

# SOCIAL ETHICS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Developing a Christian Mind  
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How should society be structured?  
(‘social ethics’)

# SOCIAL SCIENCE AND ITS NORMATIVE COMMITMENTS

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# why social science?

The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it

Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

Understanding the world is a prerequisite to changing it (or, making an intelligent stab at changing it)

True for the social world as much as physical world

Policymakers are 'social technologists'

# why social science?

The project of understanding is *descriptive*: concerned with what is

But *normative* commitments—views regarding what should be—permeate the practice of social science. It is not value-neutral

- [1] What questions are important?
- [2] What results are (a) plausible or (b) welcome?
- [3] What methodology is appropriate?
- [4] Against what criteria are policies evaluated?

# meaning-making

Humans are inveterate 'meaning-makers'. We seek to make sense of our experience, finding out what lies behind

The most fundamental way we do this is through narrative.  
We live by stories

A society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use, and the movements which they perform, but above all of the idea which it forms of itself

Emile Durkheim

# meaning-making in academia

Some of the normative content in social science is benign.  
Some is not

Academic disciplines have stories, too. These provide content for some normative commitments in social science

# a plea to Christian social scientists

## Seek intellectual *autonomy*

What questions are important for *Christian* social scientists to address?

## Seek intellectual *integrity*

How does my work integrate with a Christian understanding of the world?



# SOCIAL ETHICS

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a Christian agenda

# the structure of society

How relations between people are managed

Property

- Land, labour, capital

Exchange

Conflict resolution

- Property wrongdoing
- Personal wrongs—individual & communal

Community

- Family, context for sex, tribe, shared leisure

Religion, arts

Political forum

# Christian social ethics

Central source: Scripture (OT and NT)

Long history of reflection on Scripture, and how it relates to and informs our natural (i.e. non-revealed) understanding of the world

# OT social ethics

## Property

- Land, labour, capital

## Exchange

## Conflict resolution

- Property wrongdoing
- Personal wrongs—individual & communal

## Community

- Family, sex, tribe, shared leisure

## Religion, arts

## Political forum

“God’s people,  
in God’s land,  
under God’s law”

Community life an  
expression of worship. All  
areas spoken to by law

Israel as God’s paradigm  
to be a ‘kingdom of priests and a  
holy nation’ in context of **all  
nations** and the **whole earth**  
(Ex. 19:4-6)

# OT economic life

Under covenant relationship with creator/redeemer God, economic relationships to be constrained by and expressive of love for neighbour, beyond self-interest

- Access to resources: equitable initial distribution of land, concentration of land holdings forbidden, land could not be sold in perpetuity (the Jubilee)
- Rights and responsibilities of work: limitations on slavery, wages paid in full, rest, release from bonded labour
- Warnings against idolatry and self-sufficiency brought about by abundance (Deut 8)

# OT response to poverty

Understanding of causes:

Natural events (famine in Canaan)

Laziness (Proverbs)

Oppression (most cited cause)

- Exploitation of the socially weak (widows, orphans, aliens), the economically weak (debtors, wage labourers), and ethnic minorities (Ruth)
- Royal excess, corruption, abuse of power: Solomon, Ahab, Jehoiachim
- Corruption of justice

# OT response to poverty

- Poverty must be addressed (Lev 25): care for the poor is criterion of covenant obedience (Deut 26: 12-15, and generally in the prophets)
- Provisions addressed to those with economic/ social power—creditors, employers, slave owners—not to the poor themselves
- Kinship/family structure is the key
- Systemic ‘welfare system’—right of gleaning, triennial tithe, sabbatical year, cancellation of debts
- Equality for the poor and rich in the administration of justice

# what use the OT, then?

...[these Scriptures] render to us a paradigm, in one single culture and slice of history, of the social values that God looks for in human life generally

C.J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*



# Catholic social teaching

Dignity of the person, as *imago dei*  
(+ Human Rights)



*Principles of Common Life*

goal: the common good

subsidiarity

solidarity

# distribution of goods

## **universal destination of human goods**

God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity. The human person cannot do without the material goods that correspond to his primary needs and constitute the basic conditions for his existence; these goods are absolutely indispensable if he is to feed himself, grow, communicate, associate with others, and attain the highest purposes to which he is called. *The universal right to use the goods of the earth is based on the principle of the universal destination of goods.* Each person must have access to the level of well-being necessary for his full development

# distribution of goods

Headline grabber: God's 'preferential option for the poor'.  
But wide range of areas of application

- wage related to the worker, not the output. Need to support a family—so minimum (living) wage
- requires effective participation in the whole productive process, not just an input—so cooperatives
- role of, and need for, worker solidarity. Associations of workers or worker-controlled companies—so Catholic TUs

# SOCIAL ETHICS

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secular visions

# utilitarianism

## State of the art in normative economics

- Individual is best judge of own welfare
- Social decision rule: maximise aggregate welfare
- Seek Pareto-optimality
- i.e. efficient markets the answer

This is applied utilitarianism

# utilitarianism

The principle of utility is that which

‘approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish [happiness]’ (Bentham)

## Features

- Subjective account of the good
- Cardinal measure of wellbeing
- Utility function is maximisation of aggregate
- Purely prospective

# rawlsian liberalism

Thought experiment to derive the principles of justice – which is the ‘first virtue’ of societies

A fair procedure results in a just outcome. Self-interested, rational decisions about primary goods, by representative individuals under the appropriate constraints, provide the result

These decisions are made in the original position, behind a veil of ignorance, which excludes all morally irrelevant factors: wealth, age, sex, one’s ‘comprehensive conception of the good’

# rawlsian liberalism

Each person has the same inalienable claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all

Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions:

They are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity

They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society



# evaluation

The notion of a common good is missing from both accounts

- For utilitarians, it is just the aggregate of individual satisfaction
- For Rawls, it is a 'social union of social unions', but the overarching aim is individuals' ability to enjoy basic liberties and the primary social goods needed to pursue their own plan of life
- Is there a stronger conception, on a Christian view?

The agent of change: individuals (util), or the state (Rawls)

Why should theological premises be excluded by fiat?