

Sociology as Practical Philosophy and Moral Science

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Abstract

The philosophical assumptions that organize moral sociology as practical philosophy are the outcome of a secular quest to investigate the principles, norms and values behind the constitution of society. As a protracted response to the whole utilitarian-atomistic-individualistic tradition that systematically deemphasizes the constitutive role that morality plays in the structuration of self and society, the sociological tradition has continued, by its own means, the tradition of moral and practical philosophy in theoretically informed empirical research of social practices. Going back to classic moral philosophy, I want to show in this article how social theory is involved in the quest for ‘the good life with and for the others in just institutions’ (Ricoeur).

Keywords

anti-utilitarianism, *Geisteswissenschaften*, moral sociology, practical philosophy, Ricoeur, social theory

In this article, I will work out the lineaments of a normative sociology of action that consciously continues the venerable traditions of practical and moral philosophy.¹ While I fully accept sociology’s commitment to empirical research and also welcome its political positioning in the public sphere, I think that in privileging the descriptive and the political over the normative and the philosophical, today’s social science only pursues part of its project. By going back to philosophical traditions of the past, I will try to open up an alternative future for the discipline. By conceiving of sociology as a practical and normative science, I will reframe it not just as a social, but also as a cultural and human science with moral conscience that analyses institutions through the lens of human flourishing.

The topic of my investigation is moral sociology. I will explore its relation to philosophical ethics. Moral sociology is a rather small niche

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within the discipline (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013; Jeffries, 2014).² Like other recent approaches in the field (e.g. analytical sociology, cultural sociology, relational sociology, etc.), moral sociology has been promoted by academic entrepreneurs as a new paradigm with a capacity to fuse rivals into a united front. It largely ignores the philosophical tradition and appears more of an endeavour to reconnect sociology to its own history (with obsessive returns to Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons and Bourdieu) than to reconnect sociology to its own prehistory to make it more relevant for the present. The pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991), the social philosophy of Axel Honneth (1992) and the critical realism of Margaret Archer (2000) and Andrew Sayer (2011) are less preoccupied with defining a sociological agenda over and against philosophy. They all reject the Weberian dogma of axiological neutrality and conceive of moral sociology as an openly normative discipline.³ My own attempt to redefine moral sociology is more indebted to Paul Ricoeur's (1990) *Oneself as Another*, but otherwise it is fully consonant with the turn to ethics in critical theory, critical realism and pragmatism.

The basic idea that underlies my incursion into moral philosophy is that social theory, when it is properly conceptualized as a theory of social practices that are regulated by principles, norms and values, offers an alternative to the utilitarian conception of individuals as self-interested actors and to the atomistic conception of society as an aggregate of such interacting individuals. It is only if individuals are connected to each other via symbolic representations that offer them normative visions of self, others and society that the social synthesis of heart and minds can be conceived of in non-utilitarian fashion as an institution that is not imposed from without, but regulates from within the social practices that compose the social world as a human world.

The article is divided in two parts. In the first part, I will relocate social theory within the tradition of the moral and cultural sciences (*Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften*) and reconceive it as a practical philosophy that articulates the moral intuitions of common sense, bringing it to a higher level of reflexivity. In the second part, in an attempt to elucidate the moral horizon of our times, I will show how our moral conceptions are a patchwork of Aristotelian visions of the good life, interpersonal theories of benevolence and Kantian theories of justice.

Sociology as Practical Philosophy and Moral Science

In *La sociologie comme philosophie politique et réciproquement* (Sociology as Political Philosophy and vice versa), Philippe Chanial (2011) pleads for the development of a general social theory that would 'retotalize' and 'renormatize' the social sciences. To counter the fragmentation and Balkanization of the social sciences into a myriad of specialized

disciplines, he pleads for a new synthesis of sociology with moral and political philosophy.⁴ In the lineage of Marcel Mauss and in cooperation with Alain Caillé, with whom he edits the *Revue du MAUSS*, he launches a strong critique of utilitarianism in its different variants (from classical political economy to contemporary rational choice).⁵ As a paradigmatic alternative to the hegemony of economistic approaches in the social sciences, he proposes a Maussian anthropology of the gift, which he recodes as a political sociology of associations and enhances with significant borrowings from contemporary moral and political philosophy (Dewey, Habermas, Honneth, Ricoeur, among others). The result is a 'normative anthropology that would have the demeanour of a science' (Caillé, *apud* Chaniel, 2011: 12). It aims to 'revive the two categorical imperatives of the sociological investigation of the Ancients: to grasp, against every form of reductionism, Man [sic] in his unity; to interrogate the ends that we [sic] collectively want to assign to social life and, thus, to judge socio-historical forms of interhuman relations and types of humanity – *Menschentum* as Weber would say' (Chaniel, 2011: 13).⁶

I fully subscribe to this project of a normative anthropology and political sociology, but to properly ground it, I reckon we do not only need to rethink sociology as a moral philosophy (and vice versa), but also as a practical philosophy (and vice versa). The two are related, but to the extent that moral philosophy presupposes an actor who deliberates and evaluates, practical philosophy comes first. By practical philosophy, I want to refer to the whole gamut of normative disciplines (especially philosophical ethics, politics, and law, but also psychology, economics, anthropology and sociology) that consciously continue the Aristotelian, Kantian and Hegelian traditions of moral philosophy and investigate how the validity of norms of human action (What should we do?) and the determination of ends (How should we live?) can be rationally grounded and find their social instantiation in collectively shared principles, norms and values. For social scientists who are wary of invocations of classic philosophers they have not read and who doubt that it is not only possible, but also necessary and desirable, to look for rational foundations of normative principles, let me connect practical philosophy more directly to sociology. What I am concerned with is not philosophy as such. What I am after is a theory of action that neither accepts the Nietzschean pathos nor subscribes to the Weberian restrictions on value rationality. By reverting to more traditional approaches, I want to open up a space beyond utilitarianism and decisionism, where the actor's axiological engagements are not written off as mere rationalizations but taken seriously.

If we define practical philosophy, generically understood, as the totality of human disciplines that investigate practices, with Aristotle, as teleologically-oriented actions that imply the simultaneous rational determination of means and ends (*phronesis*); with Kant, as deontologically

motivated actions that follow maxims that satisfy the condition of objectivity, universality and freedom (*praktische Vernunft*) and, with Hegel, as axiological principles that find their actualization in social institutions and practices (*Sittlichkeit*), we can include economics, sociology and anthropology within its remit and conceive of the 'social sciences as practical reason' (Bellah, 1982).⁷ Practical philosophy is neither theory (*theoria*), nor art (*techne*), but practical knowledge (*praxis*), i.e. knowledge that is directly involved in the rational determination and execution of a course of action within a situation of uncertainty and within a context of justification (Gadamer, 1990, I: 317–29). Every theory of society that is grounded in a conception of social action that does not exclude the determination of ends and does not reduce action to instrumental or strategic action can be considered as a formalization of common knowledge and, therefore, as a form of practical sociology.

In the preface to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant (1983: BA VI–VIII) explicitly distinguishes a rational and an empirical part of ethics. He calls the rational part 'moral philosophy' and the empirical part 'practical anthropology', and argues that to develop a moral philosophy as a pure metaphysics of morals the former has to be completely purified from any reference to the empirical. My whole argument in this article is exactly the opposite: to develop moral sociology and anthropology as a practical philosophy, we need to overcome the separation between philosophy and science, the transcendental and the empirical, the normative and the descriptive in a moral sociology that investigates how actors judge, evaluate and formulate their ends in accordance with norms, values and principles in a given situation. To avoid the 'scholastic fallacy' of the philosopher who projects his or her continuous reflexivity and discursivity into the mind of the ordinary actors, one should also accept the existence of moral habits. Those may have been reflexive and explicit at one time; they may also be occasionally reactivated at other times; but they themselves are practical sedimentations of moral deliberations that are rational, even if they operate with little or no reflection and actions are performed 'on automatic' (as one of the reviewers phrased it).

The internal connection between practical knowledge and the execution of action that characterizes the object of the praxeological disciplines implies that action has, at least, the following features: reflexivity, intentionality, normativity and humanity.⁸ Reflexivity or the capacity of the subject to consider him- or herself as an object in thought means that the mind intervenes between the organism and the environment. The reaction of the former to the latter is usually mediated by internal conversations the subject has with itself. Intentionality, or the teleological implication of reflection as a moment in the constitution of the act as a sequence of acts of a certain type, imprints a direction to action. To accomplish its goals, the subject has to intercalate means and intervene in

the environment to transform it in accordance with the ends pursued. Normativity or the justification of the act through reference to evaluative discourses ('accounts') that motivate ('motives') and direct ('ends') is a detour that submits the ends and the means to a normative selection process. Finally, humanity or the vital relation (Dilthey's *Wirkungszusammenhang*) between part and whole that connects the individual to the larger community (ideally and counterfactually the largest community which is identical to the 'universe of discourse') of which s/he is a living part is what intrinsically ties the personal, the moral and the social together into a single act. Together, those four references involved in the constitution of social actions as moral actions give a dynamic quality to social practices.

Thanks to practical knowledge and practical reason, the connection between social action, order and change guarantees that the dialectics between agency and structure, freedom and constraint, never come to a standstill. 'Practical reason', says Ricoeur (1986: 285), 'is the whole of measures taken by individuals and institutions to preserve or to restore the mutual dialectics between freedom and institutions without which there is no meaningful action'. To impress the dynamic impact of practical knowledge, I can now conclude and redefine practical philosophy as the totality of disciplines that investigate everything that can be changed by means of transformative actions and practices and practical sociology as the humanistic investigation and application of reflexive, intentional, normative social actions that aim to transform the self, culture, and society.⁹

In accordance with this morphogenetic perspective on the transformation of self, culture and society at large (Vandenbergh, 2014: 67–84), we can now ask a fundamental anthropological question and ground Chantal's normative anthropology in some distinctive human capabilities: 'What kind of animals are human beings? How can we describe their peculiar characteristics in a way that might improve, or at least enlarge, our understanding of human social action and institutions?' (Smith, 2003: 3).

The question of human nature is no doubt a difficult one – it is indeed, as Charles Taylor (1988: vii) astutely observed, both 'terribly necessary' and 'unbearably problematic'. To avoid the traps of essentialism (speciesism, anthropocentrism, logocentrism, etc.), I propose to define the human being as a being who is, by nature, a cultural being, endowed with an inbuilt capacity for continuous self-transformation. Following Aristotle's classic definition of the human as a being endowed with speech and a capacity to reason (*zoon echon logon*, translated by the Romans as *animal rationale*), I'd like to stress the constitutive and transformative powers of culture, language and practice. Together, they form the ontological triad of the Spirit (*Geist*), which distinguishes the natural world from the human world. By stressing the constitutive powers of the

Spirit, I do not want to dispute that the natural world is a human world and that the human world is also a natural world (see Morin, 2008, on this). Nor do I in any way want to deny a priori that animals have the capacity to reason, talk and feel or that, as rational beings endowed with language, humans are not also interdependent and vulnerable animals (Macintyre, 1999). As far as I am concerned, one should not simply oppose humans and animals, reasons and feelings, mind and body – to better deconstruct the opposition? – but see the polarities within a spectrum where some animals (like primates, elephants and dolphins) are more human and some humans (like babies, intellectually challenged beings and unrepentant murderers) are more animal. My argument is, rather, that if one wants to understand what makes the human world a human world, and by implication the human sciences human sciences, one cannot ignore the multiple inter- and intrarelations between culture, language and practices. They constitute human beings, who, as practical subjects, constitute society, thanks to the mediation of culture and language. In other words, it is thanks to the symbolic practices that acting subjects continuously transform the self, culture and society that make them human.

If I allow myself this elementary digression – in response to an objection of one of the reviewers – it is because I want to conceive of the social sciences as human sciences and the human sciences as moral sciences. *Geisteswissenschaften*, literally sciences of the Spirit, is how in 1847 Schiel translated John Stuart Mill's moral sciences into German. Today, the term is still largely used in Germany (by the DAAD, for example) as a generic term that regroups some 40 different disciplines, from theology, philosophy and the arts via psychology and history to anthropology and sociology, under a single heading. In English, the term is not retranslated as moral sciences, but as humanities. While the term captures well the essential connection to *Bildung* and the *Bildungshumanismus* of the liberal arts, the French *sciences de l'homme* offers more promise for the development of general social theory as normative anthropology with a practical and moral intent – provided, of course, one does not stumble over gendered language.

Translated into German, Mill's *Logic of the Moral Sciences* became *Logik der Geisteswissenschaften*. As it moved from England (Mill) via Paris (Comte) to Berlin (Dilthey), the term lost all the naturalist, positivist, empiricist, utilitarian and individualist qualities that the younger Mill had given to it. In the hands of the Germans, who revitalized the human sciences through injection of a good dose of speculative idealism, the *Geisteswissenschaften* became increasingly associated with opposite features: humanism, historicism, idealism, hermeneutics and holism are indeed distinctive of the German moral, historical and cultural sciences.

While the notion of *Geist* has the advantage of maintaining its connection with a social-historical understanding of culture, broadly

understood, as the totality of objectifications of human experience (Dilthey's *Erlebnis*) in a transpersonal sphere of common significations, valuations and expressions, it also contains the risk of a contamination with an idealist speculative philosophy of history that finds its culmination in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. To divert the risk and divest the *Geisteswissenschaften* from their heavy metaphysical ballast, one has to eliminate Hegelian and Marxist macro-teleology of History altogether and limit oneself to the micro-teleologies of the multiple histories of transformative social action.

By means of such a self-limitation, the *Geisteswissenschaften* renounce the gospel of the Absolute Spirit and rejoin the neo-Kantian movement of the *Kulturwissenschaften* of Dilthey, Simmel, Weber and, closer to us, Cassirer, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Habermas. The perspective of the social sciences as cultural, moral and practical sciences that have followed the collapse of absolute idealism (1831–1933) and historical materialism (1842–1989) is that of 'post-Hegelian neo-Kantianism', to borrow a counterintuitive but brilliant category of Paul Ricoeur (1986: 279 and 305).¹⁰

For a social theory that remains indebted to the tradition of the *Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften* and self-consciously continues it as moral and practical philosophy, sociology becomes the science of the Objective Spirit, that is of the totality of vital expressions, normative understandings and cultural significations of human beings, from language, religion and science to political, artistic and economic works, which can be understood as sedimentations of collective intentionalities into autonomous cultural formations. Being at the same time expressions of organized social groups and autonomous cultural wholes that follow their own logic, the formations of the Objective Spirit are properly social and logical, hence, 'socio-logical' (Dilthey, 1979: 135–6).

In the French tradition, we find the same idea, but under a different name. For Durkheim, Mauss and Fauconnet, sociology is 'the science of institutions, of their genesis and functioning' (Durkheim, 1987: xxii). With Mauss and Fauconnet, but no doubt also with Marx and Weber, we can understand institutions as 'instituted wholes of acts and ideas that individuals find before them and that impose themselves more or less on them' (Mauss and Fauconnet, 1969: 17). As expression and sedimentation of 'collective habits' (1969: 10), they embody 'the spirit' of collectives and orient the practices by prescribing 'collective ways of thinking, feeling and acting' that are in conformity with the common values of the collective and its members (1969: 10). To the extent that institutions are above all made of social representations – 'institutions only exist in representations' (1969: 10) – they should not be conceived of as inert forces but as active symbolic forms that represent society to its members and mediate its formative influence to them by structuring their practices from within.

Against Durkheim, we should therefore insist that individuals do not confront institutions ‘from without’; rather, with Marcel Mauss, we should underscore that institutions live within people and that institutions only live because there are people who activate and animate them in the pursuit of ordinary life.¹¹ Institutions are the living junction between the individuals and society. As such, they represent the outside within (intimate alterity or ‘ecstimacy’, to speak like Lacan). ‘In this sense, one could say that sociology is a psychology’ (1969: 26). The constitutive linkage between representations (both collective and individual) and practices (both individual and collective) is what keeps the dialectics alive. Underneath the representations there are practices; within practices, there are representations; and underneath both we find the experience of life itself.

To establish the continuity between moral sociology, the human-cultural sciences and the tradition of practical philosophy, I will now make a ‘praxeological turn’ (Reckwitz, 2002; 2006) and conceive of institutions as normative sets of habitual, rule-governed social practices that produce (reproduce and transform) society in accordance with the principles, values and norms of collectively shared forms of life. Within the practice turn, there is a moral turn (Taylor, 1989, Honneth, 2011), and sometimes even a return to the Aristotelean theory of practice and prudence (Macintyre, 1981, Flyvbjerg, 2001, Smith, 2010). As sets of collective habits that prescribe and proscribe social practices as morally right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, institutions cannot exist without cultural conceptions of the social order or without certain self-understandings that are at once human, cultural and personal. According to Taylor (1985: II: 93):

There’s always a pre-theoretical understanding of what is going on among the members of society, which is formulated in the descriptions of self and other which are involved in the institutions and practices of society. A society is among other things a set of institutions and practices, and these cannot exist and be carried on without certain self-understandings.

Cultural understandings of society and of the self are mutually implicated in, and constituted by, regular practices that connect the self to society and the individual to humanity as part to whole. Mediated by symbolic representations of society concerning what is just (‘just for all’) and what is good (‘good for me’), practices are both social and individual, collective and personal, universal and particular and also, as practices gear into the outer world, spiritual and material. If normative conceptions of self and society are causally efficacious, it is because they regulate from within the teleological actions of individuals by representing them from without symbolic representations of the good life and the good society.

The Good Life with and for Others in Just Institutions

In this section, I want to argue that our contemporary moral horizon is constituted by a variety of strands and strata of moral philosophy that are inherited from the past, yet propose scripts of possible lives in the future that are still active in the present: it is ‘as if every time a stratum came to be added to the one that precedes it, and that progresses in the direction of an increasing differentiation and synthesis’ (Dilthey, 1979: 169). To make my case, I will offer a rather quick overview of the history of moral philosophy within the Western tradition (due to incompetence, I will have to forfeit any discussion about non-Western moral philosophies). Given that I am looking for materials that can help me to furbish a positive anthropology in the anti-utilitarian tradition, this overview will necessarily be selective, not to say partial.¹² In any case, I will argue that our current moral intuitions consist of a mixture of classical teleological conceptions of eudemonia (the ‘good life’), Judeo-Christian ethics of love, care and solicitude (‘with and for others’) and modern deontological conceptions of justice (‘in just institutions’). Drawing once again on Paul Ricoeur’s incredible talent to compact complex materials into a mnemonic phrase, I will characterize our moral horizon in terms of a ‘*visée* of the good life with and for others in just institutions’ (Ricoeur, 1990: 199–236, here p. 202).¹³

To unpack that phrase and show what Max Weber consciously eliminated from his purview, I will look at Aristotle’s eudemonian ethics (*phronesis*), Augustine’s conception of love (*agape*) and the Enlightenment’s secular conception of benevolence (sympathy), Kant’s categorical imperative and Hegel’s system of morals (*Sittlichkeit*). Of course, in the current conjuncture, there may be tensions between the different strands. The plurality of moralities is irreducible. At some times, in some types of societies, some strands are hegemonic; at other times in other places, others are dominant.¹⁴ It is to be expected that in a journal like *Theory, Culture & Society* more attention will be given to the cultural, practical and emotional aspects of ethics, while its more reasonable and rational features will be demoted. To understand moral life, one needs, however, to consider the whole spectrum of moral imaginaries.

‘*The good life*’: The idea that the social sciences continue the tradition of practical and moral philosophy as a normative anthropology and sociology may be unseasonable, but as Bellah usefully reminds us, not so long ago, ‘most of what we now call the social sciences was actually taught, so far as it was taught at all, under the headings of moral philosophy’ (Bellah et al., 1985: 299). This was possible because, until Nietzsche and Weber declared ends and values off limits, it was thought that social science not only submits the means, but also the ends themselves, to a rational reflection. Although it is no longer common to treat Plato and Aristotle as early sociologists, a return to the Ancients is worth

the while, not for the sake of mere erudition, however, but as philosophical prolegomenon to moral sociology.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is really a theory of action that reflexively articulates practices to a life project that is regulated by moral character (*hexis*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and aims at the realization of a virtuous, good and happy life: being good by doing well. Practical knowledge intervenes in this life project not as *episteme* (science or theoretical knowledge), nor as *techne* (art or technical know-how), but precisely as a rational deliberation about the relation between ends and means that directs the practices towards its final end: happiness or *eudemonia*. For Aristotle, happiness is not transitory but permanent; it is not a state, but a practice that implies a successful merger of moral virtue (*hexis*) and intellectual virtue (*phronesis*) in a way of life – 'But we must add: in a complete life, for one swallow does not make a summer' (1098a, 10–15).

Virtues, like courage, moderation, generosity and justice, are not given by nature, however, but acquired through exercise and training. It is by doing the right thing with the right motive in the right way, without excess and without deficit, that one becomes virtuous, that virtue becomes an ingrained disposition and sediments to a state of character. Moral excellence as a state of character is the result of virtuous practices – 'for we are ourselves somehow partly responsible for our state of character' (1114b, 20–25). Yet it is also a condition, because we become virtuous through habit. It is through cultivation of the moral virtues by practice, by continuously doing good and acting well, and by exercising the intellectual virtue of prudence, by deliberating well about the right ends and the means of action for the sake of becoming good that, eventually, when all is said and done, the person will be good and virtuous and, therefore, happy.

Unlike the Ancients, we moderns no longer believe in the existence of a cosmic order that sustains our quest for the good and beautiful life. Our age is a post-metaphysical one. Of necessity, we became pluralists; by default, we relinquished 'comprehensive doctrines', even if some of us are still yearning for an 'overlapping consensus' or a synthesis at a higher level of abstraction. We no longer think that there is only one right course of action that leads to the good life. That does not mean that we're nihilists and that all choices are arbitrary. Only that we cannot impose our particular conception of the good life and the good society on everybody without courting paternalism or authoritarianism. The emergence of neo-Aristotelianism and the debate concerning virtues, internal goods and excellence in the writings of Arendt, Gadamer, MacIntyre, Spaemann and Nussbaum show, though, that the idea of human flourishing has not lost its appeal. What remains of *phronesis* in post-metaphysical times in pluralist societies with competing comprehensive worldviews is a narrative and normative conception of identity as an unending quest for authenticity (Ferrara, 1994).

Within sociology, Aristotelean influences are evident in Bourdieu's conception of the habitus. By now, everybody knows that *habitus* is a Latin translation, first by Boethius, and then, later, by Thomas Aquinas, of *hexis* – and its various declinations (Bourdieu, 1980: 133): *ethos*, when the valorative aspects are emphasized; *eidōs*, when the typological aspect predominates; and *hexis*, when the corporal dimension of practical principles is in focus. What is remarkable, though, is that Bourdieu has largely eliminated the moral and reflexive aspects of character that one finds in the classic tradition. In Aristotle, one is responsible for one's own habitus. In Bourdieu, on the other hand, the habitus is responsible for what one does. The contrast can be formulated in terms of an opposition between a theory of action and a theory of practices. Whereas the former presupposes a subject with consciousness and will, the latter can do with a mere agent: someone who acts out a structure, but who is endowed with a practical sense and has to be creative and inventive to adapt to the concrete circumstances in which she finds herself. In any case, given the relaxation of the phronetic aspects of action, which have less to do with character formation than with class dispositions, the association of practical sense with practical reason becomes slightly more tenuous.

'With and for the others': In Aristotle, the good life is not a solitary one. 'For without friends, no one would choose to live' (1155a, 5–10). The human animal is indeed a political animal and friendship (*philia*) is a virtue too. Thanks to the presence of the other, subjectivity turns into intersubjectivity, while the question of identity opens up to difference and alterity. In Augustine, the other becomes the Other. Those who search for happiness in this life and in themselves will not find it, however. Love and life are systematically devalued. What counts is faith. The true believer is only a pilgrim on earth journeying on to eternal life in the City of God. 'The final end or supreme good of this city is either peace in eternal life, or eternal life in peace' (Augustine, 1971b: XIX, 11). Human life is a trial. The peace we find down here is only a 'solace of our misery' (XIX, 27). The only real love is love of God, for God and in God. At best, the love we feel for our neighbour is love of the divine and the eternal in Man, whom He created; at worst, it is concupiscence and sin.

Unlike his ancient forebears, who valued *philia* and *eros*, Augustine only loves and values what God loves. Although scholars of the Bible and the Torah will, no doubt, be able to indicate genuine justifications and descriptions of neighbourly love (*caritas*, *agape*) in Judeo-Christian theology, I have the impression that one will almost always find the fraternal element enshrined and nested in the paternal element, which commands the ascent of the soul and the openness towards the other too. What one gets from the religious tradition, however, and especially from Augustine, is the emphasis on inwardness and intimacy, reflection and meditation. In his *Confessions*, a prose-poem of love addressed to God, the turn inwards leads upwards. 'You are more inward than my most

inward part and higher than the highest element within me. [...] What is inward is superior' (Augustine, 1971a: III.vii.11 and X.vi 9). For the Bishop of Hippo, the internal conversation is not a conversation with others. It is not communication but communion. Similarly, it is not a conversation, but a conversion into God.

In contemporary moral philosophy, there has been an upsurge of interest in the tender thematics of friendship, hospitality, benevolence, solicitude, care, sympathy, trust, recognition, and love, not only among feminists, but also along poststructuralists and deconstructivists who have taken the ethical turn. Be it with Levinas, Derrida, Lyotard or Nancy, the preoccupation with Otherness, Othering and Alterity, is an inheritance of the phenomenological investigation in intersubjectivity. Following the 'theological turn' within post-Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology (Janicaud, 1991), the focus on intersubjectivity and alterity often takes epiphanic and hyperbolic shades, with hints to something primordial, fused, beyond duality that precedes, founds and transcends ordinary intersubjectivity. This is not only true for phenomenologists in the Christian tradition (Scheler, Ricoeur, Marion, Henry), but also and even more so for those in the Jewish tradition (Buber, Levinas, Derrida).

To find investigations of intersubjectivity that extend the classic treatments of friendship of Aristotle, Cicero and the Stoics, and are not mediated by the Other, I will now turn to the Scottish Enlightenment (1750–90), incidentally one of the most neglected ancestor traditions of sociology (Swingewood, 1970), and to its analysis of benevolence. In the proto-sociology of Hutcheson and Ferguson, but above all in Hume and Adam Smith, one can find systematic explanations of human sociality and rich empirical investigations of civil society that foreground the role of moral sentiments, like sympathy, compassion, care, tact and other tender feelings that capture well our current intuitions about what it means to be with and for the others.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith (1776) develops a theory of society that is not grounded in action but in passion, and more particularly in the observation of one's self and the others, as well as in the judgement of one's own and the other's emotions. His basic idea, which influenced Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead and of which one can still find echoes in John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, is that an action becomes moral when the actors decentre their gaze so as to watch, see and judge themselves through the eyes of others. The desire to love, to be loveable, to please and to become what one approves of instigates the subject to become oneself thanks to the other. The opening up to the other in thought, but also in action, is the distinctive mark of sympathy. By judging oneself as one would like to be judged by others, thus through the detour of a benevolent other (the so-called 'impartial and sympathetic observer'), one becomes moral and virtuous: 'No action can properly be

called virtuous, which is not accompanied with the sentiment of self-approbation' (Smith, 1976: III, 6–13). Thanks to the mechanism of sentimental decentring, one can better understand what motivates actors to go out of themselves to care about or communicate with others.

It may be somewhat surprising to look for a foundation of anti-utilitarianism in Adam Smith, the founder of classical economics. But one of the guiding ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment is that self-interest and the market presuppose the interest for others that are proper to civil society, where men and women encounter each other to talk to and communicate with each other. It is also central to the French and German traditions in sociology. Understood as moral science, sociology investigates the moral preconditions of market and exchange – the 'pre-contractual basis of contract', as Durkheim (1986: 177–209) says in one of the foundational texts of sociology – and develops the idea that human interdependence and the moral ties of civil society sustain the market and the state. Underneath society (*Gesellschaft*) there is community (*Gemeinschaft*). Underneath exchange we find the gift. Underneath self-interest and power there is reciprocity and generosity. With the morality of reciprocity, we are touching 'one of the human rocks on which our societies are built' (Mauss, 1950: 148). Social life among anonymous citizens is only possible because of the moral ties that bind the members of society with and for each other into a community of solidarity. Contra Hobbes, but with the Scottish Enlightenment, we can, thus, conceive of morality as constitutive of community and constitute sociology as an anti-utilitarian moral philosophy that grounds the common good in sympathy, reciprocity and sociability.

'*In just institutions*': The moral *visée* of leading a good life with and for the others cannot be limited to the small community of fellows, however. From the self via the others, it has to expand its reach and tend towards universality. Thanks to the encounter with the others who are part of a community of reciprocity and solidarity, the teleological ethics of authenticity and self-realization with and for others finds its logical extension in a deontological ethics of autonomy and self-determination. Through inclusion of the anonymous other – the 'faceless citizen' – the fraternal ties of the community are loosened but also extended in a society that guarantees, at least in principle, freedom and equality and, therefore, justice, to all. Following the intentional arc of morality that connects the life projects of the individual to the life of the community and beyond, we thus arrive at the idea of a well-ordered society with just institutions without social exclusion.

In Kant's moral philosophy, one finds the most rigorous formulation of the deontological or imperative vision of the just that characterizes modern morality. For Kant, morality has nothing to do with the search for happiness, nor with utility or moral sentiments, but everything to do with the subordination of the will to a law that is universally valid.

One acts morally when one acts out of duty, both towards oneself and towards the others, and 'out of respect for the law' (*aus Achtung fürs Gesetz* [Kant, 1983: BA14]). Kant's criterion of universality is a formal and procedural one. It does not say what an actor must do, but enjoins him or her to follow maxims (i.e. subjective rules of action) which are not subjective but objective, not empirical but a priori and which one has to respect always and without exception.

The first formulation of the categorical imperative – 'Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction' (BA52) – clearly indicates that an action is only moral when its justification passes the test of universality. What is not indicated, but is implied, is empathy. While the first formulation characterizes the principle of morality, the second and the third formulations determine respectively its end and its destination. The second formulation – 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end' (BA 67) – is derived from the first formulation and connects universality to the humanity of the other and the dignity of each and every person. Changing the perspective from an actor who follows the law to one who legislates for all possible rational beings, the third formulation – 'Every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends' (BA 76) – relates universality to autonomy and the ideal of self-determination. Together, the three formulations of the categorical imperative introduce with force the principle (universality), the end (humanity) and the ideal (autonomy) of morality into the normative discourse of modernity.

In his critique of Kant, Hegel argued that Kantian morality presupposes social institutions that incorporate the idea of universality and social actors that put it into practice, realizing it thereby. Without an objective morality (*Sittlichkeit*) that is institutionalized and practised, subjective morality (*Moralität*) remains powerless, abstract, unreal. Without Spirit, 'the form that right takes on as duty and as law is experienced as dead and cold letter and as a fetter' (Hegel, 1970: 19). Even if the individuals are, in theory, recognized as authors of the law, they do not recognize themselves as such. Even if freedom is formally recognized as a principle, it is not lived and experienced as such. Without backing from social institutions, like the family, civil society and the state that sustain moral norms and transform them into lived practices, without concrete customs that substantiate, in practice, the principles that reason prescribes, morality hangs in the air. It is only when morality becomes habitual and practical that it becomes real. Three hundred years after Kant's practical philosophy and Hegel's philosophy of rights, the modern principles of universality, humanity and autonomy have found their realization and institutionalization in the defence of

human rights. What was only a Declaration in 1789 (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*) has now become a concrete reality – to the point that when their rights are infringed and human beings are not recognized as human beings and citizens, they take to the streets to protest and claim their rights.

In contemporary philosophy, the emphasis on impartiality and universal rights is associated with the political liberalism of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. Both of them claim a Kantian pedigree. Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971), one of the most influential books of the last 50 years, offers a strong procedural foundation for theories of redistribution. By means of a thought experiment, known as the 'original position' in which individuals decide 'beyond the veil of ignorance', without knowing their own position within society, about the basic structure of a fair system of cooperation among free and equal citizens, Rawls resuscitates the theory of the social contract. While he uses the utilitarian language of economic liberalism, his proposition for the reorganization of society is vaguely socialist. It was welcomed by left-liberals, but opposed by left-communitarians. Playing out once again the opposition between Kant and Hegel, communitarians like Sandel, Walzer and Taylor argued that Rawls' liberalism presupposed a vision of a utilitarian self and an atomistic view of society. It is only by reactivating the solidarity within the community that a just society can come into existence.

In Germany, Axel Honneth (2010: 51–77), the main representative of the third generation of the Frankfurt School, also advanced a Hegelian argument against Habermas' discourse-ethical procedural revision of Kant (Habermas, 1983). Before the state can come in with its politics of redistribution, intersubjective recognition of values has to exist, as well as solidarity within the family, civil society and political associations. It is only because institutions of reciprocity and recognition exist within the community, and because citizens share common values and visions of the good society, that solidarity among them is possible. The ideal society cannot be imposed from outside. It has to be immanent to society and be carried and kept alive by institutions and practices that struggle to fully realize it.

Now that we have discussed the individual, interpersonal and societal dimensions of morality as they are institutionalized in Western civilization, we can better understand the normative horizon that informs the transformative social practices of the present. Composed of multiple strands and strata of the past, the modern and post-modern horizon spans the whole distance that separates the ancient *maxima moralia* of human perfection from the current *minima moralia* of human rights. With their longing for authenticity, their feelings of sympathy and their discourses of human rights, contemporary actors aspire to be at the same time fully human, compassionately humane and idiosyncratically personal. Sociologically, these aspirations to transform oneself, the

community one belongs to and the world at large can be recoded as normative scripts and read as personal practices. Reciprocally, one can also understand sociology as a script and practice that seeks to elucidate who we are as actors, what we are as society and where we want to go as humanity.

Conclusion

The philosophical assumptions that organize normative sociology as practical and moral philosophy are the outcome of a secular quest to investigate the principles, norms and values behind the constitution of society. As a protracted response to the whole utilitarian-atomistic-individualistic tradition that systematically deemphasizes the constitutive role that culture in general and morality in particular play in the structuration of self and society, the sociological tradition has continued, by its own means, in theoretically informed empirical research of social practices, the quest for a good, just and well-ordered society of interacting and interrelated individuals who act together in concert to produce, reproduce or transform the social order they are part of.

From Comte to Mauss and Boltanski, from Marx to Habermas and Honneth, from Hume to Mead and Parsons, the main traditions of generalizing social theory have sought to recover the moral ground of social action, order and change. Through an explicit dialogue with Kant, Hegel, Marx and, oftentimes, also Nietzsche, through a creative fusion of social theory and moral philosophy, they have sought to recover parts of the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy that Hobbes, Bentham and Mill had rejected. Meanwhile, as Donald Levine (1995) has shown in his dialogical reconstruction of the national traditions of sociology, most of the assumptions that informed the Aristotelian philosophy were recovered one by one in post-Hobbesian social theory. The founders of sociology knew their classics and conceived of the new discipline simultaneously in continuity and as a break with practical, moral and political philosophy. This is clear in Durkheim, but also in Marx, Weber, Parsons and Bourdieu. For half a century this legacy went into abeyance. Now that moral sociology is on the ascendant, perhaps, the time has come to take stock of our heritage and reformulate social theory as a practice and a way of life. It is high time to relinquish false interpretations of our scientific practices. As if we could erase the ground we're standing on. By becoming conscious of the traditions we stand in and continue, who knows? – we can also change them and our self-conceptions. By rethinking social theory as a collective practice, we thus return it to where it comes from: society, but now it is understood as a project of progressive humanization of its institutions and its practices.

Notes

1. This article is based on a trilogy of post-graduate courses I have taught at the Institute of Social and Political Studies (IESP-UERJ) in Rio de Janeiro: ‘Sociology as Practical Philosophy (and vice versa)’ (2012); ‘Sociology as Moral Philosophy (and vice versa)’ (2013) and ‘Sociology as Political Philosophy (and vice versa)’ (2014). I thank the students who took the course, as well as the doctoral students (Diogo Corrêa, Rodrigo de Castro, Marcelo Lopes) and colleagues (Jeffrey Alexander, Raquel Weiss, Alain Caillé) who commented on it. I am also grateful to the editors of *TCS* and their team of anonymous reviewers for a most stimulating debate.
2. In anthropology, the interest in ethics and moralities seems to be stronger than in sociology (see Fassin, 2012; Laidlaw, 2014; Lambek et al., 2014; Keane, 2016).
3. For a concerted attempt to overthrow the doxa of axiological neutrality within sociology, see the contributions of Mustafa Emirbayer, Laurent Thévenot, Andrew Sayer, Anne Rawls and George Steinmetz in the forthcoming special issue on axiological engagement in the *Canadian Review of Sociology* (Vandenberghé and Gorski, 2017).
4. For a converging proposition that also includes the ‘Studies’ in the new synthesis, see Caillé and Vandenberghé (2016a, 2016b).
5. The MAUSS, a clever acronym for Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales/Movement of Anti-Utilitarianism in the Social Sciences, gathers anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, philosophers and heterodox economists who have a common interest in the gift, feel inspired by Mauss’ seminal text and publish in the *Revue du MAUSS*. Alain Caillé, the founder of the MAUSS, is also the main theorist of the gift-paradigm. Programmatic and synthetic statements can be found in Caillé (2005, 2009).
6. Language and its conventions shift over time. When Chantal speaks about Man (l’Homme), I presume he does not mean to refer to Der Mann (the male), but to Der Mensch (the human being). Similarly, when he invokes humanity, I take it he does not intend to be insensitive to the plight of animals. Finally, when he uses the inclusive we, he does not mean to silence you.
7. For a good exploration of neo-Aristotelian, neo-Kantian and post-Hegelian ethics, see Honneth (2000: 171–92). For those who would question the possible inclusion of economics within practical philosophy, let me just remind them that up until the Scottish Enlightenment economics was part – in fact, a minor one – of ethics and politics. The historical connection to Aristotle explains why some of its most basic concepts, starting with the name of the discipline itself, but also ‘goods’ (!), refer to the rational organization of the household (oikos) in the context of the search for the ‘good life’ of its master as a precondition to participation in the public sphere. What holds for economics holds a fortiori for anthropology and sociology.
8. The highlighted features are derived from pragmatism (reflexivity), phenomenology (intentionality), critical theory (normativity) and hermeneutics (humanity). For a more systematic attempt to wed phenomenological hermeneutics to pragmatism, see my essay on internal conversations (Vandenberghé, 2014: 100–53).

9. Humanistics, as promoted, taught and practised at the Dutch University for Humanist Studies, is a normative, empirical and applied human science within the progressive post-secular humanist tradition. Resolutely interdisciplinary (social sciences and humanities), it proposes to study the human being from a double perspective that is at once existential (it deals with the human process of meaning-giving) and social (it aims to contribute to the humanization of the world). For more information, go to www.uvh.nl or visit the institution in Utrecht.
10. Configurations of ideas and philosophical systems also have their biographies: they are born, thrive and enter into coma, which does not exclude that they may come back to life and have an afterlife as it were. *Le mort saisit le vif*. The dates I've chosen for absolute idealism coincide with Hegel's birth and Hitler's seizure of power; for historical materialism with the publication of Marx's text on censorship in the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* and the collapse of 'really existing socialism' in Central Europe. The death of Marxist philosophy of history predates the fall of the Berlin Wall, but since then, at least in the northern hemisphere, it has lost every credibility and is definitely no longer the 'insuperable horizon of our times'.
11. For a good exploration of the differences between Durkheim and his nephew, see Caillé (2005: 27–44, esp. 33–9).
12. Indeed, I will systematically leave out the consequentialist tradition. For a more comprehensive overview of moral and political philosophy from an anti-utilitarian perspective, see Caillé, Lazzeri and Sennelart (2001).
13. In Honneth's (2000: 133–70) triptych, one finds a similar reconstruction of contemporary moral philosophy: 1) neo-Aristotelian and neo-Hegelian strands of communitarianism (Macintyre, Walzer, Honneth); 2) neo-Kantian liberalism (Habermas, Rawls); and 3) post-modern ethics of care (Lyotard, Derrida, Levinas). In passing, I observe that Ricoeur's catchphrase leaves out the *visée* of a sustainable environment, which is nowadays recognized with anxiety by increasing fractions of the population as a precondition of human survival and, therefore, also of the good life in and with nature in an ecologically sustainable form of life.
14. In his sociology of morality, Georges Gurvitch (1968: 137–72) has sketched out some of the functional correlations between the genres of moral life and the societal forms. He notes, for instance, that in liberal-capitalist societies, utilitarian ethics get the upper-hand, while traditional ethics and virtue ethics get devalued. In collectivist societies with centralized governments, activist and utopian image-based moralities predominate. In pluralist, democratic and decentralized societies of the future, there will be continuous experiments with creative morality and, hopefully, opportunistic morality will disappear.

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