

## CHAPTER 2

# The Cognitive Approach to Morality

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Many contemporary social scientists tend to reduce rationality to its instrumental form and ignore or even disqualify the notion coined by Max Weber of *Wertrationalität*. In this chapter, I propose a formal definition and defense of the notion of *value rationality* or *axiological rationality*, as I prefer to translate the notion of *Wertrationalität*. Axiological rationality may be defined as the type of rationality grounding value statements and value feelings, and their species, moral and prescriptive statements and feelings. But what does *axiological rationality* mean? I will claim that this notion can be given a clear analytical definition, that it labels and encapsulates a powerful theory that explains many sociological data on morality and more generally on axiological feelings and also that it was more or less implicitly used, not only by Max Weber in his empirical analyses, but also by many other sociologists before and after him. In a word, starting from Weber's notion, I will try to show that many powerful sociological analyses of moral feelings use more or less implicitly a *cognitive approach*.

### SOCIOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY ON MORAL FEELINGS

Moral, normative and generally axiological feelings—i.e., the feelings that *X is good, legitimate*, etc.—are one of the most important social phenomena and of the least mastered scientifically. The unsatisfactory state of the social scientific art on this topic is partly due to the fact that the available theories of axiological feelings produced by philosophy are highly influential among social scientists, though as a result of the division of labor in the human sciences they often fail to see it. Now, while these philosophical theories are grounded on powerful ideas, they cannot be accepted literally by sociologists. Major examples illustrate this point.

1. Kant's *theory of practical reason* maintains that an action is good if it rests on maxims that all would accept, as *never do something that you would not like to be done to you*. From his theory Kant drew controversial consequences, as that lying is always bad. This statement is contradicted by many observations though, as the fact that most people would normally consider that it is good for a war prisoner to lie when an investigation officer asks him to deliver the names of his companions of arms. Benjamin Constant, the French political theorist of the 19th century, already raised this objection. But the main sociological objection to Kant's theory is that it fails to explain

many *ought-feelings*, as the fact that people accept inequalities in some circumstances and not in others or the consensus on the point that some occupations should receive higher salaries than others.

2. *The utilitarian theory* developed from Bentham and earlier La Rochefoucauld to modern writers as Harsanyi (1955) maintains that individuals are guided by the principle of maximizing the differences between positive and negative outcomes, to them, of their actions. This theory is contradicted by the fact that people can behave altruistically, as shown by plain observation as well as by the findings from experiments as the *ultimatum game*. The latter shows that in situations where people could impose an unequal sharing of an amount of money to their own advantage many of them opt for an equitable sharing. The shortcomings of the utilitarian approach to morality led social scientists as Sen (2002) to propose to correct it by taking the Kantian approach into consideration.
3. Rawls' (1971) *theory of justice as fairness* has a more limited scope but has attracted a great deal of attention. It maintains notably that we have the feeling that some institution or state of affairs is good if it has the effect of making the situation of the worse-off in a society as good as possible. Thus, the level of inequality between salaries in a firm is good if it can be shown that making it lower would affect negatively the activity of the firm and hence threaten the worse paid. This theory is contradicted by the fact that the people appear as Rawlsian only under specific cognitive circumstances.
4. Habermas' (1981) *communication theory* states that a collective decision is good if it can be considered as deriving from individual opinions expressed in a context of free discussion between equals. This *procedural* theory is confronted with the objection that discussions among scientists are the closest approximation of the ideal situation of free and perfect communication. Pareto qualified rightly though the history of science as *a churchyard of false theories*. Why would then *communicative rationality* be immunized against wrong answers as far as normative or axiological questions are concerned, while it is obviously not as far as scientific questions are concerned?
5. The *relativistic theory* according to which axiological feelings would always be context-bound and without other ground than the strength of tradition and socialization has also to face serious objections: "truth on this side of the Pyrenean mountains, error beyond" (*vérité en deça des Pyrénées, erreur au-delà*, wrote Pascal (1954 [1670])). The relativistic theory is contradicted by the existence of axiological universals: stealing is held everywhere as bad in principle. Killing intentionally a human being is universally considered as more serious than killing him unintentionally. Corruption is treated in principle as bad by all cultures. Above all, the relativistic theory oversees that contextual variations in the *customs* can hide non-contextual *values*. Respecting the other man is a value in all societies. It inspires norms that are expressed by symbols highly variable from one context to another.

All these theories include important intuitions, but none of them can be literally borrowed by social scientists, for the reason that, though they explain some observational data on moral feelings, they appear also as incompatible with or as unable to explain other data. A good sociological theory should provide a grid from which sociologists could draw a convincing explanation of the moral, prescriptive and axiological feelings they observe on given issues in given contexts. A great achievement of Weber and Durkheim is that they use such a grid.

Sociologists do not always recognize it for two reasons: (a) it remains implicit in their work and (b) the conventional history of sociology tends to insist on the differences between Durkheim and Weber and to disregard their similarities.

I will try here to make analytical Weber's notion of *axiological rationality*. My thesis is that axiological rationality should be considered as a variant of *cognitive rationality*.

In a nutshell, Weber's notion of axiological rationality owes its importance to the fact that it implies that instrumental rationality cannot be considered as the exclusive or even the main dimension of rationality. Social action is always grounded on a combination of axiological and instrumental rationality. Most people prefer obviously to serve rather than hurt their own interests and preferences, but they also prefer that their actions are positively evaluated by others, more precisely by the anonymous other as they see him: the other G.H. Mead christened the *generalized Other*. Weber's notion overcomes the opposition between individual instrumentality and a collective sense of moral justice and generally of values. It also overcomes another shortcoming of the instrumental conception of rationality: while instrumental rationality can explain the means used by social actors to satisfy their goals or preferences, axiological rationality provides a guideline to explain their values and hence their preferences.

### WEBER'S NOTION OF AXIOLOGICAL RATIONALITY

Max Weber's notion of *axiological rationality* (Weber 1922) contains in a highly condensed fashion an idea that, once developed, generates a theory with a more general scope than the Kantian, the utilitarian, the procedural or the relativistic ones.

Many interpretations have been given of Weber's notion. Many writers hold it as controversial. Lukes (1967:259–60) goes as far as to contend that it is meaningless. Sukale (1995:43), one of the most knowledgeable contemporary commentators of Weber, qualifies the concept as misleading (*irreführend*): “Weber's distinction between axiological and instrumental rationality, as though there would be two types of rational action, is extremely misleading.” (*Damit ist Webers Einteilung des rationalen Handelns in zweckrationales und wertrationales, als gäbe es zwei verschiedene Arten rationalen Handelns, äußerst irreführend.*) Why this brutal rejection? My guess is that, to Sukale, as to Lukes, rationality means *instrumental rationality*. So, their rejection of *axiological rationality* as a genuine form of rationality is probably the outcome of the influence on them of the dominant contemporary definition of rationality. They endorse the widespread idea that the notion of rationality can exclusively be applied to the relation between means and ends. This idea is frequently considered as axiomatic notably in the English-speaking world under the influence of the followers of pragmatism and of major thinkers as Bertrand Russell or Herbert Simon. Thus, to Russell (1954), “Reason has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends”. To Simon (1983), “Reason is fully instrumental. It cannot tell us where to go; at best it can tell us how to get there”.

The skeptical interpretation of Weber's *axiological rationality* was presumably also reinforced by the fact that Weber is often described as supporting a *decisionist* theory of values, i.e., a theory according to which the ultimate values cannot be grounded. It is true that, if ultimate values could be grounded, they would not be ultimate. But Weber (1995[1919]:41) makes the point that physics itself can build reliable theories although they rest on undemonstrated

principles: “every science rests on principles” (*keine Wissenschaft ist voraussetzungslos*). Axiological statements can in the same way be valid, although they rest on undemonstrated principles. Moreover, if values were endorsed without being grounded in the minds of social actors, how could Weber insist on the crucial importance of his notion of *Verstehen* in sociology, i.e., on the idea that the ultimate causes of social action lie in the reasons and motivations of people? Finally, Weber (1995[1919]:38) states clearly that the goals and values involved in social action can be rationally discussed.

But what does *axiological rationality* mean? *Rationality* is widely used as a major concept by two disciplines: economics and philosophy of science. To economists, rationality means generally instrumental rationality, in other words: congruence between means and ends. As to the ends, they hold them as rational if they are compatible with one another, but they reject the idea that ends as such could be treated as rational or not. To historians and philosophers of science, rationality has a different meaning: to them, a scientist is rational if, to the best of his knowledge, he prefers a stronger to a weaker theory. Thus, it became irrational to believe that the earth is flat once the proofs that it is round had accumulated. I propose to qualify this form of rationality as *cognitive*.

## COGNITIVE RATIONALITY

*Cognitive rationality* can be defined in the following fashion. Let us assume that we can draw some conclusion from a set of statements and that this conclusion explains some phenomenon. To take an example, the two statements: “the air has a given weight” and “the air is heavier at the bottom than at the top of a mountain” lead to the conclusion that the quicksilver in the barometer should be higher at the bottom of a mountain. Now, this is precisely what we observe. So, the two statements explain the behavior of the barometer. Still in the 16th century, an alternative theory was available: the Aristotelian theory according to which the quicksilver rises in an empty tube because nature would abhor emptiness. It does not explain why the barometer is higher at the bottom of a mountain and it introduces a conjectural anthropomorphic statement on nature, while these two shortcomings are eliminated in the alternative theory independently devised by Torricelli and Pascal. This well-known example suggests that it is cognitively rational to endorse a given explanation of a phenomenon, if the explanation is made of acceptable and mutually compatible statements and if the competing available theories are weaker in one way or another.

Radnitzky (1987) has proposed to build a bridge between the two basic meanings of the notion of *rationality*. He uses an example to illustrate his point: it became irrational to believe that the earth is flat from the moment when it became more *costly*, he contends, to defend this theory than to accept its competitor. But the costs of defending a theory are higher than the costs of defending an alternative theory if and only if the latter explains more *easily* the observed phenomena than the former. Without knowing and understanding the arguments used by the alternative theories to explain, say, why the sails of a ship disappear at the horizon after the hull or why the moon has the form of a crescent, I cannot evaluate the costs of endorsing the theory that the earth is flat or the theory that it is round. So, the reduction proposed by Radnitzky of cognitive to instrumental rationality is artificial. The important point is: the theory that the earth is round explains more convincingly a number of phenomena than the theory that the earth is flat.

My claim is that Weber had in mind the distinction between *instrumental* and *cognitive rationality* when he coined the expression *axiological rationality*. In other words, I interpret this notion as indicating that cognitive rationality can be applied, not only to descriptive or representative but also to prescriptive, moral or axiological questions.

I will leave aside the question as to whether my interpretation describes what Weber had actually in mind and say only that, if it is true that Weber never clearly stated what he meant by *axiological rationality*, he implicitly uses it in most of his empirical analyses. I have made elsewhere the point that his analyses in the sociology of morals and religion amount at disentangling the cognitive reasons responsible for the collective beliefs he explores, of their change over time and of their contextual variations and that, as Weber, Durkheim explains long-term change in moral feelings and variations of religious beliefs as the outcome of cognitive rationality (Boudon 2008, chapters 4 and 5). But my aim here is rather to develop the theory of axiological feelings that can be drawn from Weber's notion of axiological rationality and to show its powerfulness for the explanation of moral, prescriptive and generally axiological feelings. The Weber scholars who would feel embarrassed by my interpretation of Weber's intuitions could very well forget about this point and consider the cognitive theory of morality and axiological feelings I develop below as mine, if they prefer, although on my side I find hard to forget the process through which I came to this theory.

### **THE COGNITIVE THEORY OF MORAL, PRESCRIPTIVE, AND AXIOLOGICAL FEELINGS**

This cognitive theory of moral, prescriptive and axiological feelings I propose rests upon the four following postulates.

1. Theories can be built on moral, prescriptive and axiological as well as on descriptive questions; moreover, moral, prescriptive or axiological theories can be in many cases unambiguously characterized, as descriptive ones, as stronger or weaker when they are compared to one another.
2. People tend to endorse the theory they see as stronger.
3. They tend to endorse a moral, prescriptive or value statement and to experience the feeling that *X is good, bad, legitimate, fair, etc.* when it appears to them—more or less vaguely depending on the circumstances—as grounded on valid reasons.
4. These reasons can be context-dependent but also context-free.

The Weberian–Durkheimian sociological tradition recognizes fully the validity of the distinction introduced by postulate 4. Scientific beliefs aim at being context-free. In the same way, a belief such as the belief that a democratic regime is more likely than an authoritarian one to respect the dignity of people is commonly considered as context-free. Clearly, the citizens of democratic societies do not feel that being democratic is better than dictatorial regimes simply because they have been socialized to think so, but because they perceive their feeling as right. In the same way, I think that Pythagoras' theorem is right, not simply because I have been socialized to think so. As representational beliefs, moral beliefs can also be context-dependent. The belief that rain rituals are efficient is context-bound, as is the moral belief that death penalty is a legitimate form of punishment.

My claim is that the cognitive approach to morality is useful to explain moral, prescriptive and axiological feelings, as they are observed by empirical research, that it can explain the phenomena of consensus which can be observed in societies on many issues and that it can explain the change of moral feelings over time and generally of collective axiological feelings.

At this point, it is necessary to mention an almost inescapable objection. As no *ought*-statement can be drawn from *is*-statements, it is often contended that normative and generally axiological theories are by their very nature basically different from representational ones. This is true to some extent. Still, as *is*-statements, *ought*-statements can be weaker or stronger. Thus, to take a trivial example, under general conditions, people prefer riding a car smoothly in the city traffic because, as moving is, to them, a means rather than an end, they want normally the means to be as little unpleasant as possible. For this reason, they consider traffic lights as a *good*—though unpleasant—thing. The value statement *traffic lights are a good thing* is the conclusion of a valid argument grounded on the empirical indubitable statement that traffic is more fluid with traffic lights than without. Though elementary, this example is typical of many normative arguments. It shows that a normative argument can be as convincing as a descriptive one. This is the case when the argument involves empirical statements that can be checked and axiological statements on which all would agree, as *traffic jam is a bad thing*. The example also shows that an *ought*-statement can be derived from *is*-statements, provided the set of statements concluding to the *ought*-statement includes at least one *ought*-statement.

Max Weber has well seen, however, the point of utmost importance that, by difference with the example of the evaluation of traffic lights, axiological statements cannot always be considered as the conclusion of *instrumental* arguments. By creating his notion of *axiological rationality*, he wanted possibly to insist on the point that people may have in some circumstances subjectively strong and objectively valid reasons to believe that *X is good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate, fair or unfair*, etc. without these reasons belonging to the instrumental category. He introduced by so doing a powerful idea, crucial with regard to our understanding of axiological feelings and of moral and normative feelings in particular. It provides an indispensable tool to explain the social processes whereby moral evaluations are constructed.

Once properly elaborated, the notion is also indispensable, as I will suggest below, to explain the change of moral feelings over time: why do we consider, for instance, as illegitimate types of punishment that were considered earlier as normal and legitimate? Why is death penalty abolished in a growing number of countries?

## AXIOLOGICAL RATIONALITY

As I have earlier defined *cognitive rationality* formally, I would define *axiological rationality* in the following way. Let us assume (1) that a set of statements leads to a given normative or axiological conclusion, (2) that the set of statements is made of acceptable and mutually compatible empirical and axiological statements, then, if no alternative set of acceptable and mutually compatible statements leading to a different or opposite normative or axiological conclusion is available, it will be *axiologically rational* to assume that the given normative or axiological conclusion is good.

To summarize, I would define a feeling or a statement as *axiologically rational* if people would consider it as derived from acceptable and mutually compatible arguments which can

be—but are not necessarily—of the *instrumental* type, and if no set of arguments is available that would be as strong and would lead to a different conclusion. I propose in other words to define axiological rationality as a form of cognitive rationality characterized by the fact that it deals with arguments where at least one statement is axiological, since an *ought*-statement cannot be derived from statements that would *all* be *is*-statements.

By making *axiological rationality* a variant of *cognitive rationality*, I introduce a strong thesis. For this reason it is important to stress a trivial point: *cognitive rationality* is in many cases unable to provide a solution to the questions we raise. We have no answer to a considerable number of scientific questions. We really do not know whether stress is a cause of stomach ulcers or whether bees actually have a language. In the same way, we have no answer to numerous moral and generally axiological questions. Thus, there is presently no universal consensus on the question as to whether and under which conditions a woman can rent her belly for the purpose of procreation. But the *search* for a valid answer always follows the rules of *cognitive rationality*. This is true of axiological as well as representational questions.

### AN ILLUSTRATION OF AXIOLOGICAL RATIONALITY

My thesis associating *axiological rationality* and *cognitive rationality* is actually an old one. My own contribution is to express it in analytical terms and to show that it is implicitly present in many illuminating sociological works. While Weber was probably the first author who proposed to conceptualize the notion of *axiological rationality*, he is not the first one who has used it practically, as an example drawn from Adam Smith among other possible examples can illustrate. This example shows that *axiological rationality* is a much more concrete and hence much more useful notion to the social sciences than Kant's general maxims of *practical reason*.

In his *Wealth of Nations*, Smith (1793) wonders why his fellowmen have strong collective feelings on the fairness of salaries. Thus, a strong collective feeling among 18th century Englishmen is that miners should be paid more than soldiers. What are the causes of this consensus? Adam Smith's answer consists in showing that this feeling is grounded on subjectively strong and objectively valid reasons, which can be reconstructed in the following fashion: (1) A salary is the reward of a contribution. (2) Equal rewards should correspond to equal contributions. (3) Several components enter in the value of a contribution, as the investment required in order to generate the type of competence needed to produce the contribution and the risks involved in the realization of the contribution. (4) The investment is comparable in the case of the miner and of the soldier. It takes about as much time and effort to train a soldier as a miner. The two jobs are characterized by similar risks. The two include above all a high risk of being wounded or killed. (5) Nonetheless, there are important differences between the two. The soldier serves a function that is central in any society. He contributes preserving the very existence of the nation. The miner fulfils by contrast an economic activity among others. (6) This difference has the consequence that the death of the two men has a different social meaning. The miner's death will be commonly identified as an *accident*; the death of the soldier on the battlefield as a *sacrifice*. (7) Because of this difference in the social meaning of their activities, the soldier is entitled to symbolic rewards, in terms of moral prestige, symbolic distinctions, glory notably when he has won a battle, or funeral honors in the case of death on the battlefield. (8) For symmetric reasons, the miner is not entitled to the same symbolic

rewards. (9) As the contributions of the two categories in terms notably of risk and investment are the same, the salaries of the miners should be higher; otherwise, an unjustifiable disequilibrium between the contributions and the rewards of the two categories would appear. (10) Conclusion: This system of reasons is responsible for the strong feeling of most people, Adam Smith states, that miners should be paid more than soldiers. QED.

Two remarks can be introduced at this point. First remark: the set of reasons appears as entirely convincing, *given the context*. In a utopian other context where technical progress would make possible that miners exploit the mine from the floor, instructing robots with the help of computers, the validity of the system of reasons would clearly collapse: the miners would no more run a deadly risk, but they would have to have a high level of competence and hence a long training. Second remark: the reasons grounding moral feelings are generally *metaconscious* in the mind of people—they are there, but in many cases become really conscious only from the moment when an individual asks himself or is asked by others why he thinks so. The reasons Socrates extracts from the mind of the people he interviews in Plato's early *Dialogues* are typically *metaconscious*.

These two points are of utmost importance for the construction of our own moral feelings and the understanding of the moral feelings we register in contexts to which we do not belong. Why do we normally consider the rainmaking practices in use in some traditional societies as *strange* and the fire-making practices as *normal*? Because we know the laws of transformation of energy, while the members of these societies ignore them. They consider their fire-making and rainmaking practices as equally *magical*: as recipes likely to bring magical forces into action. If we ignore the parameterization of the cognitive reasons by the context, we fail to understand the reasons as to why people in other contexts do what they do and we tend to treat them as *irrational*, if not as *primitive*, as the anthropologists and sociologists of the 19th century did. The cognitive approach to morality provides a useful explanation of prejudices as well as a tool to fight them.

## LESSONS FROM SMITH'S EXAMPLE

Several lessons can be drawn from Smith's example. Systems of reasons on the salaries of miners and soldiers different from Smith's could be devised. One could argue for instance that soldiers are taken from their families and thus deserve more financial compensation. The argument may have been present in some minds. Would have it been sufficient by itself to create a widely shared consensus? Given that an empirical confirmation is in the case of this example practically impossible, it can only be stated that the reasons proposed by Smith are all straightforward, easily acceptable by anybody and compatible with one another, so that the consensus crystallized plausibly because this ideal-typical system of reasons appears as particularly convincing. In other cases, it can be easier to opt unambiguously for one of the plausible systems of reasons, as when people can be asked why they think on an issue as they do and generally when additional empirical data are available.

The philosopher and sociologist Scheler (1954) disagreed deeply with Adam Smith, since he developed himself an intuitionist theory of values. But he saw in full clarity that Smith's theory was of utmost importance for the explanation of moral and other values and he identified it correctly as *judicatory* (*urteilsartig*). He saw well that cognitive rationality was the core of Smith's theory of moral sentiments: that it proposes to analyze them as the consequence of systems of arguments that the members of a group perceive more or less implicitly as valid.

It can also be noted that, while contemporary sociologists seldom consider Adam Smith as a founding father of their discipline, Parsons et al. (1961) fully and rightly recognized his importance for sociology. Though Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is a main source of the so-called instrumental *Rational Choice Theory*, it contains at the same time in many passages as the one I am referring to here a powerful criticism of the limits of instrumental rationality and a proposal to overcome these limits by deriving normative and axiological feelings and judgments from processes guided by *cognitive rationality*.

The approach used by Smith can easily be illustrated by examples taken from modern writers. A contemporary theorist of ethics, Walzer (1993), proposes several analyses of our moral sentiments following the same line as Smith's analysis. To take an example close to Smith's: Why do we spontaneously consider, e.g., conscription as a legitimate recruitment method in the case of soldiers but not of miners, he asks? The answer is again that the function of the former is vital to the country, while the latter is an economic activity among others. If conscription could be applied to mining, it could be applied to any and eventually to all kinds of activities, so that it would lead to a political regime incompatible with the principles of democracy.

I would add in the same vein that we accept easily that soldiers are used as garbage collectors to meet situations of emergency, as when a lasting strike of garbage collectors threatens the public health. But it would be considered illegitimate to use soldiers to fulfill such tasks in normal situations. Strong reasons likely to be widely shared are here too responsible for a collective moral feeling.

In these examples, as in Smith's example, the collective moral feelings are grounded on subjectively strong and objectively valid reasons. These reasons can be qualified as *trans-subjective*, since most people would likely consider them as strong. Using Adam Smith's vocabulary, the *impartial spectator* would accept them. Thus, people who are not directly concerned in their interests because they are neither miners nor soldiers themselves and have no miners or soldiers among their parents and friends are in the position of the *impartial spectator*. They would consider as evident that miners should be paid more than soldiers.

So, Smith's analysis proposes implicitly a general theory of axiological feelings. It suggests that axiological feelings are grounded on reasons and that these reasons are not necessarily instrumental. Smith offers here a *cognitively rational* explanation of the collective feeling he accounts for. The feeling that *miners should be paid more than soldiers* is *collective* and strong because it is grounded on strong reasons in *individual* minds. The collective *feeling* in question is not a feeling in the personal idiosyncratic sense of the word. It illustrates rather a type of feeling a social actor cannot experience without having at the same time the impression that the *Generalized other* would *feel* like him. Though *affective*, this feeling is associated with a system of reasons present in individual minds, though in a half-articulated intuitive fashion. So, the *judicatory*—or cognitive—theory of axiological feelings illustrated by Adam Smith's example has the important property that it overcomes the rigid binary distinction between affectivity and rationality: I have the strong *feeling* that some state of affairs is fair or unfair, legitimate or not, because I have strong *reasons* to believe so. The theory suggests also that the moral states of mind of the *self* depend on the way he perceives the states of mind of the *other*: I cannot experience a reason as valid without having the feeling that the other man would share my view.

This cognitive approach to moral and generally axiological feelings offers moreover an analytical answer to Durkheim's question as to why any human being perceives his moral feelings as *constraining*. It is easily checked that the individual statements used in Smith's

argument as I reconstruct it have in common to be *subjectively strong*—and in Durkheim’s sense *constraining*—because they are *objectively valid*. Some of these statements are empirical. For instance: it takes as long to train a soldier as a miner; both occupations are exposed to deadly risks. These statements are indubitable. Uncontroversial too is the statement that reinforcing the security of a nation is a central social function, while mining is a particular economic function. Some of the statements derive from the most familiar sociological theory: thus, exchange theory states rightly that people expect the reward they get to reflect the contribution they provide. Some statements express familiar sociological observations: that death is not perceived as having the same meaning when it is the effect of self-sacrifice rather than of an accident; or that symbolic rewards can be used to reward the former but not to compensate the latter. These statements can also be easily accepted. On the whole, all individual statements used in Smith’s argument are acceptable. For this reason, most people perceived its conclusion as strong.

Moreover, it should be noted that the *social effects* of paying miners more than soldiers are not evoked in Smith’s analysis. For the reasons grounding the statement that minors should be paid more than soldiers are not instrumental but cognitive: it is rational to pay miners more, not because of the eventual social *effects* resulting from paying them more, but because paying them more is congruent with strong *principles*, as the principle of proportionality between contribution and reward: *cognitive axiological* rather than *instrumental* rationality is at work there.

Habermas has suggested, fair communication can *facilitate* the production in people’s minds of the reasons justifying a normative conclusion. But communication cannot by itself make the reasons valid. On this point, Durkheim (1979[1912]:624) was more clear-sighted: “in a first stage we believe in a notion because it is collective, then it becomes collective because it is true: we check its credentials before we endorse it” (*Le concept qui, primitivement, est tenu pour vrai parce qu’il est collectif tend à ne devenir collectif qu’à condition d’être tenu pour vrai: nous lui demandons ses titres avant de lui accorder notre créance*). In plain words: consensus is the product of truth, rather than truth the product of consensus regarding moral, prescriptive and axiological as well as representational beliefs. I mean here by *truth*: conclusions grounded on systems of reasons stronger than alternative available systems leading to different or opposite conclusions. Durkheim would certainly have rejected the conventionalist conception of moral, prescriptive or axiological judgments and feelings Habermas’ *communicative rationality* unavoidably implies.

## CONTEXT-FREE VERSUS CONTEXT-BOUND REASONS

While Durkheim recognizes fully, as Weber does, the parameterization of the reasons by the social context, he also stresses, as Weber, that systems of reasons can be context-free. Nobody doubts that Lavoisier’s theory of the composition of the air is better than Priestley’s even though one can understand why Priestley was confident in his theory. In the same fashion, nobody doubts that Montesquieu’s theory arguing that the separation of powers is a *good* institution, since it makes political power both more efficient and more acceptable, dominates Bodin’s or Beccaria’s theory according to which political power cannot be efficient without being concentrated. The negative feelings of the citizens of democratic countries against authoritarian or totalitarian regimes or the moral protest that can be observed when they feel

that the separation of powers is violated in their country derive from the fact that they have in mind in a more or less conscious fashion the system of reasons elaborated by Montesquieu.

Other illustrations of the distinction context-free/context-bound can easily be mentioned: the value of the respect due to the dead is context-free since it is a consequence of the principle of the dignity of all human beings, while the symbolic norms expressing this value are context-bound; politeness is context-free, but is expressed in context-bound ways.

Durkheim (1960 [1893]:146) has answered the question as to why moral feelings can be context-free: “Individualism and freethinking were born neither with the French Revolution, nor with the Reformation, nor with the Greek and Roman antiquity, nor with the fall of the Oriental Empires; they belong to all times” (*L’individualisme, la libre-pensée ne datent ni de la révolution, ni de la réforme, ni de l’antiquité gréco-romaine, ni de la chute des empires orientaux; ils sont de tous les temps*). Durkheim means here by *individualism*: the sense individuals have for their dignity and basic needs; by *freethinking*, he means: their capacity to evaluate critically notably institutions. In other words, the dignity of human beings is a basic context-free value. This value can of course be deeply hurt in situations of war, when some categories of men are qualified as *enemies*, or in societies introducing the category of *second-class* citizens. But, even then, the value remains alive in many people’s minds.

Context-bound moral beliefs can, as representational beliefs, be compared and evaluated. I can understand that in some contexts people believe in the efficiency of rain rituals. But I do not need to believe it myself. I can understand that female genital mutilation is practiced in some societies because it is the consequence of a traditional system of beliefs. I need not seeing this practice as acceptable and I have reasons to think that the reasons prevailing on this issue in modern societies are stronger. I can understand that in an emergent society many people prefer an authoritarian to a democratic political organization. But I feel I have strong reasons to prefer democracy. I can *understand* that in some societies thieves run the risk of having their hand cut. But even radical relativists would find this practice unacceptable. I feel in other words I am entitled to *judge* the practices in use in other contexts. Moral over time change would be entirely unintelligible if the systems of reasons prevailing in various contexts could not be compared to one another.

The next major point of this chapter is that the cognitive approach to morality offers a bridge between theory and empirical sociological studies on axiological feelings.

## EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY

To begin with, I will illustrate this point by considering briefly the issue of the relations between equality and equity. There is a vast sociological and psychological literature on this important issue. I will simply mention that the general conclusion to be drawn from this literature is that the public considers a given type of inequalities equitable or not on the basis of reasons likely to be accepted by the *impartial spectator*, to use again Smith’s concept: on the basis of reasons an ideal-typical individual would accept, under the assumption he would be in position to judge the inequalities in question with the sole help of his good sense and not of his passions, interests or prejudices. This cognitive approach explains some puzzling though empirically well-documented facts. I will restrict myself to two of them.

- People tend to perceive the income of the stars of the showbiz or of the most popular sports as *excessive*, but not as *unfair* or inequitable, while the income of big business leaders tends to shock them. This can be explained by the fact that the *impartial spectator* is reluctant to perceive as unfair inequalities resulting from free individual choices from the part of fans or supporters, while he rejects the idea that people could be entitled to decide by themselves or through their associates of the importance of their contribution to society.
- According to some illuminating but rare observations, people do not consider the reduction of the overall income distribution as a major political objective. This results probably from the fact that an overall income distribution is the product of functional inequalities, of inequalities that are not functional but reflect, say, differences in the dynamism of the socio-economic context, and of inequalities of which it is impossible to say whether they are functional or not. Consequently, the *impartial spectator* feels unable to judge whether the global level of inequality is fair or not. A moral negative reaction tends to appear though when the gap between high and low incomes is so great that it makes a functional justification unlikely. People take the standard deviation of overall income distributions into consideration essentially in this case (Forsé and Parodi 2004).

On the whole, once the observations made by the social sciences are synthesized on the issue of the relation between inequality and equity, they show that the *impartial spectator* or, in Weber's vocabulary, *axiological rationality* governs the attitudes and feelings of people on this issue as on all moral issues.

### BOUNDED AXIOLOGICAL RATIONALITY

A study by Frohlich and Oppenheimer (1992) illustrates an important point: that the axiological rationality of the *impartial spectator* should be considered as *bounded*. It is bounded notably by the information available to him. Herbert Simon has made popular the idea that instrumental rationality is *bounded* in the sense that it is parameterized by the information available to the decision-maker. The same point can be introduced regarding axiological rationality. I will concentrate my discussion on the parameterization of rationality by the available *information* and disregard the well-known point that rationality is bounded by other social factors.

The study aimed at determining whether current theories of equity are able to reproduce the actual feelings of people as to whether some distribution of goods is fair or not. In this study, a number of groups were asked to choose a fictitious income distribution among a set of distributions. I need not describe the ingenious experimental procedure used by the authors. It suffices to say that the set of distributions was built in such a fashion that the choice of a given distribution among those that were proposed to the respondents allowed according to the authors of the study inferring which one of four principles of justice the subjects had likely in mind. The relations between the principles and the choices were the following.

Those who had in mind the principle drawn from *utilitarian* theory were supposed to choose the distribution with the highest *mean*.

Those who had in mind the *difference principle* drawn from Rawls's theory of justice—inequality should not be decreased to the point where the worse-off would be still worse—were supposed to select a distribution with a high *floor* and a moderate *standard deviation*.

Those who had in mind the principle that may be qualified as *pragmatic* were supposed to select a distribution with a good *mean* and an acceptable *floor*.

Those who had in mind the principle that may be called *functional* were supposed to select a distribution with a good *mean* and a moderate *standard deviation*.

The study has been conducted on samples of Americans and of Poles. First important finding is that one of the principles dominates strongly the others. The by far most frequent choice of the respondents was the *pragmatic* one (77.3%). The *utilitarian* principle comes next, but far behind (12.8%). The *functional* principle is still more seldom retained (8.64%). As to Rawls' *difference principle* of justice, it ranks last (1.23%). Another important finding from the study is that the same structure of answers characterizes the American and the Polish samples. In the two cases, the *pragmatic* choice is by far much more frequent than the three others. So, on the whole a strong majority (1) is concerned with the average income being as high as possible, (2) wants a decent floor, (3) cares little about the standard deviation.

When, as here, the distribution of answers appears as highly structured and context-free, in the sense that the answers of the Polish and the American respondents were similar, one can suppose that strong reasons are responsible for the distribution. The study proposed to the respondents a very abstract decision situation. They had to select the fairest distribution, but had no information as to where the income inequalities came from. The discussions that were conducted with the respondents suggest that they had the feeling that they could not answer the question as to whether the inequalities reflected in the income distributions were fair or not. So, given the *bounded* informational conditions created by the experiment, an attractive answer was to opt for a good mean and to pay little attention to the standard deviation. On the other hand, the respondents considered that it is a good thing to introduce a constraint on the floor, since some protection against the hazards of life is normally expected from a government. These reasons explain that the solution most frequently chosen was: good mean, income higher than some floor, little attention paid to standard deviation. The same reasons explain that actual democratic governments make more or less generally though implicitly the same choice as the respondents in the study. As the present conjuncture illustrates, a government cares about the standard deviation only in the case where the discrepancy between the highest and the lowest incomes is clearly not *functional*.

The system of reasons at work in the answers would have plausibly been different if the experimental conditions had been different. Thus, if the distributions proposed to the respondents would have been presented as reflecting, not fictitious global societies, but the distributions of salaries in some organization, they would probably have considered the standard deviation and tried to see whether it reflected functional inequalities. For, while it is impossible to determine what the fair standard deviation should be as far as a global society is concerned, this is not impossible in the case of an organization.

Other experiments (e.g., Mitchell et al. 1993) confirm the importance of these contextual *informational* effects. It consisted again in the presentation to respondents of fictitious income distributions. But in this case, the respondents were explicitly told whether the fictitious societies were *highly*, *moderately* or *weakly* meritocratic. In the latter case, the respondents tended to choose the Rawlsian solution.

## MACROSOCIOLOGICAL MORAL FEELINGS EXPLAINED BY THE COGNITIVE APPROACH TO MORALITY

The cognitively rational theory of axiological feelings is indispensable to explain macrosociological moral phenomena. The example of the wide consensus observable in modern democratic societies on the legitimacy of a moderately progressive income tax will provide a first illustration of this point.

The democratic societies have during a long period struggled on the question as to whether and in which form an income tax should be introduced. Once the idea was accepted after long political conflicts, the income tax was defined as proportional (*flat tax*). Then a consensus emerged on the principles: (1) that the idea of an income tax is good, (2) that it should be progressive, (3) but *moderately* progressive. The three principles describe the situation currently prevailing in most democratic countries, because the three principles can easily be legitimated by reasons likely to be widely accepted (Ringen 2007).

Sketchily presented, these reasons are the following. Modern societies are roughly composed, as already stated by Alexis de Tocqueville, of three social classes that have relations of cooperation and conflict with one another: (1) the rich, who have at their disposal a significant surplus which can be converted into political or social power; (2) the middle class, which enjoys a more or less important surplus, though insufficient to be converted into political or social power; (3) the poor.

Social cohesion, social peace and the principle of the dignity of all require that the poor benefit from a subvention, from the middle class in the first place, because of its numerical importance. But the middle class would not accept to assume its share if the rich would not accept to bear the load of the subvention to the poor to a greater extent than the middle class, in application of elementary principles of justice. It can be concluded from these reasons that the income tax should be progressive. On the other hand, it must be moderately progressive, since the efficiency principle would be violated if the tax were too brutally progressive, for the rich would then be incited to transfer their resources abroad, generating a loss for the national community.

On the whole, one can legitimately conclude that the consensus which we can observe on this issue results from a sequence of convincing reasons, accepted by most people in democratic societies because of their validity. Once he is sufficiently informed, any citizen, belonging to any of the social classes, would accept the idea that a moderately progressive income tax is a *good* thing. The validity of the argument is responsible for the consensus and for its stability through time. Some citizens are hostile to the idea, under the effect of their interests, prejudices, presuppositions or passions. Some economists recommend substituting a proportional tax (*flat tax*) to a progressive income tax. A few of them go as far as to propose to exclude any income tax. But they are isolated. They oversee the fact that the question has two dimensions: an instrumental and an axiological one and neglect the latter. And there are also Nietzscheans who would prefer to give all to the rich. Few people would follow them though.

Ringen's explanation of the general consensus that crystallized on a progressive income tax rests on a system of simple, obvious and mutually compatible reasons of which it can plausibly be assumed that many people have them in mind in a more or less conscious fashion. Systems of reasons different from the one he proposes could be produced. But, as in Smith's example on miners and soldiers, the challenge would be to show that they are more likely to ground the consensus. Interviews in a Socratic spirit—*focused interviews* in Merton's

vocabulary—would of course increase the strength of the theory. When such interviews are not available or not possible though, as when sociologists deal with historical data, an ideal—typical system of simple, valid and compatible reasons is the only way open to them.

### LONG-TERM TRENDS IN MORAL FEELINGS EXPLAINED BY THE COGNITIVE APPROACH TO MORALITY

The cognitive theory of axiological feelings makes also possible to explain middle and long-term trends in the institutions or mores, as already more or less explicitly seen by the greatest classical sociologists.

Durkheim (1960[1893]) observes that several secular trends characterize the change of the penalties applied in Western societies: an increasing number of categories of delinquent acts are treated by civil rather than penal courts. An increasing number of acts are prosecuted before courts of lower level. The penalties tend to become softer. These long-term trends are associated to short-term ups and downs that should not lead to ignore the existence of the long-term trends.

These long-term trends come from several factors, but mainly from a process of *rationalization*. The trend of the penalties becoming softer derives from the following mechanism: when a new type of penalty appears as equally effective in terms of dissuasion as a formerly used penalty and also as better from the point of view of some other criteria, the new type of penalty tends to be selected. In other words, a basic two-stage mechanism is at work in this type of processes: (1) innovation, (2) rational selection or rejection of the innovation. As the selection of a new political idea or institution is made, not in a classroom or laboratory, but in the political arena, it can take a long time and be more or less violent, but the new penalty has a chance to be selected as soon as there are subjectively strong and objectively valid reasons to prefer it to the older one. As Durkheim has shown, the increase in the demographic density, its effect on the division of labor and the influence of the latter on the diffusion and social recognition of individualistic values created a context that turned out to be favorable to the rationalization process.

The same analysis can be applied to our modern world. The death penalty tends to disappear from modern democratic societies notably because it has been repeatedly shown that its dissuasive power is questionable. Moreover, it makes judiciary errors irreparable. The progress in the methods of investigation has made that judiciary errors are more easily and have been more frequently identified in the recent years. This circumstance has contributed making judiciary errors a salient issue. These reasons tend to lead a continuously increasing number of people to prefer other types of penalties, as life sentencing.

This change explains why the fact that death penalty is applied in some states of the US is perceived as a moral stain on the American democracy by the Western public opinion as well as by large fractions of the public opinion in the US. Some groups justify the death penalty by religious reasons: by its supposed redemptory value. But the principle of the freedom of opinion implies that no sanction can be considered as acceptable if it is grounded on religious principles. This conclusion derives itself from the fact that a religion cannot be demonstrated true: a point the Catholic Church notably officially accepts since the Council Vatican II. Generally, all religions agree that believing in their dogmas is a matter of *faith*. Consequently, their principles cannot be imposed without hurting the principle of the freedom

of opinion, a principle considered as basic in all democracies, since it derives itself from the principle of the dignity of all human beings. This set of strong reasons leads to the prediction that death penalty will probably be abolished in the US in a more or less remote future. The cognitive theory of morality can have a predictive beside its explanatory power.

The process, by which new political ideas or institutions are selected, though rational in the long-term, can of course be thwarted in the short term by unfavorable conjunctures. Max Weber stresses that *historical forces* threaten constantly rationalization (*Rationalisierung*). These unfavorable conjunctures can make, e.g., that the public opinion wants that the death penalty be reintroduced. As surveys have shown, this happens when barbarous crimes have been committed. Thus, in Belgium some years ago, a criminal was tried because he had locked up, raped and killed two young girls. A majority of Belgians appeared in surveys as in favor of reintroducing death penalty. But the political actors have refrained from taking any step in this direction, in many cases because of their personal convictions. But also because their convictions were consolidated by the fact that they were more or less clearly aware that the strong reasons which had led to the abolition of death penalty in all European countries would reappear on the political stage once the public emotion would have passed away and would disown them, since the abolition of death penalty is grounded on subjectively strong and objectively valid reasons.

### **MIDDLE-TERM CHANGES IN MORAL FEELINGS EXPLAINED BY THE COGNITIVE APPROACH TO MORALITY**

The cognitive theory of axiological feelings can also explain middle-term changes in moral feelings. A number of observers have interpreted the trend toward more liberalism on moral issues that can be observed in the last decades in Western societies as an effect of the social movements of the 1960s. These movements should rather be interpreted as the expression of a long-term trend toward a *rationalization* of people's answers to moral, social, political and religious issues. As to the main agent of this rationalization process, it is the two-step *innovation-selection mechanism* evoked in the previous section.

This process of rationalization can be directly observed in the middle-term thanks to the survey on the *World values* led by Inglehart et al. (1998). It has inspired a host of analyses. For my part, I wondered whether the data corroborated the hypothesis of the existence of trends in moral feelings. To this effect, I grounded my reanalysis on a systematic comparison of the answers of the age and educational level groups in eight Western countries (Boudon 2008, Chapter 6).

The questions dealing with authority show that from the group of the older to the younger, from the less to the more educated a trend can be observed toward the disqualification of the *traditional* and *charismatic* forms of authority and an exclusive recognition of the *rational* form of authority. The social, moral and political importance of authority is well recognized by the younger and more educated respondents. But they want authority to be justified. They are ready to follow, but they want to be able to judge whether the goals and means proposed by the social actors invested with authority are legitimate.

The questions dealing with religious issues reveal also a trend toward rationalization in the sense that, from the older to the younger and from the less to the more educated, the

attitudes toward religious issues seem to be more clearly led by three principles: (1) Nothing prevents people from worrying about questions dealing with the meaning of life or death. (2) Religions propose answers to this type of questions, but as they themselves recognize, their answers are a matter of faith. (3) Hence one should respect all religions, in agreement with the principle of the respect of all. It follows that the principle of the separation between the spiritual and the temporal authorities is a valid one. The sociological surveys show effectively that the younger and the more educated recognize more easily the importance of this latter principle in today's Western societies.

The questions dealing with moral issues in the narrow sense display the same trend toward rationalization. From the older to the younger and from the less to the more educated, a unique moral principle tends to prevail: the respect of other people. Consequently, the younger and the more educated respondents tend to accept as a fundamental moral principle the idea that, if some action or behavior has no negative effects on other people, it should be permitted. Following this trend, when an act or a type of behavior is forbidden and when it is impossible to show that it is detrimental to other people, the moral interdict tends to be seen as a *taboo*. The taboo against homosexuality weakened in the last decades as an outcome of this rationalization process.

Most respondents, young and old, more and less educated, believe in the distinction between good and evil. But, from the older to the younger and from the less to the more educated, the respondents think less frequently that the distinction would derive from a mechanical application of general principles. They want more frequently to know the reasons that make a state of affairs, an act or behavior good or evil. In most cases, the statistical effect of the variable *age* appears to a non-negligible extent as reflecting the overall increase in the level of education. This indicates that formal education is an important vector of the process of *rationalization* on moral issues.

To summarize, the moral trends in moral feelings that can be observed in Western societies in the last decades are rather the effect of a process of rationalization than the symptom of a *value crisis*.

## **SOCIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF THE COGNITIVE THEORY OF MORALITY**

On the whole, the theory most likely to federate our growing body of knowledge on moral, prescriptive and generally axiological feelings is the cognitive theory according to which these feelings are the product of more or less coherent systems of reasons people perceive as valid. In a word, the processes generating convictions on moral, prescriptive and generally axiological issues are of the same nature as the processes generating convictions on descriptive issues. The systematization of ideas contained in an implicit and unelaborated fashion in Adam Smith's, Durkheim's, Max Weber's and other writings lead to a powerful theoretical tool. It can be used to explain the various types of data used by sociologists: data drawn from experimental research, survey data, qualitative data or official statistical data. It has also a predictive power, as the example of the death penalty shows.

Moreover, the cognitive approach to morality overcomes the difficulties raised by philosophical theories because it pays attention to the cognitive context individuals are embedded

in and sees *axiological rationality* as bounded, in the sense where H. Simon described *instrumental rationality* as bounded.

As to the objection of *intellectualism* occasionally raised against the theory that *reasons* can be the main *causes* of moral feelings and beliefs, it ignores the phenomenon of intuition. I react negatively under the effect of emotion rather than deliberation when a strong young man attacks and steals an old lady. But my reaction is not merely affective. It is also intellectual: I am immediately able to *conceptualize* my reaction as a reaction of indignation and not, say, of fear. My reaction is furthermore *rational* in the sense that I know that it is grounded on subjectively strong and objectively valid reasons, even though I feel them in an *intuitive* fashion. In many cases we have to rely on intuition, on moral as well as representational issues. As the young slave in Plato's *Menon* is able to reconstruct Pythagoras' theorem under Socrates' guidance, people are often able to tell the reasons that ground their moral beliefs once they reflect about it or are guided by questions.

The cognitive theory is able to account for the contextual variations through time and space of axiological feelings, as illustrated by the example where, according to the available information, the respondents judge a given income distribution as fair or not, or by the example of the variations over time of the moral feelings on authority, interdicts, religion or death penalty. The cognitive theory can also explain the variations in moral feelings observed in cross-cultural studies. Thus, Gintis et al. (2003) have observed that the answers to the *ultimatum game* appear as to a limited extent variable with the cultural context. While respondents give the *fair 50/50* answer in most cases, in countries where the social relations between neighbors are mainly competitive, as in South American rural contexts, respondents more often propose unfair sharing to their own advantage. Given the context, they have *reasons* to prefer instrumental to axiological reasons. But the contextual variation of reasons does not legitimate radical relativism. On many issues, the system of reasons prevailing in a context can be considered as better or worse than the system prevailing in other contexts. The sociological tradition derived from Weber or Durkheim—this is one of its great achievements—overcomes the dualism between contextualism and universalism.

The cognitive theory of morality has also a social and political relevance. Understanding the reasons as to why the rain rituals are practiced in some traditional societies protects against easy explanations of the type *they have a primitive mentality* and is a weapon against prejudice. Understanding the reasons as to why death penalty has been cancelled in a growing number of countries helps taking a position on its legitimacy. Furthermore, the cognitive theory gives sociology a predictive power. One can predict that death penalty is doomed to be abolished in all democracies in a more or less remote future since the dissuasive power of death penalty is controversial, since it makes impossible the correction of judiciary errors, since it can only be grounded on religious reasons and since religious reasons cannot be imposed to all without contradiction with the principle of the freedom of opinion, a principle grounded itself on the principle of the moral dignity of all.

One should not draw the conclusion that there would not be other approaches of morality beside the cognitive sociological approach I have advocated here. The neurological cognitive sciences show that the stimulation or the lesion of some well-identified parts of the brain can affect moral feelings and behavior (Damasio 1994). When some well-identified part of the brain of subjects playing the ultimatum game is stimulated, they accept an unfair proposal although they recognize it as unfair, while the subjects whose brain is not stimulated reject it (Henderson 2006). The cognitive-rational and the cognitive-neurological approaches both

follow without doubt the scientific *ethos* and have both an uncontroversial explanatory power. Whether they will merge is an open question, as is the question of the future of sociobiology—another approach illustrated notably by Wilson (1993)—regarding the explanation of moral phenomena.

I doubt that these approaches can be easily integrated though, since the latter deal with the biological or neurological, the former with the cognitively rational dimension of human beings. According to Weber (1920:252), “Ideas are the main immediate causes of human action” (*Ideen beherrschen unmittelbar das Handeln des Menschen*).

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