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The mitigation of the fact/value distinction as a tool for improving the philosophical and sociological accounts on morality

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Introduction

It is easy to perceive that persons living in different times and societies have divergent understandings of morality, divergent conceptions of what is good and right. For example, it seems atrocious to Europeans that in countries such as China, consumption of dog meat is considered morally permissible. Moreover, for the majority of Americans in the 18th century, the existence of slavery did not constitute a moral problem; nowadays, in the same region of the world, the instauration of slavery would be considered appalling. Evidently, moral ideas differ greatly from place to place and time to time. This observation often leads to the adoption of various forms of moral relativism. From the fact of cultural

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¹ By empirical facts, hereby I refer to empirical facts related to morality, such as the moral ideas and beliefs that people adopt.

² Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning Into Moral Subjects*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

³ Moore, George Edward, *Principia Ethica*, New York: Dover Publications, 2004.

plurality of moral ideas it is deduced that there exists no objective and universal truth about morality. However, how easily can we make this transition from the empirical evidence to moral evaluations? To account for this transition, we have to face a prior, more fundamental question, that of the relation between “is” and “ought”. How to derive normative evaluations from empirical facts¹?

This distinction between “is” and “ought” has been the object of an extended debate in moral philosophy. Under the influence of Hume’s “Law”², or “Guillotine”, and Moore’s³ critique against what he conceived as the “naturalistic fallacy”⁴, a sharp distinction has been drawn between social and other sciences and moral philosophy, each of them being assigned different tasks and aims. According to this assignment, sociology, evolutionary anthropology and psychology hold the role of examining empirical facts and explaining the causes and the structure of the various moral ideas. On the contrary, moral philosophy is responsible for making evaluations, providing justifications of morality and making normative claims about the good and the right. But the

⁴ We have to remark that Hume’s distinction between “is” and “ought” is not identical with Moore’s critique to the naturalistic fallacy. Hume claims that there is a logical gap on deriving “ought” from “is” premises, while Moore argues that the moral concept of “good” is indefinable in terms of natural properties. Moore’s argument was confusedly understood as synonymous with Hume’s Law, and both arguments were put under the label of the is/ought distinction. For an examination of the various differentiations regarding the is/ought distinction, see Curry, Oliver, “Who’s Afraid of the Naturalistic Fallacy?”, *Evolutionary Psychology*, vol. 4, no 1, 2006, pp. 243–247.

distinction goes further than that, claiming that sciences should avoid any interference with moral evaluations, while philosophy should abstain from basing its moral principles from empirical scientific data. Thus, the empirical investigation of morality has been sharply distinguished from the philosophical evaluation of the moral ideas.

In this essay, I question this relation between sociological inquiry and philosophical reasoning. First, I examine Durkheim's attempt to develop a moral theory on the basis of his sociology of morality⁵. Then, moving to a more contemporary debate, I analyze Philip S. Gorski's⁶ venture to extract normative implications from a sociological approach. After bringing to the fore certain deficits of these two theories, I argue that even without taking an ultimate position regarding the is/ought distinction, we should mitigate the separation between scientific empirical facts and moral evaluations. I claim that sociology cannot and should not be completely value-free, in order to accomplish its descriptive and explanatory task. In the same vein, I argue that philosophical moral reasoning should take into consideration scientific

⁵ Regarding Durkheim's work, I follow Gabriel Abend's and Robert T. Hall's interpretations of Durkheim's work: Abend, Gabriel, "Two main problems in the sociology of morality", *Theory and Society*, vol. 37, no 2, 2008, pp. 87-125. Abend, Gabriel, "What's New and What's Old about the New Sociology of Morality" in: Hitlin, Steven and Vaisey, Stephen (Eds.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2010, pp. 561-584. Hall, Robert T., *Emile Durkheim: Ethics and the Sociology of Morals*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987. Hall, Robert

empirical findings so as to better harmonize its argumentation with the conditions of human nature.

Moral theory on sociological foundations; Durkheim's approach

The research of the nature, causes and implications of the moral phenomena in their historical appearance has been the object of sociology of morality. We wouldn't exaggerate if we claimed that it was Émile Durkheim who, throughout his work, successfully rendered sociology of morality to a distinct and eminent branch of the general discipline of sociology. His aim was to examine morality from a sociological perspective, that is, to investigate the evolution and function of moral ideas as well the cause of their diffusion to people, groups and societies. His purpose was to look into moral facts scientifically, similarly to other objects of scientific research. Introducing his work in *The Division of Labor in Society* he claims that "This book is above all an attempt to treat the facts of the moral life according to the method of positive sciences. Moral facts are phenomena like any others"⁷.

T., "Communitarian Ethics and the Sociology of Morals: Alasdair MacIntyre and Emile Durkheim", *Sociological Focus*, vol.24, no 2, 1991, pp. 93-104.

⁶ Gorski, Phillip S., "Beyond the Fact/Value Distinction: Ethical Naturalism and the Social Sciences", *Society*, vol. 50, issue 6, 2013, pp. 543-553.

⁷ Durkheim, David Émile, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls, New York: Free Press, 1984, p. xxv, in: Abend (2008) op. cit. p. 565.

Therefore, Durkheim develops a theory of social determination of morality. He argues that social structure and morality are inherently related to each other. Certain moral ideas are necessarily associated with specific social structures, and certain moralities do not comply with some forms of social arrangement. This premise is unquestionable for Durkheim. “If there is one fact that history has irrefutably demonstrated, it is that the morality of each people is directly related to social structure of the people practicing it”⁸.

It is beyond the purpose of this essay to examine the scientific accuracy of Durkheim’s sociological methods and conclusions. Focusing on my specific aim to examine the relation between empirical investigation and moral evaluations, I will turn my attention to Durkheim’s positions regarding moral philosophy. According to the aforementioned interpretations⁹, Durkheim did not confine his work to the sociological task of describing and explaining the causes and mechanisms of morality. On the basis of his sociological, empirical findings, he also elaborated a moral theory with important normative implications. In other terms, he articulated evaluative judgements about the improvement of society, based on his understanding of social forms. In a famous passage from the *Division of Labor* he claims: “Yet because what we propose to study is above all reality, it does not follow that we

⁸ Durkheim, David Émile, *Moral Education*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1961. p.87.

⁹ Hall (1987) op. cit. Hall (1991) op. cit. Abend (2008) op. cit.

should give up the idea of improving it. We would esteem our research not worth the labour of a single hour if its interest were merely speculative [...] We trust that this book will at least serve to weaken that prejudice, because we shall demonstrate how science can help in finding the direction in which our conduct ought to go, assisting us to determine the ideal that gropingly we seek. But we shall only be able to raise ourselves up to that deal after having observed reality, for we shall distil the ideal from it”¹⁰.

The aforementioned passage fuels multitude questions about the relation between science and normative thinking. How does scientific sociological knowledge of moral norms guide us for the amelioration of society? Could social observation and description provide us with tools for moral evaluation? What moral criteria could we infer from society’s existing moral norms and beliefs?

As it has been widely noticed in the relevant literature¹¹, it is the concepts of normal and pathological, of health and illness that Durkheim uses in order to make the transition from “is” to “ought”. Durkheim draws an analogy from the medical situation in order to explain how sociology of morality could “heal” the problems of society. He claims that, like the physician who treats the ill person aiming to restore her health, similarly

¹⁰ Durkheim, David Émile, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls, New York: Free Press, 1984, p. xxvi, in: Abend (2008) op. cit. p. 101, italics mine.

¹¹ Hall (1987) op. cit. Hall (1991) op. cit. Abend (2008) op. cit.

the sociologist of morality, by finding what is “healthy” for a society, can provide us with moral guidance in order to cure this society from its “illnesses”. He characteristically claims that “for societies as for individuals, health is good and desirable; disease, on the contrary is bad and to be avoided. If, then, we can find an objective criterion, inherent in the facts themselves, which enables to distinguish scientifically between health and morbidity in the various orders of social phenomena, science will be in a position to throw light on practical problems and still remain faithful to its own method¹².”

Durkheim argues here for a form of interventionism, a moral approach that aims to improve society’s moral flaws and help it become better without necessarily appealing to any abstract moral principles¹³. But how useful can this analogy with medicine be in order to clarify the relationship between facts and moral evaluations? Its ambiguousness prevents it from elucidating this relationship. First of all, this analogy is susceptible to the charge that it cannot account for the idea of moral progress. If we understand the health of society as the normal, dominant moral ideas that prevail in it, Durkheim’s argument seems to imply the maintenance of the status quo. Moral progress would be inconceivable, given that it demands a criterion independent of the

¹² Durkheim, David Émile, *The rules of sociological method*, trans. S. A. Solovay and J. H. Mueller, ed. G. E. G. Catlin, New York: Free Press of Glen, 1966, p.49, in: Abend (2008) op. cit. p. 101.

dominant moral ideas of a society. Durkheim’s approach renders it difficult to account for the wrongness of phenomena such as slavery or ideas of the superiority of the white race. In some periods of human history, these ideas were dominant and constituted the “normal”, “healthy” ideas of certain societies regarding the good and the right. Contrary to Durkheim’s conclusions, moral improvement of the societies can only be accomplished when we succeed in distancing ourselves from the “facts themselves”.

Consequently, Durkheim’s approach cannot easily avoid the charge of moral relativism. His transition from sociological findings to normative guidance seems to be directly violating the is/ought distinction drawn by Hume. Indeed, Durkheim has been criticized during the defense of his dissertation (for committing the naturalistic fallacy)¹⁴. In any case, an overall critique of Durkheim’s sociological and moral theory would need a more extensive examination. Instead, following the interpretations of Abend and Hall on Durkheim’s work, my main aim has been to bring out some issues that arise through the attempt to base moral evaluations on sociological research. In the following section I will examine contemporary approaches that try to follow the road that Durkheim has paved while avoiding the aforementioned problems.

¹³ Hall (1991) op. cit.

¹⁴ Pickering, William Stuart Frederick, *Emile Durkheim: Critical assessments of leading sociologists*, Abingdon UK: Routledge, 2001. Schmaus (2010) op.cit.

Gorski's moral naturalism

An attempt to reconcile sociology of morality with moral theory has been recently proposed by Philip S. Gorski¹⁵. According to him, social sciences, and specifically sociology of morality, can be helpful in providing us with normative guidance for answering questions about the good and the right. Sociological findings can aid us to find moral truths and thus expand our moral knowledge. He labels his approach as “ethical naturalism”¹⁶, which object is a “middle kingdom of moral facts, situated somewhere between the realms of fact and value, an independent territory, containing discoverable truths about the good life and the good society”¹⁷.

Gorski develops his moral theory influenced by Aristotelian ethics, and more specifically by the Aristotelian concept of flourishing. The thrust of his argument is that human nature consists of certain universal capacities, the development of which is necessary for individual *eudaimonia*. He further claims that the role of sociology of morality is to discover which elements of the social life are the essential pre-conditions for the development of these human capacities. The

¹⁵ Gorski (2013) op. cit.

¹⁶ I understand naturalism, as “the view that ethical theorizing should be an (in part) a posteriori inquiry richly informed by relevant empirical considerations” (Doris, John M. and Stich, Stephen P, “As a matter of fact: Empirical perspectives on ethics” in: Jackson, Frank and Smith, Michael (eds.), *The Oxford*

argument goes that by finding which social forms promote human well-being, we can develop normative claims about how to make society better. Thus, by discovering the social forms which help individuals flourish, we acquire a criterion for assessing better or worse types of norms and moral rules in societies.

Gorski's attempt to reconcile sociological research with normative claims has two targets. The first is to avoid moral relativism. Through his naturalistic approach he denies that the fact of cultural relativism leads necessarily to the meta-ethical adoption of moral relativism. Even though he recognizes that morality differs from place to place and time to time, he contends that through the social sciences we can discover certain universal moral truths on human well-being and employ them as criterion for improving social morality.

Gorski's second aim is to contravene the Weberian call for scientific value-freedom. Arguing that normative evaluations should be derived from social sciences, he supports a value-laden understanding of sociology of morality¹⁸. Gorski tries to bring closer values and facts. He argues that not only are facts value-laden, but also values have an

Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 115).

¹⁷ Gorski (2013) op. cit. p. 543.

¹⁸ It is important to distinguish between internal and external value judgements. The former refers to judgements internal to scientific research, such as the choice of the method or the object of the research. The latter refers to external

experimental basis and hence are open to empirical investigation. Sociology of morality has an inherently evaluative character, so that value-freedom is both impossible and undesirable¹⁹.

Gorski provides some interesting arguments for reconciling the distinction between social sciences and the philosophical evaluation of morality. However, this approach does not lack deficits and weak points. First, even if we accept Gorski's approach, there are plenty normative questions which cannot be answered exclusively through sociological research. Answers to issues such as euthanasia, equality or global justice, require further reasoning and justification than mere appealing to certain universal human capacities. Even if we accept Gorski's claim that sociology can provide us with certain knowledge about human nature and the social conditions for its flourishing, there is still great philosophical distance to cover so as to derive normative conclusions.

Furthermore, what if sociological findings denied the existence of universal capacities common to all individuals? What would be the normative implications of such an empirical finding? Would that mean that we the moral value of individuals would be differentiated on the basis of the capacities that they possess? Moreover, Gorski's scheme is

evaluations, such the consideration of specific moral norms as bad or unjust. A Weberian could argue that there is no need for sociology to avoid internal value judgements; it should, however, refrain from making external value judgements.

based on a prior acceptance of basic premises of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Contrary to his claims, it is not his sociological findings that ground his moral theory; inversely, it is his latent endorsement of Aristotelian ethics that guide its sociological research.

An approximation of empirical facts and moral evaluations

Even if we do not embrace Durkheim's and Gorski's attempts to reconcile sociological research with moral philosophy, it does not follow that a sharp distinction between facts and values needs to be made. We can plausibly accept that sociology, as well as other sciences, such as psychology or evolutionary anthropology, have a mainly descriptive and explanatory task while moral philosophy has an evaluative and prescriptive one. However, the acknowledgement of this distinction has led many scholars to make the further claim that there is an irreconcilable gap between empirical facts and moral evaluations, the former pertaining exclusively to sociology, while the latter to philosophy. In what follows, I argue that sociology of morality can better accomplish its explanatory task by using value-laden language, while moral philosophy can better account for morality by harmonizing its moral premises with empirical data of human nature.

¹⁹ For the opposite thesis that sociology needs to be value-free, see Black, Donald, "Misunderstandings concerning the subject of value-free social science", *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol.64, no 4, 2013, pp. 763-780.

Let us consider the case of Holocaust. It has been captured as an instant of great evil in human history. However, it is controversial whether sociology of morality should use an evaluative language when describing the causes and the structure of such a phenomenon. But how accurate would an explanation of the cause and the role of the Holocaust be, if it does not contain any evaluative judgement? Can we really sociologically account for Nazi moral ideas and acts if we do not conceive and describe them as morally wrong, as morally atrocious?

I contend that the Holocaust, as well as other moral phenomena, cannot be adequately grasped and explained without using an evaluative language. Let us examine two different statements about the Holocaust, as articulated by Sayer: that “thousands died in the Nazi concentration camps” and that “thousands were systematically exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps”²⁰. The second statement clearly describes the same situation in a more value-laden way. For that reason, it offers a much more accurate and better explanation of the

²⁰ Sayer, Andrew, *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.45.

²¹ For the opposite argument that atrocious moral acts can be adequately described and explained without resorting to moral evaluations, see Campbell: “To explain when genocide—one-sided, ethnically based mass killing—will occur in response to a conflict, I make statements such as this: Genocide “is more likely when the antagonists are lacking in intimacy, interdependence, cultural similarity, and other forms of closeness, and when the aggressors have more authority, military power, and other forms of status than the targets. This does not praise or condemn genocide any more than any of the other

Holocaust. It is methodologically better for sociology of morality to not separate empirical facts from moral evaluations instead of opting for an infertile dedication to value-freedom²¹.

Moreover, value-laden language infiltrates sociological research through the use of what has been called thick ethical²². Concepts such as “coward”, “proud”, “devious” or “generous” bear a dual content, simultaneously descriptive and evaluative. On the one hand, they describe features of one’s character. On the other hand, they entail a moral judgement about these features. Isolating one of these contents is impossible. Even if we recognize that in sociology of morality these concepts have a predominately descriptive role, this does not disqualify their evaluative dimension.

Let us now consider the same relation, but from the opposite perspective. As we already mentioned, under the influence of Hume’s is/ought distinction and Moore’s critique of the naturalistic fallacy, moral

statements praise or condemn suicide, predatory crime, religious participation, violence, or anything else. *I could certainly make a value judgment about genocide or any of these other phenomena—and I do so in other contexts, boldly and thoughtfully I hope—but this would not increase the explanatory power of any of these statements one bit.*” (Campbell, Bradley, “Anti-Minotaur: The Myth of a Sociological Morality” *Society*, vol. 51, issue 5, 2014, p. 446, italics mine).

²² Putnam, Hilary, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 2002. Williams, Bernard, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Abingdon UK: Routledge, 1986. Sayer (2011) op. cit.

philosophers refrained from using scientific empirical data in their moral theories in order to protect the normative and prescriptive character thereof²³. Contemporary moral philosophers shun from engaging with the conclusions of social sciences about human and social nature in order to maintain the “purity” of their moral theories.

However, is it useful for moral accounting to disentangle moral evaluations from sociological or psychological facts about human nature? It seems to be a problematic methodological choice, especially in the domain of virtue ethics. Eminent philosophers of this domain, as for example Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum²⁴, have developed moral theories accounting for persons’ virtues and well-being.²⁵ In cooperation with Amartya Sen²⁶, the latter has developed an approach, according to which human nature and character consist of certain capabilities necessary for individual development of well-being²⁷.

²³ Interestingly, the same claim has been made by Kohlberg, who although, as a psychologist, he examined moral development from a psychological perspective, he pointed out the danger of committing the “naturalistic fallacy”, i.e. deriving philosophical justifications from his research findings. (Kohlberg, Lawrence, "From Is to Ought: How to Commit the Naturalistic Fallacy and Get Away with it in the Study of Moral Development" in Kohlberg, Lawrence, *The Philosophy of Moral Development, vol. 1 of Essays on Moral Development*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981, pp. 101-189).

²⁴ MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Nussbaum, Martha C., “Virtue ethics: A misleading category?” *The Journal of Ethics*, vol. 3, no 3, 1999, pp.163-201.

These capabilities are traits of humans’ personalities and constitute the basis of Nussbaum and Sen’s moral theory on justice and equality.

But is it possible to make claims about human virtues and moral traits without taking into consideration sociological and psychological data about morality²⁸? These sciences research in various levels why and how people conceive morality. They examine various dispositions, sentiments and tendencies of human moral behavior. They analyze how people react to different moral situations and how they handle the moral dilemmas that emerge in their lives. Conducting experiments, they arrive at conclusions about the elements of human nature which characterize and restrain our moral behavior²⁹.

Moral philosophy should not avoid taking into account, at least to some extent, these scientific data. Moral philosophers, especially those in the domain of virtue ethics, should not make judgements on moral traits or

²⁵ For an investigation of the connection between communitarian ethics and Durkheim’s approach to morality, see Hall (1991) op. cit.

²⁶ Sen, Amartya, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

²⁷ Nussbaum’s list of capabilities includes: life, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, control over one’s environment.

²⁸ Doris and Stich (2005) op. cit. pp. 114-152.

²⁹ Abend argues that new neuroscience findings of moral brain pose great challenges to our moral concepts of morality: Abend (2010) op. cit.

dispositions of our moral personhood while ignoring the scientific facts about them. Instead, they should use these empirical data as tools for harmonizing their moral approaches with the inescapable constraints of our human nature. They should seize the opportunities offered by contemporary scientific progress, in order to better elaborate their moral and normative justifications. This does not entail that they should totally rely on these empirical findings for their evaluative conclusions; they should however take them into consideration when accounting about human virtues and well-being.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through the examination of Durkheim's and Gorski's approaches, any attempt to establish a direct relation between empirical research and normative thinking has to confront many difficulties and objections. However, these difficulties should not prevent us from making less demanding claims against the sharp disentanglement of facts and values. Even without necessarily embracing the view that the distinction between facts and values has collapsed³⁰, we can still argue that there is an inherent connection between them. Social sciences and moral philosophy may have different aims and tasks; however facts and moral evaluations have an important role to play in both disciplines.

³⁰ Putnam (2002) op. cit.

This observation opens new possibilities for both philosophy and the social sciences. An interesting way to advance the debate would be to juxtapose the arguments regarding the methodological and epistemological foundations of both moral philosophy and social sciences. As these two disciplines examine morality from different perspectives, it would be fruitful to put their arguments side by side, in order to deepen our understanding of morality and our moral reasoning.

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