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What is This?

The poverty of (moral) philosophy: Towards an empirical and pragmatic ethics

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Abstract

This article makes both a more general and a more specific argument, and while the latter relies upon the former, the inverse does not apply. The more general argument proposes that empirical disciplines such as sociology are better suited to the production of ethical knowledge than more characteristically abstract and legalistic disciplines such as philosophy and theology. The more specific argument, which is made through a critique of Bauman's Levinasian articulation of ethics, proposes what it calls 'pragmatic humanism' as a viable alternative model for sociological ethics to follow. This model rejects the abstract notion of some innate and universally distributed moral impulse, and instead turns to acknowledgement of the precariousness of life as a strategic resource in the *construction*, rather than *revelation*, of ethical solidarity.

> [T]he only science that can equip us with an ethics is the scientific study of human life, that is to say social life, for man's life becomes human in the significant and distinctive sense only in society and by the methods of causation involved in the cumulative effects of association. In other words sociology, whether called by that name or not, is our only hope for an adequate ethics.
>
> (Hayes, 1918: 291)

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Moral debate may well be too important to be left to the philosophers.

(Plummer, 2001: 245)

Much of the classical European aspiration to establish sociology as a 'science of society' was based upon the perceived indispensability of value-freedom as a prerequisite for the production of objective knowledge (Durkheim, 1964; Weber, 1978).[1] Ethics, in this tradition, was only a concern for sociology either as an object of study, or else as a set of guidelines for methodological practice: a way of ensuring that one's research in no way compromised its own integrity or that of its participants. The self-conscious production of ethical knowledge itself was understood to lie beyond sociology's operational remit, so that even in 1988, Bauman was able to observe that 'phrases like "the sanctity of human life" or "moral duty" sound as alien in a sociology seminar as they do in the smoke-free, sanitised rooms of a bureaucratic office' (1988: 495).

Alternative conceptions of the discipline have, of course, always existed. One such alternative came to the fore at the turn of the twentieth century, primarily in America (Addams, [1902] 2002; Gilman, [1914] 2004; Henderson, 1902; Small, 1902) though also in England (Sidgwick, 1899), when both sociologists and philosophers (Dewey, [1922] 1976; Höffding, 1905), many under the influence of pragmatism, considered the ways in which the still emergent discipline of sociology might become an indispensable resource in determining the 'social ethics' necessary to carry through the programmes of social reform that progressivism demanded. This article suggests that the spirit (if not always the letter) of these thinkers' arguments may have acquired even greater force and relevance since they were first expressed. It both agrees with Bauman that searching for 'a morally neutral stance among the many brands of sociology practised today ... would be a vain effort' (2000: 216) and, moreover, argues that the pursuit of an ethical outcome may itself constitute a viable substitute goal for what pragmatists see as the misguided epistemological end of exposing social reality as it is *in-itself*. It proposes that whether consciously or not, sociology unavoidably concerns itself with the Socratic question 'how should one live?' and that sociologically generated ethical knowledge constitutes a neglected source of both value and 'impact' for the discipline, undetectable through the current supposed measures of such things (Kelly and Burrows, 2012).[2]

The first section suggests that any adequate sociological ethics must first overcome at least two challenges posed to traditional ethics: mass inhumanity and philosophical anti-foundationalism. It acknowledges, on the one hand, that the ethical catastrophes of the past century gradually unveiled the disingenuousness of any picture of humanity that started from an abstract account of our elevated, non-bestial virtues, and on the other, that philosophy itself appears to have deconstructed its own faith in pristine reason as the ultimate resource for our ethical saviour. Through a critique of Bauman's Levinasian conception of ethics, and building upon a recent revival of interest in both early and neo-pragmatism in sociology (Baert, 2004, 2005; Barbalet, 2004; Bernstein, 2010; Mottier, 2004; Silber, 2003; da Silva, 2013; Turner, 2004), the second section proposes 'pragmatic humanism' as a promising alternative model in building its 'ethics' upon the practical necessity to offer a response to *empirical cases* of the exploitation of human vulnerability. Independently of this specific proposal, however, ultimately the article

puts forward a more general argument for transferring the responsibility of producing ethical knowledge in a post-genocide and so-called 'postmodern' world away from its traditional home within the conventionally abstract, deductive, and legalistic disciplines of philosophy and theology towards more empirical and inductive disciplines such as sociology.

Challenges to traditional ethics

Assessing the catalogue of horrors through which humanity has debased itself during the past century, Todorov concludes that 'extreme evil is common, ordinary evil is ubiquitous' (2003: 185). Further, as any glance at a newspaper or human rights report quickly brings home, such inhumanity is not something that can be comfortably locked away in the archive of history, but remains threateningly present, manifesting itself on a routine and unsettlingly recurrent basis. Acknowledgement that genocide, massacre, torture, and slavery all occupy looming immovable presences on the landscape of any realistic assessment of civilization's 'accomplishments' to date throws into question the compelling nature of any ethics that begins from a concern with defining humanity through its distinguishing universal virtues: its capacity for culture, rationality, sympathy, language, intelligence, or compassion – characteristics of human beings that were understood in many of the traditional schools of ethical philosophy, as Descartes wrote regarding the human capacity to reason, to 'distinguish us from the beasts' ([1637] 1985: 112). As history has unravelled, it has become increasingly clear that humans are also capable of and can pursue and realize with equal zeal, rationality, intelligence, creativity, and passion, acts of extreme cruelty, gratuitous suffering, and murder, often on unimaginable scales, often within the heartlands of what were considered to be advanced social and cultural systems. If Agamben is correct in writing that 'almost none of the ethical principles our age believed it could recognize as valid have stood the decisive test, that of *Ethica more Auschwitz demonstrata*' (1999: 13), then it is incumbent upon us to question what hope can responsibly be maintained in constructing new forms of ethics to guide human conduct away from a cyclical return to barbarity. As Levinas put it in an interview: 'Can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?' (2008: 176).

Though critical of the term 'absolute', and critical too of the details of his own particular response to this 'essential question', this article nevertheless agrees with Levinas that it 'cannot be concluded that after Auschwitz there is no longer a moral law, as if the moral or ethical law were impossible, without promise' (2008: 176). It suggests that not only does radical inhumanity make ever more pressing the elaboration of more adequate forms of ethics, but also that an attentive examination of those historical cases where sections of humankind have been understood as less than human, and abused or obliterated precisely on that basis, is the exact location upon which any such project must build its foundations.

While this first challenge to ethical humanism rests in part upon characteristically modern advances in technology and bureaucratic social organization that have allowed the potential reach of inhumanity to far exceed in magnitude anything conceivable in pre-modern times, the second challenge rests instead upon recent advances in philosophy and social theory, built upon an earlier turn away from the idea of religion as providing

incontrovertible ethical law. This second challenge asks whether it is equally foolhardy to aspire to elaborate new forms of ethics in a post-absolutist age characterized by a questioning of universals, a wariness of metaphysics, and a deep distrust of foundationalism.

Commenting in an interview on the theological 'problem of evil', Levi observed that '[there] is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God', adding afterwards to the transcript that 'I don't find a solution to this dilemma. I keep looking, but I don't find it' (in Camon, 1989: 68). From the perspective of pragmatic philosophy that this article takes as its guide, this lack of ultimate solution suggests that perhaps all that remains to rely upon is our own fallible, limited, and searching humanity, so that just as Marx wrote that the 'critique of religion ends with the idea that man [sic] is a supreme being for man', and 'hence with the categorical imperative to change all circumstances in which man is a humiliated, enslaved, abandoned, contemptuous being' ([1844] 1978: 60), this article intends to move from a recognition that ethics can no longer find a firm foothold in the eternal foundations of Reason or God, to a pragmatic claim that it must therefore instead base itself within evolving and contestable human values and concerns.

Employing a distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality', whereby the former is concerned with a social framework that defines the rules for right conduct, and the latter with the development of virtuous forms of character and impulse, Bauman (1993; 1995) has argued that the movement from modernity to what he calls 'postmodernity' involves a corresponding shift away from 'ethical legislation' towards 'moral responsibility', towards, as he puts it, 'morality without ethical code' (1993: 13). This movement is mirrored in Levi's discussion of the breakdown of the utility of normative frameworks in situations in which humans have been stripped of almost all prior social conventions and forced to struggle for basic physical survival. Discussing his fellow inmates' reliance on a code of behaviour that attempted to retain the basics of human dignity and therefore 'at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization' through adhering to norms that made sense outside of camp life but seemed almost absurd within, Levi is left puzzled and writes, 'in the face of this complicated world, my ideas of damnation are confused. Is it really necessary to elaborate a system and put it into practice, or would it not be better to acknowledge one's lack of a system?' (1988: 47). Certain situations seem to compel us to abandon the frameworks that made sense outside of these situations, evoking an irrepressible suspicion concerning the force, solidity and authority of these previously unquestioned guides to conduct. With the increasing cultural encounters brought about through urbanization, international labour migrations, and developments in technologies of travel and communication, meetings with alternative frameworks of value have become increasingly commonplace for a growing portion of humanity within what Bauman calls 'liquid modernity' (2000: 91–130), opening up more and more circumstances in which one's own ethical framework might be brought into question. Even where groups have reacted defensively to this challenge of difference and retreated back into the apparent security of reasserting local values (2000: 182), knowledge of alternative value systems must at the very least provoke self-consciousness in respect to one's own values as having from now on to be defined not only in their own terms, but also *against* those of some Other.

A celebratory account of 'postmodernity' might conceive this shift as one of liberation; a substitution of aesthetics for ethics in which the 'unencumbered self' of our

current age can enjoy the previously unknown freedom of shopping around for ethical frameworks, all of which may at any moment, and with few consequences, be judged obsolete, discarded, and exchanged for new, more suitable, frameworks. In distinction, Bauman recognizes that the modern systems of ethics were all based on the twin principles of *universality* (the same ethical code applied to all, independent of context) and *foundationalism* (ethical codes were grounded in incontrovertible and demonstrable forms of Reason or religious Law) and could therefore be appealed to for clear and definite guidance in situations of moral uncertainty. 'Postmodern morality', by contrast, is characterized by uncertainty as to what is right or good, an uncertainty that Bauman claims must be existentially inhabited and struggled with as the only possible route to development of the moral self. This opacity in moral choice, Bauman argues, is definitional of what morality itself is, and where right action appears unambiguous to us, morality is at that moment absent, for either we are not encountering a true moral dilemma or else we have deferred the responsibility of choice for that dilemma onto ethical systems outside our moral selves – in Bauman's words, we have shifted the obligation of moral decision-making 'from the realm of personal autonomy into that of power-assisted heteronomy' (1993: 11).

Such a claim is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's ([1843] 2003) earlier reflections upon the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, where he focuses upon the acute moral anxiety brought upon Abraham by the simultaneous necessity *and* impossibility of deciding between disobeying God or murdering his son. Likewise, Arendt presents a strikingly similar image of existential moral angst that both highlights the occasional impotence of ethical codes in situations of absolute subjection and simultaneously forms a link between the two challenges to the elaboration of an ethical humanism that this section proposes:

> When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; and when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family, how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. Who could have solved the moral dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed? (Arendt, 1968: 452)

As far as deciding upon action goes, this movement from 'modern ethics' to 'postmodern morality' might therefore be understood neither as a movement of progressive liberation (Dawson, 2012), nor as one of righteousness to nihilism, but rather as a fundamentally *ambivalent* shift from dependent normative adherence to (the occasional impossibility of) independent moral responsibility. While, on the one hand, it removes all the fastened guarantees, securities, and assurances that came from foundationally grounded knowledge of what was right and good (an evaporation of ethical absolutes that need in no way necessitate the kind of radical relativism offered by an 'anything goes' approach to morality),[3] on the other hand, it signals the possibility of a humanistic maturity through transferring the burden of morality away from rational certainty or divine commandment onto human shoulders, in full knowledge of the weakness and fallibility of such shoulders in bearing this occasionally unbearable load. For as Isaiah Berlin wrote, perhaps 'the very

desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past' (1969: 172).

While accepting much of Bauman's diagnosis of the current state of ethical life, the following section critiques his suggested prescription, proposing instead what it terms 'pragmatic humanism' as providing a more promising guide in the development of an adequate contemporary ethical sensibility, while also highlighting sociology's essential role in its elaboration.

Towards a pragmatic humanism

Ironically, even though Bauman is a sociologist by trade, this section argues that because he begins his understanding of morality from a Levinasian perspective,[4] he ends up offering a philosophical, existentialist, and ultimately solipsistic understanding of what he sees as the 'primal', and therefore pre-social, nature of our moral (as opposed to ethical) impulse (Bauman, 1995: 1–2). It argues that Levinas's appeal to some innate moral sentiment distances his work from the empirical event it was written in response to, artificially abstracts impulses from the environments in which they are formed, shuts its own arguments off from critical interrogation, as well as returning us back to a kind of foundationalism, different, though equally problematic, to that which it overcomes.

Writing as a Jew, in the direct shadow of the Holocaust – an event in which many members of his family had perished – Levinas saw the philosophical anti-humanism espoused by structuralism as dangerous to the extent that its concern with suprahuman configurations displaced the centrality of inter-personal ethical behaviour to human life (Levinas, 2008: 58–61). He believed that theorists such as Lévi-Strauss had merely replaced what was understood to be the defunct human subject with abstract principles that themselves served to dissociate us from what was fundamental about the phenomenology of the lived human condition: what was most important about the human *being*. In response, and drawing strongly upon his religious convictions, Levinas's constructive philosophical project aimed at elaborating a humanism based on an assertion of the centrality of our ethical impulse towards the Other. Critchley, a contemporary follower, identifies how 'ethics for Levinas is defined as the calling into question of my freedom and spontaneity, that is to say, my subjectivity, by the other person … [in order] to subordinate claims to knowledge to claims to justice' (Critchley, 1996: 32). Therefore, in distinction to other phenomenologists, Levinas did not see *being* itself as lying at the centre of philosophy but instead understood the dialogical discovery of *ethical being* through practising asymmetric ('without concern for reciprocity') responsibility towards the Other as inhabiting the core of philosophical concerns; *ethics,* in other words, not ontology (as Heidegger had insisted), constituted the *prima philosophia.*

In order to discuss the non-reciprocal demands placed upon the moral self through the encounter with the Other, Levinas employed the image of confronting the 'face', whereby the face is recognized as never simply an object, but always as a subject capable of affecting one's own subjectivity and therefore regulating one's behaviour (Levinas, 2006: 45–58). For Levinas, apprehending the face placed a demand upon the self, in which one is only capable of *becoming* human (humanizing oneself) through turning

towards and acknowledging this demand, so that one's own humanity was only ever realized through recognition of the humanity of an Other. Levinas invites us therefore to realize that, on a very fundamental precognitive level, we are given over to Others; that we only come to realize our self through Others, and that it is through the process of acknowledging our implication in and dependence upon the Other that our humanity and the humanity of the Other can arise. In this way, Levinas's humanism is not about the human being as such but rather about the human being in relation to other human beings; as he puts it, 'it is not the concept of "man" [sic] which is at the basis of this humanism, it is the other man' (Levinas, 1994: 98). This acknowledgement of the reliance of the self upon its counterpart led him towards an understanding of human interdependence that was not fixed in a state, but had to occur through modes of encounter; the human (as an ethical being) for Levinas could not be taken as a given, but was always worked at and *in process*: granted, achieved, demanded, and denied in dialogic interaction. This apparent avoidance of appealing to immutable foundations by instead presenting an existential phenomenology of what it meant to be an ethical being has made his work an attractive starting point for many contemporary theorists, such as Bauman, concerned with moving beyond a static essentialism of the human.

Levinas's description of where the authority of this ethical interdiction issued through an encounter with the 'face' springs from, however, and indeed his facial metaphor more generally, appeal to an impulse that may (or, more importantly, may not) be triggered when apprehending a similar being at close quarters. Further, in distinction to the openness of most metaphysical propositions within philosophy, this nebulous ethical command issues from an obscure *mystical* source, which is by its very nature closed to interrogation through reason. Indeed, there is a point at which reason becomes seen as either impotent or deceitful in investigating the obligations that the Other places upon the self. As Bauman explains, morality is essentially a non-rational phenomenon, 'moral responsibility is a mystery contrary to reason' (1993: 13). This rational impenetrability black-boxes the compulsion to moral obligation from logical discussion apart from in numinous, theological, or affective terms. While acknowledging the need to move beyond the forms of deontological ethics that characterized modernity's obsession with universally applicable rules, fixed foundations, and what now appears to be a rather limited conception of reason, it is by no means clear that reverting back to distinctly pre-modern beliefs in mystically founded knowledge is the most appropriate way to achieve this move.

There are further problems too. In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Bauman sticks closely to Levinas's ethics, claiming that where inhumanity is predominantly a social phenomenon (the social environment triggering and catalyzing inhumanity), morality itself is asocial; the moral conscience of those who resisted evil during the *Shoah* is presented as 'truly their own personal attribute and possession' (1989: 168). He writes that 'the rescuers were willing to rescue because this was *their* nature. They came from all sectors and corners of "social structure" – thereby calling the bluff on social determinants of moral behaviour' (Bauman, 1988: 473). The consequence of this is that hope for the future of human coexistence resides, on the one hand, in keeping check upon situational determinants (totalitarianism, authoritarianism, technologies of violence, bureaucratic modernism) that might allow widespread immoral

behaviour to manifest, and on the other, with that slim fraction of individuals who, against the odds, resist authority and power, remain uncorrupted, and bravely turn away from evil; that inadequately small, but consistently present percentage, who, in Milgram's social psychology experiments listened to their inner conscience, rejected the scientists' orders, and refused to (continue to) electrocute the experiment's participants (Bauman, 1989: 151–68). This is no doubt a tempting perspective, for it confers a worthy sense of moral dignity upon those brave and justly celebrated individuals (Hugh Thompson, Paul Rusesabagina, Oskar Schindler, Irena Sendler, etc.) who – surrounded by unfolding horror – risked their own security in order to protect strangers. However, it begs the question of how this moral conscience was planted within us and why its force to compel is distributed so unevenly.

Bauman writes that 'well before we are told authoritatively what is "good" and what "evil" (and sometimes what is neither) we face the choice between good and evil; we face it already at the very first, inescapable moment of encounter with the Other' (1995: 2). Though not referring to an essence in the conventional sense of the term, but rather to an existential condition (our 'infinite' moral responsibility to the Other), to the pragmatic humanism defended here, Bauman is still searching for morality in the wrong place; searching deep within our *selves*, rather than within our *communities*. The pragmatic (and sociological) objection to Bauman's statement that 'well before we are taught and learn the socially constructed and socially performed rules of proper behaviour, and exhorted to follow certain patterns and to abstain from following others, we are already in the situation of *moral choice*' (1995: 1), consists in simply asking where this primal choice to do either good or bad (morality) – and indeed the specification of what in fact constitutes 'good' or 'bad' (ethics) – come from. Is a young child who has been unable to 'learn the socially constructed and socially performed rules of proper behaviour' *really* in a state of moral choice (and therefore responsibility)? A more thoroughly sociological perspective (alongside the majority of established legal systems) suggests not, and instead that morality (the individual impulse to right conduct), just as much as ethics (the rules of right conduct) is an acquired characteristic; something that simply is (or is not) conditioned into us.[5]

On this account, morality is not something we start out with and subsequently choose whether or not to heed, it is something we *construct* and *achieve*. Alongside communitarian philosophers such as Macintyre (1981) and Taylor (1989), pragmatists understand not only our ethics but also the way we deliberate morally as unavoidably contingent upon our habits, traditions, customs, and the means of justification and resolution accepted in the communities we recognize as our own (e.g. Dewey, [1922] 1976). Arendt supports this view, reminding us of the two words' etymologies: 'morals come from *mores* and ethics from *ethos*, the Latin and the Greek words for customs and habit, the Latin word being associated with rules of behaviour whereas the Greek is derived from habitat, like our habits' (1978: 5). Pragmatism therefore adopts an unmistakably sociological stance in accepting, as Hayes puts it, that 'the most private and personal moral endeavour is based on judgments and sentiments that have been developed through social experience and spread by social contacts' (1918: 296), and rejecting, as Dewey wrote, 'the notion that an abstract ready-made conscience exists in individuals and that it is only necessary to make an occasional appeal to it' ([1922] 1976: 219). This approach

does not aim to belittle the importance of our moral judgement nor to rob the virtuous of their virtue, but to understand more clearly the contingency, contestability, and relationality of morality and the fact that it too arises in reference to a particular moral (that is, *social*) community, not from the whimsical flicker of some inbuilt sentiment (whether or not such a thing in fact exists).

Rather than needing to posit some shared instinctive moral sense, this pragmatic approach instead focuses upon a simpler and indeed more animal feature of human life: our collective capacity to be traumatized – to burn, to break, to bruise, and to bleed – both mentally and physically. Beyond this, there is seen to be no 'secret added ingredient'. As Rorty puts it:

> [T]here is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature, no built in human solidarity, to use as a moral reference point. There is nothing to people except what has been socialised into them ... Simply by being human we do not have a common bond. For all we share with all other humans is the same thing we share with all other animals – the ability to feel pain (1989: 177).[6]

Rorty's rendering of what I have called 'pragmatic humanism' has faced criticism on this point for appearing to silently fall back upon the foundation of 'pain' or 'suffering' in its attempt to overcome other foundations, leading some authors to argue for an unintended affinity between Levinas's work and Rorty's own (e.g. Critchley, 1996; Jordaan, 2006; Soper, 2001). Soper, for example, has suggested that 'there is a certain equivocation in Rorty's "humanism" ... since he both denies that there is anything we share in common as human beings while in effect recognizing that his strictures against cruelty make no sense unless we accept that there is' (2001: 124). From this, she concludes that Rorty is himself an essentialist in denial for 'an essentialist position on human nature need claim no more than Rorty does himself, namely a universal susceptibility to pain and humiliation' (Soper, 2001: 123–4).

There are, however, two important problems with Soper's critique. First, vulnerability would be an awkward *sine qua non* of 'human nature' because it is clearly something we share not only with human beings, but with all other sentient organisms too, especially those with highly developed nervous systems. Butler, another thinker who turns to precarity in order to generate ethical insight, explains how

> [I]t does not ultimately make sense to claim ... that we have to focus on what is distinctive about human life, since, if it is the 'life' of human life that concerns us, that is precisely where there is no firm way to distinguish in absolute terms the *bios* of the animal from the *bios* of the human animal (2009: 19).[7]

If the turn to precarity *is* an essentialism, it is one concerned with an essence of sentient life in general, not that of humanity in particular. However, there is an additional reason to reject the notion that *using* shared precarity to mould forms of solidarity is a return to essentialism. That is, what Soper mistakenly understands to be a singular deep human 'essence' (our shared capacity to feel pain) is understood pragmatically as a multitude of recognizable and comparable imbrications and potentially even *differences*;

differences that are perhaps only recognizable through acts of translation, such as sociology can provide. Even though we may all suffer, the character of suffering itself (as is powerfully dramatized in Orwell's 'Room 101') can be a highly idiosyncratic experience, but nevertheless one capable of resonating across boundaries of difference.

In addition, although the possibility of a shared 'ability to sympathise with the pain of others' may in certain circumstances stimulate a moral response of obligation towards the Other, Rorty is equally aware that in itself this is far too flimsy a basis upon which to attempt to *ground* a broader ethics. The *strategy* of Rorty's proposed universalism, which shares much with Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak et al., 1993) and Gilroy's (2004) 'strategic universalism', is – like all strategies – open to failure. 'I am not', writes Rorty,

> [T]rying to 'locate the source of moral obligation in the sentient disposition of the self towards the Other's suffering', nor in any other sort of 'universal fact of human nature'. Maybe there is such a disposition, but it is so malleable – so capable of being combined with indifference to the suffering of people of the wrong sorts – that it gives us precious little to rely upon (1996: 42).

For a pragmatist, any notion of a 'foundation' – based as it is upon the logic of discovering an essence behind an appearance – is deeply suspect; a point on which Laclau defends Rorty, writing that 'there is no room for ethics to provide any kind of "post"-metaphysical, but still "first philosophy", grounding. There is with Rorty no danger of any kind of Levinasian proclivity' (1996: 60).

Pragmatic humanism instead asserts the idea that 'a person's moral character – his or her selective sensitivity to the pain suffered by others – is shaped by chance events in his or her life' (Rorty, 1990: 21) so that in distinction to Bauman's Levinasian motto, '[i]f in doubt – consult your conscience' (1993: 250), based as it is upon the assumption that such a moral conscience lies (whence it came, we know not) waiting to be heeded within us all, pragmatic humanism instead acknowledges that one's social environment may never have given birth to such a precognitive impulse, may have dampened or distorted its efficacy, but conversely, and more promisingly, may therefore also help in generating and nurturing such an impulse. In this sense it recognizes that human moralities are, as Weeks puts it, 'inherited moralities' (1991: 153) but that this fact makes them no less significant or necessary. Both immorality *and* morality are treated as thoroughly social in this model, and therefore work can and must be done towards not merely avoiding the possibilities of immorality, but also producing, developing, training, educating, and expanding a moral sense of sympathy towards others.

Since public cultures that only represent the sufferings of people occupying privileged positions in the hierarchy of bodily security (royalty, celebrities, *our* troops, *our* citizens) must ultimately be seen as morally dubious cultures to live in, one way in which this may in part be achieved is through determined and responsible sociological representations of shared precarity. From this view, part of sociology's 'value' might be reconceptualized as residing less in its capacity for scientific enlightenment, and more in its ability to offer empathetic and carefully contextualized representations of the suffering of those whom either the media bypass, or for whom the frames through which they are brought into

visibility foreclose the possibility of responding 'with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives' (Butler, 2007: 955). While it is beyond the remit of this article to interrogate all the likely impediments to the efficacy of such a project (e.g. Boltanski, 1999; Butler, 2007; Cohen, 2001; Sontag, 2003), it is at least clear that this strategy would require a vigilant guard against the fallacy that encountering representations of suffering shares much qualitative equivalence with victims' own experiences of suffering and acknowledgement that the road from emotional identification, through authentic ethical responsibility, to practical responsive mobilization is littered with challenging obstacles to be overcome. These obstacles in themselves, however, hardly present adequate reasons for dismissing such a project in advance.

Weeks (1995) illustrates another way in which sociologists might use precarity in this pragmatic manner, and in so doing help translate forms of loss into forms of solidarity. Reflecting upon the AIDS pandemic, he argues that something hopeful might be salvaged from the overall tragedy; that as well as human devastation, it 'also provided the challenge and opportunities for creating new identities and communities, forged in the furnace of suffering, loss and survival' (Weeks, 1991: 152). Like Jaspers' ([1938] 1971) earlier argument concerning 'boundary situations', Weeks recognizes that an existential acknowledgement of the finitude of life through the prospect of looming death can hold the power to flood life with urgency, meaning, and value. This meaning can, he argues, become a basis for solidarities among the living, naming this project of bringing diverse people together in the face of premature death and illness 'radical humanism' and stating that:

> For the radical humanist, aware of the contingencies of existence but alert to the meanings of life, the key meaningfulness must lie in our ties to others ... a crisis like the unleashing of AIDS forces us to remember that our life can have meaning only because of the human bond, our links with others (Weeks, 1995: 171).

Similarly to the more recent arguments for a pragmatic feminist ethics of care (Mottier, 2004), and unlike the belief of most traditional humanisms that unity could only be forged through the discovery of some shared essence (a belief that has historically led to bloody consequences through self-appointed groups determining what that essence might be and therefore where the boundaries of humanity might be set), Weeks sees the forms of solidarity, care, and moral recognition arising out of 'radical humanism' as instead things to be 'invented' by us, arguing that this task of 'inventing moralities' in a post-foundational world can draw sustenance from recognition of the quickness with which life can be taken away and so the consequential importance of valuing it while it is still here.

In distinction to typical deconstructive responses to the radical lack of ethical foundations, Weeks's argument is also interesting in its offering of a constructive sense of hope and resourcefulness, bearing out Bernstein's observation that 'the prevailing spirit of pragmatism has been ... *not* deconstruction but reconstruction' (Bernstein,1992: 833). Bernstein (2005) has more recently called this characteristically active and open-ended approach to morality 'pragmatic falliblism', in the sense that its denial of eternal solutions does not preclude the on-going need for successive provisional fixes.

Likewise, Weeks stresses 'the importance of valuing even if the conclusions we come to are different. The responsibility for valuing lies not in some Platonic heaven of eternal certainty, but in human action and creativity – in us with all our uncertainty' (1995: 44). Being products of human 'invention' rather than divine or rational decree, pragmatic humanistic values are understood not to respond to any ultimate condition of existence, but to the particular concrete conditions within which human beings find themselves, and therefore empirical disciplines like sociology – in the characteristic attention they pay to the observable social world around us – appear well suited to provide the material from which such an ethics might be constructed, sustained, and when necessary re-'invented'.

Since, as Rorty puts it, you 'cannot aim at moral perfection but you can aim at taking more people's needs into account than you did previously' (1999: 83), once the Levinasian appeal to some inscrutable moral impulse has been jettisoned, we might instead work towards concerning ourselves with an ever greater range of humanity. Moreover, because even those committing heinous crimes against out-groups usually feel a sense of moral obligation towards in-group members, Rorty suggests that '[moral] 'progress on a world-historical scale consists in enlarging the range of people whom we think of as people like us. Barbarians, for example, get in as well as Greeks. Greeks get in as well as Jews. Women get in as well as men. Blacks get in as well as whites. Gays get in as well as straights' (2000: 110).[8]

Pragmatic humanism therefore pursues something different to that which traditional philosophical or religious ethics aimed at; not some timeless ethical law, shared human essence or virtue, rationally-grounded and deontological categorical imperative or universal moral sentiment, but rather a tactical refocusing of our attention away from what Freud described as a 'narcissism of minor differences' (1930 [2004]: 64) and back upon recognition of the pain of those seemingly unlike ourselves as in fact remarkably similar to our own, and from this recognition attempts to *create*, rather than *reveal* human solidarity. Once solidarity has been established in small groups, the aspiration is one of outward spread: 'a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people' (Rorty, 1994: 14). With this spread, and because there is no terminal 'truth' to moral questions, inevitably comes a development in the content of morality, so that 'ethics' comes to be seen as a set of morphing agonistic conversations rather than the imperial expansion of one particular fixed set of local assertions, something Rorty himself, caught up in his unreflectively liberalistic and nationalistic concerns, certainly failed to stress (Mottier, 2004; Turner, 2004). Further, in its distinctive drive to give voice to what Foucault called 'subjugated knowledges' there is reason to believe that another of sociology's tasks may be to help ensure that subordinate perspectives are made audible within this conversation (Back, 2007) – the criminal as well as the police officer, the Private as well as the General, the Afghani war widow as well as the British war widow.[9]

The pragmatic proposition therefore is that we switch from a depth metaphor for moral insight, which understands morality as a matter of digging vertically down to get to the true all-unifying kernel of human nature, to a metaphor of expansion, which is instead aimed at spreading our sympathies horizontally so as to develop and revise them through the encounter with ever wider concrete expressions of humanity. This active, self-modifying conception of ethics is entirely in line with both the philosophical and

practical spirit of the first generation of pragmatists who saw the '*highest* ethical life' as consisting not in action in accordance to ethical rules, but rather in the 'breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case' (James, 1891: 349). It is clearly reflected too in Addams's aspirations for Hull-House ([1910] 1999), a project that embodied both her conviction in ethics-as-action above ethics-as-contemplation as well as her belief in the obligation to actively seek out experiences with the manifest diversity of different ways of life, so as to provide a constant test to the parochiality of our values (Addams, [1902] 2002).[10] Moral progress, in this model, becomes less a matter of convergence upon some profound ethical law, and more a matter of developing 'our ability to make the particular little things that separated us seem unimportant'; more like 'sewing together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt, than like getting a clearer vision of something true or deep' (Rorty, 1999: 86).

In contrast to traditional humanisms that offered us an abstract ideal of humanity (one invariably shaped by the conceits of its authors) and then proceeded to deduce downwards from this ideal to determine where the appropriate boundaries of humanity lay, what pragmatic humanism therefore provides is an *inductive* morality, erected upwards upon the sociologically observed human world.

Conclusion

In a philosophical age defined by a retreat of external sources of certainty, a pragmatic approach to ethics asserts that it is up to human beings themselves to construct their own contingent and contestable ethics. The term 'humanism', employed in this pragmatic sense, is therefore doubly suitable for it both describes the species-wide aspiration of the ethics it defends, while also referring back to human beings (rather than God, Reason, or Nature) as its only possible 'grounding'.

Whether or not one accepts 'pragmatic humanism' as the most appropriate model for such an endeavour, one might still agree with the proposition that a purely philosophical ethics, which acts on the basis of abstract speculative principles, has lost its viability in our contemporary era. This article's broader contention has been that the only material with which a workable present-day ethics might be elaborated is that harvested from careful and attentive representations of the actual concrete world that human beings inhabit, create, and reproduce; that 'the ethics needed must be a study of objective reality – of the facts of social life' (Hayes, 1918: 299), and therefore that the sociologist has an important role to play in providing what C. Wright Mills described as 'the moral conscience of his [sic] society' (1967: 611).

Unlike the certainties of bygone religious or philosophical expressions of absolute ethical commandment – or indeed of Comte's early doctrinaire conception of sociological ethics ([1851] 2002), or Durkheim ([1887] 1993) and Dewey's ([1922] 1976) shared confidence in the ease of moving from 'a sociology of moral acts' to a position of 'saying what ought to be' (Durkheim, 2008: 130) – the ethical end of such work would need to be more modest and tentative in its pronouncements, emphasizing the importance of active and contextual experiment, rather than legal and universal diktat (Addams, [1902] 2002). By this same toke, however, in conceiving itself more as an open, contestable, and developing conversation, rather than a closed and eternal set of instructions, it might also

prove more resistant to translation into dogmatic and moralizing forms of power and hidden social control than many of its abstract predecessors have proven to be. It would therefore be less concerned with providing clear and fixed ethical rules, capable of being referred to and applied in all conceivable circumstances, and more with cultivating a sensitized mindset (in those who are willing to listen) to a deeper consideration of the sameness that can be found even within our differences, and in particular, of the sameness that exists in our shared capacity to suffer, to cause suffering,[11] and also to relieve suffering. While such an ethically aspiring sociology would have to defend itself against the naïvety that its representations would necessarily have an ennobling effect, this need not in itself threaten the importance of pursuing such a goal. It is in this spirit that the article therefore finds agreement with Berger's comment that it may well be 'part of a civilized mind in our age to have come in touch with the peculiarly modern form of critical thought that we call sociology' and that 'by this contact [such minds may] become a little less stolid in their prejudices, a little more careful in their own commitments and a little more sceptical about the commitments of others – and perhaps a little more compassionate in their journeys through society' (Berger, 1963: 198).

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Gouldner (1962) provides a trenchant critique of this 'myth'.
2. Controversial indicators of 'impact' are central to the 2014 REF by which HEFCE will determine selective research funding allocations to HE institutions (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/).
3. As Connor puts it: 'the lack of absolute values no more makes all other values interchangeable than the absence of an agreed gold standard makes all world currencies worth the same' (quoted in Bauman, 1995: 6), or as Holmwood writes, acknowledging that there 'is no final adequacy from which judgements of values can be made . . . is not the same as arguing that judgements cannot be made. Wherever there are different claims, there must be issues of which account is superior' (Holmwood, 2011: 25; see also Rorty, 2002).
4. Bauman refers to Levinas as 'my ethics teacher' (2011: 2).
5. Junge (2001), Silverstone (2004), and Smart (1999) offer alternative critiques of the lack of socio-logic in Bauman's ethics.
6. Butler (2004), Gilroy (2000), and Turner (2006) present comparable arguments, and Braidotti (2013) provides a critical take.
7. Bentham's defence of animal rights (similar to some Buddhist doctrines) likewise argued that sentience and the capacity to suffer, rather than any capacity to reason, ought to be the primary concern in allocating rights to a living being. As he put it: 'The question is not, Can they [animals] reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?' (Bentham, [1780] 2009: 311).
8. Nussbaum (2007) supports this moderate account of moral progress.
9. Spivak (1988) helps highlight the inevitable and complex challenges to this project.

10. It is notable the extent to which Dewey's more famous and more formalized ethical writings relied upon the inspiration of Addams's concrete demonstration of social ethics (Seigfried, 2002).
11. Levi's (1989) description of the 'grey zone' discusses this disquieting counterpart of shared human potentiality.

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