

## ***Religious Ethics and the Scientific Study of Morality***

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This paper proposes an integral approach to the scientific study of morality which synthesizes religious ideas with the established frame of reference of the social sciences. There is consensus among the major world religions that some version of the Golden Rule is the most fundamental ethical principle. The Golden Rule and the idea of individual transformation toward greater goodness are considered as the foundation of theory and research in the scientific study of morality. The virtues, the vices, and the Ten Commandments are advanced as ideas which articulate the positive and negative prescriptions of the Golden Rule. The incorporation of these ideas in value premises and in theoretical and operational propositions is described. The bearing of the integral study of morality on a different critical perspective in theory and on scientific cumulation is considered.

Developing a theoretical tradition focused on the scientific study of morality was the goal of Emile Durkheim, one of the most important founders of modern sociology.<sup>1</sup> Morality was considered as a general orientation entailing the obligation and duty to seek the good. Within this context Durkheim enumerated three components of morality: discipline, attachment to the group, and autonomy or self-determination.<sup>2</sup> On both the individual and social level, morality was regarded by Durkheim as necessary for social solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

Despite his profound influence on many aspects of the development of sociology, Calhoun has noted that efforts to follow Durkheim's emphasis on developing a sociology of morality have generally been neglected. This neglect is in part due to the separation of normative from empirical discourse, and the ignoring of some philosophical problems which are inherent in social theory.<sup>4</sup>

An exception to the general lack of attention to morality in sociology is the work of Etzioni, who views moral acts as those which are intended by the individual to "conform to a relevant principle or duty," as contrasted to those acts intended to obtain pleasure.<sup>5</sup> Individuals who are motivated by moral commitments are regarded as behaving in a manner that is significantly and systematically different from those motivated by pleasure.

This paper builds on the views of Durkheim and Etzioni.<sup>6</sup> Morality is defined as the obligation to adhere to principles which are believed to entail the good in some manner. This perspective is elaborated by considering how religious concepts of morality which focus attention on important and perennial variations in human behavior can provide the basis for a valid concept of morality. These concepts transcend individual subjective interpretations of the good and those which are specific to particular groups or historical eras. They can thus serve as a basis for the scientific study of morality.

### *The Scientific Study of Morality*

The scientific study of morality rests on the assumption that a natural science of society is possible. This view of social science entails the belief that sociocultural phenomena have certain invariant properties which can be identified and objectively studied, and which can ultimately be explained by general laws.<sup>7</sup> Alexander has observed that scientific endeavor within this perspective is a process which ranges on a continuum from empirical to metaphysical environments. At the extreme empirical end are specific concrete aspects of the phenomena being investigated, while at the extreme metaphysical end are general presuppositions pertaining to ideological orientations and views of action and order.<sup>8</sup>

This paper maintains that an adequate scientific study of morality requires the incorporation of religious ideas, particularly those pertaining to ethics, at each level of the scientific continuum. These religious ideas have a direct bearing on identifying and enumerating the content of morality in terms of both positive and negative precepts. The Golden Rule, present in some form in all the major world religions as a foundational principle, is an example of this. At the metaphysical end of the scientific continuum religious ethical ideas can serve as value premises. In this manner they provide direction to theory and research. They also serve as a context of interpretation by providing criteria of what is desirable and undesirable with respect to individuals and the socio-cultural.

At the middle levels of the scientific continuum concepts derived from religious ethics can be incorporated in theoretical propositions. These propositions can be formulated within the context of existing theories, such as functionalist, conflict, rational choice, or symbolic interactionist perspectives. At the empirical end of the scientific continuum operational definitions derived from religious-based concepts can be employed as either independent or dependent variables in empirical research.

This study of a concept of morality derived from religious ideas can be incorporated within the most general frame of reference of theory and research in the social sciences: culture, society, personality. These basic concepts began to emerge with the writings of classical theorists such as Durkheim and Weber.<sup>9</sup>

Their clarification and explicit elaboration as the basic frame of reference of sociology and the social sciences was a major contribution of the works of Sorokin and later of Parsons.<sup>10</sup>

Incorporating religious ethics and ideas within this frame of reference to study morality can inform, broaden, and enhance theory and research on this topic. The following pages contain an elaboration of how this perspective can do the following: (1) focus attention upon fundamental attitudes and behaviors which have been a subject of interest since the earliest speculative thinking; (2) provide a new set of important independent and dependent variables, and different perspectives on existing ones; (3) transcend relativism by providing a basis for formulating value premises which have reasonable grounds to be considered close to universal; (4) provide common ideas for discourse between the social sciences and religious and other publics; (5) furnish concepts which transcend the boundaries of disciplines and special fields and thus serve as a common focus for cumulation in both theory and research; (6) lead to valid scientific generalizations which can contribute to personal, social, and cultural reconstruction toward an increase of moral thought and behavior.

### *The Integral System of Truth and Knowledge*

This synthesis of social science theories and methods with religious ideas has been suggested by Pitirim A. Sorokin in his description of "integral" sociology and social science.<sup>11</sup> Integralism is a distinctive orientation because it entails the addition of religious conceptions of truth to the already existing empirical and rational analysis characteristic of sociology and the other social sciences.<sup>12</sup> The validity of an integral system of truth and knowledge derives from the assumption that the true reality "seems to be far greater and deeper and many-sided than the narrow truth either of faith only, or of reason only, or of senses only."<sup>13</sup> An integral system combines these three methods of knowing into a harmonious and ordered system. In describing the blending of these ways of truth in the integral system of the Scholastics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Sorokin maintains: "It united them all harmoniously into one organic unity where faith, senses, and reason did not fight one another, but all were cooperating in the great service to God, to truth, and to man's real happiness, in building the full and complete truth, real wisdom and knowledge not narrowed to one vista and not reduced to one source."<sup>14</sup>

Integralism is thus the system of truth of Aquinas in which the senses, human reasoning, and faith are all regarded as sources of knowledge, with faith being the foundation.<sup>15</sup> John Paul II advocates a similar system. He notes that one mode of truth is the senses, which can confirm immediately or through experimentation. This is "the mode of truth proper to everyday life and to scientific research." A second mode is "philosophical truth, attained by means of the speculative powers of the human intellect." A third mode is religious

truth "which we find in answers which the different religious traditions give to the ultimate questions."<sup>16</sup> There is a "unity of truth, natural and revealed" in which the religious truth of faith and the truth of reason mutually enhance each other.<sup>17</sup>

This paper presents one possible approach to implementing an integral perspective in the social sciences. Focus is directed to morality as a particular topic of theoretical development and empirical research.

### ***Religious Ideas: Basic Perspectives and Procedures***

A major project in the development of an integral social science is the study of the sacred texts and theology of the major world religions to search for relevant concepts and propositions. Tiryakian has identified this critical examination of ideas from another discipline as one aspect of metatheory.<sup>18</sup> He outlines a double function of this task: avoiding misapplication of ideas and thoroughly searching for relevant ideas which may have previously been overlooked or considered unusable. In a Catholic tradition of integralism the Old Testament, New Testament, and church tradition as interpreted by the Magisterium are foundational. Within this context the Papal Encyclicals and writings of the Doctors of the Church and the Church Fathers are also important sources for ideas relevant to an integral social science.

The most important religious ideas for a science of morality are the moral and ethical precepts of the major world religions. Also important within this context are related ideas pertaining to the effects of their observance or transgression upon the individual psyche and behavior, and upon society and culture. Since these religious ideas pertain to fundamental variations in human behavior and their effects, they can be viewed as a major source of concepts, propositions, and value premises for a religious based science of morality. Bell has noted the potential usefulness of religious moral assertions when they are incorporated in a naturalistic scientific model, as is proposed in this paper.<sup>19</sup>

There is wide agreement in the major world religions regarding general moral and ethical principles.<sup>20</sup> This consensus provides a focus for formulating a concept of morality for theoretical development and research. For example, on the basis of his study of five major world religious traditions, the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim, Hick maintains " . . . all the great traditions teach the moral ideal of generous goodwill, love, compassion epitomized in the Golden Rule . . ." as a central ethical principle in their "scriptures."<sup>21</sup>

This basic idea states the universal criterion of religious morals that " . . . it is good to benefit others and evil to harm them."<sup>22</sup> A further uniformity in the traditions of the major world religions is an emphasis upon personal development leading to greater goodness and salvation. Hick maintains that while there are differences in this soteriological structure from one religious

tradition to another, there is a fundamental similarity.<sup>23</sup> All traditions emphasize individual change from focus on the self to a life focused upon some idea of God or a transcendental Reality. Each tradition teaches the manner of realizing this development through engagement with a Supreme Being or transcendental Reality.<sup>24</sup> This internal change is expressed outwardly in good works toward others.<sup>25</sup> This growth in morality is exemplified by the saints of the major religious traditions.<sup>26</sup> This emphasis upon human goodness entailing both positive and negative precepts of the Golden Rule further synthesizes scientific practice and religious ideas. From the perspective provided by religious ideas the ultimate goal of integral social science is to provide valid scientific knowledge and understanding of how to realize all facets of the Golden Rule in its personal, social, and cultural manifestations.

### ***Religious Ideas And Social Science Concepts***

Establishing the Golden Rule as one of the fundamental points of synthesis between religious ideas and the social science frame of reference requires that this generalized idea be broken down into its constituent parts. A basic distinction is the one between "doing good" and "avoiding evil." This distinction follows Durkheim's observation that moral rules always entail both positive and negative commands.<sup>27</sup>

A basic assumption of an integral science of morality is that religious and theological ideas contain valid insights and truths regarding various aspects of personality, society, and culture and their interrelationships. A key problem in the advancement of scientific knowledge is to develop type concepts which focus theoretical and research attention upon variables which are universal in the sense they transcend historical and cultural differences. There are three religious ideas which appear to have this characteristic, and which also pertain to the Golden Rule. They are virtue, sin, and the Ten Commandments.

Aquinas defines a virtue as ". . . a good habit, productive of good works."<sup>28</sup> Aquinas' scheme of the primary and secondary virtues specifies a full spectrum of behavior directed in various ways toward the welfare of another.<sup>29</sup> This scheme can be presented in terms of five basic or "primary" virtues: temperance, fortitude, justice, charity, and prudence.<sup>30</sup> Each of these primary virtues contains various "secondary" virtues which entail more specific applications of the essential quality of the primary virtue.

The five primary virtues and some of their attendant secondary virtues can be briefly enumerated as follows: (1) Temperance. The criteria of this virtue are restraint, moderation, and discipline of the passions and appetites, particularly with respect to pleasure. Secondary parts of temperance are chastity, sobriety, humility, and meekness. (2) Fortitude. The central characteristic of this virtue is firmness of mind in pursuing the good despite danger and hardships. Patience, perseverance, and magnanimity are secondary virtues of fortitude.

(3) Justice. The criteria of this virtue are fairness and the rendering to others their basic dues or rights. Truthfulness, obedience, religion, gratitude and friendliness are secondary parts of justice. (4) Charity. The virtue of charity entails both the relationship of the individual to God, and the relationship of the individual to other individuals. In this latter sense it includes seeking to do good to the other. Appropriately meeting the needs of others, forgiving them, and tolerating their faults and imperfections are thus all aspects of charity. (5) Prudence. This virtue involves the will to realize the good and the use of reason and objectivity to select the most appropriate means to reach it. The good is identified by the virtues, their relative importance varying according to the situation.<sup>31</sup> Docility and solicitude are secondary parts of prudence.

The concept of virtue is of particular importance to a science of morality for two general reasons. First, there is a broad consensus that indicates that the virtues approximate a universal standard of goodness and morality in different historical eras and cultures. From a historical perspective, the idea that the virtues are the good which perfects human nature represents one of the oldest ideas in the history of speculative thinking, dating back to classical Greek and Roman philosophy, and to early Judaism and Christianity.<sup>32</sup> The concept of virtue provides a specification of the positive precept of the Golden Rule.<sup>33</sup> Within this context the virtues provide a criterion of individual development toward the perfection of human nature.<sup>34</sup>

This transformation toward greater goodness is emphasized in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and in other religious and ethical traditions.<sup>35</sup> The virtues can also be viewed as necessary components for the fullest manifestation of benevolent love.<sup>36</sup> This is the love in which good is wished to the other for their own sake. This love of benevolence is manifested in behavior directed toward the benefit of the other.<sup>37</sup>

Social science formulations of morality can also be likened to the virtues. The virtues are comparable to Durkheim's three components of morality.<sup>38</sup> The first, discipline, is comparable to temperance, and in terms of requirements for its practice, implies fortitude. The second, attachment to the group, can be related to both justice and charity. The third element, autonomy or self-determination, can be related to the virtue of prudence as it is exercised in the individual willing the good and selecting the means of its realization. The virtues are also directly comparable to Wilson's recent enumeration of the four elements of a basic moral sense: sympathy, fairness, self-control, duty.<sup>39</sup>

A second reason for the importance of the concept of virtue is that this close to universal perspective shows promise of being integrated with theory and research in a variety of contexts. Several examples of the broad scope of relevance of this concept can be considered. In the field of marriage and family a review of the scholarly and research literature on love indicates that the view of love as giving of self to benefit the other has been incorporated in various

attempts to delineate and to measure the components of love.<sup>40</sup> An operational measure of the five aforementioned primary virtues has been validated.<sup>41</sup>

Findings from several research studies indicate the virtues are significantly associated with positive effects in relationships between young adults and their parents.<sup>42</sup> The virtues also contribute to understanding the marital relationship. A theoretical analysis applied to evidence from empirical research studies strongly suggests that the virtues are related to effective conflict management in marriage. Different theoretical perspectives can be employed to enhance understanding of how the virtues influence conflict management.<sup>43</sup> In the field of prosocial and altruistic behavior, the virtues can be related to existing empirical research to clarify the influence of social situations upon the manifestation of altruistic behavior. Particular virtues appear to be especially important according to the nature of the social situation.<sup>44</sup> Finally, in the field of deviant behavior, the virtues provide a perspective for interpreting the methods and goals of therapeutic communities devoted to transforming the lives of criminals and substance abusers.<sup>45</sup>

Sin, or vice, represents the absence, or opposite, of virtue, and can be viewed in terms of the negative precept of the Golden Rule. Vice is a bad habit which is contrary to human nature and the order of reason, while sin is "a bad human act" which stems from vice.<sup>46</sup> Aquinas enumerates a detailed scheme of the sins, or vices, and considers how they are opposed to the corresponding virtues.<sup>47</sup> A recent work by Schimmel describes the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, greed, sloth.<sup>48</sup> He notes that they are major ideas in traditional moral philosophy and in Jewish and Christian religious thought. Despite differences in these traditions, Schimmel maintains there is considerable common ground which yields a scheme of ideas with important implications for the understanding of both the individual psyche and society. Lyman also analyses the seven deadly sins, considered in relation to the sociology of evil, and elaborates on their effects on personality and society.<sup>49</sup>

The Ten Commandments are important principles of morality in both the Jewish and Christian religious traditions.<sup>50</sup> Similar ideas can be found in the other world religions. The commandments contain moral imperatives in regard to fundamental aspects of human behavior such as the relationship between human beings and God, marriage and family relations, sexual behavior, property rights, violence, theft, untruthfulness, and social justice in various contexts. John Paul II maintains that the Commandments "safeguard the good of the person" and "thus represent the basic condition for love of neighbor; at the same time they are the proof of that love."<sup>51</sup> From this perspective the negative precepts of the commandments are necessary to make possible the positive precept of the Golden Rule to do good to others.

### *Value Premises and the Critical Perspective*

Value premises or judgments are standards of desirability or good which can be applied to both the intent and the results of scientific investigations.<sup>52</sup> The Golden Rule and its more specific positive and negative aspects, as expressed in the virtues, sins, and the Ten Commandments, can be used as standards of value judgments within a science of morality.

Myrdal has maintained that value premises can serve as a major framework for both formulating research designs and for evaluating findings.<sup>53</sup> In this view, exemplified in his analysis of *An American Dilemma*, as long as value premises are clearly identified as such, they need not interfere with the objective scientific analysis of a given research topic.<sup>54</sup>

An important aspect of incorporating value judgments in scientific analysis is the manner of their justification.<sup>55</sup> In an integral science of morality drawing from religious ideas, a value premise such as the desirability of benevolent love can be justified on both religious and rational-empirical grounds. On religious grounds it can be justified, for example, as the commandment of God or as the ultimate goal of spiritual perfection. In this sense the truth of faith is utilized. At the same time benevolent love can be justified on theoretical grounds and in terms of empirical findings as being beneficial to both the human person and society.<sup>56</sup>

The critical perspective gives further specificity and direction to the integration of religious ideas with the basic frame of reference of culture, society, and personality. In the most general sense, this perspective entails the interpretation of some aspect of social reality, the evaluation of that reality relative to some standard, and the proposal of alternatives to the existing reality which more fully realize the standard.<sup>57</sup>

A science of morality linked with religious ethics is consistent with this general orientation of the critical perspective in these three characteristics. First, it rests on the assumption that the social sciences can be cumulative. Naturalist methods can be used to seek to formulate invariable laws of the structure and dynamics of culture, society, and personality. It adds to this model and expands its scope by integrating scientific methods with ideas pertaining to fundamental aspects of human behavior provided by the major world religions. Thus from this joint perspective of empirical findings and religious ideas, social reality can be studied and interpreted. Second, a science of morality deriving from religious ethics provides a clear and historically based standard of evaluation, or baseline, provided by the previously considered general ideas common to the world religions. This standard is relatively free from time or cultural specificity. It appears to most closely approximate the universal standard which is most suitable for justifying value premises on logical grounds.<sup>58</sup> Third, providing understanding of how to effect the transformation of both individuals and the sociocultural universe toward a greater realization of the baseline conditions

entailed in the Golden Rule and related ideas can be seen as the ultimate purpose of an integral approach to the study of morality.<sup>59</sup> Thus the scientific study of morality can be linked with the critical perspective by accepting the premise that research and theory should be directly linked to the moral commitment of the scientist to provide valid information for societal betterment.

The critical perspective as a general orientation to the study of society and the role of scientific knowledge can be distinguished from the more specific critical theory which originated with the Frankfurt School.<sup>60</sup> The critical perspective considered in this paper does not include the affinity with Marxism characteristic of critical theory.<sup>61</sup> Integralism links the critique of society and the proposal of alternatives to baselines derived directly from religious ethics. In so doing it shifts primary emphasis from unequal distribution and domination to morality as the principal area of investigation and criterion of evaluation.

The critical perspective within an integral study of morality can be viewed as one approach to realizing the view of Bell that moral discourse should play an important part in social science and can greatly enhance its contributions to public debate and decision making.<sup>62</sup> The scientific study of the causes and effects of a religious based conception of morality represents one approach to the broad orientation of "philosophical sociology" advocated by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton.<sup>63</sup> In this view the social sciences and the humanities, including philosophy and religion, should contribute to public awareness and enlightenment regarding major social issues. The focus of theory and research upon the personal and social implications of widely recognized religious ethical traditions furnishes a common consensus of ideas for discourse between social science and the general public. Sorokin believed that an integral social science could be a vital force in personal, social, and cultural reconstruction.<sup>64</sup> In integralism "religion, logic, science unite to form a single harmonious team dedicated to the discovery of the perennial values and to the proper shaping of man's mind and conduct."<sup>65</sup>

Bell has noted the particular potential of religions as motivators to action when religious ideas are related to possible future states of society.<sup>66</sup> In accordance with Giddens' formulation of structuration theory, this discourse regarding ethical ideas could provide highly favorable conditions for disseminating scientific knowledge and understanding.<sup>67</sup> This could serve to give agents the resources for using reflexivity and the capacities of choice and action to constructively change themselves and the social world.

### ***Concepts and Theoretical Propositions***

Formulating adequate theoretical concepts from ideas derived from the ethical precepts of the major world religions is a formidable task. As this proceeds, propositions with concepts derived from this source can be integrated

with different theoretical perspectives within the basic frame of reference of culture, society, and personality. For example, Jeffries has illustrated how specific theoretical propositions relating the virtues to both altruistic behavior and conflict management can be integrated with symbolic interactionist, exchange, and conflict theories.<sup>68</sup>

An example of this can be given with the Ten Commandments.<sup>69</sup> One approach to developing propositions is to consider the social and cultural conditions which influence conformity to or violation of each of the Commandments. Here the Commandments are the dependent variable. A second approach is to use the Commandments as independent variables and to formulate propositions pertaining to the effect of individual conformity or violation of the Commandments upon society and culture. In a more personality-centered social psychological approach, attention can be focused on the influence that conformity or violation of the Commandments has on the happiness, creativity, and life history of the individual.

Another example is provided by the virtues and the vices. Both of these schemes can be incorporated into a similar generalized set of propositions. A fundamental question is the nature of the social and cultural conditions conducive to high levels of virtue on the one hand, or vice on the other. Another perspective is to formulate propositions pertaining to the effects of the virtues and the vices. Ideas from the major world religions clearly suggest that the vices will produce negative effects for individuals and society, while the virtues should generally produce positive individual and social effects. For example, Jeffries has noted how the findings of empirical research studies indicate that the virtues contribute to effective conflict management in marriage.<sup>70</sup>

### ***Cumulation in Scientific Knowledge and Understanding***

The integral perspective focuses theory and research in the study of morality on the virtues, vices, and Ten Commandments. These ethical principles are considered as schemes which direct attention to universal variations in human behavior. These variations are viewed as having significant effects on both personality and the sociocultural. Integralism thus calls for extensive and systematic empirical investigation of both the causes and the effects of variations in adhering to these principles. Theoretical concepts at appropriate levels of analysis must be formulated for each of these schemes of ideas. Likewise, corresponding operational procedures appropriate for different research techniques need to be conceived and validated.

This study of morality can be addressed at different levels of the scientific continuum and at levels of analysis ranging from micro to macro within the context of different social science disciplines and their subfields. It therefore provides the potential for creating points of general consensus and scientific practice throughout the social sciences. Morality can be a focus of empirical

investigation in such diverse areas as personality structure and change, organizations, social stratification, religion, criminology, politics, and the family.

Both structural and dynamic factors and processes can be examined. For example, conditions for the realization of the virtue of justice, or the effects of this virtue on the relative balance between solidary and antagonistic interaction, can be investigated in the specific context of each of the aforementioned areas. Similarly, how the social organization and culture of the family, the political and stratification systems, formal organizations, religions, and the correctional system inhibit or foster the vices of greed or anger is a significant moral question which transcends the boundaries of specific disciplines.

Empirically verified findings can be obtained from two major sources. One is the direct testing of these ideas with empirical research, such as recent research on the virtues and parent-child relationships.<sup>71</sup> A second source is the recasting of previous findings within the scope of concepts derived from the ethical ideas of the major world religions. It is probable that a large body of past research findings and generalizations can be legitimately reinterpreted in this manner. For example, Wilson and Herrnstein's conclusion that impulsivity is linked to criminality can be interpreted within the context of the virtue of temperance.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, Sorokin and Lunden's generalizations regarding power and morality relate directly to the virtue of justice at both the personality and societal levels of analysis.<sup>73</sup>

By focusing on such problems of morality in different research contexts, the role of middle range theories in the development of general theories that was envisioned by Merton may most efficiently be realized.<sup>74</sup> By concentration of scientific endeavors upon the topic of morality, specific research studies, middle range theories, and general theories can develop the consensus which will contribute to their mutual enhancement. This concentration on morality in different contexts should contribute greatly to the cumulation necessary for the development of valid scientific generalizations. Such generalizations pertaining to the causes and effects of morality are a necessary condition for contributing valid knowledge and understanding to public discourse regarding beneficial conditions and changes. In this manner, the social sciences can provide a major contribution toward the shaping of a better society for future generations and tomorrow's world.

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### Notes

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