Sociology as Moral Philosophy (and Vice Versa)

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Abstract

In this article, I want to make an attempt to reconnect sociology to moral philosophy and moral philosophy to sociology. The thesis I want to defend is that sociology continues by other means the venerable tradition of practical and moral philosophy. Like its forebears, it stands and falls with a defense of "practical wisdom" (Aristotle) and "practical reason" (Kant). The development of a moral sociology presupposes, however, that one recognizes and rejects Max Weber's theory of axiological neutrality as an extremist position and that one carefully articulates prescriptive and descriptive, internal and external, as well as observer and actor positions.

Résumé

L'article tente de reconnecter la philosophie morale à la sociologie et la sociologie à la philosophie morale. Il soutient la thèse selon laquelle la sociologie continue la tradition vénérable de la philosophie pratique et morale par d'autres moyens. Comme ses prédéceseurs, la sociologie dépend d'une défense de la "sagesse pratique" (Aristote) et de la "raison pratique" (Kant). Le développement d'une sociologie morale présuppose, cependant, que l'on reconnaisse et refute la théorie de la neutralité axiologique de Max Weber comme une position extrême et que l'on articule soigneusement les positions prescriptive et descriptive, interne et externe, ainsi que celles de l' observateur et de l 'acteur.

A moral philosophy characteristically presupposes a sociology

Alasdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue* (1984:23)

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Social scientists are moral philosophers in disguise

Alan Wolfe: *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (1989:23)

WHILE A GOOD DEAL OF contemporary sociology is political and moralizing, moral sociology as such remains largely underdeveloped. Recently, there has been a resurgent interest in moral sociology with concerted attempts to institutionalize it as a specialized subfield of inquiry, both in mainland Europe (centered around the work of Honneth, Boltanski, and Thévenot) and in the Anglo-Saxon world (influenced by the work of communitarians like MacIntyre, Taylor, and Walzer or by the critical realism of Bhaskar and Archer).[1] Unlike the sociology of religion, the sociology of knowledge, or the sociology of arts, moral sociology does not have a real tradition. The founding fathers had, of course, a strong interest in morality and ethics.[2] To the extent that there is a canon, Émile Durkheim would be its prime figure (even though he did not finish his book *La morale*). Max Weber and his paradoxical defense of axiological neutrality would come second, even if it undermines ethics. Marx does not have any specific texts on ethics as such, and it is not even clear if there is space in Marxism for a morality that is not subservient to politics. After all, wasn't it Marx (1969), who declared "communists do not preach any morality at all" (p. 229). With his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, Georg Simmel (1991) has two volumes on ethics, but they are not very sociological and deconstruct most of its basic concepts. Following the Second World War, more than anyone else, Talcott Parsons has continued the Durkheimian tradition and underscored the moral dimension of social life. With the downfall of structural functionalism in the 1960s, moral sociology went into hibernation as well.[3]

[1.] The recent publications of a *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality* (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010) and *A Companion to Moral Anthropology* (Fassin 2012) show a concerted effort to bring back ethics into the fold of the social sciences. Sayer (2011), Laidlaw (2014), Abend (2014), and Keane (2016) are fine examples of theory construction at the intersection of philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. Of late, as a kind of second wave of moral sociology, values and valuation have become a trending topic. See the new journal *Valuation Studies*, as well as special issues of *Human Studies* (2015, vol. 38) and *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* (2016, vol. 26).

[2.] Like much of the literature, I use the terms morality and ethics interchangeably. While ethics has Greek origins, morals has Latin ones, with Aristotle offering a bridge between both. In the *Nikomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1979:1103a), ἔθος refers to habits, character, folkways, mores, hence morals, and has a more collective and social orientation; ἦθος (with a long e) to ethics, hence to morality, and has a personal and subjective dimension. In common usage, morality carries overtones of moralism, while ethics evokes personal deliberation and subjective responsibility. Hegel's distinction between abstract morality (*Moralität*) and concrete ethical life (*Sittlichkeit)* overlaps with the former distinction but does not correspond to it. Greek ethics is all about the cultivation of virtues and not about categorical imperatives and universal norms, which is a heritage of Stoicism, Christianity, and Kantianism.

[3.] There are so few publications on moral sociology in the second half of the twentieth century that they can easily be mentioned in a footnote. In France, there was Gurvitch (1968) and the members of the Centre de sociologie de l'éthique (Isambert 1982; Isambert, Ladrière, and Terrenoire 1978; Ladrière 2001); in the United States, Haan et al. (1983) tried to revive normative inquiry, but to no avail. One had to wait for a renaissance in moral and political philosophy in the 1980s (following the publication of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* in 1971 and the ensuing debate between liberalism and communitarianism) before sociology would put morality back on its research agenda. For a state-of-the-art of moral philosophy, see Canto-Sperber (1996) (with 250 collaborators and 1,700 pages, spread over two columns).

Pierre Bourdieu certainly has a sociology of morality, but no moral sociology. Like everything else, he explains morality sociologically but does not leave much space for independent moral reflection. As a counter position, there is Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, but most sociologists would consider him a philosopher anyway.

One could easily make the case that the "founding fathers" of our discipline, not just Marx, Weber, and Durkheim but also Parsons and Bourdieu, who, unlike us, were deeply steeped in philosophy and knew their classics, were fully aware of the moral dimensions of moral life, as well as of the normative presuppositions and implications of the new discipline. In spite of their declaration to the contrary, they knew only too well that the sociology they proposed was situated in a long tradition and taking explicit sides. Marx tried to combine Aristoteles, Kant, and Hegel in a revolutionary philosophy of history, Durkheim was knowingly fusing Aristotle and Kant into his science of morals, whereas Weber, brushing aside 2,000 years of moral philosophy with a slight of hand, was sociologizing with a hammer. Parsons for his part rejected utilitarian consequentialism and sought, through a synthesis of Kant and Christian ethics, to restore a common system of ultimate ends. In spite of his endorsement of practical reason and in order not to be too closely associated to a Marxian theory of justice, Bourdieu described himself as a Pascalian. In any case, without reference to their classics, I surmise, our classics cannot be properly understood.

To develop a moral sociology worthy of its name, one has, however, first to break down the disciplinary barrier between sociology and philosophy and overcome the reticence and resistance of professional, critical, and public sociologists to engage in some constructive "border thinking."[4] While most would probably agree that sociology entails a normative project, grounded in a slightly nostalgic liberal-communitarian worldview, few would actually be willing to spell out that project and launch a philosophical inquiry into its normative foundations.[5] Laying the groundwork and testing foundations, they would say, are best left to philosophers, engineers, and builders. It is not the work of social scientists. Similarly, while most would be sympathetic to the idea that the sociology of morals is itself relatively inseparable from a normative position, they would not want to hear that to properly understand those normative positions, they have to

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[4.] The resounding success of "public sociology" (see Burawoy [2005] and the multiple books on the subject) suggests that it is easier to break down the boundary between academia and activism than that between sociology and philosophy.

[5.] Sociology is born as a social philosophy, according to François Dubet (2009:15) and, overstating his case, he adds, as "a theology of society" (2009:8). While Comte undoubtedly saw himself as a high priest of society and conceived of sociology as a "sociolatry," this cannot be said of the other classics. This being granted, Dubet shows that sociologists are not just analysts of society, but their promoters too. Similarly, society is not only a social object to be investigated, it is also a moral and modern project that aims to bring into existence a society of individuals, based on the recognition of common values of equality, liberty, and solidarity.

know the classical tradition of moral philosophy and follow the debates in contemporary moral philosophy too.

In this article, I want to attempt to reconnect sociology to moral philosophy and moral philosophy to sociology. The thesis I want to defend is that *sociology continues by other means the venerable tradition of practical and moral philosophy*. Like its forebears, it stands and falls with a defense of "practical wisdom" (Aristotle) and "practical reason" (Kant). If I want to break the solution of continuity, it is not because I think that sociology has little to offer, but because I am convinced, like Chernilo (2013:2), that one can "*do more and better social theory*" (his italics) if one allows oneself to engage philosophical issues at the boundary of sociology. One should definitely not leave the philosophical questions of our discipline to professional philosophers. With some notable exceptions—which can be counted on one hand: Habermas, Honneth, Ricoeur, Taylor, and MacIntyre—they know little about sociology and do not really care about it. Otherwise, they would probably not develop their normative visions like castles in the air. Rather, one should give oneself the freedom to explore in all modesty the philosophical foundations of sociology and "do metatheory," not so much to indulge in the delicacies of erudition and scholarship but as a propaedeutics to solid theory construction and empirical research in the normative dimensions of the social world.

WHAT IS MORAL SOCIOLOGY?

Moral sociology is not a special sociology, like the sociology of sports or the sociology of administration for example. It does not refer to "a sector of social life," but to a "perspective on social life" that uncovers and reveals "ethics where it crops up while remaining hidden" (Isambert et al. 1978:338). As such, it is an integral part of a general sociology that seeks to systematically interrelate social structures, culture, and practices into a unified theoretical framework that gives a coherent answer to the three fundamental questions of social theory: What is social action? How is the social order possible? What are the conditions of social change? (Vandenberghe 2009:290–303). More akin in that respect to cultural sociology and its defense of the "relative independence of culture" (Alexander 1990:1–30), *moral sociology* is a general perspective that unearths the moral dimension of social life. It argues that principles, norms, and values are not just regulative but constitutive, and that they are constitutive not just of a certain domain of actions but also of social life as such. That does not mean that all actions are *per definitionem* moral actions (most of our economic actions are neither moral nor immoral, our sex life is no longer judged in moral terms either, etc.), but rather that morals, mores, and ethics are invariably implicated in action, order, and social change.

Every action, no matter how rational or emotional, routine or strategic, is surrounded by a normative horizon that provides the principles,

ends, and values that define and direct it. Similarly, institutions, no matter how systemic, have an ideal foundation that shapes their organization and their goals and are instrumental in the coordination of the actions of its members. Even financial markets are embedded in a moral economy, and it is thanks to this moral infrastructure that its excesses can be judged and criticized. If social change is possible, it is also because the normative structures that undergird the institutions, taken singly or jointly, vary over time. If a social change is necessary, it is among other reasons because yesterday's ideal interests enter in conflict with today's material interests or *vice versa*. When actors esteem that the existing social systems, institutions, and practices are not only in conflict with their material interests, but that they also betray their moral promises and undermine their existential aspirations for a good life, social change is imminent.

By analogy with Jeffrey Alexander's (2003:11–26) famous distinction between a sociology of culture and a cultural sociology, we can make a distinction between a *sociology of morals* and a *moral sociology*. While the former takes moralities as something that has to be explained by social factors (moralities as "dependent variable"), the latter investigates how morality produces, constitutes, and regulates actions, institutions, and social structures (morality as "independent variable").[6] For sure, the language of dependent and independent variables is reductive and not really appropriate for the analysis of the generalized interdependence and mutual constitution of moral and social life. As if we had to choose between a simple alternative: "To explain moral facts by society or social facts by morality?" (Pharo 2004:45).

It is nevertheless useful to distinguish two rival strands within the sociological tradition that investigates the role of morality and ethics in social life.[7] In the first strand, with antecedents that go back to the modern Masters of suspicion (Machiavelli, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche), we find authors like Weber, Elias, Adorno, Althusser, Foucault, and Bourdieu in the materialist, structuralist, deconstructivist, and critical tradition who consider ethics an epiphenomenon—and sometimes even a mask—of deeper lying interests and power struggles. As Bourdieu (1994) pointedly asked: "Who has an interest in being or in appearing without interests (*désintéressé*)"? (pp. 147–67).

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6. The analogy could be extended to religion (and politics), but perhaps with a notable axiological difference: Whereas most sociologists of religion (or politics) would argue that a sociology of religion is not a religious (or political) sociology, moral sociologists would contend that moral sociology is tied to a normative position and would do their best to make it explicit. One should not identify, however, moral sociology to a moralizing one, but to a normative-descriptive division of general sociology.

7. Pharo (2004) makes a similar distinction, but organizes his traditions differently. He distinguishes sociocultural theories of morality (Durkheim, Parsons, Bourdieu, Berger, and Luckmann) from action theories (Weber, Garfinkel, Habermas, and Boltanski). As I want to develop moral sociology as a cultural sociology of action, I have no qualms to put Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, Garfinkel, Habermas, and Boltanski in the same basket.

In the other strand, with antecedents that go back to the Prophets of transfiguration (Augustine, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel), we encounter authors in the idealist, rationalist, pragmatist, and hermeneutic tradition like Durkheim, Mauss, Weber, Mead, Parsons, Habermas, Honneth, and Boltanski. Weber figures in both lists. Depending on what one reads (*Science as a Vocation* or *The Protestant Ethic*), and also how one reads him, he can either appear as a rather stern Nietzschean with existentialist leanings or as a sophisticated Neo-Kantian in the humanist tradition.[8] Weber is indeed a shifter, but, at the end of the day, everything depends on what one does with his passionate call for axiological neutrality. Later, I will argue most strongly against that position, which I consider a serious impediment to any moral sociology.

As morality is part of culture, moral sociology is, by definition, a cultural sociology. Like culture, morality is a relatively autonomous guiding system for action. What distinguishes morality from culture is its intrinsic relation to normative standards of evaluation, judgment, and justification in terms of "understandings about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust" (Smith 2003:8). As a set of normative understandings that provide evaluative standards (principles, values, and norms) by which actions (one's own and those of others) can be judged, morality is part of a collectively shared cultural order that is institutionalized in structured social practices.[9] As such, it exists "outside of people" (Smith 2003:8). As these cultural understandings are learned and internalized in and through processes of socialization, morality also exists "inside of people" (Smith 2003:8) as a set of standards of correct behavior that define, orient, and regulate their actions from within. Those standards can be reflexively formulated, semiconsciously followed, or dimly felt (felt, but not explicitly articulated, as is the case with "moral sentiments" like compassion, pride, resentment, etc.).

Following Bourdieu's (1977) famous *détournement* of Spinoza's distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, we could say with the Durkheimo-Weberian tradition of moral sociology that morality is a "structuring structure" that discloses the world as a valuable one, and with the Webero-Marxist tradition of the sociology of morality that it is a "structured structure" that expresses relations of force and contributes to the reproduction of society as a system of domination. While the connection with culture assures that morality is conceived of as a collective

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8. For sympathetic readings of Max Weber that underplay the strong Nietzschean tenor in his work, see Schluchter (1991, I: Part 2). It should also be noted at this point that Nietzsche and authors like Simmel, Weber, and the last Foucault are not just critics of morals. They are moralists too, and are looking for a more aesthetic ethics beyond categorical imperatives and golden rules.

9. "Norm, principles, and values" is the shorthand I use to refer to normative propositions of all sorts: principles, norms, imperatives, standards, morals, manners, customs, maxims, rules, values, virtues, beliefs, attitudes, even sentiments, etc. It would take an analytic philosopher and, therefore, a lifetime, to sort them out, spell them out, and draw a complete map of their interrelations.

guiding system that structures and regulates actions from within in accordance with some standards, its relation to social structures, material interests, and relations of production suggests that the invocation of the common good and the general interest that characterizes moral life is rooted in particular forms of life and expresses, through strategies of universalization and idealization, the interests and ideals of particular groups and carrier-strata (classes, estates, parties, nations, etc.). From the point of view of the sociology of morality, moral positions can and have to be explained in terms of social positions within the social structure and of its corresponding discourses. In this respect, the sociology of morals can be considered a formalization of folk sociology: "They would say/do that, wouldn't they?" (Sayer 2005:6). For a cultural sociology that seeks to maintain the connection between the practices and social change, the question is how principles, norms, and values can be at the same time a condition and a consequence of social action. To resolve the conundrum, I suggest, a reference to normativity and morality is necessary.

DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS

Philosophers esteem that the sociological reduction of morality to a set of *mores*, customs, and manners that are socially, culturally, and historically variable evacuates moral judgment altogether.[10] With its suggestion that morality always comes in the plural, sociology introduces a good dose of relativism and skepticism into the moral debate. Pascal's exclamation comes to mind: "A meridian decides the truth. [. . .] A strange justice that is bounded by a river! Truth on this side of the Pyrenées, error on the other side" (Pascal 1954, §294). For moral philosophers, who search for evaluative criteria that are ideally universal and hold for any conceivable moral community, talk about multiple moralities is necessarily problematic. With Steven Lukes, we can imagine that they want to ask the sociologists of moralities a basic meta-ethical question: "What is diversity of morals a diversity of?" (Lukes 2013:558). To properly answer that question without subterfuges, meta-ethical criteria that make the qualification of any given act as a moral, an immoral, or a morally indifferent one possible have to be formulated.

While this reflection on the nature of ethical properties of moral judgments (What makes a judgment moral?) is definitely a philosophical one, one can make it more sociological by opening the question *to the actors themselves*. To the extent that the actors themselves reflect on the criteria they use to justify their own behavior or criticize that of others, every actor may well be considered a philosopher. There is, indeed, no reason why one

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10. "It was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of mores, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people" (Arendt 1994:740).

should rule out a sociology of philosophy or, better, of lay philosophers in ordinary situations of action that are submitted to the imperative of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000). In everyday life, actors evaluate, judge, and criticize others all the time. Once one starts paying attention to the role of philosophical arguments in ordinary situations of action, one will discover that actors are endowed with a "critical sense" and that they continuously use moral language to denounce injustices of all sorts. "It is enough to pay attention to hear the incessant rumor that bears testimony to the indignation, to the pain and also to the inquietude triggered by the sentiment of injustice that manifests the capacity of persons to put into work their sense of equity" (Boltanski 1990:130).

Sociologist do the same, not so much as sociologists, however—the dogma of ethical neutrality forbids them from taking a stand—but as actors. A reflexive sociology, in which the sociologist observes and describes, explains, and understands the normative arguments of ordinary actors, including his or her own, is not only a necessary part of "epistemological vigilance" (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1973:94–106); it also allows one to see that sociology encounters the moral position both as a "resource" (the moral presuppositions of sociology) and as a "topic" in its own right (the moral positions of the actors themselves). Morality is always there both as an unquestioned and continuously reaffirmed moral background (sociology as a modern liberal-communitarian enterprise) and as a moral horizon (the normative worldviews that inspire and motivate the actors). Provided that the denomination does not preclude the investigation of the interconnections between both, one could call the first the professional morality of sociology, the second its lay morality. With sociological concepts circling in and out of the life-world into academia, and back, both are profoundly intertwined. The "double hermeneutics" is indeed so profound and the "institutional reflexivity" so intense that it is hard to say where one begins and the other ends (Giddens 1982: 1–17).

Moral philosophers live in an ideal and perfect world where judgments are always fully articulated and people behave rationally and morally. What they are concerned about are purely normative, conceptual, and historical–philosophical issues: What are the criteria of morality? How does the sense of justice operate? Can one be a cognitivist in ethics? How can one justify a certain norm? What is the relation between virtues and values, values and norms, or values and moral sentiments? Does justice have priority over the good? How should one behave in a given situation? What does Aristotle mean by phronesis? Is Hegel's critique of Kant justified? What is Rawls's original position and how does it compare to Habermas's ideal speech situation? Can critique be transcendent or does it always have to be immanent? To sociologists, who are no longer trained in moral philosophy, those philosophical discussions often seem airy, technical, and even pointless.

From a sociological perspective, philosophers appear as perfectionists. Unlike sociologists, they deal with ideal actors in ideal worlds, not with real worlds and messy situations. They are above all concerned with normative issues and the examples of everyday life they refer to (or even invent—especially if they are schooled) show they do not care too much about description or explanation. Sociologists for their part eschew enumerations of virtues, articulations of the good, and elaborations of the just. Rather, they focus on the negative and the bad (racism, sexism, and colonialism), denounce injustices (inequality and exploitation), and uncover social pathologies (alienation, disenchantment, and anomie), leaving the explicit justification of their critiques, norms, and utopias to philosophers (Benhabib 1986). And in any case, aren't we all against exploitation, rape, and murder?

To make the transition from moral philosophy to moral sociology as a form of "moral inquiry" (Bellah 1983) one needs to bring philosophy back into the real world and investigate empirically how actors reason, think, evaluate, justify, and act morally in ordinary situations of action. This transition from the normative to the empirical is only possible if one does not oppose philosophy to sociology, but rather integrates them into something like a "descriptive ethics" (along the lines perhaps of "descriptive metaphysics"). This endeavor would be at the intersection of ethics (because it implies philosophical discussions about "the good" and "the just" and knowledge of the tradition of moral philosophy too) and sociology (because it describes, understands, and explains the moral sense of persons in real situations of action).

What is needed is a fine articulation between (i) descriptive and prescriptive, (ii) external and internal, and (iii) observer and actor positions: (i) From this dialogical perspective, one needs, first, to study the normative prescriptions of philosophers in order to better describe the normative dimension of social life. Through the ages, philosophers have developed complex languages and elaborate visions of the good and the just in well-ordered societies (MacIntyre 1966; Paranjpe 2002; Taylor 1989). Sociologists should study those philosophical systems as moral repertories that are part of Western culture.[11] Varying a well-known phrase of Paul Ricoeur—"to explain more to understand better" (Ricoeur 1986:22)—we could say that the point of this detour via philosophy is to prescribe more in order to describe better, and also, conversely, to describe more in order to prescribe better and ground one's judgments in the critical sense of the actors. (ii) Next, one also needs to overcome the opposition between an internal understanding of moral acts (internalism) and an external

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[11.] Someone might object: "You could have submitted the Western canon to a post-colonial critique." If I emphasize Western culture, however, it is simply because I have insufficient knowledge of other cultures and their philosophical systems.

observation of moral facts (externalism). As a matter fact, externalism presupposes internalism, observation presupposes understanding, understanding presupposes judgment: "We only understand a speech act if we know what makes it acceptable. [...] Understanding of the grounds (of action) implies *eo ipso* an evaluation" (Habermas 1981, 168–69). This is the case, because, as sociological semanticists (Pharo 2004:48–84), neo-Wittgensteinians (Louch 1966:50–60), and ethnomethodologists (Jayyusi 1991:227–51) have underscored over and again, before one can observe and register moral facts, one needs to be able to recognize them, which presupposes at least some kind of a "normative criteriology." Without the recognition of morality, without implicit judgment, and without the evaluation of social facts, there is no cognition of moral facts either. The normative is in the descriptive, just as the descriptive is in the normative. The *quaestio facti* cannot be separated from the *quastio iuris*. For descriptive ethics, objective, nonevaluative, neutral methods are, therefore, not a real option. (iii) Finally, and relatedly, one also has to join the first-person perspective of the normative philosopher with the third-person perspective of the sociological observer. Philosophers take a performative perspective and seek to rationally ground their judgments through moral argumentation, deliberation, and justification. They often speak in their own name, but through sustained moral argument with real or imaginary interlocutors, they ascend from the perspective of the first person to the universal perspective of an imaginary judge (Kant's "tribunal of reason") who incorporates the perspective of humanity as such. Sociological observers usually avoid judging their subjects. Instead of critically evaluating their positions from a moral point of view, they try to understand them and explain their behavior by reference to their community and its moral discourse. In good Weberian fashion, they do it by making explicit the particular moral universe of the native community. To explain, explicate, and understand the moral positions of the subjects, without judging them, is what participant observation commends and demands.

Through a fusion of the position of the philosopher (and remember, with Gramsci [1975:326] that "every man is a philosopher") and the position of the sociologist, we can arrive at an explicitly normative hermeneutics of "participant evaluation" in which the sociologist has to judge the evaluations of the ones s/he observes in order to understand them better, they and their moral universe. Once one has thus articulated philosophy and sociology into a "moral ethography" (sic), one can also attack the Weberian dogma of axiological neutrality (Weber 1988b, 1988a) and propose a normative sociology that is neither relativist nor decisionist, but does full justice to the normative conceptions and intuitions of the actors themselves.

AGAINST AXIOLOGICAL NEUTRALITY

If one wants to develop moral sociology as a "moral inquiry" that explains, explicates, and describes the actor's moral sense, one has first of all to remove a huge stumbling block—*Wertfreiheit*—and ask oneself if Weber's defense of axiological neutrality is really axiologically neutral. I know it is part of the sociological *doxa* that one should not insert one's own subjective evaluation into the object one studies. Research should be objective and neutral, not partial and partisan. For sure, when one is teaching, one should abstain from evaluation, refrain from indoctrination, and not behave like a "publicly remunerated petty prophet in the lecture-room" (Weber 1988c:609). Even a Marxist should be able to teach Spencer, Pareto, or Weber to his students without irony, depletives, and invectives. But what appears at first as a reasonable position represents, in fact, if one approaches it as an ethical doctrine, a rather extreme position within the history of moral philosophy.

One does not have to go as far as Leo Strauss (1953:35–80) and accuse Weber of "nihilism" (be it "noble nihilism"), but that his defense of neutrality is far from neutral is evident to anyone with some knowledge of the history of ethics and moral philosophy. Weber's plea for *Wertfreiheit*, which Talcott Parsons judiciously translated as "freedom to judge," is inseparable from Nietzsche's wholesale denunciation of ethics as resentment in disguise. Neutrality is, therefore, not what it seems, but, rather, its opposite: irrationalism, relativism, and decisionism (Vandenberghe 2005). Neither a consensual position nor a common sense one, it is a rather polemical position that introduces conflict and tensions among colleagues and detracts from their professional commitment to modern liberal-communitarian values.[12]

But before I get to a refutation of a battery of dualisms (fact/value; is/ought; objective/subjective; positive/normative) associated with *Wertfreiheit*, I must first praise Weber's scientific practice as a classic historian and sociologist who demonstrates, like perhaps no other has done since, the constitutive role of ideas, values, and beliefs in the course of universal history. If *The Protestant Ethic* is a classic, it is not so much because of its main thesis—which has been contested by historians ever since it was first published in 1904 (Fischoff 1944)—but because as a prime work in the tradition of the German *Geisteswissenschaften*, it has become our finest example of interpretative sociology. His reconstruction of the ethos (or moral habitus) of the early Protestant entrepreneurs and its determinant role not only in the rise of Northern capitalism but also, more generally, in the

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[12.] Nathalie Heinich's (2006) passionate plea for "a science of morals that would not be a moral sociology" continuously invokes Weber, but in a polemical vein, to attack her opponents in the field. The distinction between the values of the analyst and those of the actors is merely analytical and breaks down as soon one analyzes the sociologist not as a scientist but as an actor engaged in a scientific field of struggle.

emergence of Western rationalism makes it a paradigmatic exemplar of and for moral sociology.

As always with Weber, the problem is not in what he does, which is exemplary, but in what he says about what he does. Between the theory and the practice, there is a significant tension and, quite often, even a blatant "T/P inconsistency" (Bhaskar 1979) that can be dialectically resolved if one sticks to the practices and develops the theory that is immanent to them.[13] It has often been remarked that Weber prescribes methodological individualism in the opening chapter of *Economy and Society*, but that in the substantive chapters of the same book, he practices a form of structuralism that is not that far removed from the accounts one finds in Marxist historiography. Similarly, on a methodological level, idealtypes (*Idealtypen*), as they are commonly constructed and used by comparative historians, are just fine; yet, the epistemological justification that Weber gives is problematic. Methodologically robust, the method of idealtypes is epistemologically weak. It smacks of nominalism and conventionalism and forgets to reconnect the categories of the analyst to the categories of the actors themselves—as if the analyst could impose his or her categories at will, analyzing, for instance, the social life of a restaurant as a theater play or, much worse, one's stay in a concentration camp as a "career." The use of irony, sarcasm, and satire of such a Goffmanian analysis is not only epistemologically problematic but also, perhaps, morally (though I would definitely would not want to police texts for their moral correctness).

If we move from epistemology to ethics—from Weber's analytics of idealtypes (*démarche ideal-typique*) to what, following Alain Caillé (2015, chap. 12)—we could call his dialectics of "idealist-types" (*démarche idéaliste-typique*), which confronts the values a society professes with the ones it institutionalizes—we find a similar split between theory and practice, but now in the form of a theory–axiological inconsistency (or T/A inconsistency). Here as well, the defense of value neutrality makes sense at a practical level (a pacifist sociologist should be able to teach a course on violence, an atheist should be able to do research on the Calvinist ethos in the Northern countries, etc.), but it can hardly be sustained reflexively and philosophically without incurring performative contradictions and self-referential paradoxes. Once again, there is a disconnect, but this time between the values of the actors (who judge all the time) and those of the analyst (who refrains from judging because s/he is a relativist and/or a decisionist). The disconnection between lay and professional morality is part of a dualistic and disjunctive approach that does not integrate but opposes facts to values.

The problem with this fact/value distinction and the cascade of dualisms that derives from it—"is/ought, reason/emotion, science/ideology,

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13. For a dialectical investigation and resolution of Theory-Practice or T/P inconsistencies, see Bhaskar (1993, chap. 2).

science/ethics, positive/normative, objectivity/subjectivity" (Sayer 2011: 30)—is a double one. It leads not only to an "expulsion of values from science" but also, though less noticed, to an "expulsion of science or reason from values" (Sayer 2011:30).[14] If moral sociology, as an explicit continuation of moral philosophy by other means, is to be possible as a field of descriptive ethics, it has to actively deconstruct the oppositions and reconnect science to values and values to reason. The expulsion of values from science through axiological cleansing is ill conceived from the very beginning. Science is anything but value-free. By this, I do not mean that science is a "free-for-all," but with (i) critical theory, (ii) phenomenology, and (iii) ordinary language philosophy, I want to argue that science, perception, and description are shot through with values. (i) As an exercise in reflexive critical sociology, I want, first, to point out with *critical theorists* (like Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas) that the value-free conception of science is itself one of the central planks of the "scientist" worldview of traditional theory ("science as ideology") and that this interventionist, pragmatic, and instrumentalist conception of knowledge ("science as technology and ideology") is typically Western and typically modern, even if it by now has become universal. The separation of science and common sense—*science et conscience*, to speak like Edgar Morin—marks an epoch and a civilization. The systematic application of science and technology modifies the ethical substance of the life-world and destroys traditional values. By cloaking the "domination" of nature and the concomitant destruction of traditional values in the neutral language of science and technology, "which has to be recognized by a Chinaman as correct" (Weber 1988b:155), the positivist can disguise his technological vision of the world as a universal one. "In affirming that he only seeks the truth for its own sake, the scientist is therefore not so much lying as pledging allegiance to the flag of truth, while saying nothing about the country for which it stands" (Gouldner 1973:65). (ii) With *phenomenologists* (like Husserl, Heidegger, and Scheler), we can show, moreover, that the "extraction" of values from the "natural worldview" and the imposition of a "naturalist worldview" to substitute it can hardly be considered neutral. The conjunction of naturalism and positivism that characterizes the scientific worldview dehumanizes the world and strips it of its *Eigenvalues*. When Weber implores the scientist not to impose his or her own values on the world, he forgets that the constitution of the world is always and already an axiological affair. His demand to remove values from science is contingent on, and comes after, his own removal of values from the life-world! Before we even perceive the world, we value it, and it is because we value it, that

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[14.] In Weber, the double expulsion of values and their reduction to mere sentiments and affects goes together with an expulsion of emotions from reason and their consequent reduction to expressions of preference or attitude. Contra Weber and his fellow emotivists, Barbalet (2001:29–61) argues that emotions can be rational and demonstrates that the operation of instrumental reason presupposes the work of "background emotions" (like satisfaction in one's work, pride in one's skills, etc.).

we can perceive it. There is no perception (*Wahrnehmung*) without valuation (*Wertnehmung*) or, to shift from Max Scheler (1980) to Axel Honneth (2005), no cognition (*Erkennung*) without recognition (*Anerkennung*) of principles, norms, and values. (iii) With *neo-Wittgensteinian philosophers* (like Winch and Louch) and *ethnomethodologists* (like Garfinkel, Jayyusi, and Anne Rawls [in this issue]), we could, finally, easily make the case that scientific facts are not only "theory-laden" but also "value-laden." The description and the valuation of facts are not two distinct operations, but they merge into each other. Values are not just regulative, they are constitutive of the very fact that is observed and described. When we describe an action as an action of a certain sort (e.g., a promise, a threat) or when we use "thick concepts" and say that it is performed "poorly" or "successfully," we do not first describe and then judge, but it is by judging them that we describe and identify them as actions of a certain sort, namely as "performances," that is as "actions that can only be identified as appropriate, felicitous, or successful" (Louch 1966:233). These are value-judgments, to be sure, but they are also descriptive. Moreover, in certain morally loaded cases, a neutral description of events is not only immoral but also descriptively inadequate. Consider the famous example of Isaiah Berlin (quoted by Bhaskar 1979) and compare the following account of what happened in Nazi Germany: "Thousands died in the Nazi concentration camps" and "Thousands were systematically exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps" (p. 75). While both statements are true, the last and most evaluative is also the best and most adequate. The problem with Weber's demoralizing position is that it does not allow one to call things and events by their name.

The doctrine of value neutrality does not only imply the expulsion of science from values but also, to quote Andrew Sayer (2011:30) once again, the "expulsion of values from reason." For Weber, values are merely subjective and arbitrary; they cannot be defended in an objective and impartial way. One can impose one's values and one's worldview by force, ruse, and persuasion but not by practical reason, rational argumentation, reference to natural law, moral sentiments, sense of justice, or a mix of these. With the death of God, all moral systems of the past (theological, teleological, deontological, consequentialist, etc.) have been crucified as well. For our stern scientist, values are like colors and tastes. One likes them or not, but one cannot argue that green is nicer than blue (as I think it is) or that rice is better than brown beans (actually, combined they are better). One can rationally argue about means, but never about ends. Ends or like Gods, Demons, and football teams—they have to be chosen.

There is no need here to rehearse Weber's well-known pathetic statements about the "polytheism of values" and the "eternal fights between the Gods." Any sociologist is supposed to know by now the relevant quotes from *Science as a Vocation* (Weber 1988c) or the objectivity article (Weber 1988b). If they have some knowledge of philosophy, they will not have any

difficulties to connect Weber's heroic, manly, and lonely stand on values to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and his flippant appeal to the Overman in the *Zarathustra*.

For Weber, any appeal to practical reason, moral justification, and normative foundation is suspicious. The struggle between the Gods cannot be moderated by Man. The idea that values can actually coexist, that relativism can be overcome or tempered, that the diversity of values and value system can be accommodated in a pluralist and multiculturalist framework, that the clash of values, like the clash of civilizations, is not inevitable, that even in modernity, there are some basic principles (like pluralism) that are universally valid, that agonism and antagonism are not the only possibilities, that we should search for unity at a higher level of abstraction, that the search for an "overlapping consensus" between encompassing doctrines should be encouraged, and that peace, not struggle, should be the final word, none of these positions are seriously entertained by Weber. If he is so tortured and bedeviled, at the end of the day, it is, no doubt, because he has trapped himself in a radical, extreme, and unsustainable position.

Like the man himself, his work is full of tensions, antinomies, and paradoxes.[15] One of the paradoxes of Weber's work is that the reader remembers exactly those passages where he takes an explicit stand and affirms his values. Without his moral judgments, his work would definitely be more boring—as boring and soporific, perhaps, as some of his more encyclopedic entries in *Economy and Society*. Another, more perverse paradox is that Weber does not really mean what he says. He does plead for a neutral science; deep down, though, he is against it. A gray, bureaucratic science would only contribute to the "petrification of the spirit" he deplores and place one more bar in the iron-cage. If he makes prophesies, it is because he wants them to be refuted. His self-refuting antiprophetic prophecies are part of a "heuristics of fear." The last paradox is that by arguing against the intermingling of fact and values, Weber himself commits the "naturalistic fallacy" and gets trapped into one more performative contradiction.[16] Against "Hume's law," according to which one cannot derive ought from is, values from facts, imperatives from descriptions, the naturalistic fallacy he uses as the premise of an argument itself commits the fallacy. Instead of being continuously trapped in the strings of theory/practice, theory/theory,

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15. A reviewer suggests that Weber's paradoxes are performative—rhetorical acts of communication, designed to elicit an earnest response from the audience. From this perspective, the irony is not in the eye of the beholder, but in the mouth of the speaker. It does not aim to undercut the message, but paradoxically to bring it home. I have no problem with Weber's irony; rather, my problem is with his philosophical position. As I have argued elsewhere (Vandenberghe 2005), I am simply not convinced that his irrationalism, relativism, and decisionism offer a sustainable rationale for axiological neutrality.

16. A contradiction is performative when it occurs not between enunciations but between the enunciation and the enunciator. Typical examples are: "I was on the boat, the boat sank, no one survived." Also, "I affirm in an axiologically neutral way that one has to be axiologically neutral."

and practice/practice inconsistencies, would it not be better to shelve value neutrality? Not to transform moral sociology into political partisanship, for sure, but to develop a better, more consistent, and less-tortured moral sociology. To do moral sociology better not by arbitrarily disconnecting it from, but by actively reconnecting it to, its origins in practical and moral philosophy.

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