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The Sociology of Morality

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Handbook of The Sociology of Morality

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Introduction: The Return of the Moral

In assembling the very first *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, Steven Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey have not only demonstrated remarkable intellectual vision, but also rendered a great service to the social sciences and to all those interested in broader normative and empirical thinking about morality and the state of societies. Here is why:

(1) The educated public has always been eager to learn about and reflect upon the moral fabric of their communities. Readers have often turned to the interpretive social sciences to inform their thinking – witness the popularity of books such as *The Lonely Crowd* and *Habits of the Heart,* two of the sociological best sellers of the last 50 years. They are now increasingly turning to popular books from psychology and philosophy to reflect on broad moral issues. These books often consider how individuals respond to ethical problems that are abstracted from their social context – e.g., the famous "trolley" dilemma. The sociological voice has been less present in these conversations than desirable. More than establishing disciplinary presence is at stake. Indeed, the various fields offer different ways of framing questions – a focus on an ahistorical human nature, boot strapping and individual will power, or on institutions and cultural repertoires (bolstering greater security and recognition). These frames have huge consequences for the thinking of policy makers and the general public about how to address social problems. Sociologists need to be at the table in order to shape conversations about how to create more successful societies – including more moral (fairer, less exploitative, more inclusive) ones.

(2) Hitlin and Vaisey recognized the need to orchestrate a broader substantive conversation within our discipline among experts of morality. Thus they had the foresight to create a much needed "shared context of recognition," with the goal of facilitating disciplinary exchange. They have brought together a wide range of scholars who vary in their theoretical approach to the study of morality (favoring the phenomenological, functionalist, rational choice, etc), their preferred method (as they are inspired by grounded theory, inductive or deductive approaches, idiographic or nomothetic ones, and so forth), the research techniques they favor (experimental, interview or survey based, ethnographic, historical, etc.), the analytical level they privilege (micro, meso, macro), and the disciplines and subfields with which they are in conversation (social psychology, criminology, philosophy, cultural sociology, religion, etc.). But this pluralism of approach goes even further: contributors belong to various academic generations. While some came of "academic age" at a time when Harvard's

> Department of Social Relations remained an important point of reference in the social sciences at large (e.g., Teriakyian), many received their PhD only recently and are generally energizing (not to mention energetic) voices in the sociological study of morality. Because of this generational diversity, the new *Handbook for the Sociology of Morality* offers a window into current scholarship which reflects changes in taste and fashion over several decades, as well as a more or less implicit intergenerational dialogue.

But one might ponder: What does sociology bring to the table when it comes to the study of morality?

The centrality of morality to the sociological agenda is not debatable and remains remarkably strong, as this volume demonstrates. Not only was it a concern of our sociological forefathers – most predominantly Durkheim – but it continues to attract considerable interest, as various waves of neo-Durkheimians succeed one another, as exemplified by the work of Mary Douglas, Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, Jeffrey Alexander, John Evans, Gabriel Abend, Mary Blair Loy, Paul Lichterman, and many others. Concern for morality is also central to scholarship inspired by research on small-group study as well as the phenomenological and the symbolic interaction traditions (witness the lasting influence of Berger and Luckman, the work of Anne Rawls, Gary Alan Fine, Robert Jackall, Boltanski and Thevenot, and others). Finally, the literature on morality continues to refract the influence of communitarian thinking and other conversations inspired by philosophy (e.g., in the work of Alan Wolfe and Craig Calhoun, among others).

Although psychologists have more often considered moral universalism (but see signal contributions in cultural psychology such as those of Hazel Markus and Richard Shweder), sociologists have made crucial contributions to the study of the diversity of morality across segments of various populations. They have documented moral visions shared by co-nationals, but also as it is instantiated in working class cultures, in variously gendered cultures, in religious cultures, and so forth. They have shown that individuals draw on available cultural repertoires to develop lives that they consider meaningful, to consider whether they are treating their partners, children, and coworkers fairly, as well as broader societal issues having to do with bioethics, abortion, homosexuality, bank bailouts, unemployment, and diversity – to consider what we owe to ourselves and others. We have also considered the implications of boundary work for understanding the causes for poverty, the culture of the poor, and attitudes toward the poor, including views concerning our responsibilities toward them.

But equally importantly, the sociology of morality has been central to our understanding of fundamental social processes, such as that of identity and group formation. We cannot understand deviance, scape goating, and group hierarchies without factoring in the cultural and often moral meanings on which they are predicated. The study of social movements generally requires a consideration of the moral causes to which they are committed, as does the study of politics, conflict, and self-formation. Moreover, morality is also central to the study of collective memory, reputations, group boundaries, and valuation processes, as exemplified in the work of Ezra Zuckerman, Bruce Carruthers, Wendy Espeland, Carol Heimer, Kieran Healy, Marion Fourcade, Mitchell Stevens, Viviana Zelizer, and others. As such, the study of morality remains at the very center of the sociological enterprise. And there is no sign of its importance diminishing.

Cultural sociology has had a particularly important role in identifying an intermediary analytical plane between traditional social psychology and the more structural dimensions of

social life. To mention only a few examples, the work of Sharon Hays alerts gender researchers that available cultural repertoires form a crucial dimension for understanding gender inequality. Indeed, an understanding of cultural repertoires is an essential complement to labor market research on gender inequality, to symbolic interaction-derived work a la Arlie Hochschild, and to more social psychological work on biases, stereotypes and implicit association. The task of disentangling these analytical levels is far from complete, and much remains to be done in terms of raising awareness of the centrality of cultural repertoires as intermediary analytical levels essential, yet absent, in many causal models.

A complementary research agenda, also tied to the growth of cultural sociology and spreading rapidly, is the study of alternative and competing concepts of worth. Boundary work generated by intra and inter-individual conversations feeds into wider social and symbolic boundaries, into the boundaries drawn toward (for instance) the poor and immigrants, and has implications for policies aimed at dealing with poverty or other social issues, as illustrated in this volume by the paper by Steensland and others. Thus normativity and politics are deeply intertwined; the task of untangling these relationships and of understanding role of meaning making (and morality in particular) in political transformation and reproduction falls to us.

Against the background of such a proliferation of approaches and empirical research, it is clear that we stand to benefit enormously from the timely publication of this *Handbook*. By offering such a broad umbrella, Hitlin and Vaisey are sure to facilitate intellectual exchanges in very palpable ways and to contribute in defining an important research frontier ahead. May this *Handbook* find the readers it deserves.

Michèle Lamont

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Table of Contents

Introduction: The Return of the Moral . . . . **v**
Michèle Lamont

Contributors . . . . **ix**

Part I. Sociological Perspectives on Morality („What Is It"?) **1**

Chapter 1. Back to the Future **3**
Steven Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey

Chapter 2. The Cognitive Approach to Morality **15**
Raymond Boudon

Chapter 3. Four Concepts of Morality **35**
Christopher Powell

Chapter 4. Adumbrations of a Sociology of Morality in the Work of Parsons, Simmel, and Merton **57**
Donald N. Levine

Chapter 5. The (Im)morality of War **73**
Edward A. Tiryakian

Chapter 6. Social Order as Moral Order **95**
Anne Warfield Rawls

Part II. Sociological Contexts ("Where Does It Come From?") **123**

Chapter 7. Natural Selection and the Evolution of Morality in Human Societies **125**
Jonathan H. Turner

Chapter 8. The Sacred and the Profane in the Marketplace **147**
Frederick F. Wherry

Chapter 9. **Class and Morality** 163
Andrew Sayer

Chapter 10. **The Unstable Alliance of Law and Morality** 179
Carol A. Heimer

Chapter 11. **Morality in Organizations** 203
Robert Jackall

Chapter 12. **Explaining Crime as Moral Actions** 211
Per-Olof H. Wikström

Chapter 13. **What Does God Require? Understanding Religious Context and Morality** 241
Christopher D. Bader and Roger Finke

Chapter 14. **The Duality of American Moral Culture** 255
Wayne Baker

Chapter 15. **Education and the Culture Wars** 275
Jeffrey S. Dill and James Davison Hunter

Chapter 16. **The Creation and Establishment of Moral Vocabularies** 293
Brian M. Lowe

Part III. Morality in Action ("How Does It Work?") 313

Chapter 17. **The Trouble with Invisible Men** 315
Robb Willer, Matthew Feinberg, Kyle Irwin, Michael Schultz, and Brent Simpson

Chapter 18. **The Justice/Morality Link** 331
Karen A. Hegtvedt and Heather L. Scheuerman

Chapter 19. **Toward an Integrated Science of Morality** 361
Rengin Firat and Chad Michael McPherson

Chapter 20. **The Social Psychology of the Moral Identity** 385
Jan E. Stets

Chapter 21. **Morality and Mind-Body Connections** 411
Gabriel Ignatow

Chapter 22. **Moral Power** 425
Jal Mehta and Christopher Winship

Chapter 23. Moral Dimensions of the Work–Family Nexus **439**
Mary Blair-Loy

Chapter 24. Moral Classification and Social Policy **455**
Brian Steensland

Chapter 25. The Moral Construction of Risk **469**
Leslie T. Roth

Chapter 26. Moral Discourse in Economic Contexts **485**
Rebekah P. Massengill and Amy Reynolds

Chapter 27. Morality in the Social Interactional and Discursive World of Everyday Life **503**
Jason J. Turowetz and Douglas W. Maynard

Part IV. Future Directions for Sociological Science **527**

Chapter 28. Morality, Modernity, and World Society **529**
Sabine Frerichs and Richard Münch

Chapter 29. The Social Construction of Morality? **549**
Steven Lukes

Chapter 30. What's New and What's Old about the New Sociology of Morality **561**
Gabriel Abend

Subject Index **585**

Part I
Sociological Perspectives on Morality ("What Is It"?)

CHAPTER 1

Back to the Future

Reviving the Sociology of Morality

STEVEN HITLIN AND STEPHEN VAISEY

If we could travel back in time and speak with Emile Durkheim or Max Weber, they might be puzzled by this handbook, with its goal to renew "the sociology of morality." "Can there be," we imagine them asking, "a sociology that is *not* a sociology of morality?" Durkheim, after all, once claimed that

> [i]f there is one fact that history has irrefutably demonstrated, it is that the morality of each people is directly related to the social structure of the people practicing it. . .The connection is so intimate that, given the general character of the morality observed in a given society . . . one can infer the nature of that society, the elements of its structure and the way it is organized (1961 [1925]:87)

Weber, from a different angle, also saw moral ("value-rational") action as a vital force in social life and argued that the analysis of such action was an integral part of the sociological method (1978:24–26). He described his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as a study of "the motives of moral action" (Weber 2003:231; see also Campbell 2006). For all their differences, Durkheim and Weber – along with many other classical theorists – would have considered the separation of the moral from the social unthinkable.

From our perch in the 21st century, however, it is clear that sociologists are capable of neglecting morality. Indeed, our discipline has successfully neglected it for some time (see Calhoun 1991, Campbell 2006, Lukes 1973, Smith 2003, Stivers 1996). This realization might be troubling under any circumstances, but it is especially disconcerting given the explosion of interest in morality happening in law (e.g., Sunstein 2004), neuroscience (e.g., Greene et al. 2004), philosophy (e.g., Knobe and Leiter 2007), and psychology (e.g., Haidt 2001, Hauser 2006). Researchers in these fields have even started to recognize that they need to think more deeply about the social dimensions of morality (e.g., Haidt and Graham 2009, Turiel 2002). Unfortunately, after neglecting morality for decades, we have too little systematic guidance in sociology to provide our peers.

How did sociology – a discipline in which cutting-edge research must begin by tipping its hat to the "founding fathers" – let one of its most important intellectual inheritances fall into such disrepair (see chapters in this volume by Boudon, Levine, Powell, and Tiryakian)? Sociology's gradual disengagement from morality is likely due to a wide range of factors,

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including political apprehension (Patterson 2002, Lamont and Small 2008), intellectual fashion (Campbell 1996) and methodological suspicion (Spates 1983, Vaisey 2009). Perhaps a future intellectual history of the discipline will address this question more thoroughly. But although we touch briefly on the past to provide necessary context, our goal for this chapter is to focus on the present and future of the sociology of morality. We have methodological and theoretical tools at our disposal today that Weber and Durkheim did not, and we hope to help stimulate their application to the oldest of questions about the human experience.

PERSISTENT OBSTACLES TO A SOCIOLOGY OF MORALITY

In this section, we summarize several ongoing challenges that can help explain why contemporary sociologists have not figured more centrally in the past decade's "morality renaissance". There are undoubtedly more reasons than what we consider here, but we outline what we see as key institutional and intellectual barriers to a fuller sociological engagement with the study of morality. As the existence of this handbook attests, sociologists are beginning to overcome these barriers, but a clearer and more accessible development of these ideas must continue if we are to influence this rapidly growing interdisciplinary conversation. Although we have learned – and continue to learn – a great deal about morality from the cognitive and behavioral sciences, many scholars are now beginning to realize that we cannot learn everything we want to know about morality using fMRI machines. Without due consideration of the social and cultural dimensions of human morality, our collective understanding of the subject will remain exceedingly limited.

Disciplinary Fragmentation

Classical sociology's broad focus on the complex interplay between social structures, historical shifts, moral codes, and value-rational action eventually yielded to a system of subdisciplinary specialization that made such intellectual breadth difficult to maintain. Rich – but vague – notions like "moral order" were necessarily subdivided into terms more tractable for empirical research. Though these divisions have deep historical and institutional origins, our primary concern is with their contemporary consequences. Today, those who study norms (e.g., Willer et al. 2009), values (e.g., Hitlin and Piliavin 2004, Baker 2005), codes (e.g., Lamont 1992), and "interaction orders" (Rawls 1987, Fine and Fields 2008) find themselves located far from one another in sociological research networks. Subdisciplines inevitably developed their own – occasionally parallel – approaches to particular dimensions of moral life. For example, many scholars now focus on the development of values, but they work in different domains, including (among others) the intergenerational transmission of attitudes (e.g., Glass et al. 1986), the shaping of religious values (e.g., Starks and Robinson 2007), cultural notions of specific values (e.g., Finke and Adamczyk 2008), or institutional influences on values (e.g., Jackall 1988). Although some big-picture, morally relevant concepts managed to retain their names, they eventually came to mean different things to different subfields. For example, depending on one's specialty, "identity" might refer to anything from an individual's role set (Stryker and Burke 2000) to a domain of postmodern politicking in which groups "struggle to self-name, self-characterize, and claim social prerogative" (Cerulo 1997:393).

As a result of this disciplinary fragmentation and the sheer cognitive difficulty (and lack of institutional rewards) for ranging too far from one's "home" area of research, most scholars rarely build connections to other lines of research even if doing so would greatly enrich their own work. Students of value development in children, for instance, rarely reference those who focus on the existence of conflicting cultural codes. Those who investigate cross-national variation in moral worldviews rarely engage with theorists exploring the role of moral emotions in maintaining social order. Scholars of the self too seldom consider vast literatures about contextual influences on moral behavior. And those who delve into the nuances of various "moral repertoires" hardly ever draw on relevant social psychological research on emotion, justice, or cooperation. What has been missing is a sense of common cause among scholars who appear on the surface to be studying vastly different phenomena but whose specialties are actually "cousins" with a high degree of common intellectual ancestry. Unlike psychologists and philosophers, who maintain some shared reference points via the institutionalized subfields of moral psychology and moral philosophy, sociologists who are interested in morality have few places to congregate that are explicitly defined by that interest. Taken together, the breadth of the moral domain coupled with the eclectic character of sociology points toward the possibility of a rich and varied empirical engagement. But without a shared context of recognition, our attempts at synthesis must remain hopelessly fractured and underappreciated. This handbook is one step toward developing mutual recognition. But much more institutional work remains to be done.

Incompatible Definitions of Morality

Even when sociologists in diverse subfields *have* recognized their common concern with morality, they have not always understood the term in the same way. This continues to lead to misunderstandings. The adjective "moral" seems to have two main definitions applicable to academic research:

> (1) "relating to human character or behaviour considered as good or bad . . . [or] the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, in relation to the actions, desires, or character of responsible human beings"; and
> (2) "good, virtuous; conforming to standards of morality" ("Moral," *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://dictionary.oed.com)

"Moral" is thus used both to denote a domain where concepts like good and bad, right and wrong are relevant, and to evaluate the status of a particular action or practice in that domain. For example, since some groups hold female genital mutilation to be an integral part of the "good life" while others see it as a horrible violation of rights, one might reasonably refer to it as a "moral" practice using the first definition's sense of "morally relevant" (see e.g., Shweder 2003, chapter 4). On the other hand, those who condemn the act claim that the practice is *immoral* (consistent with the second definition) because it violates "standards of morality," usually meaning Kantian standards about harm, rights, and fair treatment (see e.g., Turiel 2002).

Airtight distinctions are impossible, but cultural and historical sociologists tend to gravitate toward the first definition, exploring temporal and social variation in the understandings of

obligation, value, and worth (Baker 2005, Calhoun 1991, Inglehart and Baker 2000, Lamont 1992, Lamont et al. 1996, Rawls 1987) while social psychologists generally follow the second definition, using "moral" as a synonym for "altruistic" or "prosocial" (Piliavin and Charng 1990, Schwalbe 1991, Stets and Carter 2006, Simpson and Willer 2008). This parallels the divide in moral psychology between methodological relativists like Richard Shweder and Jon Haidt, for whom moral variation is *qualitative* (i.e., reflects different standards) and neo-Kantians like Lawrence Kohlberg and Eliot Turiel, for whom moral variation is *quantitative* (i.e., corresponds more or less well to substantive or procedural standards of ethical conduct). Of course, this terminological confusion also causes difficulties for moral psychology, including – but not limited to – various iterations of the moral/conventional debate (e.g., Kelley et al. 2003, Nado et al. 2009, Turiel 2002, 2006). In sociology, however, the absence of "centripetal" institutional forces makes it vital for would-be sociologists of morality to address definitional issues in a satisfactory fashion. For our purposes, the interesting questions seem less about the truth of any particular moral code and more about (a) determining the proper relationship between innate moral capacities and the moral variation observed within and between societies (e.g., Hauser 2006, Turner this volume); (b) empirically analyzing the contours of moral variation within and between societies; and (c) uncovering the social antecedents of particular moral frameworks and their social and behavioral consequences.

An Ambivalent Relationship to the Normative

Although social psychologists and sociologists of religion routinely use terms like norms and values in their work, most cultural sociologists strongly reject them (Smith 2003, Vaisey 2009, 2010). This is not the place for the full story of cultural sociology's repudiation of formerly central terms, but the view that relying on norms and values to explain behavior is "dated and simplistic" is widespread among today's cultural sociologists (Small 2002:5–6, see also Swidler 2001, Harding 2007, Lamont and Small 2008, Wilson 2009). The new approach does not regard culture as a normative force, but rather as a cognitive "toolkit" or "repertoire" made up of "rule-like structures" that serve as "resources that can be put to strategic use" (DiMaggio 1997:265). Some scholars have offered intellectual justifications for this shift away from the normative (e.g., Collins 1981, Swidler 1986, 2001, Lamont and Small 2008), although others have argued that it can be explained at least partially by cultural sociologists' reluctance to "blame the victim," as some were accused of doing in the political backlash against "culture of poverty" researchers in the late 1960s (Patterson 2002, Vaisey 2010). Whatever the reason may be, most cultural sociologists now scrupulously segregate the "normative" from the "cognitive," neglecting the former and focusing exclusively on the latter (see Small 2002:30, Young 2004:19, Harding 2007:352–353, Lamont and Small 2008:80, Wilson 2009:17).

Because cultural sociologists possess conceptual and methodological expertise vital to the sociological study of moral life, their abdication of the normative has been – and continues to be – a significant stumbling block for a nascent sociology of morality. Fortunately, there is evidence – in this volume and elsewhere – that cultural sociologists are relearning that "what is" and "what ought to be" cannot really be separated when it comes to understanding the role that culture plays in people's judgments (e.g., Boudon, this volume, Martin and Desmond 2010, Vaisey 2010, see also Geertz 1957:437, Shweder 1992). If this trend continues, it will help contribute to a more robust sociology of morality. There is much to be gained by building

bridges between moral psychologists, who use laboratory research to hone detailed models of the interplay between cognition, emotion, and situations, and cultural sociologists, who specialize in decoding the "real world" patterns of shared meaning that comprise the content of so much "individual" cognition. We explicate this in the next section.

Wariness of Biology and Psychology

The final obstacle we suggest here is the "Durkheimian" tendency for sociologists to be wary of biology and psychology.[1] Given the ubiquity of "personality" and "genes" as folk explanations in Western culture, sociologists might be forgiven for their tendency to react with "minimization and denial" to biological and psychological accounts of social phenomena (Freese 2008:S5). However understandable such reactions may be, aversion to research in these fields has made it less likely that sociologists would be influenced by the developments in the cognitive and neurosciences that have been at the heart of morality's resurgence as a focus of inquiry (e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong 2008). Unfortunately, many sociologists exaggerate the "individualism" of psychological work that incorporates biological factors, when in fact, exemplars of this tradition go to great extent to discuss the interplay of genetic predispositions and environments (e.g., Caspi et al. 1998, Moffitt et al. 2002). The widespread suspicion of the biological and cognitive sciences helps explain sociology's lack of engagement with interdisciplinary dialogue about morality, runs the risk of suggesting "oversocialized" models of human development (e.g., Wrong 1961), and leaves the discussion of environmental factors in the hands of scholars less suited to describe, theorize, and measure them. Regardless of one's particular position on the proper role of biology and cognition in the study of morality, the fact is that – rightly or wrongly – this is where much of the recent action is. There is therefore little to be gained by facile denials (destined in any case for "domestic consumption") and much to be gained by a sustained – and critical – empirical engagement with biologically informed research on morality.

Fortunately, there are signs that this hostility is fading. While many sociologists are too quick to resist models of morality that are informed by biology and psychology, contemporary work at the boundaries of social, behavioral, and biological sciences is becoming more nuanced. Researchers are growing more and more interested in the interplay between biological potentialities, individual differences, and micro and macrodynamics of the social environment (e.g., Shanahan and Hofer 2005, Freese 2008, Adkins and Vaisey 2009, Turkheimer et al. 2003). More specifically, many biologically and cognitively influenced models of morality are not hostile to social factors but are explicitly designed to incorporate them (e.g., Haidt and Graham 2009, Oishi et al. 2009). As we mentioned above, researchers from other fields lack the training and experience needed to theorize and measure social factors effectively. Though we acknowledge a diversity of views on this subject, we believe that sociological contributions in this area have primarily been held back by sociologists themselves. Overcoming

[1] Weber, by contrast, was "in general positive toward psychology and interested in its findings" and regarded "psychophysical" characteristics as potential elements of which "account must be taken" even though they were not the focus of sociological inquiry per se (Swedberg 2005:217).

our in-group prejudice against biological and psychological factors will not lead to a rampant reductionism and the demise of our discipline, but will contribute to a more realistic integration of social, psychological, and biological explanations of moral phenomena. Not only will such bridging lead to the development of more realistic models, but it may also help us to export sociological insights more effectively to our disciplinary cousins. But this can only happen to the extent we demonstrate that we have substantive contributions to make and are willing to listen and learn. No one wants to talk with someone who continually insists on changing the subject

TOWARD A "SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE" ON MORALITY

This handbook is an attempt to address these obstacles, though it is necessarily more successful with some than others. Its main purpose is to bring together a wide range of sociological work on morality in the hope of surmounting some of the effects of disciplinary fragmentation; in one volume we bring together empirical social psychologists, macrosociological theorists, and experts in a wide range of substantive sociological subfields. If we are successful, it will be one step toward establishing a stronger collective identity. We hope to create a mini-movement that will inspire taking a step beyond one's typical self-identification and becoming part of the sociology of morality. We also hope that the proximity of so many varied scholars and topics stimulates easy – but substantive – engagement with topics outside of readers' typical purview. This collection demonstrates the wide reach – methodically, topically, and theoretically – of the discipline of sociology. Perhaps this collection serves as a useful starting point for morality scholars from other disciplines, as well, to enter into interdisciplinary dialogue.

The other issues we identified – definitional confusion, ambivalence about the normative, and our unwarranted wariness of biology and psychology – receive a more uneven treatment as these issues remain to be worked out by the members of our discipline. Some chapters address one or more of these issues, and it is only through continual collisions between scholars and research programs that we might approach any sort of consensus, if such a consensus is possible. It may be that the moral aspects of institutions are qualitatively different from the moral concerns surrounding nation-states, the polity, or individual behavior. (Or, more pragmatically, it may simply not be *useful* to treat these concerns as essentially unified.) But even though sociology cannot provide a unified corrective to the limitations of psychological or other research on morality, this volume offers a number of possibilities for future interdisciplinary research.

Although the bridge-building we envision is in its initial stages, we can draw on the contributions to this handbook to provide a preliminary answer to the question, "What is a *sociological* approach to morality?" Does this handbook lead to a better sense of our discipline's *distinctive* contribution to the science of the moral? If we wanted to evade the question, we might say that a sociological approach to morality is neither more nor less than the sum of the approaches taken by the individual papers in this volume. Given the disparate treatments, approaches, theoretical traditions, and empirical concerns, allowing scholars to develop and utilize their own terminology, presuppositions, and analyses, and simply calling it all "the sociology of morality" might be the safest way to go. But we prefer to take up the challenge of characterizing a nascent sociological approach to morality in more general terms. At the risk of losing some of the nuances of each contribution, we highlight three themes that cross-cut

the papers in this volume: (1) attention to social structures, resources, and power; (2) a focus on historically and socially patterned complexes of meaning; and (3) an emphasis on studying moral judgment, action, and discourse in ecologically valid contexts.

With the possible exceptions of those in the concluding section by Abend, Frerichs, and Munch and Lukes, few of the chapters in this handbook treat all of these themes simultaneously; nevertheless, they represent three key aspects of the emerging "sociology of morality." These analytic emphases are certainly compatible with the psychological, biological, and economic approaches to morality that have recently drawn so much attention. And they can help rectify the simplistic treatments – or omissions – of the "social" that characterize these approaches. As should be evident by now, we find much of value in the research on morality conducted in other fields. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling these widely noted findings – that brains that are wired to draw moral distinctions, to weigh costs and benefits, and to process the cognitions and emotions that influence moral judgment and behavior – do not exist in and did not develop in a vacuum. Humans are fundamentally social creatures and human interaction is fundamentally shaped by moral concerns (see Turowetz and Maynard, and Rawls, this volume). Our development as members of primary groups and larger collectivities inevitably shapes our reasoning and reactions, our judgments and embodied senses of "proper" and "taboo." Religion, education, language, social movements, and public policy all set the backdrop for the formation of a human person as they go about their lives. As our contributors point out, this inextricably social element of human life affect evolutionary pressures on our brains and fundamental interactional properties, and shape the "self-evidently true" moral codes that guide social action across a series of substantive life-domains. We briefly consider the three themes we have identified and discuss their importance for the interdisciplinary study of morality.

Social Structures, Resources, and Power

Social structure refers to enduring patterns of relationships among members of a society, including the formal and informal mechanisms through which people's needs are addressed (e.g., education, health, reproduction). Within a given society, individuals are embedded in social structures that organize their lives, ranging from religious communities, educational systems, government, medical systems, family structures, and (more abstractly) social classes. These patterns of resource possession, access, and usage locate members in various in-groups and out-groups and situate them on a number of horizontal and vertical axes of distinction. Human development occurs simultaneously across all of these structures, each of which has the capacity to influence moral thinking in a variety of ways.

At the micro level, differential access to resources is a crucial dimension of moral formation because it creates the bounds within which people come to imagine what a "good life" looks like and to understand their relationship to members of other groups in pursuing that life (Sayer 2005 and this volume). A person is not simply a "decider," doing his or her best to make isolated moral choices according to reasonable rules or idiosyncratic intuitions; each person is also a member of many groups and a player of many roles. One's position in social space provides a vantage point from which allies and rivals, role models and cautionary tales, all play a role in shaping the salience of particular kinds of moral judgment over others (e.g., Lamont 1992).

At the macro level, not all groups or actors possess the same degree of power to promote their version of "good life" or "good society." Though sociologists differ in how much influence they attribute to powerful actors, they agree that historical shifts, government action, social movement advocacy, and other forms of contested collective action influence perceptions about right and wrong, good and bad. Part 2 of this handbook is largely focused on these sorts of patterned influence, though certainly many more chapters necessarily offer hints about these processes (see the chapters by Sayer, Heimer, Jackall, Wikstrom, Bader and Finke, Baker, Steensland, Roth, and Massengill and Reynolds.)

Complexes of Moral Meanings

"Culture" – a term usually used as a synonym for "society" or "nation" in psychology (Cohen 2009) – has a more specific meaning in sociology. The term is generally used to refer to a "complex of meaning" (Weber 1978:9) that may or may not be identified with membership in a well defined group. Complexes of meaning, though stored and processed in individual bodies, are not primarily about individual cognition. Like knowledge of one's native language (which is also "stored" within individuals), culture is composed of durable patterns of meaning that emerge socially and are acquired experientially. The chapters by Baker and Dill and Hunter in this volume show, for example, that "progressivist" and "orthodox" moral cultures – though neither monolithic nor perfectly coherent – serve to structure beliefs and attitudes in disparate domains like law, education, religion, science, and aesthetics. This cultural dimension of morality means that people's judgments in one domain are at least loosely coupled to judgments in other domains, providing any particular position a degree of moral-cultural "baggage" that can spill over into other areas of life.

Because moral judgments cohere to some extent into cultural meaning complexes, they play at least three roles in structuring moral life that are not typically addressed in more biological or psychological accounts. First, shared moral meanings can serve as a basis for group solidarity, bringing people together in ways that can lead to collective action and identification (see Winship and Mehta, this volume). Second, moral meanings can also serve as a mechanism of exclusion when the negative side of a complex of moral meaning is used to condemn out-groups (e.g., Lamont 1992). Finally, moral meanings are used to create narrative coherence around an *individual's* life, such that seemingly discrete decisions can sometimes take on larger significance because of their implications about what kind of person one is becoming (see Smith 2003, Vaisey 2008a, b). Studying these complexes of meaning across one or more societies and across time is more challenging and "messy" than treating moral judgments and decisions one by one. Nevertheless, such investigations are central to the sociological approach to morality and, we suggest, should be part of any science of morality that seeks to understand real-life moral concerns.

Ecological Validity

The final aspect of sociology's distinctive contribution is that it involves a higher degree of attention to ecological validity than is typical of related work in psychology, philosophy, or

neuroscience. Certainly, psychological and neurological literatures are replete with improvements in measurement of moral functioning, reasoning, emotion, and (to some extent) behavior (see Firat and McPherson's chapter for an introduction and Ignatow's chapter for a sociological version). But the exciting and rigorous work that occurs in psychological laboratories isolates processes that sociologists have often attempted to study in more realistic contexts. Even laboratory work can be improved by distinctively sociological approaches to experimentation that capture more aspects of "real" social relationships and interactions (see the chapters by Stets, Hegdvedt and Scheuerman, and Willer and colleagues).

Sociology's main contribution in this vein is the determination to investigate moral phenomena "in the wild" as far as possible. Focusing on a single individual's moral mind isolated from context, networks, interaction partners, history, social location, and self-understandings, is indeed the study of something – perhaps even something important – but it cannot claim to be the study of morality. Sociological theories of morality and supporting research suggest that moral judgments are rarely dependent on abstract understandings about the nature of right and wrong, but rather on one's own standpoint in the social world (Taylor 1989, Smith 2003) and on the ways these standpoints are implicated in particular situations. What is "right" at home might not be "right" at work. Moral commitments and standards are not solely personal but exist within the context of recurrent situations, identities, and relationships one has developed (e.g., Hitlin 2008). Much of the psychological work on moral development implicates the famous Trolley Problem, but many of the moral dilemmas people face in their real lives are not about the life or death of imagined others (see Blair-Loy this volume for one important example). Life involves real conflicts and trade-offs that have moral elements but that rarely involve the extremes of immediate physical or psychological harm. This does not mean that we advocate closing down lines of inquiry where they remain productive, but an ecologically valid sociology of morality can contribute much to understanding how moral phenomena work in day-to-day life.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The goal of this handbook is to provide an institutional resource and a focus for the development of a common identity that we hope will contribute to the revival of the "sociology of morality." More generally, our objective is to aid sociology's contribution to the growing interdisciplinary dialogue around moral phenomena. This is not, however, merely because we want to avoid being left out, but rather because we believe we have something vital to add to the conversation.

We trust that readers both inside and outside sociology will take us at our word and not consider this an attempt at the discipline's final word on "the sociology of morality," much less on morality in general. Reviving and revising our intellectual inheritance in the domain of morality will take time and effort well beyond what any single book or collection of papers could achieve. This handbook's need is only to provide a rallying point for other sociologists who will join us in going well beyond what we have accomplished here. Though we are confident that the papers in this handbook provide an adequate "down payment" on sociology's potential contribution to the study of morality – including attention to resources and power, consideration of cultural meanings, and a commitment to ecological validity – future work that overcomes more fully the obstacles outlined above will have an even greater impact. More than anything, we simply need to roll up our sleeves and engage with our colleagues

from other fields, challenging, confirming, and complementing their models as warranted by research not yet conducted.

We cannot, of course, go back in time and discover exactly what Durkheim, Weber, or other classical theorists might have said about our attempt to revive the sociology of morality. However, we do know that morality was once central to sociology and that somehow over the past half-century we have, as Calhoun puts it, become "unmusical" in this domain (Calhoun 1991:232). We hope that this collection of papers will be the start of a much needed tuning up; if so, perhaps the sociology of morality will once again become something worth listening to.

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CHAPTER 2

The Cognitive Approach to Morality

RAYMOND BOUDON

Many contemporary social scientists tend to reduce rationality to its instrumental form and ignore or even disqualify the notion coined by Max Weber of *Wertrationalität*. In this chapter, I propose a formal definition and defense of the notion of *value rationality* or *axiological rationality*, as I prefer to translate the notion of *Wertrationalität*. Axiological rationality may be defined as the type of rationality grounding value statements and value feelings, and their species, moral and prescriptive statements and feelings. But what does *axiological rationality* mean? I will claim that this notion can be given a clear analytical definition, that it labels and encapsulates a powerful theory that explains many sociological data on morality and more generally on axiological feelings and also that it was more or less implicitly used, not only by Max Weber in his empirical analyses, but also by many other sociologists before and after him. In a word, starting from Weber's notion, I will try to show that many powerful sociological analyses of moral feelings use more or less implicitly a *cognitive approach*.

SOCIOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY ON MORAL FEELINGS

Moral, normative and generally axiological feelings—i.e., the feelings that *X is good*, *legitimate*, etc.—are one of the most important social phenomena and of the least mastered scientifically. The unsatisfactory state of the social scientific art on this topic is partly due to the fact that the available theories of axiological feelings produced by philosophy are highly influential among social scientists, though as a result of the division of labor in the human sciences they often fail to see it. Now, while these philosophical theories are grounded on powerful ideas, they cannot be accepted literally by sociologists. Major examples illustrate this point.

1. Kant's *theory of practical reason* maintains that an action is good if it rests on maxims that all would accept, as *never do something that you would not like to be done to you*. From his theory Kant drew controversial consequences, as that lying is always bad. This statement is contradicted by many observations though, as the fact that most people would normally consider that it is good for a war prisoner to lie when an investigation officer asks him to deliver the names of his companions of arms. Benjamin Constant, the French political theorist of the 19th century, already raised this objection. But the main sociological objection to Kant's theory is that it fails to explain

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many *ought-feelings*, as the fact that people accept inequalities in some circumstances and not in others or the consensus on the point that some occupations should receive higher salaries than others.

2. *The utilitarian theory* developed from Bentham and earlier La Rochefoucauld to modern writers as Harsanyi (1955) maintains that individuals are guided by the principle of maximizing the differences between positive and negative outcomes, to them, of their actions. This theory is contradicted by the fact that people can behave altruistically, as shown by plain observation as well as by the findings from experiments as the *ultimatum game*. The latter shows that in situations where people could impose an unequal sharing of an amount of money to their own advantage many of them opt for an equitable sharing. The shortcomings of the utilitarian approach to morality led social scientists as Sen (2002) to propose to correct it by taking the Kantian approach into consideration.
3. Rawls' (1971) *theory of justice as fairness* has a more limited scope but has attracted a great deal of attention. It maintains notably that we have the feeling that some institution or state of affairs is good if it has the effect of making the situation of the worse-off in a society as good as possible. Thus, the level of inequality between salaries in a firm is good if it can be shown that making it lower would affect negatively the activity of the firm and hence threaten the worse paid. This theory is contradicted by the fact that the people appear as Rawlsian only under specific cognitive circumstances.
4. Habermas' (1981) *communication theory* states that a collective decision is good if it can be considered as deriving from individual opinions expressed in a context of free discussion between equals. This *procedural* theory is confronted with the objection that discussions among scientists are the closest approximation of the ideal situation of free and perfect communication. Pareto qualified rightly though the history of science as *a churchyard of false theories*. Why would then *communicative rationality* be immunized against wrong answers as far as normative or axiological questions are concerned, while it is obviously not as far as scientific questions are concerned?
5. The *relativistic theory* according to which axiological feelings would always be context-bound and without other ground than the strength of tradition and socialization has also to face serious objections: "truth on this side of the Pyrenean mountains, error beyond" (*vérité en deça des Pyrénées, erreur au-delà*, wrote Pascal (1954 [1670]). The relativistic theory is contradicted by the existence of axiological universals: stealing is held everywhere as bad in principle. Killing intentionally a human being is universally considered as more serious than killing him unintentionally. Corruption is treated in principle as bad by all cultures. Above all, the relativistic theory oversees that contextual variations in the *customs* can hide non-contextual *values*. Respecting the other man is a value in all societies. It inspires norms that are expressed by symbols highly variable from one context to another.

All these theories include important intuitions, but none of them can be literally borrowed by social scientists, for the reason that, though they explain some observational data on moral feelings, they appear also as incompatible with or as unable to explain other data. A good sociological theory should provide a grid from which sociologists could draw a convincing explanation of the moral, prescriptive and axiological feelings they observe on given issues in given contexts. A great achievement of Weber and Durkheim is that they use such a grid.

Sociologists do not always recognize it for two reasons: (a) it remains implicit in their work and (b) the conventional history of sociology tends to insist on the differences between Durkheim and Weber and to disregard their similarities.

I will try here to make analytical Weber's notion of *axiological rationality*. My thesis is that axiological rationality should be considered as a variant of *cognitive rationality*.

In a nutshell, Weber's notion of axiological rationality owes its importance to the fact that it implies that instrumental rationality cannot be considered as the exclusive or even the main dimension of rationality. Social action is always grounded on a combination of axiological and instrumental rationality. Most people prefer obviously to serve rather than hurt their own interests and preferences, but they also prefer that their actions are positively evaluated by others, more precisely by the anonymous other as they see him: the other G.H. Mead christened the *generalized Other*. Weber's notion overcomes the opposition between individual instrumentality and a collective sense of moral justice and generally of values. It also overcomes another shortcoming of the instrumental conception of rationality: while instrumental rationality can explain the means used by social actors to satisfy their goals or preferences, axiological rationality provides a guideline to explain their values and hence their preferences.

WEBER'S NOTION OF AXIOLOGICAL RATIONALITY

Max Weber's notion of *axiological rationality* (Weber 1922) contains in a highly condensed fashion an idea that, once developed, generates a theory with a more general scope than the Kantian, the utilitarian, the procedural or the relativistic ones.

Many interpretations have been given of Weber's notion. Many writers hold it as controversial. Lukes (1967:259–60) goes as far as to contend that it is meaningless. Sukale (1995:43), one of the most knowledgeable contemporary commentators of Weber, qualifies the concept as misleading (*irreführend*): "Weber's distinction between axiological and instrumental rationality, as though there would be two types of rational action, is extremely misleading." (*Damit ist Webers Einteilung des rationalen Handelns in zweckrationales und wertrationales, als gäbe es zwei verschiedene Arten rationalen Handelns, äußerst irreführend.*) Why this brutal rejection? My guess is that, to Sukale, as to Lukes, rationality means *instrumental rationality*. So, their rejection of *axiological rationality* as a genuine form of rationality is probably the outcome of the influence on them of the dominant contemporary definition of rationality. They endorse the widespread idea that the notion of rationality can exclusively be applied to the relation between means and ends. This idea is frequently considered as axiomatic notably in the English-speaking world under the influence of the followers of pragmatism and of major thinkers as Bertrand Russell or Herbert Simon. Thus, to Russell (1954), "Reason has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends". To Simon (1983), "Reason is fully instrumental. It cannot tell us where to go; at best it can tell us how to get there".

The skeptical interpretation of Weber's *axiological rationality* was presumably also reinforced by the fact that Weber is often described as supporting a *decisionist* theory of values, i.e., a theory according to which the ultimate values cannot be grounded. It is true that, if ultimate values could be grounded, they would not be ultimate. But Weber (1995[1919]:41) makes the point that physics itself can build reliable theories although they rest on undemonstrated

principles: "every science rests on principles" (*keine Wissenschaft ist voraussetzungslos*). Axiological statements can in the same way be valid, although they rest on undemonstrated principles. Moreover, if values were endorsed without being grounded in the minds of social actors, how could Weber insist on the crucial importance of his notion of *Verstehen* in sociology, i.e., on the idea that the ultimate causes of social action lie in the reasons and motivations of people? Finally, Weber (1995[1919]:38) states clearly that the goals and values involved in social action can be rationally discussed.

But what does *axiological rationality* mean? *Rationality* is widely used as a major concept by two disciplines: economics and philosophy of science. To economists, rationality means generally instrumental rationality, in other words: congruence between means and ends. As to the ends, they hold them as rational if they are compatible with one another, but they reject the idea that ends as such could be treated as rational or not. To historians and philosophers of science, rationality has a different meaning: to them, a scientist is rational if, to the best of his knowledge, he prefers a stronger to a weaker theory. Thus, it became irrational to believe that the earth is flat once the proofs that it is round had accumulated. I propose to qualify this form of rationality as *cognitive*.

COGNITIVE RATIONALITY

Cognitive rationality can be defined in the following fashion. Let us assume that we can draw some conclusion from a set of statements and that this conclusion explains some phenomenon. To take an example, the two statements: "the air has a given weight" and "the air is heavier at the bottom than at the top of a mountain" lead to the conclusion that the quicksilver in the barometer should be higher at the bottom of a mountain. Now, this is precisely what we observe. So, the two statements explain the behavior of the barometer. Still in the 16th century, an alternative theory was available: the Aristotelian theory according to which the quicksilver rises in an empty tube because nature would abhor emptiness. It does not explain why the barometer is higher at the bottom of a mountain and it introduces a conjectural anthropomorphic statement on nature, while these two shortcomings are eliminated in the alternative theory independently devised by Torricelli and Pascal. This well-known example suggests that it is cognitively rational to endorse a given explanation of a phenomenon, if the explanation is made of acceptable and mutually compatible statements and if the competing available theories are weaker in one way or another.

Radnitzky (1987) has proposed to build a bridge between the two basic meanings of the notion of *rationality*. He uses an example to illustrate his point: it became irrational to believe that the earth is flat from the moment when it became more *costly*, he contends, to defend this theory than to accept its competitor. But the costs of defending a theory are higher than the costs of defending an alternative theory if and only if the latter explains more *easily* the observed phenomena than the former. Without knowing and understanding the arguments used by the alternative theories to explain, say, why the sails of a ship disappear at the horizon after the hull or why the moon has the form of a crescent, I cannot evaluate the costs of endorsing the theory that the earth is flat or the theory that it is round. So, the reduction proposed by Radnitzky of cognitive to instrumental rationality is artificial. The important point is: the theory that the earth is round explains more convincingly a number of phenomena than the theory that the earth is flat.

My claim is that Weber had in mind the distinction between *instrumental* and *cognitive rationality* when he coined the expression *axiological rationality*. In other words, I interpret this notion as indicating that cognitive rationality can be applied, not only to descriptive or representative but also to prescriptive, moral or axiological questions.

I will leave aside the question as to whether my interpretation describes what Weber had actually in mind and say only that, if it is true that Weber never clearly stated what he meant by *axiological rationality*, he implicitly uses it in most of his empirical analyses. I have made elsewhere the point that his analyses in the sociology of morals and religion amount at disentangling the cognitive reasons responsible for the collective beliefs he explores, of their change over time and of their contextual variations and that, as Weber, Durkheim explains long-term change in moral feelings and variations of religious beliefs as the outcome of cognitive rationality (Boudon 2008, chapters 4 and 5). But my aim here is rather to develop the theory of axiological feelings that can be drawn from Weber's notion of axiological rationality and to show its powerfulness for the explanation of moral, prescriptive and generally axiological feelings. The Weber scholars who would feel embarrassed by my interpretation of Weber's intuitions could very well forget about this point and consider the cognitive theory of morality and axiological feelings I develop below as mine, if they prefer, although on my side I find hard to forget the process through which I came to this theory.

THE COGNITIVE THEORY OF MORAL, PRESCRIPTIVE, AND AXIOLOGICAL FEELINGS

This cognitive theory of moral, prescriptive and axiological feelings I propose rests upon the four following postulates.

1. Theories can be built on moral, prescriptive and axiological as well as on descriptive questions; moreover, moral, prescriptive or axiological theories can be in many cases unambiguously characterized, as descriptive ones, as stronger or weaker when they are compared to one another.
2. People tend to endorse the theory they see as stronger.
3. They tend to endorse a moral, prescriptive or value statement and to experience the feeling that *X is good, bad, legitimate, fair, etc.* when it appears to them—more or less vaguely depending on the circumstances—as grounded on valid reasons.
4. These reasons can be context-dependent but also context-free.

The Weberian–Durkheimian sociological tradition recognizes fully the validity of the distinction introduced by postulate 4. Scientific beliefs aim at being context-free. In the same way, a belief such as the belief that a democratic regime is more likely than an authoritarian one to respect the dignity of people is commonly considered as context-free. Clearly, the citizens of democratic societies do not feel that being democratic is better than dictatorial regimes simply because they have been socialized to think so, but because they perceive their feeling as right. In the same way, I think that Pythagoras' theorem is right, not simply because I have been socialized to think so. As representational beliefs, moral beliefs can also be context-dependent. The belief that rain rituals are efficient is context-bound, as is the moral belief that death penalty is a legitimate form of punishment.