

ESSAY

The Logical Necessity of the Transcendent in Social Scientific Inquiry

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Introduction

This essay addresses a fundamental problem for the social sciences and humanities in general and sociology in particular, namely, the adoption of a self-defeating intellectual paradigm as the foundation for much modern social analysis. Rather than critiquing sociology with questions about the motivations of its founders and contemporary practitioners, we wish to explain how their ideas can only be taken seriously when positioned within an alternative framework. This framework makes a strong case for the continuing utility of Judeo-Christian insights in general, and St. Augustine's insights in particular, in this age of hyper-modernity.

As the youngest of the social science disciplines, sociology has endured over a century of growing pains during which its founders have been appreciated, mythologized, deconstructed, and at times belittled. This was, in part, because each new generation of sociologists has generally sought to test itself against the insights of their era's intellectual giants, all of whom have drawn heavily from the founders. Even as sociologists have sought to move beyond the grand theory approach of its founders toward a narrower disciplinary division of labor, their foundational ideas and assumptions act as social forces, pushing and prodding each new generation. For this reason, it is of utmost importance that we seek to understand the methodological and philosophical ideas of the founders.

Among the oft noted and even more often misunderstood aspects of European history during the founding time period was the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason in opposition to superstition. Yet as we shall see later, the real distinction between the philosophy of the Enlightenment and that of the Middle Ages was not about reason or science, but about how *faith* could distort a study. This was in sharp relief of the Medieval worldview that emphasized order and hierarchy on the one hand, and mystery and tension on the other. C.S. Lewis, who was a brilliant Medievalist, embodied the medieval worldview in his scientist character Bill Hingest in *That Hideous Strength*. Speaking with Mark Studdock after finding out he is a sociologist, Hingest opines,

Because you study them, you want to make the lower orders govern the country and listen to classical music, which is balderdash. You also want to take away from them everything which makes life worth living, and not only from them but from everyone except a parcel of prigs and professors. (1945:69)

Conversely, our modern age seems more interested in reducing the complexity of the human person and the human condition. This claim was made most famously by Max Weber when he likened rationality to an iron cage. While Weber meant the iron cage to illustrate the constraints on people in a rationalized society, one could extend the metaphor to see how sociology has been stuck in its own ontological, epistemological, and methodological iron cage. We will address the seriousness of the cage over the course of this essay, but first we wish to note sociology's tendency to render judgment of certain theorists as being "out of step" with the present, not based on empirical evidence, but categorical exclusion.

The Frankfurt School and Critical Epistemology

Despite the claims that sociology is a science, the theorists who have arguably influenced our present moment the most – critical theorists of the Frankfurt school and their descendants – have operated much as Gnosticism did by claiming to possess secret knowledge that others were incapable of knowing. In other words, their claims were rooted in a sort of private revelation that others could not share except by affirming it. Unsurprisingly, several modern commentators have noted the affinities between critical scholarship and some types of organized religion.

Critical theory has, since its inception, relied on this style of reasoning and argumentation that criticizes opponents by “seeing through” what they are “really” doing, rather than what they claim to be doing. This seems perfectly sensible because people often act in ways they themselves do not fully understand. Still, critical theory has made this point not because people are complicated and pulled in conflicting directions, but rather on the grounds that critical theory possesses hidden knowledge and specialized expertise in diagnosing social ills. Questions about their epistemology led critical theorists and those working in their tradition further down this road. They developed methods of inquiry like auto-ethnography that are insulated from falsifiability. Sociology is supposed to be social science, yet these methods and rhetorical styles violate core tenets of the scientific method. To the extent we can consider this the result of historical forces, we must consider the influences of the Frankfurt school.

Marx and Freud: An Unholy Alliance

The Frankfurt School of critical theory combined the temperamentally opposed insights of Marx (ultimately an optimist) and Freud (the eternal pessimist) to generate critiques about the shallowness of American culture (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Noerr 2002), the banality of art in an industrialized society (Benjamin and Arendt 1996), and the reduction of life to one pursuit – consumption (Marcuse 1945). Let us take Marx and Freud in turn to see how their influence is still palpable in our present moment.

For Marx, humans were infinitely malleable creatures whose desires were shaped entirely by the social structures—chiefly the economic structures—of the society in which they lived. There was little to nothing about people that Marx could not reduce to their class position in the economic system. A prime example of this style of reductionism is found in Marx’s depiction of himself and his fellow Young-Hegelian academic heroes:

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be...They, the creators, have bowed down before their creatures. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third to knock them out of their heads; and end existing reality will collapse. These innocent and childlike fancies are the kernel of the modern Young-Hegelian philosophy, which not only is received by the German public with horror and all but is announced by our philosophic heroes with the same solid consciousness of the cataclysmic dangerousness and criminal ruthlessness. The first volume of his present publication has the aim of uncloaking the sheep, who take themselves and are taken for wolves; of showing how their bleeding merely imitates in a philosophic form the conceptions of the German middle class; have a posting of these philosophic commentators only mirrors the wretchedness of the real conditions in Germany. It is its aim to discredit the philosophic struggle with the shadows of reality which appeals to the dreamy and muddled German nation. (Marx 1946:1-2)

Given his conflation of persons with social structures, changing people required changing the structures, yet Marx never explains how he himself, a man in capitalist Europe, freed himself from the prison of values and assumptions that shackled his peers and predecessors. We are left to wonder how such a thing is possible outside of him being gifted secret knowledge that can be neither confirmed nor denied. Ironically, his “science” of politics and society requires us to take a leap of faith.

Freud has been battered around much more than Marx, primarily for insisting that his methods and conclusions were scientific when more rigor and control would have been required to support such claims. Freud asked his readers to make a conscious leap of faith into

the subconscious and even unconscious mind. For Freud, humans were an aggressive and selfish lot stuck between the ruthless demands of their unconscious biological drives (id) and their culture's normative expectations, which Freud referred to as the super ego. The ego is left to balance the demands of the id and super ego by channeling them into culturally appropriate expressions of aggression and anxiety. While certain behaviors are culturally appropriate in a given time and place, that does not mean they are good in and of themselves. Regarding how individuals might come to realize that the superego's standards may fall short of some other external standard, Freud offers neither comment nor explanation. Marx and Freud were not alone in this; intellectuals as diverse as Comte, Saint-Simon, Weber and even Durkheim all fell into this to a greater or lesser extent.

To summarize, Freud and Marx both rejected their intellectual rivals and influences because they could contextualize why others thought about things the way they did, while maintaining that they themselves, men of science as they were, thought in rigorous and scientific ways that allowed them to cut through the curtain and see behind it. This is the same epistemological claim of critical theorists and their descendants. C.S. Lewis, who was a devout Freudian in his younger years, captures the issue with the following epistemological claim in his book, *The Abolition of Man*:

But you cannot go on 'explaining away' forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it.... If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see. (2001: 81)

This does not invalidate Marx, Freud, and the Frankfurt school as valuable theorists, but it does illustrate that their methods and insights cannot be considered scientific. Ironically, were their works actually taken to be scientific, they would likely have been much less impactful. The scientific method leaves no room for allegiance to a thinker or idea, requiring both theory and the empirical evidence for its claims to be considered. What all these thinkers have in common is an intellectual sleight of hand whereby they claim they are making empirically verifiable claims, when they were actually making theoretical claims. At the same time, they criticized theorizing or philosophy that was not wedded to action, which further decreased the weight placed on theory as part of social science research. Whether or not this was a conscious move on their part, the result was it masked the grounds on which their ideas could be debated or disproven. The result has been a virulent "contextualism" and "presentism" that has simultaneously eroded respect for the past and undermines the value of academic inquiry at every turn.

Our Present Context as Prejudgment

Understanding the ideas and insights of those who have come before us is a tremendous virtue for any scholar, recognizing as it does that knowledge is difficult to acquire. This is clear to any student of history or culture, as these are essentially catalogs of how the frailties and foibles of the human condition constantly conspire against us even as we seek to acquire knowledge coolly and dispassionately. Part of this is because of the kind of creatures we are, and part is because we exacerbate our weaknesses by misusing tools, and neglecting their intended purpose or upkeep.

At our current historical moment, there are two thinkers whose ideas about society and morality, when combined, can address the epistemological issues explained above, as well as the related problem of sociologists, following Marx, of viewing the purpose of academic inquiry as a type of social engineering (Smith 2014). Those thinkers are Emile Durkheim and St. Augustine. As both thinkers wrote during times of tremendous social turmoil, where the sense of the sacred was so weak that it was nearly lifeless, there is a natural affinity between their concerns. Moreover, if one reads Durkheim in light of the insights of Augustine, the coherence of the tradition that birthed both thinkers becomes clear, as does the magnitude of our present concerns.

More than the other theorists discussed here, Durkheim came closest to establishing sociology as a scientific discipline. His work on suicide, in particular, strikes an impressive balance between stating various theories about suicide and then testing them. Yet, Durkheim was also trying to establish sociology as its own distinct discipline, and arguably drew the boundary between sociology and related disciplines too deeply (Lukes 1977:34-35). We shall address the issue with this deep distinction later.

Of pivotal importance to Durkheim's sociology was a condition he referred to as "anomie," the popular translation of which has been "normlessness" due to etymological analysis. That said, Durkheim's use of anomie has been studied most carefully by Stjepan Mestrovic, who noted that the only synonym Durkheim ever used for the term was derangement. Mestrovic also pointed out that the theological underpinnings of both terms combined with Durkheim's upbringing as the observant son of a rabbi, and his insistence on the shared meaning of words (Durkheim 1968:481) suggests that we read Durkheim through a theologically informed lens that renders "normlessness" incomprehensible, because nothing like it exists in Judeo-Christian theology.

Let us return to Durkheim's insistence that the definition of a word was not determined by the intentions of an individual, but was shared among the people at a particular time and place. The meaning of words of course changes as their usage changes, and thus Durkheim's point is both descriptive and instructive. We should, therefore, read him as a scholar in a particular tradition that structured and constrained his academic vocabulary. In demonstrating

his understanding of how context is essential, Durkheim can transcend the limitations of context and address the essence of a social phenomenon, as he does when he discusses the sacred and profane in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Durkheim insisted that contextualization was a vital part of the sociological method. Yet it has frequently been overridden by an assumption about the nature of social change, namely, that society's norms and values only continue to progress upward or forward. There are good reasons to think this, as every society appears to become self-conscious at some point and seeks to change in response to this self-consciousness. Yet the limitation becomes clear when we look back at significant figures of the past and find ourselves disappointed that, as progressive and forward-thinking as they were, they enslaved people or committed some other offense against our current collective consciousness, and therefore cannot be held up as moral exemplars worthy of admiration and emulation.

Reframing Contextualization

Perhaps this is because contextualization is viewed as a stand-alone methodological virtue instead of a contribution to intellectual and moral virtue. From this perspective, the culture of inquiry becomes anti-culture, as it seeks to destroy all diversity, difference, and complexity in the human story. Everything that came before is terrible; only we in the present are good. There is no attempt to address how this presentism and contextualization invalidate our current efforts to explain and change things for the "better," the concept of which was also invalidated.

All cultures grapple with human universals like freedom, justice, beauty, truth, relationships, hunger, sex, and death. Yet cultures are frequently viewed as falling short in some fundamental way, an assertion that is impossible if we accept the idea that all our ideas come from the cultures in which we are raised. Individual humans, imperfect as they are, cannot even live up to the rules they create for themselves, much less those instituted by culture. We fall short of our personal aspirations as well as those of our culture. An outsider might be able to pass judgment, but only based on the standards of their culture. Yet this is not how social and cultural reform happens; it happens both by outside and inside pressures and judgments.

Marx puts the cart before the horse and insists that our minds and values are shaped by the economic and political conditions in which we live, which does not resolve the problem of how an individual can transcend these limitations and offer a judgment or prescribe an uncharted course forward. Freud, to a degree, equates humans with horses and carts. They are, ultimately, just animals that have evolved their specific attributes to help them survive. The human mind is just a product of the brain, and offers us no means of transcending the limits of culture and experiences. How Freud supposedly manages to transcend his own culture and

experiences is never addressed. As we consider Marx, Freud, and Durkheim, we see that the novel judgments of insiders are only possible if there is a standard outside both the individual and their culture. In other words, the existence of the transcendent is implied in their arguments, even as it is explicitly denied in them.

Consequences of the Foregoing and a Way Out

In his book, *Doors in the Walls of the World*, philosopher Peter Kreeft claims that

We can also say that there are three philosophies of life. Let's call them moreness, lessness, and sameness. For either there are more things or fewer things or the same things in heaven and earth (i.e., in objective reality) as the things in dreamed of in our philosophies (i.e., in our subjective ideas). (2018:11)

The problem with sociology is that, in general, its primary practitioners have opted for either lessness or sameness. Among the theorists discussed in this essay, Marx, Freud, Weber, the critical theorists, and even Durkheim to a lesser extent all embody the lessness approach. They largely sought to reduce the complexity of the human condition to social, economic, cultural, or power conditions. Durkheim's renovated rationalism comes closer to "moreness" than the others, yet it appears his desire to establish sociology as a unique scientific discipline led him to push beyond reasonable doubt to offer social facts as a reductive and total explanation.

The issue with reductive approaches, according to Kreeft, is that

all reductionisms, like all skepticisms, are logically self-contradictory. Skepticism is self-contradictory whatever form it takes: is it true that there is no truth? Certain that nothing is certain? Absolutely no absolutes? Or universal truth that there are no universal truths?... An objective truth that truth is not objective? Sociologically or psychologically relative that everything is sociologically or psychologically relative? The game takes many forms, but you can never win it. Similarly with reductionism. If love is only lust, thought only cerebral biochemistry, reasoning only rationalization, gods only myths, justice only power, choice only unperceived necessity... the formula for that "nothing buttery" is that A is nothing but B, that it is only B – but that means that there is in all reality no A, or dimension of A, that is more than B. But you can know that only if you know all reality or all the dimensions of reality. And for that, you must have total, all-encompassing intelligence; in other words, you must be God. (2018:121-122)

As we saw earlier, our theorists could not furnish an explanation that did not contradict itself. The tremendous irony of sociology's history is illustrated in the following paraphrase of Durkheim: the old gods had died and the new ones had yet to be born. Into this philosophical

and moral vacuum stepped the thinkers who would become the founding sociologists and their most impactful descendants, the critical theorists. Yet our theorists thought too much about explaining others and not enough about explaining themselves, so logically, we offer an alternative who thought deeply about both self and others—Saint Augustine.

If we wish social science to be as scientific as possible, it must operate from the perspective of “moreness” that Kreeft alluded to earlier. In other words, things can exist outside of our experience and perception on the one hand, and our minds can transcend the limitations of the present on the other. This was why Augustine rooted our minds, feeble and limited as they are, in the mind of God. The concepts of goodness, justice, beauty, and truth that Plato located in the world of Forms are brought into the coherence of a single perfect mind by Augustine. This brilliant and philosophically necessary intellectual move provides a solid foundation for modern social science research. As Augustine himself notes in *Confessions*:

[N]or did I know that true and inward righteousness which judges not according to custom but according to the most righteous law of Almighty God. By that law the ways of conduct of different places and times are shaped as is best for those places and times, though the law itself is always and everywhere the same, not different in different places or changing with the ages. By this righteousness... All those others praised by God were righteous, although they are judged not so by ignorant men who apply the test of their human minds, and measure all the conduct of the human race by the measure of their own custom. (2006:51-52)

Augustine’s formula of a divine mind is more than just another idea about reality, it is a logical necessity to explain the data of our minds, our experiences, and our insights. By grounding reality in a transcendent and immanent being, an unmoved-mover, Augustine’s ontology is open to all, but is not fully perceived or understood by any. Next, as the above quote illustrates, the standard of judgment is neither the individual nor the culture, but the perfect Divine Mind. As there can be no division or contradiction in perfection, so we can also say that the Divine Mind is the Divine Law. To claim the Divine Law is perfect is also to assert that it exists and is unchanging. It can, therefore, serve as a consistent standard for social science and the humanities to describe and criticize society, even as we all fall short of seeing the complete picture.

This Divine Law is like a three-dimensional target that can be missed in all three dimensions. Imagine you are shooting a bow and arrow at a large, cloudy sphere with a ping pong ball floating right at its center. Your goal is to shoot your arrow with sufficient force and accuracy that the arrow penetrates the sphere and the ping pong ball, but stops before it comes out the other side of the ping pong ball.

One can easily imagine missing the sphere by shooting to the left or right (issues related to width), but we might also miss by shooting too high or low (issues related to height). This remains the case whether we are aiming at a target in front of us, below us, or above us and

accounts for two of the three dimensions. We may miss the target in four different ways: first by shooting short of the sphere, second by shooting the sphere with insufficient force so that the arrow doesn't "stick," third by using sufficient force to pierce the sphere yet insufficient accuracy to strike the ping pong ball, and finally we can miss the sphere by using excessive force so that we propel the arrow completely through the sphere regardless of whether we hit the ping pong ball. While a shot through the sphere was on target in one sense, it also results in the form of the sphere becoming deformed or, put differently, less than it otherwise would be. To aim true and to strike true, the arrow must penetrate both the sphere and the front of the ping pong ball without emerging from the back of the ping pong ball or the back of the sphere.

Human minds seek truth by aiming at it and seeking to penetrate a complicated and often unclear reality. Yet the possibility of striking the truth targeted is quite small, and further decreases if one believes there is nothing to aim at, or that wherever you hit the sphere with your arrow is an equally good shot.

What does this possibly have to do with sociology or the philosophy of social science? Everything. The nature of the mind, the nature of truth, and even the nature of inquiry itself all come into play. Thomas Aquinas argued that truth was a unity held together by a single Logos. That Logos is the arrow that unites both the outer and inner spheres, and, while it is very challenging for us to recreate the shot, our shots can be meaningfully closer or further away. Most fundamentally, though, if we do not believe there is an inner sphere, we will only aim for the outer one. There is nothing wrong with restricting one's inquiry, but there is something wrong with restricting reality. To argue there is only "less" than what appears (reductionism) or the same as what appears (rationalism) is to make a claim from a position beyond both. It is to position one's mind as possessing "moreness" than one is allowing for. This is the error of the sociologists discussed in this analysis.

The implications for social science are immense. First, in recognizing our own complexity and contradictions, we aim more carefully and are more mindful of the "force" we invoke. It allows us to appreciate the difficulty of our task, and encourages intellectual humility. Second, it illustrates how our empirical observations as well as our theories are rooted in an absolute reality, even if made from a relative position. That is, we might all see the sphere from different angles, but it is equally real from every vantage point. Finally, we can offer meaningful judgment (not self-defeating judgment, as in Marx and Freud) about social injustice because there is a fixed standard of which we all fall short, both as individuals personally and cultures collectively.

Does this mean that social science is off-limits to atheists and those who follow polytheistic religions? No, it does not. The insistence is that social science must be grounded as if there is only a single Divine Mind. Only this provides the intellectual and moral coherence that social science needs if it wishes to understand society fully and then reform it effectively. This, after all, is consistent with the claims of many atheists that one need not be religious to be

a good person. If there is a single divine law, believers and atheists can equally fall short of it or overshoot it.

This, we contend, is a more stable basis for the sociological inquiry imagined by Emile Durkheim. While he might not have agreed with such a position while carving out a space for sociology as a discipline, our integrated approach explains how one could maintain the tension between methodological relativism and the judgment that some cultures and eras are anomic.

Implications for Future Sociologists

In our own time, social science in general and sociology in particular are gripped by what Christian Smith called a "sacred project," which amounts to the tools of sociology being turned toward particular "progressive" social ends. Recasting Smith's study based on Augustine's ontological realism allows us to consider the possibility that these progressive aims are themselves social constructions about progress, and therefore not inherently good in themselves. They can produce suffering and social pathology just as the laws and norms before them did, and if we wish to make this world as much like the next one as possible, we must be on guard against not just falling short, but overshooting the mark. This is the true wisdom of describing sin as missing the mark, for it implies that one might miss by very little or by very much. Let us work toward building a better social science and society by creating a better foundation on which to structure both.

Far from closing off inquiry, the Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition provides a solid basis on which to conduct research. This is primarily because it can take into account the limitations of humans as finite creatures and their unique ability to represent the world they experience in a meaningful way because it is enduring. If sociology wishes to live up to its claim to be a science, augmenting the work of Emile Durkheim with that of Augustine offers a firmer epistemological foundation. To the extent sociologists want to study and address social problems, the Augustinian-Durkheimian paradigm offers a fixed moral standard and the possibility that we can finally take the beam (mostly) out of our own eye.

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