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# On the Historical Sociology of Morality

## Introduction

T A K E N   T O   M E A N   N O R M S   A N D   V A L U E S, morality was a central building block of American—and partly also European— sociology at the heights of its postwar boom in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of the temporary neglect of morality as an object of sociological inquiry is tied to the demise of structural-functionalism and the selective appropriation of Durkheim's and Weber's writings on this topic by scholars such as Talcott Parsons.

In recent years, however, morality has resurfaced as an object of sociological inquiry. Sociologists have not only opened up new vistas for empirical research, but also re-evaluated the contributions of classical authors in innovative ways and added new authors to the theoretical agenda. Moreover, these interventions and debates have expanded from sociological theory to include several subfields of the discipline, including cultural sociology, economic sociology, and social psychology.

In this special issue we push this recovery of morality further by investigating it from a historical perspective. Historical research on morality is especially important because it offers the opportunity to probe the way in which the intellectual and social architectonics of the concept shift over time—an insight voiced by many classical authors, but overshadowed by structural-functionalism's essentializing assumptions.

### The sociology of morality: New, old, and historical

To distinguish recent work on morality from structural-functionalism, Stephen Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey [2013b] have introduced the label

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"new sociology of morality." They mean this term to contrast not only with the work of Parsons and collaborators (as "old sociology of morality"), but also implicitly with many of the classics that Parsonsians drew on [Vaisey 2008].

Yet this contrast gives Parsons too much credit. For one thing, it uncritically accepts his claim that his account of morality builds on accurate readings of, initially, Weber and Durkheim, and later also Freud. However, these three scholars also formulated ideas that contradict Parsons' sociology outright. Dennis Wrong's influential broadside against Parsons' "oversocialized conception of man" [Wrong 1961] was, for instance, based on a re-reading of Freud. And a large body of influential works subsequently called for "De-Parsonizing" Weber and Durkheim and pointed out the difference between the two classics that Parsons had ignored [Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope 1975; Pope 1973; Pope, Cohen and Hazelrigg 1975].

Moreover, dual-process theory, prominent in the work of Vaisey [2009] is itself based on Freudian psychology [see Brakel and Shevrin 2003] and draws one of its key mechanisms—action driven by actors' internalized moral values—from the Parsonian sociology of morality.

In other words, there are a lot of old ideas contained in this version of a "new" sociology of morality. But while the labels "old" and "new" might sound like temporal categories, they are often deployed, as they are here, in a surprisingly unhistorical way. The prefix "new" in the new sociology of morality is, upon closer inspection, similar to the "neo" in neoliberalism: not a complete departure from classical liberalism, but a revival of it after a period of sustained opposition and decline, together with the attempt to distance this revival from a simple return.

This is not to suggest that no sociological innovations in the study of morality have taken place since Parsons. To the contrary, one can also use the expression "new sociology of morality" to emphasize contemporary efforts to do something that Parsons himself did not: study morality empirically. Parsons tended to settle all questions about morality by means of definition, rather than empirical inquiry [Spates 1983]. For instance, morality, again taken to mean norms and values, was defined as the integrating force of social life, solving the problem of social order. Moral values, as an integral part of cultural values, were defined as collectively shared, internally consistent, and clearly demarcated from non-moral values.

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Empirical validation of these conceptual assumptions was not only missing, but made almost impossible by this definition, since Parsons derived the notion of social norms from that of cultural values [Parsons 1961]. Values, he argued, were so general as to be neither situation nor function-specific. As abstract concepts, they simply provided a referent for thought and action. Norms, by contrast, provided the specific do and don'ts of a situation. This derivation states a causal relationship, but it cannot be studied [Blake and Davis 1964]. This is because, in Parsons' formulation, the only way to discern a society's overall values is by inferring them through either statements of belief or behavior, which are themselves caused by those values. One cannot say that x causes y when the only indicator one has of *x* is *y*.

Yet abandoning this kind of Parsonian circular reasoning about morality for empirical research also leaves aside the power of definition: we now lack a consensus definition of what we are supposed to study when we study morality. Consequently, there are many different sociologies of morality advanced in different subfields, and part of the reason the "new sociology of morality" is necessary and salutary is because it is a search for such an agreed on definition, counteracting centripetal institutional forces in a discipline with many subfields [Hitlin and Vaisey 2013a]. While the aim is not to advance a substantive definition of what should count as moral, it certainly is an effort to set formal criteria for what kind of assertions, actions, and ideas should count as moral [Tavory 2011].

In this special issue, we argue that historical sociology is uniquely suited to contribute to this question. Historical research on morality reveals that the difficulty of finding a definition of morality that satisfies researchers across subfields, working on a variety of empirical cases, and employing different research methods, may not spring from a failure to sharpen our conceptual tools. Instead, it might indicate the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of morality, calling into doubt the possibility of designating such a thing as a static and clearly demarcated entity that can be called the "moral self" [Chazan 1998], nurtured by anything resembling an analytically distinct "moral dimension" [Etzioni 1988] of social life.

Research across disciplines suggests that the boundaries of all the things that we currently address as "morality" are fuzzy, and the core missing. Noticing that neither a focus on substantive content, emotional expression, motivating force, social function, nor brain

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mechanism can produce such a common or shared element, Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley [2012] have coined the notion of the "disunity of morality." The phenomena grouped under the name morality have family resemblance, to use Wittgenstein's expression, yet they do not have a shared essence.

### Genealogies of morality vs. studies of value change

A prominent way to study the connections between things that have family resemblance is genealogy, that is, the study of their family history. Historical research, advanced as genealogy, was arguably the harbinger of the insight into the lack of a shared essence of all things called moral. Indeed, few accounts on the study of morality and the history of ethics fail to notice the seminal role played by Friedrich Nietzsche in introducing such considerations in his study *On the Genealogy of Morality* [[1887] 2007]. The insight of Nietzsche was that "morality" as a category, and not just particular moral values, is a historical product.

Trained as a classical philologist, Nietzsche argued that our contemporary semantic contrast between "good" and "evil" is a replacement of an earlier contrast between "good" and "bad." In the latter distinction, "good" is synonymous with nobility and everything which is life-asserting, such as wealth and power. In the contemporary distinction, by contrast, the meaning of "good" is associated with self-restraint and made the antithesis of the original aristocratic "good," which is now seen as cruel and aggressive and re-labeled as "evil." Morality grew out of what, from today's perspective, looks like aesthetic judgments in a process called the "revaluation of all values." What Nietzsche observed is also known as the difference between ancient virtue ethics and contemporary norm based ethics [MacIntyre 1981; Williams 1993]. Once made, it proved to be an insight that was difficult to unsee. The turn-of-the-century philosophy of values that followed upon it was in large parts a failed effort to regain an air of transcendence for the notion of morality that it had lost to historical research [Schnädelbach 1984].

John Levi Martin has recently followed in these footsteps and shown that the triad of "the true, the good, and the beautiful," ubiquitous as it is nowadays, is not universal even within the history of Western thought [Martin 2017]. The creation of this triadic architectonic and its subsequent mapping on separate faculties of the mind was

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a product of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was subsequently paired with the language of values, which initially developed within economic thinking [Joas [1997] 2000]. We now distinguish among truth or cognitive values, moral values, and aesthetic values without taking into account how comparatively recent and fundamentally different from previous ways of thinking this threefold categorization is.

It is the genealogy of such architectonics, as Martin calls them, that we pursue in this special issue. In a similar way, Gabriel Abend has recently reformulated the genealogical project in the language of analytical philosophy and provided a checklist of criteria to map different moralities across time and space [Abend 2014]. Building on an earlier distinction between thin and thick forms of morality [Abend 2011], he describes the existence of different moral backgrounds, that is, sets of assumptions, predispositions, and beliefs that underpin and inform moral judgments and behavior. In this special issue, we distinguish between morality as a category or form, and moral values as content. The latter might change, while the former stays the same, or vice versa: actors might arrive at the same moral judgment or line of action from very different moral systems.

The work of Ronald Inglehart on value change provides a well known example that illustrates the difference between these two projects [Inglehart 1977; Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005]. Based on data from the Eurobarometer and later the World Values Survey, Inglehart describes a shift from materialist values (e.g. economic security) to postmaterialist values (e.g. self expression and quality of life) in a process of generational replacement. This longitudinal survey has been running for more than three decades now in some places, so we can take it as an example of historical research into value change. As such, it is has produced fascinating results and remains a project that is worth pursuing, but it does not exhaust the potential of what a historical study of morality can contribute. Inglehart grounds his account of "moral value change" in an unchanging or universal category of morality based on a hierarchy of needs [Maslow 1943]. Thus, the way people make moral judgments and relate different values to each other is fixed by human nature; what changes is instead simply the number of people who subscribe, for instance, to "materialist" or "postmaterialist" values. Put differently, what is changing is not the architectonic of the hierarchy of needs, to use Martin's expression, but only people's position within it.

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Inglehart's work is not the only research on changing moral values tied to a universalizing account of morality as a category. Comparable examples range from accounts of human nature and the moral sense in enlightenment thought [Taylor 1989] to current research in neuroscience and arguments about the moral brain [Liao 2016]. Sociologists have contributed to such universalizing accounts as well; structural-functionalism was in fact a major protagonist of such universalism. Parsons devised a set of initially five, later only four, dualistic pattern variables to describe cultural values. In their various logically possible combinations these variables resulted in a system of 32 types, comprising the realm of the empirically possible [Parsons 1951]. Just like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the architectonic of this system was not subject to historical change, only the position of a given social system within it was.

One has to be careful to distinguish this argument from the claim that structural-functionalism lacked an account of social change. While this theory would be accused of being a fundamentally static social theory, one of its most prominent applications—modernization theory—heavily emphasized change. Receiving an early specification from Parsons' collaborator Edward Shils, modernization theories often used dualistic pattern variables to distinguish between traditional and modern societies. Morality played a central role in making this distinction. In particular, the difference between the values of ascription and achievement was used to explain differences in economic development between countries. One prominent work with the revealing title *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* [Banfield 1957] held that underdevelopment could be attributed to cultural values. As critics have noted [Adams, Clemens and Orloff 2005], this kind of analytic model risks imposing an idealized image of Western societies on other countries in the world where it fits poorly, and hypostasizes a dubious, dualistic distinction between moral values associated with tradition and modernity [Chakrabarty 2000].

*Dimensions of research: Moral justifications, practices, and institutions*

The articles in this special issue all provide genealogies of morality (as a category), rather than inquiries into changing values (as its content). We do not aim to present a unified theory of morality, but instead highlight causal factors that bring the change of morality about. This research thus helps to show what produces and

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re-produces morality over time and what causes it to change. We highlight three insights first, the relation of moral evaluations and justifications to non-moral evaluations is contingent over time; second, the question what it means to be a moral actor is dependent not only on moral evaluations themselves, but also on how these evaluations intertwine and structure the self; and, finally, the relationship between moral evaluations and the self is in turn dynamically structured by and structures social institutions. Thus, research relating to the contingency of moral justifications, practices, and institutions has been a recurrent theme in historical scholarship.

Unlike under the dominance of structural-functionalism, this research is no longer restricted to scholarship on sociological theory, but has been advanced in multiple subfields of the discipline. If structural-functionalism tended to, as David Stark has put it [2011], strategically separate economic value and social values, it is perhaps ironic that important recent work on moral evaluation stems from economic sociology. Indeed, this subfield draws from Polanyi's [2001 [1944]] insistence that the moral "disembedding" of modern economies from their surrounding social structures is only a fragile and dubious historical accomplishment, and Hirschman's [1997 [1977]] demonstration that economic "interest" can only be understood in terms of surrounding moral concepts.

Indeed, how moral arenas—whether the economy itself or beyond—are bounded has become a central area of sociological research. Viviana Zelizer, for instance, has shown that putting a price on social relations can increase their moral and emotional value, and that money itself is hardly a neutral medium of exchange, but rather a socially meaningful and thus also morally significant entity [1985, 1994]. Similarly, Michel Lamont has influentially shown that the categories or symbolic boundaries of cultural taste, socio-economic status, and moral values do not only differ in content among American and French upper middle-class men, but also in the way they are related to each other [Lamont 1994; Lamont and Molnár 2002]. Marion Fourcade, moreover, has shown not only how economic valuation remains one of these crucial moral backgrounds [2011] but also how conceptions of the domain of economics itself vary internationally [2009].

Making a moral evaluation means asking a prior question: how do moral evaluations, and morality more generally, relate to what it means to be a person and agent? In the "new" sociology of morality, explorations of the historically-contingent ways of answering this

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question have several roots. One root is in the history of philosophy, which uncovers enormous variations in how philosophers related the structure of selfhood to changing moral regimes [Schneewind 1998], and the implications these shifts had for everyday moral life [Taylor 1989]. Another root is Foucault's archeology of knowledge, excavating how modern subjects were constituted by diffuse regimes and discourses of power [Dreyfus and Rabinow 2014 [1983]]. Finally, the tradition of "relational" sociology has emphasized how the very category of individualism and selfhood is constituted partly by evaluative judgments of relationships with others [White 2008].

A vibrant social-scientific scholarship has grown from these roots. Christian Smith [2011] and Webb Keane [2015] have both investigated the connections among selfhood, moral action, and philosophical and psychological conceptions of ethics. Historical studies of literature, likewise, have shown tantalizing hints that "the self" as a unitary entity is best understood as a kind of emotional and moral self-presentation [Greenblatt 1980]. Iddo Tavory [2013; Tavory and Winchester 2012] has also sought to connect selfhood and moral action, but comparatively emphasizes the role of religious life and the experience of ritual. Meanwhile, more explicitly historical research has also brought changing moral conceptions of selfhood into sharper focus. Some of this work has emphasized that strategic action along partitioned networks has radical consequences for the status of the self, either fracturing its unity [Padgett and Ansell 1993] or leading to behavior that to modern eyes looks ethically corrupt and hypocritical [Biagioli 1993; McLean 2007]. As these early-modern networks were reconstituted into recognizably national, elite fields, moreover, scholarship has also emphasized how the arenas to which moral selves referred and attached also grew increasingly impersonal and abstract [Bearman 1993; Ikegami 1995] even as they relied on stark methods of moral discipline [Gorski 2003].

If moral evaluations and agency are both historically dynamic, what links them together? For structural-functionalists, the answer was social institutions—the social norms or rules of society that are shaped by cultural values and through a process of socialization into role expectations determine individual behavior. But this kind of mediating account was one of the central points of attack of the structural-functionalist paradigm, and subsequent theories which emphasize the contingent historical dynamics of institutional change [Sewell 1992; 2005], their potential to become institutionalized into taken-for-granted features of social life [Ogilvie 2007], and their

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tendency to have their forms copied and mimicked (Meyer *et al.* 1997) have all influenced the contemporary study of moral institutions.

One rich vein of recent work has been in the sociology of organizations, which has emphasized the autonomous dimension of institutional dynamics. Kieran Healy [2006], for instance, has shown how procurement organizations motivate people to donate organs and blood in the absence of market mechanisms that rely on monetary incentives. Donations are not just an expression of internalized values, but an outcome actively facilitated by organizational strategies. Dan Lainer-Vos [2013] has looked at fundraising among diaspora communities and shown that nation building is not tantamount to creating unifying symbols, but facilitated by organizational mechanisms that bind heterogenous groups to the nation. Monika Krause [2014] likewise studied how organizations shape moral decisions, focusing on how organizational fields influence the logic of humanitarian relief that NGOs use when deciding how to allocate resources. The focus in these studies, in other words, is on organizational tools that produce outcomes in the absence of shared moral values and norms that guide behavior. Taken together, research on moral justifications, agency, and institutions has shown that there is a diverse set of moral values that is produced and re-produced by an equally diverse set of causal mechanisms.

In this issue, Laurence Fontaine demonstrates the deep connection between social and economic evaluations through a history of market development in early Modern Europe. Departing from a scholarly consensus that views markets as "self-contained entities," Fontaine instead insists that the kinds of conflicts that occurred over what kinds of market activity are morally appropriate—she focuses in particular on moneylending—are only intelligible in light of status conflicts between aristocratic honor societies and a rising merchant class. As she demonstrates through her analysis of plays by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Molière, the passions of market exchange, such as greed, were repeatedly brought into dramatic confrontation with aristocratic virtues like prodigality.

Nicholas Hoover Wilson investigates the changing dynamics of imperial administration in the case of the English East India Company. Advancing a "historical meta-ethics," he sets the task of suggesting why deeply contextualist moral justifications of imperial officials' behavior transition (as they do by the 19th century) to much more abstract relationships of personal "duty" to impersonal spheres of value such as "the economy," "the state," and indigenous and

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colonial "society." This transition, he argues, implies different justifications and groundings of the moral character of administrative officials. His explanation for this shift emphasizes the role of escalating organizational conflict across social and geographical distance to appeal to unfamiliar audiences.

Stefan Bargheer, meanwhile, compares efforts to pass international legislation for the conservation of wild birds in turn of the century Europe, with a focus on Britain and Germany. Obstacles to this project were not merely incompatible laws already in existence in the various countries, but different ways of relating economic, moral, and aesthetic evaluations of wildlife to each other. Extending the sociology of morality into an ecology of mind, he shows that as a consequence of different experiences of birdlife in everyday practices, not only the specific content of moral arguments for conservation differed between countries, but the very boundaries of moral claims and their relation to other forms of justification.

Finally, Matthew Norton looks at the law as a moral institution and asks why, ironically, given their meanings in the larger legal and British imperial fields at the time, the act of attainder (legislative condemnation) came to be absolutely excluded from the U.S. Constitution when the power to pardon was strengthened in it. To explain this historical divergence, Norton develops and deploys the concept of "relational facts," arguing that the moral significance of both pardon and attainder came not from an immutable content, but rather from the way that both concepts fit into a network with other concepts.

In sum a historical perspective on morality, as exemplified by the articles in this issue, gives considerable weight to the claim that morality is a central element of social life, yet it calls into doubt approaches that conceptualize morality as an analytically fixed category or operationalize it as a self-contained entity akin to a variable.

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