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SYMPOSIUM: FACTS, VALUES, AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

A Deweyan Defense of Ethical Naturalism

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For some time now, sociologists have largely evaded meta-theoretical questions, no more so than those pertaining to the relationship between fact and value and the role of values within the social sciences. This is not because such issues have faded in importance. On the contrary, the central questions of social theory remain as relevant today as they were during the earliest days of the discipline. Luckily, some members of the guild continue to pursue them. Philip S. Gorski's exploration of terrain "beyond the fact/value distinction" makes an important contribution.[1] His essay challenges the orthodox claim of fact/value dualism and utilizes neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism (hence forward "Aristotelian naturalism") to defend the idea that the social sciences can contribute to knowledge of the good life and the good society. As a fellow traveler also seeking a space for moral inquiry within the discipline, I am encouraged by this effort. However, I question whether the neo-Aristotelian notion of human flourishing provides an optimal starting point. Aristotelian naturalism depends upon antecedent notions of human functioning, which veer closely towards foundationalism. As a result, it seems to favor the viewpoint of the scientific observer and therefore remains somewhat distant from the moral dilemmas of social and political life.

My commentary aims to extend the current dialogue by considering some weaknesses of the Aristotelian position and proposing an alternative based within the pragmatist tradition. To justify my observations, I outline the philosophical underpinnings of this approach in more detail. Next, I point to some weakness of Aristotelian naturalism with respect to the translation of scientific knowledge to moral questions. I consider how insights from the ethical theory of John Dewey might serve as a corrective by clarifying how abstract notions of "human flourishing," rather than ends in themselves, serve as standards that orient ongoing moral inquiries and deliberations. I conclude by contemplating what this might mean for scientific practice and the future of social theory.

[1] This may not be the most felicitous language. The distinction between fact and value is useful, if not necessary, for the effective practice of inquiry. One can reject dualism and recognize fact/value entanglement, while also maintaining instrumental distinctions between them.

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The Neo-Aristotelian Position

In his essay, Gorski cites philosophical critiques of fact/value dualism to support a form of ethical naturalism inspired by the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia* (understood here as "flourishing"). Drawing upon the works of philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Richard Kraut, and Martha Nussbaum, the claim is made that there are moral properties and facts that are natural (rather than occult or supernatural), which are derived from certain innate dispositions and capacities of living things (i.e., those associated with growth and self-maintenance as opposed to destruction or harm). Human beings have evolved as social creatures with special capacities for speech and reason such that specification of "human flourishing" is more complex and problematic than it is for plants or animals. For the human being, the idea of the "good life" goes beyond biological survival and pertains to potentially ambiguous concepts such as virtue, happiness, and "well-being." The preconditions of human flourishing are linked to the characteristics of societies, political and economic systems, and the qualities of social relationships. Nevertheless, this view holds that moral evaluations of human characteristics and operations utilize the same conceptual structure as that applied to determine goodness and defect in all living things (Foot 2001). This provides a warrant for empirical as well as philosophical investigations of moral facts, and thus the claim that the social sciences can contribute to ethical knowledge.

The neo-Aristotelian defense of ethical naturalism is connected to a normative theory of virtue ethics, which emphasizes moral character, and which identifies the virtues with those character traits that enable a person to live a good life qua human being (Foot 2001; Hursthouse 2012). Human

beings, like all other living things, have a life cycle that is specific to their species, and ways of "being" and "doing" (or capacities) that are necessary to meet life functions (e.g., self-maintenance and reproduction). Following Foot (2001), this provides the basis for "natural norms" and a reference point for evaluations that are independent of our interests and desires. So for birds of prey, which utilize keen eyesight to hunt and secure nourishment, sharp vision is "good" and blindness is "bad." Such statements are facts about things in the natural world. Aristotelian naturalism holds that there is no change in the meaning of "good" when used in reference to the "good eyesight of the raptor" or the "good character of a human being" (Foot 2001). Judgment of human beings does entail an important transition to *moral* evaluation because human capacities for inference and reason are much more expansive that those possessed by other animals. However, the distinctive claim of Aristotelian naturalism is that both forms of evaluation pertain to natural fact (Hursthouse 2013).

Shifting to evaluations of human "good" moves us to dramatically new terrain since humans are (broadly speaking) rational beings. One advantage of Aristotelian naturalism is that it provides an empirically grounded theory of personhood. Rather than posit a supernatural view or an idealized notion of the rational agent, it assumes that we are, just like other livings things, part of the natural world. On this account, human nature presents a tiered set of life functions, those pertaining to a "first" nature that we are born with and those associated with a "second" nature, which we acquire through our development and education within society (MacIntyre 1999; McDowell 1995). The fact that we "are brought up to be socialized, language-using, reason-giving, culturally embedded animals which mature to act for their own reasons," provides a basis for moral evaluations of people and their actions in terms of dispositions of the human will (Hursthouse 2013: 3574). Since our powers of reason are dependent upon socially, culturally and linguistically embedded patterns of human development, the formation of virtuous characters is taken as primary. To live a good life is to live virtuously by developing characteristics (i.e., dispositions towards certain choices, intentions, desires and attitudes) that are beneficial both to their possessor and others because human flourishing requires them (Foot 1978).

The *Question* of Human Flourishing

Here then is the key question. Just what does human flourishing require? What exactly is the good life? Philosophers working within this tradition emphasize the development of human capacities related to the maintenance of social and affective ties and the ability to reason practically about the appropriateness of our actions. Such capacities are "human goods" to be cultivated. In a number of popular works, Martha Nussbaum has offered a substantive list of these goods: life, health, bodily integrity, imagination and thought, emotional expression and attachment, practical reason, affiliation with others, protection of other species, play, and political voice. The list is abstract and general by intent. Nussbaum aims to provide a theoretical basis for assessing development and pursuing social reform that is sensitive to cultural differences. To do so, she works within the Aristotelian structure. The virtues are specified by drawing upon a universalist account of human functioning, and so are nonrelative to culture, yet broad enough to leave room for variations in local expression (Nussbaum 1993). In collaboration with Amartya Sen, Nussbaum has extended these ideas to propose a "capabilities approach" to social policy aimed at fostering the conditions, which support the discovery and development of human capacities.

The specification of human capacities is tentative and open to revision. Gorski argues that it would be a mistake to leave their identification to philosophy alone. Once understood as natural facts, human capacities and the preconditions for flourishing (or faltering), like other objective phenomena, are open to scientific investigation. Highlighting "positive psychology" and "happiness economics" as examples, he calls for making moral inquiry expressly part of sociology's agenda. Yet, the discussion fails to address the limits of scientific methods and the dangers of top-down approaches to moral dilemmas. Gorksi could interrogate further how knowledge, by expanding our ability to envision and choose among alternative futures, often presents us with competing goods and conflicting desires. Such situations demand that we take responsibility for choices that are beyond the reach of expert guidance. They provide opportunities for growth and the development of moral imagination. Failure to consider this expresses a general flaw of the Aristotelian approach. The reliance upon antecedently defined capabilities unavoidably entails claims about what it means to be fully human, which opens the door to authoritarianism and blocks inquiry into methods of reconstruction and growth. Gorski's call for a normative sociology reflects this. It overlooks the dangers associated with making scientific claims about human nature and fails to examine the complex moral decisions involved in the practice and application of sociological research.

By seeking a foundation for moral truth within notions of human flourishing, the Aristotelian position continues the traditional quest for an Archimedean point from which to observe moral subjects. Translated to the natural and social sciences, this position runs the risk of providing undue authority over moral questions to the scientific observer. Certainly, the idea that knowledge of moral truths has an objective basis in "well-being" has intuitive appeal. Indeed, I agree with Gorski that we can acquire knowledge about the characteristics and conditions of personal and social "well-being" and that this knowledge can provide standards for evaluation. Yet, I would argue that such knowledge is much more contextually based than the focus on

innate characteristics would allow, even if as Gorski suggests we adopt "a more open and fallibilistic picture of human nature" and make allowances for "within-species variation." Determining what counts as flourishing and how to accomplish it is a messy business when undertaken within the concrete world of people's "havings" and "doings." What is more, the discussion seems to downplay the uncertainty and outright disagreement that generally surrounds scientific findings and fails to address the potential misuses and abuses of scientific authority. I believe these are serious considerations that must form a part of any attempt to advance a more normative orientation to social science.

Experience reveals that dilemma, conflict, and uncertainty are persistent features of moral life. Therefore, ethical knowledge is not an end in itself. In the best of possible worlds, it is a tool that aides people in resolving morally problematic situations. Aristotelian naturalism seems to be oriented more towards offering an account of moral truth than providing methods of inquiry or deliberation. As a result, it offers less guidance to the moral dilemmas found within politics and everyday life. With regards to the social sciences, I am left wondering how we should conceptualize our role in the development of ethical knowledge. What are the nature and limitations of our contributions? How do we get from scientific findings to standards that may guide conduct? Gorski outlines a response to such questions. Likening ethical naturalism to a civic center or forum, he suggests that the social and behavioral sciences have a voice alongside philosophers and theologians in describing the "good life" (pp. 17). He hints to a division of labor. Philosophy contributes to conceptual clarity and reflection, while theologians offer "semantic resources." He also puts limits on naturalistic evaluations (i.e., they address what is good, not what is right), and warns against the dangers of intellectualism (pp. 13–14, 18).[2] This is a good start. However, it may be worthwhile to consider how other approaches to ethical naturalism address such questions. In particular, the moral philosophy of John Dewey provides valuable insights, which share deep affinities with the neo-Aristotelian position. However, Dewey more explicitly addresses the practical nature of moral judgment.

A Deweyan Approach to Moral Inquiry

For the better part of a century, John Dewey (1859–1952) was "America's Philosopher." The quintessential public intellectual, Dewey wrote prolifically on a wide range of topics within philosophy, psychology, and education, while also addressing the political and social issues of his time. He was a leading voice for social reform during the Progressive Era who combined scholarship and public engagement in a manner rarely seen today. Like his pragmatist philosophy more generally, Dewey's ethical theory reflects a profound awareness of the public and private problems associated with social change. Dewey was born shortly before the Civil War and lived to see the dawn of the Atomic Age. He was a direct witness to the dramatic social transformations of the Industrial Era and participant in the intellectual sea change that followed Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. The influence of these events is woven throughout his philosophy, reflected in his natural empiricism, anti-foundationalism, and process metaphyics. Applied to ethics, Dewey's philosophy provides a novel approach that rejects the quest for moral principles in favor of a comparative and genetic examination of reflective intelligence in moral life.

The ethical theory of John Dewey is influenced by Aristotle's understanding of human functioning, and so is compatible with Aristotelian naturalism in some respects. Both accounts maintain a naturalistic theory of human being, adopt an empirical approach to human development, and take ongoing organic activity as the basis for normativity. Dewey also employs the notion of *eudaimonia* to orient his consideration of moral judgment and knowledge.

However, Dewey's naturalism goes all the way down. For Dewey, all aspects of human existence, including experience, are natural modes of interaction between organism and environment. Dewey does not need to ground ethical knowledge in an external foundation such as human functioning because he begins with a naturalized understanding of moral experience. This reflects the immediate empiricism and naïve realism that defines his pragmatist philosophy more generally (Hildebrand 2003; Shook 2000). Aristotelian naturalism seeks to answer the question "what is the good life" through reference to an antecedently given human nature. In contrast, Dewey's ethics considers moral problems as they are given within experience and provides a method for answering questions about "how we should live" based on where we are (i.e., our present living conditions and what we can do).

To appreciate the difference, it is helpful to consider Dewey's defense of ethical naturalism. As Gorski illustrated, ethical naturalism challenges the traditional separation of fact from value and "is" from "ought" that is commonly associated with "Hume's Law." Dewey offers a critique of dualism that is compatible with Gorski's observations. It is not just that values are implicated in our understanding of facts. Facts inform our understanding of values. However, Dewey emphasizes the instrumental nature of these relationships. Value judgments are both descriptive and action-guiding. Taken as propositions, they state that certain consequences follow

[2] The distinction between "good" and "right" harkens to the charge made by rule-based ethicists that virtue ethics fails in application (i.e., it does not tell us what we ought and ought not do). Full consideration of this matter is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it worth noting that the neo-Aristotelian response does, in fact, draw a line from "good" to "right," although room is left for "undecidable questions" (i.e., tragic situations that preclude acting rightly). See Hursthouse 1995 and Foot 2001 (pp. 62–65).

certain actions and that such consequences would be liked or valued (Anderson 2012). These propositions can be empirically warranted because they can be tested. They are action-guiding because the point of making them is to decide upon courses of action within problematic situations. As such, judgments of value are practical judgments that not only posit ends worth pursuing. They partly constitute the means by which action comes about (Dewey 1979 [1915]). The entanglement of fact and value fundamentally rests upon their shared status as practical judgments and their mutual constitution within what Dewey referred to as the "ends-means continuum" (1988 [1939]: 227). Like estimations of value, "judgments of fact have reference to a determination of courses of action to be tried and to the discovery of means for their realization" (Dewey 1979 [1915]: 23).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve much further into Dewey's instrumentalism and ethical naturalism. However, a few points will serve to indicate future directions. Dewey was less concerned with knowledge than with learning. A common tread throughout his work is the development and growth of intelligence, which he associated with experimentation, imagination, and open-mindedness, qualities that allow for the adaptation and revision of ideas, habits, and values in light of their practical consequences within fluid and changing situations. Dewey based this understanding of intelligence upon an examination of actual instances of inquiry within the context of their development and application. Much of his work sought to characterize the successful methods of modern science and illustrate their relation to other productive fields (e.g., the arts, law, and history) (Hickman 1995). Similarly, Dewey's approach to ethics begins with an examination of moral experience and the development and growth of group morality. Dewey does consider basic biological factors and human capacities (e.g., reason and socializing agencies). Yet in doing so, he does not seek to establish human functioning as a basis for "the good" but rather aims to identify those factors that allow for more conscious control and valuation of conduct (Dewey 1985 [1932]). In *Ethics*, a popular textbook written in collaboration with James H. Tufts, Dewey shows us what this sort of empirical ethics might look like. Dewey draws upon comparative historical research on the development of customary and reflective morality and insights from psychology, anthropology, sociology, and law, while maintaining the distinctiveness of ethics as a disciplinary field (Dewey 1985 [1932]: 10).

The very notion of an empirical ethics challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries. I propose that the work of John Dewey offers a valuable resource for reimagining ethical inquiry and constructing spaces of engagement between the "sciences" and moral philosophy. While addressing the role of the social sciences, Dewey's work does no resolve questions about the proper scope of scientific contributions to moral inquiry. However, he does offer valuable resources for reconstructing and extending the neo-Aristotelian position. Dewey offers a more open-ended conception of human nature centered on growth, creativity and imagination (Alexander 1993). He directs inquiries into "the good life" towards considerations of future consequences rather than antecedent functions. This effectively moves dialogue towards questions about human agency and democracy since a great deal now turns on how future consequences are evaluated. Following Charles Sanders Peirce's (1839–1914) original notion of a community of inquiry, Dewey appeals to the collective and cooperative model of the scientific method. This model is deeply connected to democratic ideals of pluralism and equality and operates through open discourse and debate.

A Call for Social Theory

Acceptance of fact/value entanglement and ethical naturalism opens up new and exciting avenues of inquiry and presents opportunities to direct the ethics of social science more consciously and intelligently. Yet as social scientists, we have an obligation to approach the practice of normative claims-making with caution. Here, one might recall that Weber's principle of *Wertfreiheit* was not intended solely, or even primarily as a methodological principle, but was aimed against what he saw as attempts to trivialize great ideals and human problems by transforming them into technical concerns (Hennis 1994). Weber's insistence regarding value conflict brings to mind a hardnosed pragmatist more so than a disenchanted nihilist, for what he often seems to highlight are the practical consequences of pursuing certain paths (and not others). He saw that the institutions, language and methods of science generally serve to obscure rather than illuminate the meaning and significance of our value commitments. Yet, such commitments are unavoidable, even for science, as Gorski clearly points out. The question then is what does fact/value entanglement mean for scientific practice.

Broadly speaking, much sociological inquiry is already oriented towards understanding and promoting social arrangements and institutions that support (a particular interpretation of) "human flourishing." Elsewhere, Gorski has noted that early efforts to distance sociology from religion and philosophy did not free the discipline of moral concerns so much as provide for a "thin morality" centered on critiques of inequality and power (Gorski 2012: 100). By reengaging with political and moral philosophy, Gorski seeks to make sociology's normative assumptions more explicit and to give them greater depth and seriousness. Such work is essential to the development of the discipline. It reaffirms the contributions to be made by often-marginalized sub-disciplines such as the history of sociology, the sociology of knowledge and social theory.

There are strong cultural and institutional influences shaping the role of values within sociological research. Critical and

reflexive practices on the part of researchers, while valuable, are not sufficient to the task. Empirical research is needed to illuminate how underlying value systems and value conflicts have shaped the discipline and channeled its social contributions. Furthermore, it is vital that we nurture intellectual spaces for dialogue and debate over past and future directions and the "right" normative foundations. Building off of Alvin Gouldner's later work, Robert J. Antonio (2005) argues that social theory provides a distinct discourse space where critical discussions about the value of sociological knowledge and its role in the public sphere can take place. Contemplating sociology's potential contribution to moral knowledge, I find Gouldner's idea that social theory serves as a mediator between science and politics not only compelling, but imperative. A more reflexive sociology demands more reflexive practices of inquiry. However, this cannot be accomplished through the self-reflection of individual sociologists alone but also requires a space within the discipline for the practice of social theory.

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