Social Science, Objectivity, and Moral Life

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Published online: 3 October 2013
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Within American society, the fact-value dichotomy is firmly ensconced, and for a paradoxical reason. The dichotomy, part of a cluster of related dualisms separating objective (value-free) and subjective (value-laden), meets a powerful need in liberal society. The need is to regulate behavior, an inescapable feature of social order, but to do so without any appearance of moral authority. In the liberal order, authority in moral matters is given, for moral reasons, to individuals. Each person's good is a question of his or her own convictions or preferences, inhibited by only the barest necessity of social interference and a reciprocal responsibility to respect the rights and dignity of others. Therefore, regulation by society, both in the enforcing of norms and the spurring of effort to conform to norms, must be carried out in technical terms such that it appears to be agnostic with respect to conceptions of the good. The ever-expanding use of medicine, with its ostensibly objective, value-free modes of discourse, to manage issues of difference and deviance, is a prime example (see Davis forthcoming). The moral imperative to treat the good as a matter of personal choice, to treat values as inherently subjective, *requires* a strong fact-value dualism.

Within the academy, the situation is somewhat different. At least in some parts of philosophy, the “is/ought” or fact/value dichotomy—the “last dogma of positivism”—is under serious strain (Zammito 2012). Philosophers, especially in ethics and the philosophy of science, have issued powerful challenges, showing how facts and values, descriptive and prescriptive statements, are inextricably “entangled” (Putnam 2002; Brewer 2009; Longino 1990). Social scientists, notably feminists and those in the hermeneutic tradition, and more recently, scholars working from some form of “realist”

perspective, have also weighed in, drawing on the philosophical critiques in support of new ways of thinking about the relation of ethics and science and the rationality of values (for example, Gorski 2013; Sayer 2011; Smith 2010).

These challenges to the dichotomy are clearing some space to bring ethics back into social science. How we do that, however, is critically important. Historically, the drive to sever facts and values has sprung from two motivations (Zammito 2012, 307–308). One was to protect the purity of scientific knowledge from corruption by subjective values. This, for example, was the defining concern of the early twentieth century logical positivists, the school of philosophers who formulated the version of the fact-value dichotomy known as the “naturalistic fallacy”—what is good or right cannot be derived from natural “facts”. The other motivation was to protect the ethical domain from the deterministic materialism and epistemological imperialism of the natural sciences. A concern with the (relative) autonomy of ethics, for instance, has been important for those in the Kantian tradition, including even Max Weber. One motivation, then, was to protect “facts,” while the other was to protect “values.” Both of these concerns, with objectivity and with materialist reductionism respectively, are valuable, and any retheorizing of the relation of social science and morality must keep both in view.

I want to chiefly focus here on the concern with objectivity. Positivism remains strong in the social sciences, and in many ways the continued embrace of the “last dogma” hangs on the question of objectivity. Value freeness is held out as the goal for any science worthy of the name, and is typically assumed to be guiding inquiry in such a manner that ethical reflection is needless or inappropriate. Beginning with a specific case and then moving to a larger body of research suggesting that social scientific categories, and the images they embed, are inescapably value-laden, I want to argue that value-freeness is a chimera and that objectivity does not require it. What objectivity does require is openness to critical scrutiny, including

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value considerations in research decisions, description, and explanation. Such openness will improve analysis and set the terms for a proper and delimited role for the social sciences in our ethical reflection and public life.

Though space allows for little more than a caution, I want to end with a comment on materialist reduction. As Kwame Anthony Appiah, along with Phil Gorski and others, remind us, “what we should do depends on how the world is” (2008, 1). Our values are not just intuitions or emotions but convictions informed by understandings of human nature and the human condition. We must be attentive, therefore, to both the relation of values to science *and* the relation of science to values. Social science alerts us to context, and in a context of liberal individualism there is a powerful incentive to privilege conceptions of the good by giving them scientific warrant. The “realists” worry about moral and cultural relativism, which concerns, as I have argued in these pages before, seem to me easily exaggerated (Davis 2008). The greater danger, as I see it, is in the manipulating of “reality” by reducing morality to neurological determination.

Abuse by Any Other Name

Despite the philosophical challenges to the fact/value dichotomy, conceptions of objectivity in the social sciences remain anchored to it. A not atypical example is the widely-discussed article by Bruce Rind, Philip Tromovitch, and Robert Bauserman (1998) titled “A Meta-Analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples.” It appeared in *Psychological Bulletin* in 1998 and generated considerable public protest, including a unanimous condemnation by both houses of Congress and a rejection of the article’s conclusions by the American Psychological Association itself, the publisher of *Psychological Bulletin*. The controversy centered on assertions of bias, but that spurious charge misses what was actually at stake. In defense of the article, both the authors and others argued for its rigorous value-free objectivity (e.g. Gladwell 2004; McNally 2003), a claim that rests on the availability of a neutral language without evaluative presuppositions. Does such a language exist?

Rind and his colleagues did not conduct a study of their own. Rather, their paper is a meta-analytic review of 59 existing studies, based on samples of college students, of the enduring effects of childhood sexual abuse. They found that those with a history of child sexual abuse were more likely to have psychological adjustment problems than those who weren’t abused, but the difference, *on average*, was small. When family environment was controlled for, most of this difference disappeared. Bad family environment (physical abuse, emotional neglect) was a much stronger predictor of psychological problems than sexual abuse. Finally, they also reported that a significant minority of the students surveyed,

especially adolescent males, did not regard their experience as negative but as positive.

The public controversy over the article did not center primarily on these findings. While some scholars did challenge the article on methodological grounds,¹ the public reaction was to the authors’ questioning of the scientific validity of the term “child sexual abuse” and “related terms such as *victim* and *perpetrator*” (Rind et al. 1998, 22; emphasized words in this and the following quotes are in the original). Rather than the blanket term “sexual abuse,” Rind and his colleagues proposed a new distinction based on “the young person’s perception of his or her willingness to participate and his or her reactions to the experience” (46). They suggested that “[a] willing encounter with positive reactions would be labeled simply *adult-child sex*, a value-neutral term” (46). In cases where the child felt that “he or she did not freely participate in the encounter and experienced negative reactions” (46), then, they suggested, that “*child sexual abuse*, a term that implies harm to the individual, would be valid.” They also emphasized that “child” should be restricted to nonadolescent children, and propose a similar distinction for adolescents: “adult-adolescent sex” and “adolescent sexual abuse” (46).

Many of the critics of Rind et al. accused them of having a “socio-political agenda” (see, e.g., Dallam 2002; Hagan 2001). The authors, along with their defenders, argued that the paper was guided by science alone, and accused those who challenged the article as having an agenda of their own. The attacks by critics, in the words of Rind and his colleagues, are “all grounded in maintaining their strongly held ideological beliefs and, in the case of therapists, their practices” (Rind et al. 2001, 71). Neither side, as far as I know, has evidence for these accusations. What is clear is that Rind and his colleagues insist that, one, they are not advocating for a change in either the moral or legal perspective on “behaviors currently classified as CSA [child sexual abuse]” and, two, their study should not be read as necessarily implying that moral/legal perspectives “should be abandoned or even altered” (47). Their proposed classification changes, in other words, are not in service to some extra-scientific agenda.

The problem is not with bias. It is with the claim of value-free objectivity in naming and classification. Rind et al. argue that the term “abuse” implies psychological harm (they are aware that this is not strictly true, but we can leave that aside). Since sex between an adult and a youth is not always unwelcome and does not always lead to psychological harm, they reason, we need another category. So they propose *adult-child sex* as a “value-neutral” alternative. By “value-neutral” they mean “value-free.” These terms are often conflated but mean different things. Value neutrality, according to

¹ A reexamination of the Rind et al. review that sought to correct for some identified methodological and statistical problems reported findings consistent with the original. See Ulrich, Randolph, and Acheson (2005–2006).

the philosopher Heather Douglas (2004), means “taking a position that is balanced or neutral with respect to a spectrum of values” (460). Rather than free from value influence, a value-neutral position, aware of the range of values at play and the arguments for them in a given context, is one that is “reflectively centrist”. Taking this position, for instance, “allows one to make the necessary judgments without taking a controversial value position, without committing oneself to values that may ignore other important aspects of a problem or that are more extreme than they are supportable” (460). Rind and his colleagues are quite clear that they are not adopting such a stance. They are not balancing values. They go to some length to quote others on the important distinction between harmfulness and wrongfulness, and insist that while questioning harmfulness in some cases they are *not* questioning wrongfulness in any. Their position is not value neutral; they believe their new category, “adult-child sex,” is value free.

What are we to make of this claim? Rind and his colleagues criticize the application of the term “abuse” to cases not “likely to produce harm” as an instance of “the slippage of legal and moral constructs into scientific definitions” (23). In the cases “likely to produce harm” they retain the term “abuse,” which, of course, is both a legal and a moral concept. But if the authors countenance the abuse classification, which is value laden, why suggest that the other classification, “adult-child sex,” is value free? It may connote less than “abuse” about harm and coercion but that does not make it value free. A prominent theory of child sexual abuse, based on the model of rape, for instance, treats sexual abuse as an act of power and exploitation rather than of sex. So placing some of the “behaviors currently classified as CSA” in the category of “sex” already involves taking a value position, a position that scientific criteria alone could not resolve.

More to the point, would “sex” in this case be a value-free category? As noted above, the authors insist that in proposing “adult-child sex” they are not advocating for a change in either the moral or legal perspective on behaviors classified as child sexual abuse, and they do not question the wrongfulness of such behaviors. But since the moral and legal perspective on these behaviors is not value free, and Rind et al. are affirming this perspective, then their term “adult-child sex” must not be value free, either. The “sex” in “adult-child sex” cannot be some generic species of willing behavior, equivalent in any way to other types of sex not involving a child. Rather, the “sex” in their proposed behavior-category must inscribe the same evaluative load—illegal and morally illicit—as “abuse.” Like “abuse,” the descriptive content and the evaluative force must inhere in the word “sex” together.

Further, Rind et al. suggest that the terms “victim” and “perpetrator” would not be appropriate person-categories with respect to their “adult-child sex” behavior-category. Presumably this is so because these terms too are legal and moral

constructs, whereas “child” or “adolescent” and “adult” are not. Here again, however, the new terms must implicitly carry social and ethical values, and much the same values as the old terms. The person who is acted on in most crimes is called the victim. In more general moral terms, we speak of the person subjected to immoral or unjust action as one who has been wronged. In both cases, we label the instigator of the illegal or immoral action, the perpetrator, the wrongdoer, and the like. While there is no question that “child” or “adolescent” and “adult” are far less normatively and affectively charged terms than victim and perpetrator, substituting them in this context merely re-inscribes the same values in different language. Further, if the new terms must carry the same ethical values, then it is hardly clear that “child” and “adult” are more scientifically valid—descriptively adequate—than “victim”. If anything, they strike one as euphemisms almost guaranteed to generate precisely the sort of confusion among both social scientists and the general public that the Rind et al. paper in fact precipitated.

Perhaps the new terms, because they are less charged are less stigmatizing. That is often an important ethical reason for reframing categories of conditions, behaviors, and persons under new descriptions. But that presupposes that the stigmatization is unjust or counterproductive and therefore should be changed. Rind et al. do not make any such argument. Their analysis of studies is addressed to the question of whether college students who had a history of childhood sexual abuse reported “intense psychological harm” from their experience. They do not address questions of the *social* harm that sexual abuse might cause. But we know, from historical experience, that sexual abuse does cause social harm (see Davis 2005). So it is a valid question whether using the generic “adult” rather than “perpetrator” in the context of adults having sex with children and adolescents might not have the predictable consequence of easing the stigmatization that is attached to the behavior of the adult perpetrator. Because predictable, that consequence cannot be simply ignored.

There are more questions of this kind that could be raised. Let me also add that in questioning the Rind et al. formulations, my purpose is not to defend the sexual abuse category. I share their judgment that we need further ways to classify the “behaviors currently classified as CSA.” Criminologists normally stick with legal language but that may not be sufficient or appropriate in this case. Particular usages can and should be discussed, and strong evaluative concepts used only with care. But no categories—and this is my point—will be free of value implications. The standard of “value-free” is not one of the options and therefore is not the appropriate goal.

Person and Category, and their Interaction

The case of sexual abuse is dramatic, but it is not atypical. Over the past generation, social scientists have produced a

significant body of research on the interaction effect between classifications and the persons classified. This research also documents an inescapable evaluative component to our categories. These categories, in the words of philosopher Ian Hacking, “evaluate who is troubling or in trouble...things to do or not to do. Kinds of people to be or not be” (1999, 131).² The basic insight was given early theoretical expression in the labeling perspective on mental illness. In the labeling perspective, the stigma that attaches to a psychiatric category is of central theoretical concern. Psychiatric categories, theorists argued, are often freighted with negative stereotypes and devaluing images that are applied to labeled persons by others and by themselves. The resulting stigmatization brings discrimination, interferes with access to resources, and often damages the labeled person’s sense of self-efficacy and general well-being. A related body of research, which also emerged in the 1960s, explores the nature, sources, and negative consequences of stigma. Inspired by Erving Goffman’s seminal book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), the concept has been especially important in studies of mental illness but has also been applied to many other conditions and social circumstances. There are additional bodies of research of this kind.

The interaction effect between classifications of people (and their behavior) and the persons so classified can change how individuals understand, evaluate, and experience themselves. This effect does not require that people be directly aware of how they are classified. They may experience themselves as being of a particular *kind* because of how they are treated in institutions or through practices that are structured by the classification. Then again, individuals who are the objects of social scientific categories are often keenly aware of the categories and what they mean. They may embrace or reject them. Many public sources encourage and make possible the widespread practice of self-labeling by providing potential category incumbents with descriptions, checklists, testimonials, and other resources for classifying themselves. On the other hand, because of the implied valuations, people on whom classifications have been imposed, as well as their advocates, may resist, proposing different labels and redefined categories. The relationship between categories and persons is often fraught and contested.

The multivalence of governing images means that naming and classifying will seldom be free of ambiguity or command straightforward consensus. Scholars studying condition and person categories and their governing images often adjudge them to be of mixed social import for affected persons. The potentially divisive normative understandings and cultural assumptions that embed and are embedded within these

images come into play, as does the shifting nature of language. Just as importantly, political and economic interests are often at stake, creating further trouble and uncertainty. Concerns with classifications and governing images can be distorted and trivialized (“political correctness”), can be used to conceal important but inconvenient evidence, and can even serve as the basis for censorship efforts. There is no question that ideological and interest-driven assertions of values can be very disruptive in science and interfere with scientific reasoning. The checkered history of advocacy research is testament to both the promise and the peril of ethical engagement (see, e.g., Gilbert 1997).

But if we recognize that names and classifications carry risks for persons, and thus have ethical implications, then on what basis could we justify avoiding such engagement? Not, I think, on the grounds of objectivity. Scientific objectivity does not require moral indifference, as Weber observed,³ and “social needs and cultural values,” as the philosopher Helen Longino argues, have a place in “good science” (1990, 83–85; Douglas 2004). Though we cannot have “absolute objectivity,” that is, value-free objectivity, in these matters, there are other forms of objectivity—procedural, disciplinary, interactional, and so on—that can and should be brought to bear (Megill, Ch. 5). Recognition of risk also does not challenge any of the other epistemic values—reliability, reproducibility, simplicity, and so on—that are constitutive of scientific method and reasoning. Nor, of course, does it eliminate the requirement for good arguments and evidence. Objectivity, understood as a perspective that sets aside partiality and predetermined answers in both inquiry and analysis of results, does not preclude ethical engagement.

In fact, the reverse is surely closer to the mark. The hallmark of scientific objectivity is openness to critical scrutiny. The bracketing of ethical concerns under a rubric of value freedom, as I have argued, does not eliminate values from social science, nor does it produce better description and explanation. Rather, it simply keeps the role that values play and the tradeoffs made in research decisions unavailable for examination and consideration. It is hard to see how such immunity to criticism can be anything but inimical to adequate and objective inquiry.

The Calling of Social Science

The interaction effect between persons and categories illustrates one feature of the value-ladenness of social science. Because we care, because our experience has a qualitative and self-conscious character, the names and categories we devise for persons will unavoidably reflect an anthropology

² For an influential sociological statement of this point with respect to medical categories, see Freidson (1970, 208). Also, see M. Douglas (1986).

³ “An attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific ‘objectivity’” (Weber 1949, 60, emphasis in original).

with implications for what they ought to be. Alerting us to the interaction effect also represents one way in which social scientific analysis can offer evaluations that both aid adequate description and explanation and sharpen moral judgment. There are many other such contributions. Social science can help us access particular states of affairs and their (measurable) consequences, illuminate the complex interplay between ideals of well-being and existing social arrangements, pick out what might be ethically at stake for persons in a given practice or circumstance, bring into focus the cultural and institutional context that mediates moral action and reflection, discover unintended and unexpected consequences of action, and more. Scientific findings can also challenge specific moral intuitions by disputing or invalidating the factual assumptions that undergird those intuitions (for examples, see Appiah 2008). Surely, any effort to lead moral lives must be informed by a broad, careful understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

However, while social science evaluations and findings do have implications, what we *ought* to do does not follow deductively and is *always* subject to other considerations. Without accepting his subjectivist view of values, I think Weber is correct when he argues, “it can never be the task of an empirical science to provide binding norms and ideals from which directives for immediate practical activity can be derived” (1949, 52). Social science, in other words, has clear limits. Social science is best conceived as a form of critique—in the tradition of an older political philosophy—exploring and accessing social life in a deliberative rather than manipulative or legislative mode. “[T]he true calling of sociology,” wrote Edward Shils, “is to contribute to the self-understanding of society rather than its manipulated improvement” (1980, 76). This calling is also incompatible with an expert stance, above its subject matter and closing down alternatives. If objectivity, rightly understood, is the goal, then our assessments and background assumptions must be open to scrutiny and revision. The social sciences have an important role to play in our ethical reflection and social self-understanding, but that role is properly educational, enriching but not supplanting other humanistic modes of thought. The aim is to foster richer ethical reflection and inclusive democratic deliberation not ethical algorithms, social therapeutics, or social control.

The goal of breaking the fact/value dichotomy, then, is not to abandon objectivity; it is to put it on a firmer foundation. But if science need not be corrupted by values, what of the fate of values in the encounter with science? All I can offer here is one cautionary note, which connects back to my initial comments about our public culture. What the philosophers call “noncognitivism”—moral statements are outside the scope of reason and express little more than personal preferences—is, under the guise of liberal individualism, essentially public policy in the United States. This regime creates a powerful incentive for social science to preserve the illusion of value

freedom, to avoid any use of evaluative language, and to treat all problems as technical problems. Said differently, it creates a powerful incentive to appear natural science-like and to embrace reductive, mechanistic accounts of human being that establish, simpliciter, that one is outside the “subjective” domains of morality, religion, and politics and in the “objective,” neutral, and indifferent world of nature.

Old-style positivism is one form of such scientism; the new science of morality is apparently another. Everywhere we turn we are confronted by scientists and popularizers of science making claims of putative discoveries that will transform what we thought we understood about moral agency and human nature. Evolutionary psychologists have given us a prescriptive “evolutionary ethics” that was supposedly adaptive in eons past and is now hard-wired in our DNA. Neuroscientists believe they can settle age-old questions about moral decision making with a brain imaging machine. Psychologists and others tell us that free will is an illusion and that reason plays little role in moral judgment. And on it goes, the science of morality informing us that moral behavior and judgment are “grounded” in “gut reactions” and neurochemistry, the source of “what makes us good or evil” (Zak 2012). This sort of materialist reductionism is pernicious. In our regime of moral individualism it is proving rhetorically persuasive, in part because it distances itself from moral or political authority by basing its truth claims in a language of science and objectivity and with respect to the self-regulating capacities of individuals. Such formations easily generate a self-fulfilling dynamic. And they reproduce the old problem of naturalizing cultural ideals and shielding them from contestation and debate. If scientific findings have a place in our moral thinking, we need a radically different and far more holistic model.

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