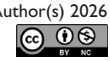
Article

JCS

Journal of Classical Sociology
1–16



DOI: 10.1177/1468795X261432169
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs


Is sociology a moral science?

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Abstract

This article uses the work of David Hume, J. S. Mill and Émile Durkheim to trace the ambiguous and difficult relations between the concepts of the moral and the social within the development of Sociology. The works of Hume and Mill will be examined in terms of their respective attempts to develop a Moral Science, and the limitations and legacy of their respective approaches will be analyzed. The article will then demonstrate how Durkheim signals a shift away from a notion of the "moral sciences" based on an analysis of human nature to the invocation of the realm of the social which operates at the level of the group or collective. The moral becomes a matter of what is considered "obligatory" within a society. The article suggests that the difference between the moral [la morale] and morality [moralité] has been lost in English translations of Durkheim's texts and that a recognition of how he deployed this distinction throughout his work sheds new light on his theoretical position. By asking whether Sociology is a Moral Science, it is possible to shed new light both on the specific history and development of Sociology, and the article points to the importance for Sociology and sociologists of renewing their engagement with matters of the moral. The article will suggest that an ongoing consideration of the relation between systematic knowledge and what ought to be done is core to the project of what Sociology is, or could be. It is in this sense that Sociology is (or should be) a moral science.

Keywords

moral, social, ethos, morality, Durkheim, sociology, moral science

Introduction

This article will attempt to demonstrate that the relationship of Sociology[1] to matters of the moral are longstanding and often ambiguous. It will trace some of the shifting meanings of the terms "moral" and "moral science" in relation to the development of social science and Sociology, through analyses of the positions of David Hume, J. S. Mill, and

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Émile Durkheim, all of whom have something to say about "moral science." Although the contentious place of the political has been of longstanding concern (see, e.g. Latour, 1993; Weber, 1949), the status of the moral has received less attention[2] and this article seeks to provide a partial remedy to this situation. For, as Abend (2008) has pointed out, matters of the moral and morality pervade sociological research to an extent which often goes unrecognized. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the analyses which follow do not involve a general historical review of how morals have been studied within Sociology, nor how morality is treated within the contemporary field.[3] Instead, the starting point is Abend's (2008: 90) contention that: "For the sociology of morality to be theoretically and empirically fruitful, its underlying metaethical and epistemological commitments must be clear, consistent, and solid" (Abend (2008: 90). The first stages of the article will outline the development of some of these epistemological commitments, and how these have led to ambiguities within attempts to render the moral as a possible object of knowledge, through analyses of Hume and Mill. The second half of the paper will focus on Durkheim's attempts to develop a "science of the moral." It will be argued that an important aspect of Durkheim's argument has been misrecognized in most commentaries, namely his distinction between the moral [*la morale*] and morality [*moralité*]; a recognition of this sheds new light on his theoretical position. The aim, however, is not simply to advocate Durkheim's stance. Instead, following Martin (1998), the article seeks to unravel the complex overlapping of questions of the moral, authority, society and science and to consider some of the implications for contemporary Sociology.

Admittedly, to ask – "Is Sociology is Moral Science" – might suggest that it is possible to answer such a question with a simple "yes" or "no." It will soon become clear that this is not the case. The question is posed in this way to highlight the contentious status of the moral in the development of Sociology and it is important to recognize that there are other paths through which such relations could be traced.[4] Rather than provide a definite account either of what Sociology is, or what it *should* be, the more modest aim of the article is to invite a reconsideration of how this problematic status came about, with a view to reconsidering the status and role of the moral within Sociology today.[5] Less modest, perhaps, will be its suggestion that matters of the moral are inherent to Sociology, in ways that require further consideration. Without wishing to go as far as Dahrendorf in his claim that "moralizing has at all times been the stimulus that advanced theory, especially in sociology" (Dahrendorf, 1973: 82), the conclusion to the article will propose that an ongoing consideration of the relation between systematic knowledge and what *ought* to be done is core to the project of what Sociology is, or could be. It is in this sense that Sociology is (or should be) a moral science.

Hume on morals and morality

David Hume has been credited as the first to set out the distinction between the natural social sciences. For example: "Much printers" ink has flowed, and ebbed, in the 250 years since David Hume staked the claim for a social science to equal the natural sciences' (Dahrendorf, 1997: 101). Such broad statements overlook the fact that Hume does not use the term "social science," instead preferring phrases such as "moral science" or "moral philosophy." Others, such as Sauer (2006: 51), have recognized that Hume's

project involves "the establishment of 'moral science'" but do not investigate what constitutes the "moral" element of such a science, describing it, somewhat anachronistically, as simply "the social sciences" (Sauer, 2006: 51). By contrast, this section will outline the dual sense in which Hume deploys the word "moral," thereby highlighting an ambiguity which, it will be argued, influenced the development of what is now called social science and Sociology.

In both *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1975) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (2007), Hume outlines the need for a method and "an instrument" to enable a science of the human mind. He argues that while the "natural philosophy" of Newton and others has set out its particular method for the analysis of nature and mathematics what is lacking is a "moral philosophy" or "moral science" which will enable an "anatomy of the mind" (Hume, 1975: 326). Hume, therefore, sets out to demonstrate how to investigate "the finer sentiments of the mind, the operations of the understanding, the various agitations of the passions" (Hume, 2007: 44) as it is these which, according to Hume, constitute "human nature." The science of such human nature proceeds from his philosophical position that ideas are copies of impressions, and that such impressions convey the experiences through which the world is felt via our sense experience or "sensations."[6] How, then, to know "the finer sentiments of the mind [. . .] the various agitations of the passions"? His answer is that we need to:

> produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied [. . .]. And by this means, we may, perhaps, attain a new microscope or species of optics, by which, in the *moral sciences*, the most minute, and most simple ideas may be so enlarged as to fall readily under our apprehension, and be equally known (Hume, 2007: 46. Emphasis added)

The moral sciences act as a microscope, replicating and enlarging the basis of human experience so that it can be considered separately from its initial occurrence. In this way, the moral sciences are able to provide a specific kind of knowledge, different from that of the natural sciences: Moral science is the science of the tastes, sentiments and passions of humans. One consequence of Hume's position is that most "factual" reasoning is "moral" in that sense that it deals not with the mathematical or the metaphysical but with the operations of human feelings and cognitions. Indeed, Millican states that Hume's realm of the "moral" refers to *any* "factual or inductive argument from experience" (Millican, 2007: xxxix. Parentheses removed from original for sake of clarity).

This sheds light on the structure and argument of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1975) which has the subtitle "Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects." The "moral subjects" which Hume sets out in the subtitle include Logic, Morals, Criticism and Politics (Hume, 1975: xv–xvi) and the form of investigation is "scientific" in the 18th century sense of science as producing systematic knowledge. The development of this moral science (or moral philosophy), which is based on factual arguments derived from experience, runs through Book I – "Of the Understanding" – and Book II – "Of the Passions" (Hume, 1975: 1–274; 275–454), as he attempts to provide an anatomy of the operations of the mind, and hence of human nature. The analyses continue in Book III which has the title – "Of Morals" – (Hume, 1975: 455–621) though it would have been clearer if Hume has called it "Of Morality,"

for it is here that he discusses that specific capacity of the human mind to make "moral distinctions" as opposed to the more general philosophical and proto-psychological questions that he addresses in the first two books. The kernel of Hume's account of morality is that that reason and understanding cannot account for the immediacy and violence of those feelings which morality arouses. "Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular" (Hume, 1975: 457). This introduces the idea that there is a distinct "force" to morality which needs to be explained. Hume links this force of morality to the specific kind of "feelings" which are generated by "moral rectitude and depravity" (Hume, 1975: 470). Morality becomes that sphere of feeling and judgment whereby humans "approve of one character [. . .] condemn another" (Hume, 1975: 456). It is in this way that Hume's version of morality, with its primary concern on the judgment of of the character of others, is intimately connected to a form of moralizing. This does not mean that such moralizing necessarily infects the rest of his moral science. However, Hume is not as clear as he could be on this matter and his lack of a clear distinction between the moral as a mode of analysis and the particular moral judgments made by individuals has led to a misunderstanding of the role and status of moral science. Proponents of a moral science that aims to generate a form of knowledge which is distinct from that of natural science are faced with the difficulty of disassociating this "moral" element of knowledge from the moralizing aspect of morality, insofar as the latter becomes associated with judgments of character. Without a clear distinction or theory of the difference between moral knowledge and accounts of moral judgments (morality), Hume sets moral science on its ambiguous path.

Before turning to a discussion of how Durkheim insists on maintaining a distinction between the moral [*la morale*] as the subject matter of a moral science and the particular judgments or rules behavior which confront specific individuals [*moralité*], an analysis of J. S. Mill's specific account of "Moral Science" will be offered.

Mill on moral science

While Hume focuses on the very possibility of moral science, or moral philosophy, and says little about the procedures of "natural" science, Mill (2009 [1882, 1843]), a century or so later, takes the opposite route in his mammoth text *A System Of Logic, Ratiocinative And Inductive*. It is the final chapter – "On the Logic of the Moral Sciences" – which is of interest. Here Mill sets out to explain why moral science (and hence social science) is to be allowed within the fold of ("proper") science. In the five preceding books of his *System of* Logic, Mill has insisted that the cornerstone of science is that it discovers universal laws. Such universal laws can be compared to, and distinguished from, empirical laws. In a manner very different to Hume, Mill seeks to investigate the possibility of a science of human nature, though, like Hume, he does so under the heading of "Moral Science": "the science of Human Nature may be said to exist in proportion as the approximate truths, which compose a practical knowledge of mankind [sic], can be exhibited as corollaries from the universal laws of human nature on which they rest" (Mill, 2009[1882, 1843]: 1031).

The logical and ontological order of analysis is important for Mill. He starts with individuals, in terms of individual minds, notes that they are diverse and subsequently asks what it is that they have in common.[7] His answer is *not* that there is one unique human

nature which all humans share ("there is scarcely any mode of feeling or conduct which is, in the absolute sense, common to all mankind [sic]" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1049)). The vast range of human beliefs, actions and behaviors which are witnessed cannot be subsumed into one general human nature. It may be possible for the budding social scientist to make some generalizations from experience and observation and thereby derive "empirical laws" which can serve well in many, if not most, cases. However, this does not justify us in claiming that such generalizations are universal. They do not, therefore, have the status of science. This is not to deny the possibility of a science of human nature; its basis, however, lies elsewhere. That which enables all humans to be compared is the universal law which governs the formation of (individual) character, and which, thereby, provides something which humans have in common: "mankind have not one universal character, but there exist universal laws of the Formation of Character" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1049). True science invokes universal laws, and what can be said to be truly universal, when it comes to humans, is not some shared aspect of human nature but the manner in which individual characters are formed. Mill proposes the term "Ethology" for this mode of analysis. "This science of Ethology may be called the Exact Science of Human Nature; for its truths are not, like the empirical laws which depend on them, approximate generalizations, but real laws" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1055). This raises the question of what is *moral* about such moral sciences.

The most general *moral* science, according to Mill, is Psychology. His proposed subbranch of this science, Ethology, therefore relies upon the more general set of laws which comprise the human mind (see Chapter IV, "Of the Laws of the Mind," Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1032–1043]: "if [. . .] we employ the name Psychology for the science of the elementary laws of mind, Ethology will serve for the ulterior science which determines the kind of character produced in conformity to those general laws by any set of circumstances, physical and *moral*" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1054. Emphasis added). This mention of the moral returns Mill to the subject matter of Book VI and to the topic of this article. Crucially, in the sentence which precedes this elaboration of the status of Psychology, Mill provides some etymological justification for the name which he gives his moral science of human nature:

> A science is thus formed, to which I would propose to give the name of Ethology, or the Science of Character, from *ἦθος*, a word more nearly corresponding to the term "character" as I here use it, than any other word in the same language. The name is perhaps etymologically applicable to the entire science of our mental and moral nature. (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1054)

The word *ἦθος* is usually translated as ethos but it closely related to the term *ethics*. Mill renders it as "character" and makes an implicit differentiation from the moral. With this in mind, it is time, perhaps, for a discussion of the complex and shifting meanings of the terms "moral" and "ethos."

Morals and ethos

The word "moral" has a long history with shifting, overlapping and expanding meanings. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED),[8] the English derivation of the word has "multiple origins" and, in its extensive entry for the etymology of the word "moral,"

points out that in the late 17th century, in addition to being concerned with the distinction between right and wrong, it developed the sense of "founded on opinion, sentiment or belief and not on meticulous facts or reasoning."[9] Here lies an explanation of the dual usage of the term moral to be found in Hume. What is key, for the argument being set out here, is that there is both an overlap and a distinction between morality as concerned with the rightness and wrongness of (individual) actions or characters, and the sense of the "moral" referring to a form of knowledge or reasoning which might lack the definiteness of the mathematics, but which formed a different basis of knowledge. Moreover, there was a general sense that such "moral" investigations were tied to an analysis of, and knowledge of feelings, sentiments, passions.

In addition to this, there is an etymological aspect to the development of the word "moral" which is of more than scholarly interest. The Roman philosopher, politician and lawyer Cicero (106–43 BCE) felt that his contemporaries had lost sight of the ideas of Ancient Greece and he set about translating the works of Aristotle, Plato, and others into Latin to improve the intellectual climate of Rome. In doing so, he coined the Latin term *moralis* making use of an already existing couplet between the Latin word mōrēs and the Greek ἤθη.[10] Importantly, ἤθη is the plural of *ήθος* (or ethos) which, as has been seen, is the term that Mill used to explain his notion of Ethology. Both mōrēs and ἤθη indicate the "shared habits, manners, and customs of a community or social group."[11] Indeed, the English word *mores* still carries the same meaning. Cicero made use of the affinity between these two terms to derive the new adjective "moralis" or "moral." His deployment of this new word was intended to both condemn the lax customs of his contemporaries and to point to an ideal of behavior which he felt could be found in Greek philosophy. Cicero felt that his society, and its members, lacked character. It is tempting to say that he believed that they lacked *moral* character. However, it is precisely this moral element that Cicero is trying to evoke, create even, through his neologism "*moralis*. What is noteworthy is that *ήθος* or ethos refers, not only to the habits and customs of a group or society but also to *character*.[12] Mill was clearly aware of such etymological roots when choosing the term *ήθος* and ethos as descriptors of his universal law of character formation which lies at the heart of his Moral Sciences.[13] For Mill, character formation constitutes the moral element, and the universal law provides the science element.

According to Mill's scheme, Social Science[14] stands *within* Moral Science; the Moral Sciences are more general, their remit includes the Mind and the individual human mind. Social Science is derivative in that the lives of humans within society or social organizations are "empirical" phenomena which proceed from the more general laws which govern the mind and how this is organized into the formation of individual characters: "after the science of individual man [sic] comes the science of man [sic] in society—of the actions of collective masses of mankind [sic], and the various phenomena which constitute social life" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1061). Social Science or "Sociology" (a name that he calls "a convenient barbarism" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1085) is subsequent to both Psychology and Ethology, and this is reflected in the organization of the chapters in Book VI.[15]

As with Hume, Mill's position includes a subtle yet marked distinction between the Moral in its most general sense and morality, as concerned with the rightness and wrongness, goodness, and badness of either individual actions or as constituting individual characters. It is only in the final chapter, Chapter XII, that Mill turns to questions of

morality, in the chapter "Of The Logic Of Practice, Or Art; Including Morality And Policy" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1145–56). For Mill, that which differentiates morality from moral science is that the former deals with imperatives. As Mill is a clear writer, it is worth letting him explain his position at some length. This is how he starts the very final chapter of his lengthy tome:

> In the preceding chapters we have endeavored to characterize the present state of those among the branches of knowledge called Moral, which are sciences in the only proper sense of the term, that is, inquiries into the course of nature. It is customary, however, to include under the term moral knowledge, and even (though improperly) under that of moral science, an inquiry the results of which do not express themselves in the indicative, but in the imperative mood, or in periphrases equivalent to it; what is called the knowledge of duties; practical ethics, or morality. Now, the imperative mood is the characteristic of art, as distinguished from science. Whatever speaks in rules, or precepts, not in assertions respecting matters of fact, is art; and ethics, or morality, is properly a portion of the art corresponding to the sciences of human nature and society. (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1145)

It may be tempting to assign Mill's comment to a clear statement of the division between the hard, natural sciences and the humanities or arts. Such an interpretation would miss the nuance of Mill's position and the legacy that it bestows. Mill is clear that there is an area of knowledge which he terms "Moral." Within this field there are some branches which merit the correct designation of "science" insofar as they are inquiries into the "course of nature." In addition to moral science, in the strict sense of the term, there is the possibility of another form of knowledge; a moral knowledge which is concerned not with describing things as they are but as pointing to what should, or even ought, be done with respect to such things. This he calls the "imperative mood." Mill's aim is not to undermine or dismiss such investigations but to give them their proper place and to distinguish them from the investigations of genuine Moral Science.

To give shape to this distinction, Mill describes those forms of investigation, and knowledge, which fall under the remit of the imperative as "arts." This includes "knowledge of duties," "practical ethics" and morality. Again, as with Hume, we have a double sense of the moral. Moral science is not about morality, as is customarily understood, in terms of duties and practical ethics. What is of interest, is how Mill describes debates over the rules and precepts which constitute "ethics or morality" (interestingly, he uses both the Greek and Latin informed terms) as "arts." But such arts are not separate from, or in opposition to, science (including Moral Science). Instead, he describes ethics and morality as "properly a portion of the art corresponding to the sciences of human nature and society."

Art, according to Mill, deals with truths, even the truths of science, but does so in a manner different to that of science. Art assembles truths from disparate and different fields of science, insofar as they impact upon the concerns of "practical life." Nevertheless, despite (or perhaps because of) his view of the distinction between the imperative mood of morality which concerns the rules which infuse "the exigencies of practical life" (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1151) and the indicative mood of science, including Moral Science (which is, after all, the "natural" science of those aspects of human nature which exhibit universal laws), Mill leads himself to a clear bifurcation between considerations of a

description of states of affairs within society and an injunction of what should be done about such states of affairs. It is important, Mill argues, not to confuse or confound the Art of Morality with the knowledge generated by Moral Science. Indeed, he condemns those social scientists who do not adhere to the distinction:

> Whether the ends themselves are such as ought to be pursued [. . .] is no part of his [sic] business as a cultivator of science to decide [. . .]. but those who treat of human nature and society invariably [. . .] undertake to say, not merely what is, but what ought to be. (Mill, 2009 [1882, 1843]: 1153)

This creates a tension, which has dogged Sociology and Social Science throughout its history, between the implacable status of the findings of science, which tell us nothing about what should be done about them, and the impetus for those involved in the social sciences to make statements about what should be done about such findings (see Martin, 1998: 125–127). Furthermore, two aspects have appeared within the study of morals. On the one side there is the attempt to provide an "objective" description of the customs, or patterns of behavior which are to be found in a specific group, society, or culture and which make us various morals codes. On the other, there is the need for an account of the specific force or impetus which seems to surround matters of the moral. The following section will discuss how Durkheim deals with these overlapping tensions and how this has a legacy which still informs current Sociology.

Durkheim on the moral and morality

The relationship of the moral to both society and science is a concern that runs through Durkheim's work. The book that he was working on at the time of his death was to be called simply *La Morale* (see, Abend, 2008: 98; Riley, 2014: 203–205) while on the first page of his first book, *De La Division Du Travail Social*, Durkheim sets out his intention to establish a "science de *la morale*" (Durkheim, 2007: xxxvii. Emphasis added). This phrase has been translated as both "the science of ethics" (Durkheim, 1964: 32) and "the science of morality" (Durkheim, 2013: 3). In what follows, the more direct translation – "science of the moral" or "moral science" – will be used. Not only will this align the discussions with the theme of this article, it will enable attention to be drawn to the important distinction that Durkheim maintains between the moral [*la morale*] and morality [*moralité*]. In French, "morale" refers to a collection of rules or prescriptions regarding behavior within a group, culture or society; "moralité" conveys more of a sense of moral character and an individual's orientation to the collective set of moral rules. English versions of Durkheim's works have tended to use the word "morality" to translate both of these terms, thereby clouding interpretations of his work. For example, In *The Division of Labour* Durkheim states that "the moral [la morale] is the indispensable minimum, that which is strictly necessary, the daily bread without which societies cannot live [. . .]" (Durkheim, 1964: 51; 2007: 14). In both the Simpson and Hall translations (Durkheim, 1964: 51; 2013: 43, respectively), this reads: "*morality* is the. . .". This misses the important point that, for Durkheim, morality can be individual but the moral cannot.

The moral (la morale) is concerned with the social bond which enables society to both inhere and cohere, and the systematic study of this constitutes a "science of the moral" or "moral science" ("science de la morale"): "The moral [La morale], at all levels, is never met with save in the state of society" (Durkheim, 2013: 311; 2007: 395). In this respect, although there may be the possibility of an individual morality, it is impossible for there to be an individual *moral* as the moral is always social.

> As for what is termed *an individual moral* [la morale individuelle], if by this is meant a set of duties in relation to which the individual would be both subject and object, which would bind him [sic] only to himself and would consequently subsist even if he [sic] were alone, this is an abstract conception that has no foundation in reality (Durkheim, 2013: 311; 2007: 395. Emphasis added)

The English translation uses the phrase "individual morality" thereby both obscuring Durkheim's specific conception of the moral and making it seem that he denies the existence of individual morality, which is not the case. Durkheim's point is that the very constitution and possibility of society is a matter of the moral, for "social solidarity is a wholly moral phenomenon" (1964: 64).

The extensive and close connection between the moral and the social raises the important question of what, exactly, is the *moral* element of Durkheim's theory? Why is it not just *social*? To put it another way, what gives the moral its force – what enables it to constrain, restrain or influence human beliefs, actions and behavior. Sociology is not, for Durkheim, a simple description of the habits or customs of a groups or societies. A delineation of expected and customary behaviors will be involved but what is also required is an account of the dynamic factor which explains why, and how, people act as they do in relation to the prevailing edicts. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim talks of what he calls "the material and moral supremacy that society exerts over its members" (Durkheim, 1982: 45). In his last major published work, the focus has shifted from society to the collective, but the crucial role of the moral remains: "The necessity with which the categories are imposed upon us is not the effect of simple habits whose yoke we could easily throw off with a little effort [. . .]; it is a special sort of moral necessity which is to the intellectual life what moral obligation is to the will" (Durkheim, 2008: 17–18). However, it is in the series of lectures which have been collected into the posthumously published *Moral Education* (1961, 1925) that Durkheim most explicitly discusses where the moral draws its force, in terms of what constitutes its authority. *Moral Education* (Durkheim, 1961, 1925) follows the opposite path from *The Division of Labour* (Durkheim, 1964, 2007, 2013) in that its main concern is how individuals, in the figure of schoolchildren, can be best integrated into the moral bonds of society, for example through the inculcation of discipline, which is the topic of the first two lectures. Although Durkheim talks of "the critical moment in the formation of moral character" (Durkheim, 1961: 17), unlike Mill, he does not think there is a universal law of such character formation. Instead, he seeks to demonstrate how Sociology, as a science of the moral, has a specific role to outline the strengths and weaknesses of the current status of the moral within a society, with a view to suggest amendments.

This is, according to Durkheim, a pressing question as he felt that French society was suffering from a decline in participation in forms of group life. One reason for this was

that associations, such as guilds and communes, which had previously acted as intermediaries between the "domestic society and political society [. . .] have been totally abolished" (Durkheim, 1961: 232). As a result, "communal life is very impoverished" (Durkheim, 1961: 232). Hence, Durkheim sees the school as vital insofar as it was, in France, the only intermediary "between family and the state" (Durkheim, 1961: 232).[16] Schools, according to Durkheim, become the main method through which common life can be encouraged. Furthermore, Sociology, is to play a major role in providing the means for the renewal of group life insofar as it can contribute to an identification of the means by which communal life can be generated and maintained. Individual "morality," in the sense of the actions and judgments of individuals, is characterized in terms of a social, and hence, moral integration. For example, the absence of likeness or similarity of an individual to the collective group is "a sign of moral failure" (Durkheim, 1964: 396).

As demonstrated by Mestrović (1985), such concerns also relate to Durkheim's account of anomie. Mestrovic and Brown (1985) also focus on the question of translation and argue that those which render anomie as "normlessness" have obscured the fundamental link in Durkheim's thought between sociality and morality. They show how, in his discussions of anomie, Durkheim makes use of two key terms: "règle and dérèglement" (Mestrovic and Brown, 1985: 84). The notion of "règle" is that of a rule of conduct which prescribes action, and insofar as such rules of conduct enable the cohesion of a society, they constitute an element of the moral [la morale]. However, the lack of such rules, which is represented by the state of anomie, is not simply "normlessness," as writers such as Merton and Parsons have suggested (see Mestrovic and Brown, 1985: 81). It is a more serious matter. If the moral is integral to the social, then a lack of social bonds becomes a matter of a lack of moral bonds. Mestrovic and Brown offer the term "derangement" (1985: 84) to retain the force of the French "dérèglement" in order to characterize anomie. This also makes it possible to equate anomie with sin: "Durkheim seems to use 'anomy' as the secular equivalent of 'sin.' It is [. . .] an inversion of the sacred and the profane" (Mestrović, 1985: 127). Or, as Hilbert puts it: "Morality is not simply an extra-societal phenomenon attached to society that makes it run smoothly [. . .]. Absence of morality *is* absence of society; any tendency toward that state is a tendency toward anomie" (Hilbert, 1992: 30. Emphasis in original).[17] It is in this respect that a science of the moral, a moral science, is key to Durkheim's enterprise.

In order to respond to the more general question of whether Sociology itself is, or should be, a moral science, it is necessary to spend some time on the relationship between morality and science and Durkheim's text *Moral Education* contains a remarkable discussion of autonomy, science and morality, Durkheim (1961: 116–119) in which he argues that Kant's categorical imperative may be categorical but it lacks any (moral) imperative, as will be discussed further in the next section.

Morality, authority, science

Durkheim regards compulsion, obligation and duty as the hallmarks of the moral. If consent is absolutely freely given then the element of compulsion, and hence the moral aspect, has dropped out. This produces a different slant to the question regarding what exactly is moral about Durkheim's conception of the moral. For: "while all rules

command, the moral rule consists entirely in a commandment and in nothing else. That is why the moral rule speaks to us with such authority – why, when it speaks, all other considerations must be subordinated. It permits no equivocation" (Durkheim, 1961: 30–31). Indeed, if any other element of consideration does arise then the action "loses its moral character" (Durkheim, 1961: 30). The moral implies immediate obedience and this obedience is characterized in terms of duty. As Martin (1998: 103–104) has noted, this positing of duty evokes echoes of Kant, and questions of autonomy and heteronomy. "If duty speaks there is nothing to do but obey" (Durkheim, 1961: 31). A crucial difference is that, for Durkheim, duty comes not from reason but from society. The first step is to clarify what authority entails:

> What is it, in fact, that we label authority? [. . .]. Authority is a quality with which a *being*, either actual or imaginary, is invested through his relationship with given individuals, and it is because of this alone that he [sic] is thought by the latter to be endowed with powers superior to those they find in themselves' (Durkheim, 1961: 88. Emphasis added).

Authority is a quality invested in a being insofar as that being is related to certain specific individuals. Moral authority, insofar as it compels all such individuals within a given group or society to obey, must therefore inhere in a being. "Above and beyond me as a conscious being, above and beyond those sentient beings who are other individual human beings, there is nothing else save that sentient being that is society" (Durkheim, 1961: 51). It is tempting, perhaps, at this stage to render Durkheim's argument in terms of an external society imposing its "will" upon meager individuals who, as individuals, are powerless to resist its demands. However, the explicit distinction that Durkheim draws between the moral and morality leads in a different direction. And as Martin (1998) has explained, there is an interesting tension in Durkheim's account: "While it is not authority 'in general' but concrete authority - this authority, the authority of this one - that is experienced in social life, Durkheim could not permit the collapsing of the authority-of-society with the authority-of-this-one, for it would reverse his understanding of where authority comes from, that is, from society's 'mind'" (Martin, 1998: 113). This is a question that Durkheim addresses throughout his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2008) and his paper "The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions" (2005). It is not that there is an external set of (moral) rules constituting a moral realm which individuals have to inhabit. The moral element *is* society's mind in the individual. This is a striking position to adopt: "The sorcerer is an authority for those who believe in him [sic]. This is why authority is called moral: it is because it exists in minds, not in things" (Durkheim, 1961: 88). This mention of sorcery again raises the specific force with which the moral is endowed: "that element of mystery that seems inherent in all conceptions of authority is not lacking in the feeling we have for society" (Durkheim, 1961: 89). And Durkheim enlists Kant to support his argument stating that:

> Kant has shown better than anyone that there is something religious in the sentiment that moral law inspires even in the loftiest reason. But we can only have a religious feeling for some being – actual or ideal – that seems to us to be superior to the faculty that conceived it. That is why obligation is an essential element of the moral precept; and we have suggested the reason for

> this. Our whole nature has the need to be limited, contained, restricted – our reason as well as our senses. For our reason is not a transcendental faculty; it is implicated in society and consequently conforms to the laws of society. (Durkheim, 1961: 110).

Durkheim agrees with Kant that the limits of reason need to be established but these bounds are not to be found in individual reason, or minds. Instead, reason is "implicated in society." In contrast to both Hume and Mill, Durkheim links human nature to limitation – "it is in our nature to be limited by forces outside us; accordingly, we accept this limitation freely" (Durkheim, 1961: 118) and it is society (or collectivity in his later texts) which has the authority and power to both limit human nature and to cultivate the free acceptance of such limits.

Sociology, is in the specific position to outline and analyze the authority which comprises the power inherent in the moral as it, alone, is able "to explain its (the moral's [la morale]) majestic nature while giving it a purely scientific expression and without destroying or even diminishing its authority" (Durkheim, 1961: 122; 1925: 139). Taken on its own, reason is not able to oblige specific behavior; a societal aspect must also be involved. It is only as a consequence of its placement in society that the moral law assumes its superior power and its "majesty"; its very ability to compel compliance (see Martin, 1998, especially pp. 104–105 for a fuller discussion of Durkheim's position with respect to Kant, reason, society, and authority). Motivation and behavior, therefore, can only be explained *sociologically* rather than philosophically. Crucially, as this social element relies upon the moral for its impetus, this implies that sociology is, in a very specific sense, a science of the moral, or a moral science. The moral has become resolutely social. More than that it has become *the* object of Sociology, if not of social science.

Such a statement might seem to suggest that the moral as *the* object of Sociology and hence the question set out in the title of this article – Is Sociology a Moral Science – has been resolutely answered in the affirmative. This, however, is not the case. As discussed in the Introduction, this article uses this rather bold question as a device for re-examining the long and ambiguous relations between shifting conceptions of the moral, and the possibility of developing systematic knowledge of such a domain. The discussions of Hume and Mill sought to point to some of the historical and etymological complexities that still linger today. The analyses of Durkheim were intended to encapsulate his recognition of the need to address both the factual and the motivational elements of the moral and morality. This led Durkheim not to declare a simple science of the social but, as Abend (2008: 101) has described, to argue that such a science can tell us what we *ought* to do.

Conclusion – The question of "ought"

Questions of morality and its relation to science and knowledge often introduce the injunction that "you cannot derive and 'ought' from an 'is'", especially when Hume is introduced into the discussion. That is to say, it seems possible and important to differentiate between factual descriptions and prescriptive ones. This is linked to the supposed separation of fact and values which sociology has dealt with in various ways.[18] This article has not engaged directly with such debates and the reason for this is not that they are uninteresting or unimportant but that the specific argument of this piece has a different trajectory. Having said this, Hume's original observation is still apposite, namely that it is

important to note when a writer slips from using "is" to "ought," for, as he puts it: "This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence" (Hume, 1975: 469). This is not, however, to debar the move from "is" to "ought." Rather, it is to ask that attention is paid to any such shift. Or, to put it another way, it is important that the move from description to prescription is signaled and not brought in surreptitiously.

What is notable, as Abend (2008: 100–102) has discussed, is that Durkheim purposefully deployed an "ought" as part of his account of what constitutes science. The first stage of his argument is that: "one can inquire *what the moral [la morale] ought to be* only if one has first determined the complex of things that goes under this rubric" (Durkheim, 1961: 23. Emphasis added; 1925: 26). It is important to recognize that Durkheim is talking of the moral and not "morality" as the original English translation has it. For "behind" any particular morality is the "complex of things" which constitutes the moral aspect of society "the moral [la morale] as a fact" (Durkheim, 1961: 23. Emphasis added; 1925: 26). It is this factual element which comprises the subject matter of his moral science. This science, unlike that of Mill, does not implacably report on this domain, however. Integral to this moral science is an assessment of its fitness for purpose: "we are able to check on the extent to which the moral order is founded in the nature of things – that is, in the nature of society – which is to say to what extent it is what it ought to be. In the degree that we see it as such, we can freely conform to it" (Durkheim, 1961: 117. Emphasis added). As Abend (2008: 101) comments "Durkheim claims to overcome the gap between facts and values, 'is' and 'ought,' science and morality," especially in *The Division of Labour*, through the use of the compelling contrast of health and illness, when he states that science can establish the health or otherwise of the moral organization of a society.

In opposition to those who think that the loss of a divine element to morality means that there is a subsequent loss of compulsion, Durkheim maintains that what is new about the new moral order is precisely the role of the understanding of its *social* constitution: "we can say that the third element of the moral [la morale] is the understanding of it [la morale]" (Durkheim, 1961: 120; 1925: 137). This entails that not only is Sociology inherently a matter of the moral but that, in some respects, it is *only* Sociology that is able to develop an understanding of the moral, given its implicit interrelation with the social. While some have argued that secularism leads to a disenchantment of the world, Durkheim sees the secular moral [morale] and a "human science of the moral [une science humaine de la morale]" (1961: 121; 1925; 1938) as precisely the source and the conveyor of the mystery and majesty which was formerly given to the relationship between god and the injunctions of morality. It is in his search for an explanation of the power and authority which pervades secular society that Durkheim alights on the moral as the animating factor of both society and Sociology. Or, to put it another way, he uses the term "moral" to convey the impetus and animus in collective human life that Sociology seeks to explain. In this sense, the moral constitutes the spirit of both society and Sociology. This is not to conclude that Durkheim was "right." As Martin (1998: 113 and 120–121) shows, there is an "apparent circularity" in Durkheim's account of exactly where the authority of society (and hence the moral and morality) comes from.[19] Moreover, it is not clear that he is ever able to pinpoint the "impetus and animus" of society and Sociology. Durkheim was, however, a rigorous and clear thinker who has set out some of the demands of Sociology, for Sociology.

This article has sought to contribute to a reengagement with question of the moral, not simply because such matters are interesting and important but because there seems to be an inextricable link between such concerns and the very constitution, methods and practices of Sociology, as a discipline. Hilbert (1992, 30–32) argues that the influence of Parsons still looms large, in that Sociology tends to conflate morality with norms and the normative. As a result, questions of the moral are reduced to questions about whether a rule has been followed or not. Sociology may well be interested in matters of moral regulation and rule-following but this does not mean that such matters of prescriptiveness comprise the full extent of the moral. It is always worth sociologists spending some time considering the status of their enterprise. What is it that makes sociology worthwhile, what is it that gives it is specific impetus? This article has sought to respond to such a question by suggesting that at the core of Sociology there is (or there *should*[20] be) a concern with that which goes beyond the immediate. Sociology is not just another science among others, in the sense of reporting upon implacable facts; it answers to the very human call for a need not only to understand or explain the essence of how we currently live but to offer suggestions as to what could be done. And this seems like a *moral* matter.

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Ethical considerations

No ethical approval was required for this research.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was partially enabled by a period of Research Leave granted by the University of Essex.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. I have capitalized the word Sociology, to give it the status of a proper name and to refer to the general scope of the field.
2. Though, of course, it has not been completely ignored. See, for example, Ginsberg (1956), Halewood (2023), Skeggs (2005, 2009). Furthermore, Sayer (2011: 11–18) has described how a reluctance to engage directly with such questions and concepts has meant that the social sciences have faced difficulties in accounting for the complex status of morals within contemporary society.
3. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out the need for clarity on what is *not* involved in this article.
4. Weber (2003 [1904–5]) would be an interesting comparison in his use of the words “ethic” and “spirit,” in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

5. This mention of what "should" be done again raises the question of what "ought" to be done. Introducing questions of what "ought" to be done seems to run the risk of being moralistic, and hence judgmental and un-academic (see Gouldner, 1975: 27–68). As will be seen, this apparent threat of moralizing often seems to accompany discussions of the moral as it can easily slip into judging or condemning the behavior, or even the intellectual positions, of others.
6. "our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions, or, in other words, that it is impossible for us to *think* of any thing, which we have not antecedently *felt*, either by our external or internal senses" (Hume, 2007: 45).
7. This marks an important difference from the approach of Durkheim who stresses the priority of society and is left with assigning a duality to human "nature."
8. Oxford English Dictionary, "moral (adj.), Etymology," June 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7165757601.
9. Oxford English Dictionary, "moral (adj.), Etymology," June 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7165757601.
10. The Latin term *moralis*, was 'was formed by Cicero [. . .] as a rendering of ancient Greek ἠθικός ethic adj. (mōrēs being the accepted Latin equivalent of ἦθη): Oxford English Dictionary, "moral (adj.), Etymology," June 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7165757601.
11. Oxford English Dictionary, "mores (n.), sense 3," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1020088561.
12. Oxford English Dictionary, "ethos (n.), Etymology," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4444167070.
13. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out the similarity between such a distinction and that of Hegel in his differentiation between Sittlichkeit (ethical life) and Moralität (morality) (see Habermas, 2021).
14. A term which Mill always deploys in the singular, he does not use the plural from – Social Sciences.
15. Chapter III. "That There Is, Or May Be, A Science Of Human Nature"; Chapter IV. "Of The Laws Of Mind; Chapter V. Of Ethology, Or The Science Of The Formation Of Character; Chapter VI. General Considerations On The Social Science."
16. He contrasts the French situation to that of Germany where, he states, "everything is done in a group. People sing together. They play together. They philosophize together, or talk about science and literature" (Durkheim, 1961: 234).
17. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed me in the direction of Hilbert's interesting text.
18. See, for example, Weber (1949).
19. "We have an apparent circularity: thought is both cause and effect of authority relations" (Martin, 1998: 113, see also 120–121).
20. I am aware of the prescriptive character of this statement. It may well be that the relation of morals to Sociology is itself a moral matter.

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