the Sixties* as its "methodological exemplar" (Bellah et al. 1985:331). In light of this, it is noteworthy that Tipton conscientiously avoids passing judgment on the worth of the three worldviews. Given how many things he would have to say about it a few years later, it is rather remarkable that

he also avoids passing judgment on American individualism and biblical tradition, which he identifies and discusses. With the exception of the intriguing last paragraph of the book (1982:281), Tipton's point of view is that of the detached, unbiased, and amoral observer. The nature of his approach is suggested by what he says at the end of Appendix 3 (and the location of this remark is itself revealing): "Let me conclude by acknowledging my own point of view, and bias, toward each of the cases studied" (1982:294). Tipton then tells us that he "found Zen's practices and tenets in themselves more appealing than those of the other two cases," so he "sought to hedge against my greater personal interest and involvement in Zen in describing and especially judging its ethic." The author also "remained unpersuaded to suspend moral disbelief in [*est*]," so he "sought to hedge against my relative lack of sympathy for the movement per se (as distinct from its clients), and to limit my criticism to those substantive issues that deserve it on their own merits" (1982:294). The key point is that to give a good sociological account, the sociologist's moral disbelief is not only irrelevant but even detrimental.

Durkheim

The "science de la morale"

At the time of his untimely death, Durkheim was working on a three-volume treatise titled *La Morale*. As his student, collaborator, and nephew Marcel Mauss (1979:77) recalled, the introduction to its first volume is the last thing Durkheim wrote, "some time during the period March to September 1917, when his doctors permitted him to work." *La Morale* was intended to be the systematic exposition of an old project of his: the "*science de la morale*."[8] This science would deal with "moral phenomena, with moral reality, as it appears to observation, whether in the present or in the past, just as physics or physiology deal with the facts they study" (Durkheim 1979b:92; see also Durkheim 1974).

In fact, the project of a science of morality can be seen as a consistent theme throughout Durkheim's *oeuvre*. Durkheim became interested in the issue of morality during the year he spent studying in Germany (1885–1886). This interest is manifest in the article "*La Science positive de la morale en Allemagne*" (Durkheim [1887] 1975), which he published in the *Revue Philosophique* upon his return to France. However, it is in *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893]; 1984), Durkheim's doctoral dissertation and first book, that the project appears as a more systematic effort. Even though the contemporary sociological canon emphasizes Durkheim's concern with social solidarity (see Hall 1987:17), Durkheim seems

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[8]Different translators and commentators have rendered Durkheim's French terms into English differently. George Simpson's translation of *The Division of Labor* (Durkheim 1933) renders *"science de la morale"* as "science of ethics." Simpson and also Traugott (Durkheim 1978) use both "ethics" and "morality" to translate "*morale*." For his part, Hall (1987:10) notes that Durkheim sometimes uses phrases such as "*physique des moeurs*" or *"physiology des moeurs,"* and thus he decides to use "the phrase 'sociology of morals' to designate Durkheim's science of moral facts." The problem here is that Durkheim (1979b:92) himself suggests that *"science ou physique des moeurs"* is not as appropriate a name as *"science de la morale"* or *"science des faits moraux."* All in all, I think "science of morality" is the most accurate rendition. "Science of ethics" seems to imply that the discipline deals with the ethical doctrines that philosophers design. "Science of morals" seems to imply that the discipline deals with mere customs. Although I generally rely on the English translations of Durkheim, I have systematically checked their accuracy against the French originals.

to have interpreted his principal concern differently. Thus, he begins the preface to the book's first edition with the following words:

> This book is above all an attempt to treat the facts of the moral life according to the method of the positive sciences... We do not wish to deduce morality from science, but to constitute the science of morality, which is very different. Moral facts are phenomena like any others. They consist of rules of action recognisable by certain distinctive characteristics. It should thus be possible to observe, describe, and classify them, as well as to seek out the laws that explain them. (Durkheim 1984:xxv)

Then, the young Durkheim introduces three crucial points that would frequently recur in his writings:

> [W]hat above all is certain is that *morality develops over the course of* [*dans*] *history and is dominated by historical causes, fulfilling a role in our life in time.* If it is as it is at any given moment, it is because *the conditions in which men are living at that time do not permit it to be otherwise.* The proof of this is that it changes when these conditions change, and *only in that eventuality.* (Durkheim 1984:xxv–xxvi; emphasis added; see also Durkheim 1974:75–76)

First, "morality develops over the course of history"; that is, morality is located in history, and, indeed, it has a history. Second, morality can be accounted for, either causally or functionally, by "the conditions in which men are living." It is "dominated by historical causes" and it "[fulfills] a role in our life in time." Third, this relationship between morality and society is a deterministic one.

Let us examine more carefully Durkheim's metaethical views. In *The Division of Labor* the thesis about the social determination of morality seems to be coupled with some sort of moral relativism:

> Nowadays we can no longer believe that moral evolution consists in the development of one self-same idea, held in a muddled and hesitant way by primitive man, but one that gradually becomes clearer and more precise as enlightenment spontaneously occurs. If the ancient Romans had not the broad conception of humanity we posses today, it is not because of any defect attributable to their limited intelligence, but because such ideas were *incompatible* with the nature of the Roman state. Our cosmopolitanism could no more come to the light of day [there] than a plant can germinate on a soil unable to nourish it. What is more, for Rome such a principle could only be fatal. Conversely, if the principle has appeared since, it is not as a result of philosophical discoveries. Nor is it because our minds have become receptive to truths that they failed to acknowledge. It is because changes have occurred in the *social structure* [*structure des sociétés*] that have *necessitated* this change in morals. (Durkheim 1984:xxvi; emphasis added)

According to Durkheim, then, there is a deterministic relationship between "social structures" and moralities – certain moralities are "incompatible" with certain social structures, and certain social structures "necessitate" certain moralities. Furthermore, Durkheim's argument goes, we know that our conception of humanity is very different from that of the Romans. Now, as stressed above, a descriptive relativist could still consistently argue that our broad conception of humanity is better, truer, and so on, than theirs (this

argument would be consistent even if the nature of both conceptions is completely determined by social factors). Nevertheless, Durkheim seems not to lean in this direction, when he argues that there is no moral evolution, no moral truths that our ancestors could not see.

A very similar impression is given by Durkheim's famous definition and discussion of crime. The conclusion that he reaches is the following:

> Thus, summing up the above analysis, we may state that an act is criminal when it offends the strong, well-defined states of the collective consciousness.... It is not disputed that any criminal act excites universal disapproval, but it is taken for granted that this results from its criminal nature. Yet one is then hard put to it to state what is the nature of this criminality. Is it in a particularly serious form of immorality? I would concur [*Je le veux*], but this is to answer a question by posing another, by substituting one term for another. For what *is* immorality is precisely what we want to know – and particularly that special form of immorality which society represses by an organized system of punishments, and which constitutes criminality. [...] [W]e should not say that an act offends the common consciousness because it is criminal, but that it is criminal because it offends that consciousness. We do not condemn it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it. (Durkheim 1984:39 – 40; emphasis in original)

Again, this conclusion does not necessarily commit Durkheim to the thesis that there are not any crimes that really are immoral. Unfortunately, he does not spell out his views on this, although it is interesting that he says he would concur with the description of the nature of criminality as a particularly serious form of immorality. More than 15 years later, Durkheim would be more explicit about his metaethical outlook. In an oral discussion eventually published in 1909 as "*L'Efficacité des doctrines morales*" he says:

> It can no longer be maintained nowadays that there is one, single morality which is valid for all men at all times and in all places. We know full well that morality has varied. It has varied not only because men have lost sight of their true destiny, but also because *it is in the nature of things that morality should vary*. The moral system of the Romans and Hebrews was not our own, *nor could it have been so*. For if the Romans had practised our morality with its characteristic individualism the city of Rome would never have been, and nor consequently would the Roman civilization, which was the necessary antecedent and condition of our present civilization. The purpose of the morality practised by a people is to enable it to live: hence morality changes with societies. There is not just one morality but several and as many as there are social types. And as our societies change, so will our morality. It will in the future no longer be what it is today. Such and such a rule that horrifies us at the moment may well be practised tomorrow. *It is not that one is truer than the other*, merely that the needs of the time will have changed. (Durkheim 1979a:130–131; emphasis added)

Here Durkheim rehearses the argument about cultural variation, and the argument about the deterministic relationship between societies and moralities. But now he clearly denies that there is a single universally "valid" morality, and he refuses to call a rule "truer" than another. In any case, it is unclear whether his claim is that the predicate "(be) true" does not apply to moralities and moral rules at all, or that today's and tomorrow's moralities and moral rules are equally true (that is, true for the people of today and true for the people of tomorrow, respectively).

Health and illness

According to my account so far, Durkheim seems to be in agreement with the argument that sociology can and should be value free. The object of his new science happens to be values, but this is not a challenge to its own value freedom, for "[m]oral facts are phenomena like any others." But, in fact, Durkheim is far from being in agreement with that argument. Indeed, this is clear already in his early writings, for example, in the preface to the first edition of *The Division of Labor*:

> Yet because what we propose to study is above all reality, it does not follow that we should give up the idea of improving it. We would esteem our research not worth the labour of a single hour if its interest were merely speculative. [...] [I]t is customary to reproach all those who undertake the scientific study of morality with the inability to *formulate an ideal*. It is alleged that their respect for facts does not allow them to go beyond them, that they can indeed observe what exists, but are not able to provide us with *rules for future conduct*. We trust that this book will at least serve to weaken that prejudice, because we shall demonstrate in it how *science* can help in finding the direction in which *our conduct ought to go*, assisting us to *determine the ideal* that gropingly we seek. But we shall only be able to raise ourselves up to that ideal after having observed reality, for we shall distil the ideal from it. (Durkheim 1984:xxvi; emphasis added)

Durkheim strongly contests the argument that science can determine means but not ends. But how is science to determine what is right and what is good? How can science derive "ought" from "is"? His answer is based on the concepts of the normal and the pathological, social health and illness, which were systematized in chapter III of *The Rules*:

> [F]or societies as for individuals, health is good and desirable; disease, on the contrary, is bad and to be avoided. If, then, we can find an objective criterion, inherent in the facts themselves, which enables us to distinguish scientifically between health and morbidity in the various orders of social phenomena, science will be in a position to throw light on practical problems and still remain faithful to its own method. (Durkheim 1966:49)

I do not criticize here the supposedly "objective criterion" for distinguishing "scientifically" between social health and morbidity. What for this article is more important to notice is how powerful and persuasive the analogy with health is. It is intuitively obvious that health is good and illness is bad, and that actions that lead us to health ought to be done, and actions that lead us to illness ought not to be done. Only one premise is missing, which does not escape Durkheim's (1984:xxvii; emphasis in original) attention: "*assuming mankind wishes life to continue*, a very simple operation may immediately transform the laws that science has established into rules that are categorical for our behaviour."

Thus Durkheim claims to overcome the gap between facts and values, "is" and "ought," science and morality. For him, "the antithesis that some have often attempted to establish between science and morality [is] an impressive argument whereby the mystics of every age have sought to undermine human reason." Yet science itself – that is, the science of morality – can prove these mystics wrong: "What reconciles science and morality is the science of morality, for at the same time as it teaches us to respect moral reality it affords us the means of improving it" (Durkheim 1984:xxviii–xxix).

Once these arguments are considered, Durkheim's metaethical outlook appears in a very different light. There is no doubt that he acknowledges a certain objectivist meaning of the concepts of moral goodness and rightness. It is not that whatever each society decides or agrees to call virtue thereby becomes virtue for them. Healthy things are virtuous and pathological things are vicious. More importantly, what things are healthy and what things are pathological is not at all arbitrary, conventional, or subjective – it depends upon an "objective criterion, inherent in the facts themselves." What is more, it is often forgotten that Durkheim's major empirical studies have normative and prescriptive conclusions – for instance, that in modern societies the division of labor is morally valuable (1984:333–335; see also Lukes 1985:425), and that "suicide must be classed among immoral acts" and "must be forbidden" (Durkheim 1951:337).

Now, we have seen that Durkheim denies that "our" moral system is truer or more rational than that of the Romans, or that "our minds have become receptive to truths that they failed to acknowledge." How do these two sets of arguments cohere? I think that the trick lies in his theory of social types. Within each type questions about moral rightness can be objectively answered. But one cannot compare the truth, rationality, or worth of moral systems across types. As Durkheim puts is, "[t]here is not just one morality but several and as many as there are social types." Thus, for example, among "lower peoples" one ought to "resemble his fellows," but in "more advanced societies" one ought to "play [one's] part as one organ of society" (1984:335). In this sense, Durkheim is a genuine normative relativist. Yet precisely because of his being a normative relativist, Durkheim does accept the notion of moral truth. Indeed, he holds the very strong thesis that science can determine the truth of moral judgments.

In the next section, I turn my attention to a group of contemporary sociologists of morality whom I call the "Durkheimians." By calling them this I do not mean to suggest that they would agree point by point with Durkheim's approach. As I have shown, this approach strikes a very complex balance between various ethical and epistemological arguments, and is embedded in a larger theoretical framework that involves functionalism, social types, and an organicist analogy. But I believe those sociologists would be willing to endorse at least two points made by Durkheim. First, they would allow some room for objectivity and truth in ethics (for my taxonomic purposes it does not matter what kind of room they would allow, or how much they would disagree with Durkheim on this). Second, they "would esteem [their] research not worth the labour of a single hour if its interest were merely speculative" Indeed, in the opinion of some of them it may be possible to "transform the laws that science has established into rules that are categorical for our behaviour."

The Durkheimians

The Durkheimians on moral truth

Like Durkheim, the Durkhemian sociologist of morality believes that principle (1) is mistaken: moral judgments *are* capable of truth. The Durkheimian denies that in ethics everything is a matter of subjective opinion or social convention. For example, Zygmunt Bauman sketches a "sociological theory of morality" in his *Modernity and the Holocaust*. According to Bauman, the Holocaust challenges the sociological approach to the study of morality and its "programmatic relativism."

> Were the distinction between right and wrong or good and evil fully and solely at the disposal of the social grouping able to 'principally co-ordinate' the social space under its supervision (as the dominant sociological theory avers), there would be no legitimate ground for proffering a charge of immorality against such individuals as did not breach the rules enforced by that grouping. (Bauman 1989:176)

Thus, Bauman's theory does proffer charges of immorality, and not only against the perpetrators of the Holocaust but also against the modern norms, institutions, and civilization that made it possible. Bauman's moral judgments are predicated on his more abstract argument about the nature of morality:

> The socially enforced moral systems are communally based and promoted – and hence in a pluralist, heterogeneous world, irreparably relative. *This relativism, however, does not apply to human 'ability to tell right from wrong.'* Such an ability must be grounded in something other than the *conscience collective* of society. Every given society faces such an ability ready formed, much as it faces human biological constitution, physiological needs or psychological drives. And it does with such ability what it admits of doing with those other stubborn realities: it tries to suppress it, or harness it to its own ends, or channel it in a direction it considers useful or harmless. *The process of socialization consists in the manipulation of moral capacity* – not in its production. (Bauman 1989:178; emphasis in original)

This is not the place to assess the plausibility of this argument, nor to consider what should count as evidence for and against it. Rather, I want to underscore that if Bauman turns out to be correct, his argument should turn the empirical research on morality on its head. As he suggests, "[i]t is ... the incidence of immoral, rather than moral, behaviour which calls for the investigation of the social administration of intersubjectivity" (Bauman 1989:183). Morality is explained by "pre-societal sources." What needs to be explained sociologically is immorality – what I would term the social construction of immorality, or, more precisely, the social destruction of morality.

A comparable point of view is that of Philip Selznick. Influenced by Dewey and the communitarians, Selznick's *The Moral Commonwealth* vehemently attacks various forms of moral and cognitive "subjectivisms" and "relativisms." According to the author, "some ways of living may, by some objective and rational standards, be better than other" (1992:99).

> A long list of "moral universals" could be drawn up, including the fact of morality itself, which involves subordination of individual inclination to the perceived welfare of the group; the ideal of preserving human life; looking to the well-being of close relatives; prohibiting murder and theft; valuing affection and companionship; reciprocity in helping and being helped; and hospitality. (Selznick 1992:96)

It seems to me that some of Selznick's "moral universals" are more universal than others. There are at least some counterexamples to the claim that all human societies have valued affection and companionship, looked to the well-being of close relatives, or subordinated individual inclination to the welfare of the group. Selznick (1992:96) may respond that these are not genuine counterexamples, for "the same principles may yield quite different rules under different circumstances." But the problem with this type of "situation ethics" (to use the phrase popularized by Fletcher (1966)) is that if one allows

any kind of difference in the rules, then the claim that the principles are the same becomes vacuous. If, for whatever reasons, a certain society does not include bank robbery in the definition of "what constitutes theft," can we still say that the prohibition of theft holds there? Or, to take issue with one of Selznick's (1992:97) own examples, do we want to accept that the "clash of values" that underlies certain forms of infanticide is after all "by no means beyond sympathetic understanding"?

Finally, let us look at Amitai Etzioni's work on morality, community, and the good society. Etzioni relies heavily on a functionalist argument of a very Durkheimian kind. However, the ultimate proof that there are truths in ethics and the method to establish these truths is not functionalist but intuitionist:[9]

> In searching for the final touchstone, I draw on the observation that *certain concepts present themselves to us as morally compelling in and of themselves*. For example, when one points out that we have higher obligations to our own children than to the children of others, this moral claim speaks for itself, effectively and directly. One does not sense that a reason is needed; nor does one demand some consequentialist explanation or sociological analysis: Such moral concepts have the kind of special standing the founding fathers referred to as "self evident." Our moral sense informs us that "of course, we do." Indeed, I have not found a single person who maintains, believes, or argues that we have the same moral obligations to all children that we have to our own. (Etzioni 1996:241–242; emphasis in original)

Etzioni's reference to his personal circumstance – namely, that he has not found a single person of a certain kind – may be particularly unpersuasive to sociologists, who are in the business of representative sampling. Additionally, Etzioni makes an intuitionist case, but does not say how he would meet the arguably decisive objections that have been raised against the metaphysics and epistemology of intuitionism ever since John Stuart Mill ((1861) 1979; see, e.g., Stratton-Lake 2002). More importantly, the refutation of nihilist and skeptical approaches to morality through intuitionism is more compatible with philosophers' than with sociologists' standards of proof. Philosophers generally try to account for the phenomenology of morality and the ordinary use of moral language. Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to be suspicious of intuition and common sense, and indeed one of their most interesting findings about people's thoughts and beliefs is that intuition and common sense can be deceptive.

The Durkheimians on value freedom

The very first words of Bellah et al. (1985:vii) *Habits of the Heart* read: "How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live?" The book tells us how Americans answer these questions, and offers a theoretically and historically informed account of the linguistic and conceptual resources available to them. Epistemologically, the book makes a case against principle (2), that is, against the Weberian value-freedom thesis:

> Social science as public philosophy cannot be "value free." It accepts the canons of critical, disciplined research, but it does not imagine that such research exists in a

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[9] Etzioni does not use this term, nor does he refer to Ross's (1930), Moore's (1959), Prichard's (1949), or any other variant of ethical intuitionism. However, his argument about self-evident moral concepts is unmistakably intuitionist.

moral vacuum. To attempt to study the possibilities and limitations of society with utter neutrality, as though it existed on another planet, is to push the ethos of narrowly professional social science to the breaking point. (Bellah et al. 1985:302; see also Bellah 1983)

Thus, Bellah et al. not only report Americans' stances on how we ought to live, but also argue for a particular stance. But what are the logical connections between these two prima facie distinguishable projects? The authors clearly hold that the two projects *are* distinguishable (e.g., 1985:140) – unlike subjectivist and relativistic theories according to which what a certain person or group believes to be the good life is in fact the good life (for her or them anyway), and therefore there cannot be substantive ethical mistakes. It follows, then, that only some Americans are on the right moral track. In fact, in *Habits of the Heart* not only Flaubert's and Chekhov's rule of impartiality toward one's "characters" is not followed (Booth 1961:77), but even some "characters" seem to become the authors' spokespersons (e.g., 1985:194, 277). So how did Bellah et al. find out which of the opinions they listened to are on the right moral track? The critic may argue that they did not, and that prior to their encounter with the data they were already committed to the republican and biblical traditions and against modern individualism.

Bellah et al., of course, argue along different lines. They claim to have found that Americans' very language is incapable of fully accounting for their moral lives, commitments and beliefs. From this empirical finding they infer that there is something wrong with that language and that it ought to be abandoned and replaced. Yet one might still ask how the authors could get a grasp on moral lives, commitments, and beliefs that their interviewees could not articulate. The authors do not systematically address this objection, but at least once they suggest they may have contrasted what their interviewees told them with what they observed:

Yet when [four of their interviewees] [use] the moral discourse they share, what we call the first language of individualism, they have difficulty articulating the richness of their commitments. In the language they use, their lives sound more isolated and arbitrary than, as we have observed them, they actually are. (Bellah et al. 1985:20–21)[10]

Three other sociologists of morality who criticize the idea of a value-free sociology of morality are Etzioni, Selznick, and Alan Wolfe. In *Whose Keeper?*, Wolfe argues that "social scientists are moral philosophers in disguise," and that social science "contain[s] implicit (and often explicit) statements of what people's obligations to one another should be" (1989:23, 6). Thus, Wolfe's sociology is both about "is" and about "ought." For instance, he dispassionately shows and passionately regrets that "[l]iberal democracies ... tend to rely on either individualistic moral codes associated with the market or collective moral codes associated with the state" (1989:10). The book's argument is that it is true that this is the case and that it is bad that this be the case. Similarly, Selznick (1992:xii–xiii)

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[10]However, not all of the fieldworkers involved in the project could observe the lives of their subjects. In these cases, then, there seems to be no way to determine if there is a gap between language and life. Furthermore, the critic may want to press the objection hinted at above. In this view, "the richness of Jones' commitments" or "how Jones' moral life actually is" cannot be grasped from the outside, without the mediation of her accounts and therefore the language she uses.

believes that sociology is "preeminently" a "moral science."[11] In his view, "the distinctive feature of a moral or humanist science is its commitment to normative theory, that is, to theories that evaluate as well as explain." Not only does Selznick argue that some values are "inherent in humanity," but also that *sociology* – that is, the sociology he advocates – can help us discover what those values are.

In *The Active Society*, Etzioni (1968:viii–ix) argues that "a social science theory can be scientifically valid, can be intellectually relevant, and can serve as a springboard for active participation. Factual statements and value judgments can be systematically articulated without being fused or confused." But what exactly this "systematic articulation" should be like is not systematically articulated. More than 30 years later, in *The Monochrome Society*, Etzioni says:

> Many used to hold that virtues do not constitute a proper subject for a social scientist, and some still do. Social science was supposed to be value-free, to be scientific. However, there is nothing unscientific about finding the conditions under which virtue is nourished versus those in which it is undermined. Additionally, social science cannot be value-neutral. Whether it studies the relations between people of different races, classes, genders, or nationalities, it inevitably deals with matters that entail value judgments. (Etzioni 2001:xiii)

There are at least two problems with this argument. Even hard-line positivists would grant that "there is nothing unscientific about finding the conditions under which virtue is nourished versus those in which it is undermined." What may seem unscientific is to elucidate what virtue is or what things are virtuous in the first place. Still, this consideration seems to be overridden by the assertion that social science *cannot* be value-neutral anyway. Yet the claim that it "inevitably deals with matters that entail value judgments" is not entirely clear. The study of matters such as race or class relations obviously involves value judgments, in the sense that the sociologist's subjects constantly make them. Moreover, values are constitutive of the problems under consideration. What Etzioni does not convincingly demonstrate is that the sociologist herself cannot avoid making value judgments.

Finally, let us note that Durkheimian sociologists sometimes address themselves to their academic peers, yet sometimes address themselves to the general public. In particular, many of Etzioni's later works intend to be a contribution to the public sphere and are written in the style of social commentary (thanks to which he can reach a broader audience). The important point here is that one's choice of genre and style is associated with one's metaethical and epistemological commitments, and genre and style is precisely one respect in which the Durkheimians and the Weberians are sometimes at variance.[12]

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[11]Selznick's complete sentence reads: "Like [É]mile Durkheim, I believe sociology is preeminently a 'moral science'." Selznick interprets Durkheim as a "moral realist" (1992:141–146), but it is not entirely clear what he means by "realism" here. For instance, Selznick contrasts Durkheim's "moral realism" with Marx's "prophetic idealism." In any case, Selznick (1992:141) quotes approvingly the argument Durkheim presents in *The Rules* to the effect that science should talk about good and evil. I think it is on these grounds that he attributes to Durkheim the claim that sociology is preeminently a moral science. As discussed above, this is not false but should be qualified. What is truly Durkheimian in this section of Selznick's argument is the claim that sociology can help us discover the right values.

[12]I thank a *Theory and Society* reviewer for bringing up and discussing this point.

Discussion

Thus far I have examined how several contributors to the sociological literature on morality have dealt with the problems of moral truth and value freedom. I have identified two ideal–typical paradigms. The Weberians believe that there are no moral truths and that sociology can and should be value free. By contrast, the Durkheimians believe that there are moral truths, and that sociology cannot and should not be value free. In this section, I evaluate these competing claims and offer my own arguments about what sociology's approach to moral truth and value freedom ought to be.

Moral truth

Are there or are there not truths in ethics, then?[13] Since this is an essentially philosophical problem – and one to which metaethicists have given a lot of thought – it is reasonable that the sociologist's first move be to seek their help. But when one turns to this literature what one basically finds is that there still is a great deal of disagreement and almost nothing that everyone would agree to call "progress." None of the philosophical positions has proven to be so compelling as to demand universal or nearly universal (not even general) assent.[14] There is not even agreement on what constitutes an acceptable articulation of the problem (my own purportedly neutral presentation would not be accepted by some), let alone what constitutes an acceptable solution. In fact, it may turn out that this is one of those problems that, because of their very nature or because of the way they are set up, just cannot be resolved. For its part, the field of sociology is not the place where one should be able to find a satisfactory answer to a philosophical question of this sort, which is clearly beyond its jurisdiction and competence. And, as we have seen, sociology's attempts to make metaethical inferences from empirical findings are fallacious. The bottom line is that at present we cannot say that we have figured out whether there really is truth in ethics or not. Nor is it clear what is the most sensible or reasonable thing to believe in light of the deliberations carried out over about 2,500 years, nor do we know what are the odds of the solution turning out to be one or the other (or some other response that does not fit in with the way we have thought about the question thus far). Therefore, I argue that sociology should suspend judgment on this metaphysical question.

However, that sociology can make this convenient metaphysically-agnostic maneuver does not prevent it from facing the following practical problem: any empirical investigation of morality necessarily – that is, knowingly or not – makes an assumption as to whether there is truth in ethics. Suppose you (a contemporary Western sociologist) undertake a comparative and historical study about why at a certain point in history certain people began to believe that slavery was morally wrong. You may either believe that slavery is in fact wrong, that is, that it is objectively true that slavery is wrong; or you may believe that it

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[13]Drawing on Boyd (1988), Brink (1984, 1989), and Sayre-McCord (1988), I conceptualize moral truth as correspondence to moral facts (on moral truth, see also Hooker 1996). I recognize that it is a very contentious question what it is for a statement to be capable of truth, and that the correspondence theory of truth has many problems of its own. Should the consensus reached under ideal speech conditions count as truth? Does truth "happen" to an idea, as William James (1975) famously argued? Nonetheless, for my present purposes these quandaries can be bypassed.

[14]For a sample of cogent metaethical arguments that are at odds with one another, see: Dworkin (1996); Foot (1978, 2002); Hare (1952); Harman (1977); Harman and Thomson (1996); McDowell (1985); Mackie (1977); Moody-Adams (1997); Sturgeon (1988); Wiggins (1998); Williams (1985); and Wong (1984). One could make the disagreement even more dramatic by considering non-analytic moral philosophy as well.

is not true, but a mere social convention that you happen to endorse, an expression of your feelings, and so forth. But you cannot help taking a stand, explicitly or implicitly. This is because if you do not realize that this is an issue at all, or do not say anything about it, then by the very fact of not considering moral truth as an explanatory factor your investigation assumes that there is no such a thing as truth in ethics (and proceeds accordingly).

Scientific discourses are always underpinned by numerous epistemological and ontological assumptions, which scientists make on different grounds, for different purposes, and with different degrees of awareness of the fact that they are making assumptions. For example, some social scientists assume that everyone everywhere all the time behaves rationally and instrumentally under conditions of complete information and infinite computational powers, because that allows those social scientists to use certain techniques that they could not use if they tried to be literally true to the facts.[15] Still, they presumably know that the truth-value of their assumptions is "not-true." In some other occasions, scientists make assumptions because the truth about those matters is unknown, and they do not want to wait until we figure it out. Here scientists often consider what assumptions are more "reasonable," "plausible," "useful," "safer," "less harmful," and so on. Against the background of our metaphysical uncertainties (and until we hear, are persuaded, and come to the agreement that there are compelling reasons to believe otherwise), I suggest that we assume that there is no truth in ethics. More precisely, I suggest that we bracket the question of whether there is truth in ethics, and proceed as though there were not.

My suggestion is based on two rationales. First, we want to minimize the potential harm caused by our ignorance of what is in fact the case, and therefore we should opt for the more conservative assumption. Let me suggest the analogy of what in statistics is called type I (or alpha, or "producer's risk") and type II (or beta, or "consumer's risk") errors.[16] As Blalock (1979:159; emphasis in original) points out, "[f]or any given test the probabilities of type I and II errors are inversely related. In other words, *the smaller the risk of a type I error, the greater the probability of a type II error.*" Then, which of the two risks should be minimized? Statisticians grant that there is no objectively right decision, so it is necessary to exercise one's judgment. Blalock's (1979:160) discussion is very illustrative:

> The decision as to the significance level selected depends on the relative costs of making the one or the other type of error and should be evaluated accordingly.... In the coin-flipping example, suppose that the decision involved refusing to continue gambling with a coin the honesty of which were in doubt. If a male gambler were faced with the prospects of a nagging wife should he return home with empty pockets, he would do well to quit the game if there were even a reasonable doubt about the coin. In such a case he would select a large critical region since the penalty for making a type II error (i.e., staying in the game when the coin is actually dishonest) would be quite large. On the other hand, if he were to run the risk of insulting his boss if he claimed that the coin was dishonest, he would want to be very sure of this fact before he made his decision. In the latter case he should select a very small critical region, thereby minimizing the risk of a type I error. (Blalock 1979:160)

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[15]In this same category fall the assumptions that physicist make (most famously to non-physicists, the frictionless plane), and the regression assumptions.

[16]Type I errors consist in rejecting the null hypothesis when it is in fact true. In other words, one claims that there is a difference when in fact there is not. Type II errors consist in accepting or failing to reject the null hypothesis when in fact it is false (the alternative hypothesis is true). In other words, one claims that x and y are not different when in fact they are.

Table 1 Causes of factual belief

Sociologist's assumption about truth	MODEL I: There is an objective truth: The earth is in fact about 4.5 billion years old (e.g., scientific realist)		MODEL II: Reject the concept of truth, e.g., no world outside/independent of beliefs, states of consciousness, etc. (e.g., skeptic, postmodernist, idealist, radical constructionist)	
	Social group A	Social group B	Social group A	Social group B
Belief	The earth is about 4.5 billion years old	The earth is about 6,000 years old	The earth is about 4.5 billion years old	The earth is about 6,000 years old
Causes of belief	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief
	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all
	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that the earth is about 6,000 years old	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that the earth is about 6,000 years old
	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group
	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this (true) belief credible	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this (false) belief credible	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this belief credible	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this belief credible
	Powerful institutions or parties support this (true) belief	Powerful institutions or parties support this (false) belief	Powerful institutions or parties support this belief	Powerful institutions or parties support this belief
	The earth is in fact about 4.5 billion years old	–	–	–
Research question	What social factors caused their true belief (that is, contributed to their seeing and believing the truth)?	What social factors caused their false belief (that is, led them to error, misled them, blinded them to the truth)?	What social factors caused their belief? (Which is not false, but is mistakenly thought of as being capable of truth or falsehood.)	What social factors caused their belief? (Which is not false, but is mistakenly thought of as being capable of truth or falsehood.)

Table 2 Causes of moral belief

Sociologist's assumption about truth	Model I: There is an objective truth: Slavery is in fact wrong (e.g., moral realist)		Model II: Truth doesn't apply to moral judgments (e.g., moral skeptic, nihilist, noncognitivist, subjectivist, etc.)	
	Social group A	Social group B	Social group A	Social group B
Belief Causes of belief	Slavery is wrong	Slavery is not wrong	Slavery is wrong	Slavery is not wrong
	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief	Language and conceptual resources that allow to state that belief
	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all	Culture that allows that such a question arises at all
	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that slavery is wrong	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that slavery is not wrong	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that slavery is wrong	Some people claim to know (have found out, have evidence, etc.) that slavery is not wrong
	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group	Institutions and social structure make it possible that the belief be communicated throughout the group
	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this (true) belief credible	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this (false) belief credible	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this belief credible	Worldview, cosmology, way of life, social structure, etc. make this belief credible
	Powerful institutions or parties support this (true) belief	Powerful institutions or parties support this (false) belief	Powerful institutions or parties support this belief	Powerful institutions or parties support this belief
	Slavery is in fact wrong	–	–	–
Research question	What social factors caused their true belief (that is, contributed to their seeing and believing the truth)?	What social factors caused their false belief (that is, led them to error, misled them, blinded them to the truth)?	What social factors caused their belief? (Which is not false, but is mistakenly thought of as being capable of truth or falsehood.)	What social factors caused their belief? (Which is not false, but is mistakenly thought of as being capable of truth or falsehood.)

Consider now the following two hypothetical situations (summarized in Tables 1 and 2). Let *A* and *B* be two social groups. In group *A* the predominant belief is that earth is about 4.5 billion years old. In group *B* the predominant belief is that the earth is about 6,000 years old. The sociologist sets out to explain why these two groups believe what they believe. She notes that the language and conceptual resources of both groups make it possible that

they state their beliefs. In her comparative and historical inquiry, she finds out that at some point a subset of members of group *A* claimed to have evidence that the earth was about 4.5 billion years old. Similarly, at some point a subset of members of group *B* claimed to have evidence that the earth was about 6,000 years old. Interestingly, in both cases powerful institutions and parties devotedly supported those claims, and, even more interestingly, zealously opposed rival points of view. And so on. As described thus far, there is no fundamental difference between this investigation and one that tried to account for group *A*'s fondness for football and group *B*'s fondness for tennis. But there is a consequential choice the sociologist has yet to make. According to Model I: (a) the concept of objective truth is valid; (b) the objective truth is that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old[17]; and (c) this objective truth helps explain subjective beliefs. By contrast, Model II: (a) does not accept the concept of objective truth; (b) hence it makes no sense to discuss how old the earth in fact is; and (c) obviously, there is nothing here to contribute to the explanation.

The turmoil that the "strong programme" in the sociology of knowledge brought about (see, e.g., Hollis and Lukes 1982; Laudan 1996; McCarthy 1989) is in part due to its claim that sociologists of science should not rely on Model I. From this perspective, the explanation of why nowadays most people believe that the earth revolves around the sun and the explanation of why at some point in the past most people believed in the geocentric theory of the universe should be symmetric. As Bloor (1991:7) puts is, "[t]he same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs." On the other hand, the adversaries of this school of thought find it hard to believe that there is no relationship whatsoever between the putative objective fact that the earth revolves around the sun and people's subjective belief that the geocentric theory of the universe is false.

We have seen that group *A* and group *B* hold conflicting factual beliefs. But they also hold conflicting moral beliefs. In group *A* most people believe that slavery is wrong. In group *B* most people believe that slavery is not wrong. Again, the sociologist sets out to explain why these two groups believe what they believe. Again, she finds out that institutions, cultures, and social structures help account for the prevalence of those particular beliefs in the two social contexts. And, again, there is a point at which she must choose between Model I and Model II.

I argue that, in practice, sociologists of morality should favor Model II. Let me return to the statistical analogy. What would be the consequences of assuming that there cannot be truth in ethics (Model II) if it turned out that there can be and slavery is in fact wrong? First, we would have not asked the most accurate research question. Second, we would have missed an important causal factor, namely, the fact that slavery is in fact wrong. It is difficult to estimate how much of the variance of the dependent variable would be explained by this independent variable, but it is clear that it should be able to account for some of it. We would have committed an error analogous to a type II error, because we would have failed to affirm the truth of a proposition that is in fact true. Still, our analysis of social institutions, culture, language, and so on, would be correct. At least we would have gotten this part of the story right.

What would be the consequences of assuming that there can be truth in ethics (Model I) and slavery is in fact wrong if it turned out that there cannot be truth in ethics? First, we would have not asked the most accurate research question. Second, part of our explanation of moral beliefs would be plainly wrong, for it would have relied on a "fact" that turned out to be imaginary. We would have committed an error analogous to a type I error, because we

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[17]My argument does not depend, of course, on which one of the two beliefs is considered to be objectively true.

would have affirmed the truth of a proposition that is in fact false. We would still have gotten part of the story right. Yet the cost of making this type of error is much more serious. Given the epistemic values supported by the scientific ethos, it is preferable to give a true account that misses part of the story rather than to affirm that x is true when in fact x is false. All other things being equal, theory T_1 – which fails to endorse the true statement p – is to be chosen over theory T_2 – which makes the false statement not-p. In this sense, the scientific ethos is conservative and values certitude.

The second reason that supports Model II is the following: if it is assumed that there are moral truths, how should sociology go about finding out and agreeing upon what these truths are (in order to incorporate them into its empirical accounts)? I think that Model I would result in the sociology of morality being caught up in ethical debates, and most empirical projects being unable to move forward. Let me first suggest one probable exception to this rule. If there are any moral truths at all, it is likely that one of them be that what Hitler did is morally wrong. If the *explanandum* is most Americans' belief that what Hitler did is morally wrong, it might be easy to figure out and agree upon what is the moral truth on the matter. But what is one supposed to do in cases such as the moral status of abortion, the use of psychoactive drugs, or the relationships between different ways of life? Indeed, a quick survey of the investigations that sociologists of morality have undertaken suggests that most times there is no widely accepted "moral fact" that could be invoked.

More importantly, most moral issues are not amenable to such simple formulations as "Is x morally right or wrong?" This is a very artificial way of posing an ethical question that is almost never useful. First, most times moral considerations incorporate shades, nuances, and contexts. Even if most of us agree that it is true that killing human beings for the fun of it is wrong, there may be profound disagreements about under which special circumstances it is not. If the *explanandum* is not the belief that killing is wrong, but the belief that killing in such-and-such circumstances is wrong, it is not clear again what would be the moral truth that the sociologist should use. Second, sociologists of crime and deviance have been usually interested in whether a certain institution, practice, or belief is thought to be morally right or wrong. By contrast, the sociology of morality is particularly interested in beliefs about issues such as what kind of life one should lead, what justice is, or what counts as a fully human person. It seems unreasonable to demand that sociologists' agreement on these extremely complicated ethical dilemmas be a prerequisite of their undertaking empirical studies.

Value freedom

Let me begin my argument by showing how one may object to the idea that the social sciences can be value free. A classic argument is that even though social scientists try to be value free, values always find their way into their discourse anyway (well-known exponents include sociologist Gouldner 1973, economist Myrdal 1969, and political philosopher Strauss 1953). In one version of this view, the scientist's values not only influence her choice of research questions, methodologies, and style, but they also *necessarily* influence her appraisal of the evidence and the conclusions she draws from it. For example, it is said that the political scientist's political commitments influence her purportedly scientific accounts of politics. *A fortiori*, it may be said, the sociologist's values influence her purportedly scientific account of values. By contrast, this argument proceeds, the physicist's political commitments or values do not influence her purportedly scientific accounts of quarks. Now, it is obvious that political commitments may influence the political scientist's accounts, and perhaps it is often the case that they do. Likewise, it is easier that these political commitments contaminate a story about politics than a story about quarks. But this

argument does not demonstrate that this must be so *in principle*. To save the argument, one usual move is to postulate a somewhat mysterious subconscious mechanism that would render the influence of values inevitable. I do not find this move very persuasive, partly because I am not aware of any demonstration of this theory (nor am I sure what such a demonstration would look like). A more forceful strategy is to show how the findings of the sociologists of scientific knowledge contribute to the plausibility of that argument. Throughout the history of science, numerous successful theories resonate remarkably well with prevalent views about the social order, the good society, God, gender roles, hegemonic ideologies, and so forth. Still, given that these are historical investigations, it is in principle impossible that they prove that value-free science is in principle impossible.

However, there is a more sophisticated line of reasoning. Moreover, this line of reasoning is much stronger, as it might not only apply to the social sciences or the sociology of morality, but to science in general. Factual and scientific statements may *presuppose* value judgments. There are two ways in which this argument can proceed: one focuses on the foundations of knowledge and the other on the actual choice of theories. First: we have good evidence that there is no pure sense perception – as Kuhn (1970:120; emphasis in original) puts it, different people may "*see* different things when *looking at* the same sorts of objects" (see also Barnes et al. 1996; Duhem 1991; Hanson 1958; Polanyi 1958; Popper 1992). The language, categories, definitions, and concepts through which we apprehend and represent the empirical world are theory- and value-laden as well (Bulmer 1967; Douglas 1986; Douglas and Hull 1992; Durkheim 1976; Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Schwartz 1981; Whorf 1956; Zerubavel 1991, 1997). Similarly, any way of knowing is predicated on a set of epistemological *assumptions*, which, as *assumptions*, are not dictated solely by the empirical world (Abend 2006). Whatever one's opinion about what these non-empirical components of sense perception and knowledge are, how they come into being, and how they work, it is clear that values – and, specifically, social and cultural values – have something to do with them.

Second, we have good arguments that demonstrate that theories are always underdetermined by the evidence and that there can be no algorithm for theory choice (Duhem 1991; Kuhn 1977; Putnam 2002; Quine 1953; see also Harding 1976). In his more radical moments, Quine argues that "[i]t is rational to hold on to any theory whatever in the face of any evidence whatever" (Laudan 1996:34). Along these lines, one might conclude that theory choice is just a "matter of taste" and "subjective wishes" (Feyerabend 1970:228, 1975:214, 285). Even though this radical view has been largely abandoned, there is widespread agreement about Quine's more moderate argument, which Laudan (1996:33) calls the "nonuniqueness thesis": "for any theory, T, and any given body of evidence supporting T, there is at least one rival (i.e., contrary) to T which is as well supported as T."

Now, scientists' actual choice of theories is not necessarily a function of, say, their views on world politics or gender inequalities. But it is necessarily a function of epistemic values such as simplicity, parsimony, reasonableness, elegance, comprehensiveness, coherence, and so on. Naturally, it is also a function of what scientists think should count as good, reasonable, or sufficient evidence. And, as Richard Rudner wrote 50 years ago, this is a value judgment as well:

> [S]ince no scientific hypothesis is ever completely verified, in accepting a hypothesis the scientist must make the decision that the evidence is *sufficiently* strong or that the probability is *sufficiently* high to warrant the acceptance of the hypothesis. Obviously our decision regarding the evidence and respecting how strong is "strong enough," is going to be a function of the *importance*, in the typically ethical sense, of making a

mistake in accepting or rejecting the hypothesis. (Rudner 1953:2; emphasis in original; for the most recent work on this point, see Machamer and Wolters 2004)

This sort of values often passes unnoticed, or is mistakenly assumed to be an objective feature of the natural world. However, scientists must weigh epistemic values, and they do so in the same fashion people weigh their values about what is good, desirable, and admirable in life. As Hilary Putnam (2002:4; see also Putnam 1981) has recently argued, epistemic values are "in the same boat as ethical values with respect to objectivity."

> Indeed, each and every one of the familiar arguments for relativism in ethics could be repeated in connection with these epistemic values. The argument that ethical values are metaphysically "queer" because (among other things) we do not have a sense organ for detecting "goodness" could be modified to read "epistemic values are ontologically queer because we do not have a sense organ for detecting simplicity and coherence." The familiar argument for relativism or noncognitivism from the disagreements between cultures concerning values... could be modified to read that there are disagreements between cultures concerning what beliefs are more "coherent," "plausible," "simpler as accounts of the facts," and so on; and in both the case of ethics and the case of science, there are those who would say that when cultures disagree, saying that one side is objectively right is mere rhetoric. (Putnam 2002:142–143)

All these arguments demonstrate that, *stricto sensu*, the sociology of morality cannot be value free. At the very least, its empirical accounts and scientific theories are predicated on a series of value judgments. But what exactly follows from this conclusion? Let us consider the following two statements:

3. Killing is wrong.
4. The cat is on the mat.

One can concede that in statements like (3) values and facts may be entangled (most obviously in the case of what Bernard Williams (1985, 1995) calls "thick ethical concepts"). One can concede that statements like (4) may presuppose values. One should also notice that both (3) and (4) are in the indicative mood, and that at least superficially their grammar is alike. However, this does not imply that there is no difference between (3) and (4) whatsoever – that both are value judgments of the same sort, or that both are factual statements of the same sort. This difference can be roughly captured by saying that (3) is addressed to the question of what one should do or what kind of life one should lead, whereas (4) is addressed to the question of what the world is like. Like Putnam (2002), I am not advocating a metaphysical theory about the place of facts and values in the natural world. I am not talking about what facts and values really are. Nor does my argument entail that statements like (3) are hopelessly subjective, rationally undecidable, or matters of opinion. I am just putting forward the conservative argument that usually we can recognize claims that are principally interested in what is the case and claims that are principally interested in what ought to be the case. In this sense, we can meaningfully talk about two distinct types of inquiries: those concerned with statements like (3), and those concerned with statements like (4). As a matter of fact, this is the value of the fact/value distinction.

And this rather modest distinction – not the untenable *dichotomy* (Putnam 2002) – is all my argument needs. Let us now look at these four statements:

5. Most Uruguayans believe that killing is wrong.
6. That most Uruguayans believe that killing is wrong can be accounted for by x, y, and z.

7. It is good that most Uruguayans believe that killing is wrong.
8. Killing is wrong (most Uruguayans have gotten it right).

My argument is that while the sociology of morality cannot be completely value free, it can be principally interested in statements like (5) and (6) rather than (7) and (8). It just does not follow from all the good arguments against value freedom that one cannot make empirically supported claims about what most Uruguayans believe, or that all one can do is to discuss whether it is good that most Uruguayan believe what they believe. As the old maxim has it, ought implies can. But *why* ought the sociology of morality to be principally interested in statements like (5) and (6)?

As long as we clarify some conceptual issues, this is not a difficult question. The meaning of the terms of a natural language cannot be decreed – for example, it cannot be established in a summit of eminent linguists or in the pages of an academic journal. Meaning is fixed at the social level, in the same way that we socially fix what it is to follow any given rule (Wittgenstein 1968). According to its socially sanctioned definition, the foremost objective of science is to find out what is the case. My point here is not based on an empirical observation about modern Western science (e.g., that the persons we call "scientists" have been principally interested in finding out what is the case), but on an empirical observation about what people mean by the word "science." That this is what we have come to understand by "science" might be viewed as a bad thing, but in any event it is a matter of fact. Hence, to the extent that sociology in general and the sociology of morality in particular want to count as scientific endeavors, they should be principally interested in what is the case. If the people we now call social scientists preferred to devote their efforts to the issues that statements like (7) and (8) point to, then they would actually *be* public philosophers, normative or practical ethicists, experts on the right and the good, etc. If this were the case, then departments of social science should be rechristened accordingly; current sociologists should move to departments of moral philosophy; or perhaps new institutions should be established to accommodate these important investigations. In any case, this is just a matter of nomenclature.

However, insofar as there is room for inquiries into (5) and (6) – and these inquiries are interesting in their own right – somebody else should undertake them, presumably using the epistemological and methodological principles commonly associated with science. It would thus be quite accurate to call this enterprise the science of morality. Given what sociologists do when they study organizations, culture, stratification, or deviance, it seems reasonable that *they* undertake this kind of studies. More precisely, it seems reasonable that whoever undertakes this kind of studies be called a "sociologist."[18]

There are at least three important objections to my argument about value freedom. First, some Platonists and some cognitive naturalists might deny that there is any significant difference between the statements "killing is wrong," "most Uruguayans believe that killing is wrong," and "the cat is on the mat." In this view, (3) is addressed to the question of what the world is like as much as (4) and (5) are. For example, the naturalist may contend that we can discover whether killing is wrong using the exact same scientific methods that allow us

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[18] I am arguing that the sociology of morality ought not to talk about what ought to be the case. Thus, one might point out that I myself am deriving "ought" from "is." However, my "ought" is not categorical but conditional. I am not arguing that sociology ought to do *x simpliciter*, but that it ought to do *x* if it wants *y*. For an influential article that claims to derive "ought" (that is, a categorical "ought") from "is," see Searle (1964).

to discover where the cat is, what most Uruguayans believe, and the specific heat of water. Moral facts might be of a "*sui generis*" or "queer" nature; they might supervene on natural facts; or they might just be identical with natural facts. But the basic point is that the issue of what one should do or what kind of life one should lead may be somehow reducible to the issue of what the world is like. Perhaps ethics should not be studied in department of philosophy but in departments of social science or even physics.

It is not my intention to assess the plausibility of this type of theory. Rather, my reply is that the proposed distinction between statements of fact and statements of value is less demanding than what the objector thinks. I am not saying that there is a compelling linguistic distinction between two kinds of statements that can take the place of the usual ontological distinction between two kinds of things. Rather, the difference lies in the *subject matter* of (3) and (4); the difference lies in *what they are about*. Even the person who believes that both (3) and (4) are addressed to the question of what the world is like must accept that only (3) meaningfully answers the question of what one should do (or, at least, may contribute to the answer to that question). This is how we can recognize that there is a distinct subject we call "ethics." Thus, one can still group together statements (3), (7), and (8) on the one hand (and let moral philosophers deal with them), and statements (4), (5), and (6) on the other hand (and let social scientists deal with them).

The second objection is that statements like (7) and (8) might just logically follow from statements like (5) and (6).[19] This is Durkheim's own position, which allows him to condemn suicide and celebrate the modern division of labor. This is also the way in which Bellah et al., Selznick, Wolfe, and Etzioni criticize certain characteristics of modern societies and contemporary American culture. The problem is that it is not clear how Luker, after carrying out her thorough empirical research, could elucidate whether abortion really amounts to murder (maybe this is why she did not return to the ethical problem brought up in the preface). Likewise, what value judgment should follow from Tipton's meticulous description of three alternative religious movements and their distinct moral outlooks? I think that the more debatable the moral status of a practice or belief in our society (or, perhaps, the more debatable it is among Western academics), the less it is possible to demonstrate that facts entail values. I take this as a sign that there is something wrong with these putative entailments.

The second objection is also dubious for another reason. For Durkheim, empirical investigations, coupled with the premise that health and normality are good, render insights into what is right and what we ought to do. Similarly, functionalist approaches like Etzioni's couple empirical investigations with the premise that society's maintenance is a good thing. Bellah et al.'s empirical investigation is supplemented by the premise that it is good that one's moral language be able to account for one's moral life. The point is that these inferences from "is" to "ought" are possible only if those auxiliary premises are accepted. Yet these premises – however reasonable, consensual, or "self-evident" – are clearly normative ones. Therefore, these writers do not offer a proof that "is" may logically entail "ought."

The third objection is much more difficult to dismiss. The Weberians claim that they study moral facts in a scientific and objective fashion, and therefore, *qua* sociologists, they stand outside of morality. But, the Durkheimians would ask, how is someone who stands outside of morality supposed to determine which issues count as moral issues, and which

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[19]In more technical terms, this objection focuses on "neutrality" rather than "impartiality" (Lacey 1999). Impartiality denies that scientists' acceptance and rejection of theories is necessarily influenced by their moral values. Neutrality claims that scientific theories do not logically entail any value judgments.

reasons count as moral reasons in the first place? The Weberians would probably respond that that is not determined by them, but by the society, community, or group they are studying. Their job is only to find out what counts as a moral issue in that context by asking their subjects, examining historical documents, or something like that.

The problem is whether we are really willing to allow that *anything* can be a moral issue; that *anything* can count as a moral reason. Suppose that our interviewees tell us that they consider the color of telephones to be a very important moral issue. Since we know full well that people differ in their opinions, worldviews, and ways of life, we would not object to that answer. But we will also expect them to tell us a story that explains how it is that the color of telephones can be a very important moral issue. And presumably we would not accept stories that refer to the beauty of white receivers, the efficiency of red telephones, or how prudent it is to have a blue mobile phone. If we did, it would seem that they and we do not mean the same thing by the word "morality" (or, if they speak a different language, that we are not getting the translation right).

Instead, we may demand a story that relates the color of telephones to life and death, to human flourishing, to God, or to the life worth living. No matter how awkward the relation turned out to be, this story may make sense to us, and thus we would accept that the color of telephones is an important moral issue in that social context. Yet note that we accept this story because it invokes the kind of reasons that *in our view* and *by our standards* count as moral reasons. Therefore, we do not seem to be outside of morality anymore. The sociology of morality, the objector would conclude, is not objective and scientific – it is to some extent a normative endeavor.

What is more, as Leo Strauss pointed out some 50 years ago in his famous anti-Weber lecture, this criticism is not restricted to the study of morality:

> [Weber's] sociology presupposes a fundamental distinction between "ethos" and "techniques of living" (or "prudential" rules). The sociologist must then be able to recognize an "ethos" in its distinctive character; he must have a feel for it, an appreciation of it, as Weber admitted. But does such appreciation not necessarily imply a value judgment? Does it not imply the realization that a given phenomenon is a *genuine* "ethos" and not a *mere* "technique of living"? Would one not laugh out of court a man who claimed to have written a sociology of art but who actually had written a sociology of trash? (Strauss 1953:50; emphasis in original)

According to this argument, then, there cannot be a value-free sociology of art, religion, knowledge, culture, or any human endeavor whose nature is in part constituted by people's definitions of it. Insofar as there might be competing definitions of these endeavors, none of which inheres in nature and none of which is disinterested, the sociologist's very definition of the object of study would constitute a value judgment.

What conclusion should be drawn from the third objection? Clearly, through a different path this objection reinforces the argument that there cannot be a wholly value-free sociology of morality. However, once again it does not follow that the sociology of morality must be normative ethics, and hence tell us what to do, how to live, or adjudicate between the divergent outlooks it investigates. It is true that it must define morality, and this implies a value judgment. Moreover, this definition must draw on the theoretical, conceptual, and linguistic resources that are available to us and that we favor. Obviously, we cannot step outside of ourselves. But this does not entail that this must be a definition such that, for example, abortion could be called a moral issue but the color of telephones could not. At a substantive level, *any* practice or belief somehow related to, say, how one ought to live

could be legitimately called a moral one.[20] Indeed, how could this possibly be otherwise? As Davidson (1984, 2001) has shown, if we did not "charitably" keep meanings constant we could not find out anything at all about beliefs. We could not find out that "they" do not share "our" moral beliefs if we did not first assume that we do share an understanding of what "morality" means and what kind of a thing morality is. In this sense, not only ethnography, the sociology of culture, knowledge, and morality, but any attempt to understand a worldview, opinion, or social system that is not ours or that we do not share is a normative endeavor. And this probably comprises most if not all of sociology.

I conclude that the third objection does not threaten the entire project – the sociology of morality can empirically investigate things like what different societies view as morally valuable, according to its own historically and linguistically conditioned conception of morality. I believe this is a defensible and valuable project. If it does not offer the "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986) that some aspire to in the sociological study of morality and elsewhere, I would hold the reasonableness of that aspiration accountable.

Conclusion

Craig Calhoun (1991:232) has written that "[f]or the most part, sociologists have not carried forward Durkheim's task of creating a sociology of morality." I think this statement is inaccurate in one important sense. It is clear that sociologists have developed numerous compelling accounts of people's ideas about the good and the right, and their social, cultural, and institutional contexts – for instance, Bellah et al.'s (1985) on Americans' conceptions of the good life; Lamont's (2000) on the values of American and French workers; Heimer and Staffen's (1998) "sociology of responsibility"; Luker's (1984) classic book on abortion; among many others. Yet there is a sense in which Calhoun is surely right. In order for sociology to improve its understanding of morality, better conceptual, epistemological, and methodological foundations are needed. And this is the task that sociologists have not carried forward. As we have seen, most sociological research relies on an outdated picture of the ontology, epistemology, and semantics of morality, and is insufficiently informed by the conclusions arrived at by moral philosophy and epistemology. In fact, a common assumption in sociology is that the scientific empirical investigation of this object does not present any special problems.

In this article I have argued that any forceful sociological approach to morality must address the problem of moral truth and the problem of value freedom. For these issues, while essentially philosophical, have willy–nilly a significant effect upon what kind of empirical research on morality the scientist can and should carry out. More generally, the success of the sociology of morality depends on its ability to: define its concepts with precision and come to an agreement about these definitions; develop an adequate methodology; be mindful of the relevant literatures in normative, applied, and metaethics; defend the plausibility and fruitfulness of the project against objectors within and outside sociology; and resolve the special problems that arise by virtue of the particularities of its object of study. The present article should encourage analytically inclined sociologists of morality to devote their energies to these five tasks.

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[20]This is not an uncontroversial argument. For instance, Philippa Foot (2002:191) argues that "there is some content restriction on what can intelligibly be said to be a system of morality." Thus, she opposes those theories that "[allow] the possibility even of bizarre so-called 'moral judgments' about the wrongness of running around trees right-handed or looking at hedgehogs in the light of the moon" (2002:191).

My analysis of the Weberian and Durkheimian paradigms should also encourage further research on the contributions that two other paradigms can make to the sociology of morality: pragmatism and critical theory.[21] With regards to moral truth, both the Deweyan and the Meadian pragmatist ethics argue that "moral questions can be treated in accordance with criteria of rationality and truth, in a way comparable to the scientific solution of factual problems" (Joas 1997:125). With regards to value freedom, the pragmatist approach proposes a complete overturn of the very terms in which the problem is generally posed. Thus, pragmatism radically reformulates the nature of value, the distinction between means and ends, and the relations between ethical and scientific inquiry (see, e.g., Dewey 1903, 1916, 1939; Mead 1908, 1923; cf. Joas 1993, 1997; Welchman 1995; Whitford 2002). While contemporary empirical sociology has largely neglected pragmatism, there might be much to gain from an explicitly pragmatist sociology of morality.

Critical theory, from Horkheimer and Adorno to Honneth and Habermas, has also offered valuable views on the problems of the sociology of morality. Here I cannot explore the complexities and heterodoxies within this large body of literature, so I limit myself to a few basic points that are relevant. First, critical theory is not "theoretical" in the etymological sense of contemplation. In accordance with its Marxist roots, its aim is not representation but transformation and emancipation from bourgeois domination. Second, the Frankfurt School's historicist epistemology denies the possibility of a detached asocial subject who can attain value-free knowledge (cf. Calhoun 1995:18–21). Third, social science and philosophy should be integrated in a supradisciplinary fashion (rather than an interdisciplinary one—see Kellner 1990:20).[22]

As to moral truth, the most significant position is that of Habermas. Habermas reformulates the Kantian universalizability requirement in terms of communicative rationality. Thus, his "discourse ethics" is based on the principle that "[o]nly those norms can claim validity that could meet with the acceptance of all concerned in practical discourse" (1998:41). Against metaethical skeptics and noncognitivists, Habermas develops a strong concept of moral "validity." Indeed, in certain respects this validity can "be understood as analogous to the truth of descriptive statements": "[w]hat unites these two concepts of validity is the procedure of discursively redeeming the corresponding validity claims. What separates them is the fact they refer, respectively, to the social and the objective worlds" (1998:38; see also 1990:56; 1993:25–26; 2003:247–249). For our sociological purposes, it is crucial that the validity of moral norms does not derive from the existence of an objective moral reality, external to the social world, but from social processes of communication and argumentation. Therefore, the idea of moral truths that can help account for moral beliefs cannot work within this perspective.

To recapitulate, this article's conclusions on moral truth and value freedom are, very succinctly put, as follows. First, if it turns out that moral judgments are capable of being

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[21] I chose to focus on the Weberian and Durkheimian paradigms because they provide the framework for most contemporary sociology of morality. The former represents the epistemological/methodological orthodoxy, and the latter is now its main challenger. This is not a judgment about the relative worth of these four paradigms, but about their relative ascendancy at the present time. I thank a *Theory and Society* reviewer for bringing to my attention this limitation in the scope of this article.

[22] These stances are at the basis of the demarcation of "critical" from "traditional" theory in Horkheimer's programmatic essays, and of the attacks on positivism in the *Positivismusstreit* of the 1960s (Adorno et al. 1976; Habermas 1988; Horkheimer 1972, 1993). Third-generation critical theorists, such as Honneth, still aim at a "social theory with normative content" (1995:1). Thus, his theory of recognition is *both* an empirical and a normative one (see, e.g., 1995:160–170). Honneth's relevance for the sociology of morality also lies in his substantive interest in the moral dimension of social life–e.g., the "societal significance of moral feelings" or the "moral grammar of social struggles" (1995:166).

true, their truth would be one of the factors that cause moral belief. However, I claim that as a practical sociological research choice, the most prudent thing to do is to proceed as though there were no truths in ethics. My answer here is metaphysically agnostic, and in practice disregardful of putative moral truths. Second, I have argued that from the fact that the sociology of morality cannot be completely value free it does not follow that this project is no different from public philosophy (to use Bellah's term). My point is that there is room for a distinctively sociological inquiry into morality that would occupy itself with giving empirical accounts of people's moral beliefs, and their causes and consequences. This inquiry would occupy itself neither with the soundness, validity, reasonableness, or truth of those moral beliefs, nor with whether there is any point in occupying oneself with the soundness, validity, reasonableness, or truth of moral beliefs at all. In my view, it is possible to defend and it is desirable to preserve the logical distinction between the project of the sociology of morality and the projects of public, normative, and moral philosophy.

This argument does not entail (and I certainly do not believe) that moral judgments are immune to rational evaluation, or that public philosophy is just politics under a different guise. Further, my argument does not entail that the sociologist has nothing to contribute to public life. Obviously, she can disseminate useful knowledge and make useful empirical calculations – for instance: given that the achievement gap is a bad thing and such-and-such initial conditions, we should do x, y, and z to close it. (Most of the recent debates about "public sociology" have focused on this first kind of contribution – see Burawoy 2005, and the *Social Forces* [June 2004], *Social Problems* [February 2004], and *American Sociologist* [Fall/Winter 2005] symposia). Second, as Weber himself noted, the sociologist can help achieve moral clarity and reflexivity: "we can force the individual, or at least we can help him, to give himself an *account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct*. [...] I am tempted to say of a teacher who succeeds in this: he stands in the service of 'moral' forces; he fulfils the duty of bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility" (1946b:152; emphasis in original).

The third kind of contribution is much more ambitious in its reach and claim to public relevance. I would argue that the sociologist's professional expertise (knowledge of relevant social facts, familiarity with different theoretical accounts of the facts, awareness of cultural variations, analytical skills, etc.) *increases the odds* of her being a valuable participant in a rational discussion about how we ought to live together. That is, in a substantive moral discussion in which substantive moral arguments are put forward, attacked, and defended. This is only an argument about probabilities, though. I know of no scientific method (let alone logical formula or mathematical algorithm) to translate claims about what the good life is believed to be into claims about what the good life actually is.

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