



Value change and the pragmatist theory of morality: A response

Stefan Bargheer¹

Accepted: 10 July 2022 / Published online: 21 October 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract

What is the contribution of pragmatism to the sociology of morality? I answer to the points raised by the essays in this symposium on *Moral Entanglements: Conserving Birds in Britain and Germany* by outlining what the work of John Dewey adds to recent discussions on the question how values change over time and how individuals develop moral commitments.

Keywords Culture-practice dualism · John Dewey · Morality · Pragmatism · Value change · Work and play

It is a truism that once published, a book no longer belongs to the author but to the readers. The topics that readers pick up on are not necessarily those that were at the forefront of the author's mind. I am grateful not only for the thorough engagement with my book and probing of its arguments, but also for the different directions into which the contributors developed its arguments, which allows me to look at my own work with fresh eyes.

The diversity of perspectives on the book speaks to the versatility of what might at first glance look like a very narrow topic. Birds are usually not what sociologists turn to first when they go about their business, even though they are to be found at a central place of sociological theorizing. In his theory of religion, Durkheim argued that totem species (whether animals or plants) serve as symbols for the social group and thus form the moral basis of society.

In this sense, *Moral Entanglements* (Bargheer, 2018a) has two topics, morality and the environment, but one point of reference – the sociology of Durkheim. The reference is, however, a critical one, since I take my point of departure from the

✉ Stefan Bargheer
bargheer@aiaa.au.dk

¹ Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Høegh-Guldbergs Gade 6B, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

argument that Durkheim's approach has distinct limits. It generalizes what is only a special case, i.e. the singular totem species that in Durkheim's interpretation has no social importance other than serving as a group symbol, to nature at large, with its myriad ways of relating to social life.

Birds are a case in point. Some of the more than ten thousand named bird species serve as totem animals in the way Durkheim depicted them, yet the vast majority of them do not. In addition to using birds as totem animals, people also eat birds, collect their eggs, adorn themselves with their feathers, put them in cages to listen to their song, use them as targets for sport shooting, stuff them and put them into show cases, take pictures of them, observe their behavior, use them as ecological pest control or as indicators for the health of ecosystems, etc. All of these practices shape the meaning people give to birds in distinctive ways and are central for an understanding of people's motivation to engage in conservation.

It remains open to debate whether pure symbols unconnected to any real life experience have much of a motivating force. The American eagle, for instance, a totem in the Durkheimian sense that symbolizes the American nation, did not fare particularly well from a conservationist point of view. The bald eagle can be found on coins, dollars bills, postage stamps and on the presidential seal of the United States, yet in the late 20th century it came close to extinction. Its fate did not differ much from other birds of prey that were endangered through a combination of habitat loss, shooting, and exposure to pesticides (Beans, 1996). If there is anything remarkable about the story of this totem animal, then how unremarkable its fate is compared to that of other species that do not serve as national symbols.

Moral Entanglements argues that it is not the symbolic reflection of social relations, but the practical experience of birds and other species that gives meaning and value to them. This experience differs between countries and changes over time. I use the distinction between work and play as an analytical vantage point to compare the various practices listed above. In Britain, birds derived their meaning in the context of the game of bird watching as a leisure activity. Here birds are now, as then, the most popular and best protected taxonomic group of wildlife due to their particularly suitable status as toys in a collecting game, turning nature into a playground. In Germany, by contrast, birds were initially part of the world of work. They were protected as useful economic tools, rendering services of ecological pest control in a system of agricultural production modeled after the factory shop floor.

Moral Entanglements is of course not alone in emphasizing the centrality of the experience of nature in the analysis of its social meaning. The same holds true for a wide range of recent works in environmental sociology. Elliott's (2021) work on climate change, for instance, focusses on people's experience of environmental disasters such as the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy and shows that a rich cultural analysis does not have to ignore material conditions. Looking at the projected consequences of climate change in her essay for this symposium, she asks "[h]ow can we think about emergent and potential trajectories of moral valuation if and as worsening effects of climate change become an experiential reality for more and more people?" (Elliott, 2022). To tackle the issue, Elliott proposes to add catastrophe as an independent third category to my analysis of work and play.

Yet catastrophe, in the sense described by Elliott, is less a category in addition to work and play than denoting events that impinge on practices and institutions of work and play. Such catastrophic events are in fact analyzed in the book, in particular in reference to the adverse effects of the indiscriminate use of DDT and other pesticides in the 1950s and 1960s. Bestsellers such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* fueled public debates that a vocal critic at the time dubbed doomsday environmentalism. *Moral Entanglements* shows that the postwar environmentalism epitomized by Carson and others was not the beginning of something altogether new. The way the catastrophic event of pesticide overuse was perceived differed depending on whether conservation had been previously institutionalized around practices of work or practices of play. It were thus not solely the catastrophic events of the 1960s, but also long-term processes of institution building that started decades earlier, which shaped people's perceptions of these events and their choice of action.

This is not to suggest that Elliott is not correct in pointing out that climate change creates a reality (and a set of social actors who respond to it) that is different from that created by previous environmental issues. Climate change, in a sense, is about everything. The sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that is currently in preparation is organized around seven domains on which climate change has an impact, including issues relating to health, wellbeing, and the changing structure of communities as well as poverty, livelihoods and sustainable development (IPCC, 2017). The important thing about climate change is that it is not only one environmental issue among others, but one that affects other issues as well. As such, it is an event that cannot exclusively be subsumed under the rubric of either work or play. It effects the way we work and make our livelihood just as much as it affects the way we enjoy our leisure time.

The way conservation organizations currently react to the topic of climate change is shaped by their organizational trajectories and the practices on which they are built. In Britain, the main bird conservation organization as a single-issue organization only addresses climate change to the extent that it has an impact on birds and their habitats, while the main German bird conservation organization as a multi-issue organization deals with climate change as an independent topic that has an additional impact on a large range of other conservation issues. While the high popularity of bird watching in Britain makes for the success of organized bird conservation, it also has the effect that there is less room for other issues. Since bird watching does not have similar resonance in Germany, the leading conservation organization in this country diversified its agenda early on, well before climate change became a major topic (Bargheer, 2018c). The resonance of conservation issues that were already institutionalized in the first half of the twentieth century thus continues to shape the way new environmental issues are addressed at the present.

The question how bird conservation relates to other environmental issues can accordingly not be answered by arguing that the specific case under investigation is "a window into," as the expression goes, a larger and coherent system of cultural symbols. There is no coherent environmental ethic or consciousness at work that ties all environmental issues together. Each environmental issue and its relation to other environmental issues, so the larger claim of the book, is a reflection of a specific set

of practices and institutions in which it is entangled. *Moral Entanglements* uses John Dewey's pragmatist theory of moral valuations to develop this argument.

Pragmatism and social theory

As Gorski notes in his essay, there has recently been a renewed interest in pragmatism in sociology. What is notable about this renaissance is that it does not simply rejuvenate the previous interest in the topic. Pragmatism was already part of the sociology curriculum, represented by the work of George Herbert Mead and symbolic interactionism, i.e. the adaptation of Mead's work by Herbert Blumer and others (Joas, 1980, 1987, Rock, 1979). Current sociological scholarship on pragmatism, by contrast, brings topics to the forefront that were rather peripheral to symbolic interactionism. It is no longer the work of Mead, but that of Peirce and Dewey that receives most attention (e.g. Emirbayer, 1997; Whitford, 2002; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

This shift in attention raises the question what it is that ties the work of different pragmatists together. Is there a unique pragmatist point of view? *Moral Entanglements* does in fact draw on an idea that many previous sociologists who were inspired by pragmatism did not emphasize. Central to the book is Dewey's distinction between work and play, with the category of play making for the more counter-intuitive part of the argument. While the attention paid to play and games is something that Mead and Dewey have in common, there are also substantial differences between their works. In Mead's work, the process of role taking in a game is described as a central element in the development of the self. Yet this centrality of games in his theory notwithstanding, Mead's focus in studying games is ultimately on face-to-face interactions in small groups, not on play as an activity that is distinct from other activities such as work, although he, just as much as Dewey, distinguished between work and play as two different forms of action (e.g. Mead 1896). This difference in focus was amplified by the adaptation of Mead's work by symbolic interactionism. Fine's (1987) study of little league baseball in *With the Boys*, for instance, focuses on face-to-face interactions to trace the development of small group cultures, so-called idiocultures. The focus is on play groups, yet there is nothing about play that is peculiar to it as an activity in this analysis (and one should add: neither does it have to, given the research question that Fine seeks to answer).

At the same time, scholars who are not pragmatists (and seem not to be inspired by it) have produced arguments about play and games that have noticeably more in common with Dewey's and Mead's take on the topic than the works of many symbolic interactionists have. Huizinga ([1938] 1944), for instance, put play as an activity at center stage in *Homo Ludens*, arguing that human civilization (or culture) has its origin in play, i.e. agonistic competition, rather than in work, i.e. a cooperative division of labor. *Homo ludens* thus forms the counter-image to *homo faber*, that is, man the maker or economic producer. What Huizinga shares with Dewey (and the arguments by Mead that did not get developed further by symbolic interactionism) is the attribution of a creative potential to play.

In short, neither do all sociologists who were inspired by pragmatism have the theory of play adopted in *Moral Entanglements* in common, nor do pragmatists, either as a group or as individuals, own this point of view. It is thus quite apt to ask how my adaptation of Dewey's theory of valuation relates to other schools of thought and how it might be combined with them. Summers-Effler and Tavory challenge *Moral Entanglements* by first translating it into different theoretical languages, and by then bringing these theories to bear on the argument. Both essays consider my focus on practical experiences as an important contribution to the sociology of morality and propose to extend the book's argument by flashing out in more detail the causal mechanisms that connect experiences to moral valuations.

Summers-Effler takes her point of departure from the theory of interaction ritual chains developed by Collins (2004). The focus is on the (trans-)formation of the self in a process of action. Looking at this process in more minute detail than I do in the book, she suggests that one can distinguish between different emotional dynamics at work in the practice of bird watching as a ritual process. "Throughout Bargheer's book, the term 'attachment (2018:188)' is used to describe positive emotions towards birds that make the birds unique and worth preserving. This leaves the question: what generates and shapes this attachment?" (Summers-Effler, 2022). Her answer to this question is what she calls a ritual engagement theory. Bird watching produces wonder, and from this experience follows serenity and delight, which in turn constitute different moral valuations of birds.

If we want to classify different moral valuations, we accordingly have to group them based on these emotional dynamics, not based on, as Summers-Effler calls it, visions of embodied or emminded morality. In contradistinction to dual process theory, where morality is separated into emotionally grounded intuitions (i.e. embodied morality) on the one hand and cognition (i.e. emminded morality) on the other, she argues that actors gain both cognitive awareness and emotional commitments through the dynamics of a process of action.

I consider this a prime example how the argument in *Moral Entanglements* can be successfully expanded by translating it into a different theoretical language, although a language already influenced by pragmatism, in this case the pragmatism of Mead. A distinction between different emotions and the specific dynamics of action that they entail is in fact missing from *Moral Entanglements*, although emotional gratifications and attachments are a central part of the argument. The other way around, however, the interaction ritual perspective could benefit from taking the difference between the practices of work and play into account. Only play matches the dynamic process of action that Summers-Effler describes. Work, by contrast, as a practice in which this ritual process is interrupted, is tied to other emotions, such as feelings of duty and guilt that are entangled with notions of absolute (and frequently unattainable) ends, which, as *Moral Entanglements* shows, might easily flip into feelings of apathy.

Like Summers-Effler, Tavory agrees that the emphasis on practical experience in *Moral Entanglements* is crucial. While the former extends my argument by bringing in additional theories of practice, the latter seeks to extend the argument by providing a different theory of experience. Tavory argues that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Schutz provides a more fruitful point of departure. Both pragmatism and phenomenology have in common that they look at experiences in order to understand

how actors perceive and evaluate the world. Yet Tavory argues that the core contribution of phenomenology is the insight that experience is motivated. “The crucial point here, to put it in phenomenological language, is that our structure of experience is always *intentional*. We are always experiencing *something*, sensing *something*” (Tavory, 2022).

This insight is, however, equally central to the pragmatism of Dewey. In his famous article on *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896), Dewey argued against the stimulus-response model then popular in psychology by pointing out that perception is motivated, i.e. that it represents an act rather than a passive reception of sense data. A bird watcher searching for blue jays and gaining a more acute awareness of everything blue in their visual field throughout the activity can serve as an example. The pragmatism of Dewey and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Schutz seem to me fully compatible in this regard. I build on this insight by making a distinction between seeing, looking, and watching, that is, different degrees to which the perception of birds is motivated and structured by the game of bird watching.

The difference between pragmatism and phenomenology is not so much found in a theory of motivated perception, but in the specific motives that Tavory seems to have in mind. As the examples given throughout his essay make evident, his focus is on the desire to have a “nature experience,” which requires a preexisting set of cultural expectations of what this experience will be like as well as a preexisting appreciation of nature at large, rather than just of birds. In Tavory’s re-interpretation of my account of why bird photography gradually replaced bird shooting, the former practice won the day because bird photos allowed for a fuller recapturing of the nature experience than the practice of collecting stuffed specimens (i.e. it allowed actors to obtain an image of nature at large, compared to just being able to hold the bird in ones hands).

Tavory admits that his alternative explanation is speculative and there is in fact ample ethnographic evidence that points into the opposite direction. Bird watchers also systematically visit landfills and sewage treatment plants to spot birds (Schaffner, 2009). They do so not because they want to have a “garbage experience,” but because these are the places where the birds are, or, to use Goffman’s (1969) expression, because this is where the action is. It is the thrill of the game that makes people get out of their way and visit these otherwise unpleasant sites. Bird watching is first and foremost about birds, not about nature at large. As already outlined above, there is indeed a certain amount of single-mindedness among bird watchers. Hence the high valuation of birds among many conservationists, without an equally strong interest in other environmental issues.

Pragmatism and the culture-practice dualism

While it is not the outgrowth of a holistic discourse on nature, there is nevertheless a discursive element in bird conservation. In Britain, conservation is discursively linked to the realm of art and aesthetic experience. The moral discourse on conservation in this country accordingly highlights the benefits of an intact bird-life for individual well-being, i.e. joy, without making any allusions to an intrinsic moral value of birds. In Germany, by contrast, economic arguments for conservation prevailed

initially. Actors who were not satisfied with a purely economic rationale predominantly formulated equally one-sided moral arguments for conservation. The view on morality that dominated here was one that highlighted the intrinsic value of birds and the moral duty to counteract economic interests. Arguments about individual well-being did not enter the picture.

The discourse in each of the two countries was part of already established cultural repertoires that were available to actors to make sense of their experiences. Neither of the two discourses was unique to either Britain or Germany. A discourse on aesthetic experience was also widely available in German culture (think of Kant's notion of beauty and the sublime and its amplification in German romanticism) and notions of industrial discipline tied to pecuniary standards of worth were well established in Britain (Weber had in fact Britain, not Germany, in mind as his core old world example when he wrote about the topic). Which discourse dominated among bird conservationists was a reflection of the practical experiences they tried to make sense of, both to themselves and to others. This is not to suggest, however, that there is in all instances an exact correlation between individual experience and dominant discourse. Once institutionalized, a discursive rationale for conservation could prove to have substantial staying power, even if the practices that once sustained it broke away, as I show on the example of the collapse of economic ornithology in Germany in the 1960s. The transfer of the British discourse (and the practices in which it is entangled) to Germany that followed took several decades, was fraught with inter-generational conflict, and could potentially have failed.

Similar to Tavory, albeit coming from a different direction, Dromi and Scoville argue in their essays that this account of the relation between culture and practice attributes too little autonomy to culture. In a way, these two contributions can be seen as a defense of the status quo, counter to my argument that sociologists of morality have in the past paid too much attention to culture and too little to practices. What makes this defense intriguing is that both essays employ ideas that are frequently identified as pragmatist ideas to make their point. Dromi bases his argument on Boltanski and Thévenot, while Scoville builds on Latour, albeit with reservations. There are substantial differences in the way these recent French scholars relate to American pragmatism. While Latour makes systematic use of the ideas of pragmatist writers, the same does not hold true for Boltanski and Thévenot. The affinity between the latter and pragmatism seems to consist of no more than a conflation of the notion of pragmatics, as used in structuralist linguistics, with pragmatism as a particular school of philosophical thought (Quéré and Terzi, 2014).

Dromi's use of the work of Boltanski and Thévenot in his essay raises in fact the question how his argument is different from Parsonian sociology. While *On Justification* (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) makes many contributions that move social theory away from structural-functionalism and highlight the importance of studying practices, it is the part about the plurality of moral values, or orders of worth as the authors call them, that receives most attention. Dromi suggests that these regimes of justification (he prefers the original French term *cité*) provide the foundation for the practices analyzed in *Moral Entanglements*. "I suggest instead that those practices and institutions that, according to Bargheer, generate moral discourse are in themselves rooted in pre-existing moral evaluation frameworks (or *cites*)" (Dromi, 2022).

Much hinges, of course, on the question how one interprets the meaning of “rooted in” in this argument. To say that practices and institutions are rooted in discourse can mean that discourse is what provides the motivating force for moral practices and sustains the institutions that reproduce them. The claim that the discourse about play, for instance, is the root of the practice of play in this sense is seriously hampered by the fact that animals, too, are playing. One of Dewey’s examples for play behavior is a cat playing with a piece of yarn (Dewey, 1911–1913). The ability to play correlates with the level of cognitive development of various species and entails learned behavior, both in human beings and animals (see Sutton-Smith, 1997 for an overview of play in primates and the insights about cognitive development that it affords). Yet it would be farfetched to call the enabling precondition for play behavior discourse. What kind of discourse, after all, is supposed to provide the foundation or root for cats playing with yarn?

A more favorable reading of Dromi’s argument would suggest that discourse is not at the root of practices in the sense that it is always the cause of play behavior, but in the sense that in the specific empirical case analyzed in *Moral Entanglements* a specific discourse was already present before the transformations described in the book took place. Such an argument makes sense and should in fact be rather uncontroversial, since the book argues that changes in discourse were not the cause of the rise of bird conservation. As already described above, discourse on play and aesthetic experience existed before the onset of organized bird conservation, with the latter dating to the second half of the nineteenth century. I do, however, disagree with Dromi’s claim that this discourse was not available in Germany and hence accounts for the difference between this country and Britain. One of the British actors that I quote in the book made an analogy between bird watching and listening to a Beethoven sonata. I have a hard time thinking that German actors do not have the cultural repertoire available to refer to Beethoven sonatas.

Even more important, the insight that discourse on play predates the development of bird conservation is by itself unable to answer the question why the valuation of birds changed over time (i.e. why it shifted from bird bodies to living birds), which is the core question of *Moral Entanglements*. By declaring discourse to be foundational, Dromi has no theoretical tools left to account for value change, i.e. change in moral discourse. This, of course, is the same corner into which structural-functionalism maneuvered itself by declaring the question of social order to be the core of sociology. The difference between Parsons and Boltanski and Thévenot, at least in the way that Dromi appropriates their work, is mainly to be found in the fact that the former allowed for only one order of worth to exist, while the latter recognize a plurality of them. This is an important improvement, but it does not answer the question how values change, i.e. where the origin for the different orders of worth is to be found and why some discourses have a grip on people while others do not. As I argue elsewhere, the cause for the difference between Britain and Germany is to be found in divergent practices of land use that developed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were tied to the relative importance of domestic food production versus imports from the global market (Bargheer, 2018b).

French pragmatism is also the point of departure for the essay by Scoville, who picks up on the work of actor-network theorists such as Latour (2005) and Callon

(1984). He highlights the centrality of the notion of assemblages in actor-network theory and its affinity to pragmatism. While *Moral Entanglements* is in his view successful in studying practices as part of such assemblages, he nevertheless thinks that the book fails to scale up from the micro-domain of practices to the macro-domain of social structure.

To fill the gap, Scoville suggests to extend pragmatism (and actor-network theory by affiliation) with a Weberian notion of value spheres. “[The] broader project of developing a pragmatist sociology of nature would benefit from going beyond a rejection of the teleological relationship between means and ends, to accommodate other explanatory virtues of Weber’s (and by extension, Parsons’s and Bourdieu’s) theory of modernity” (Scoville, 2022). Such an undertaking is not entirely new. There is in fact a substantial amount of scholarship that has looked at environmental values from this perspective. Luhmann has identified environmental discourse as an autopoietic social system following its own code (Luhmann, 1989), Habermas has interpreted environmentalism as a new social movement that is directed against the colonization of an authentic life world by the capitalist economy and the bureaucratic state (Habermas, 1981; Habermas, 1984), while Alexander and Smith have argued for the existence of an autonomous discourse on technology through which environmental risks are interpreted (Alexander and Smith, 1996). More recent work by Thévenot on the environment as an order of worth in its own right that is not captured by the six orders of worth discussed in *On Justification* can be added to the list (Thévenot, Moody, and Lafaye, 2000) (for a comparison of Weber’s value spheres with Boltanski and Thévenot’s orders of worth see Wagner, 1999).

Moral Entanglements, by contrast, advances a different argument. At the macro level, bird conservation is not part of a separate sphere (or social system) of environmental values, but is instead located at the triangular intersection of professional field ornithology, amateur bird watching, and nature conservation. It thus spans three institutional domains: science, sport, and social movement. The connection between these three domains is not to be found in a shared rationality of social systems, whether formulated with a Weberian or Parsonian accent. What holds these three institutional domains together is the fact that they are based on the same practices – play in the case of Britain and work in the case of Germany. These practices were institutionalized in different ways in each of the three domains, yet the fact that it is one and the same practice facilitates the interaction between these institutions. Individuals who started their career in one institutional setting often end up in another or occupy positions in several of them at the same time.

Work done within these three domains builds on each other. At the present, data collected by amateur bird watchers are used by professional field ornithologists to produce insights about population trends that form the basis for political lobbying efforts and the enforcement of conservation legislation. I talk accordingly about the entanglement of moral valuations in practices *and* institutions, not just in practices. The big picture that emerges from this institutional analysis is a network structure, an actor-network as Latour and others have called it, not a society differentiated into autonomous (and potentially conflicting) value spheres. Moving from the micro to the macro level does not mean that we suddenly have to switch from practice to culture, as Scoville suggests. We can also study how practices, rather than ideas, are

institutionalized and result in big structures and large processes, to use Tilly's (1984) expression (on pragmatism and the study of macro phenomena more generally see Gross, 2018). Scoville simply omits the analysis of institutions that is an integral part of the book from his considerations.

Neither Weber nor Durkheim are mentioned by name in the book, yet an engagement with their arguments is nevertheless present. While the introduction tacitly argues against Durkheim's theory of totemism in the way stated above, the conclusion equally tacitly addresses Weber's theory of rationalization. According to Weber's sociology of religion, moral ideals derive from a rationalization of ideas, with theologians and popular preachers as central actors. Wuthnow (1989) has developed this argument further by distinguishing between the innovation and diffusion of ideologies and the moral ideals that they contain. Great thinkers as moral virtuosi invent new ideas in a process of rationalization, while the mass of people pick up on them if they resonate with their structural position in society. In the history of nature conservation, Rachel Carson, the author of the bestseller *Silent Spring*, is often identified as such a moral virtuosa or intellectual innovator. By placing Carson and her work in context, I turn this argument on its head: in the case of bird conservation, diffusion proceeded innovation, i.e. it was after new practices had come into being among large segments of the population and were fully institutionalized that new ethical concepts to address this altered reality were coined. The notion of endangered species is the case in point. Great cultural innovators often do their work after the fact, with Carson as a very clear-cut example. This is not to deny the tremendous impact that the book had both in the United States and abroad. It is simply to show that the moral ideals that the book articulated did not derive from a process of ethical rationalization.

To reject Weber's theory of ethical rationalization, however, is not to argue that culture has no causal significance. Alexander's strong program for cultural sociology, for instance, proposes to study culture always as an independent variable, not as a dependent variable (Alexander and Smith, 2001). This is the program that Dromi echoes (and references) in his essay. Does the pragmatist approach in *Moral Entanglements* make the reverse proposal, i.e. to always study culture as a dependent variable, never as an independent one? Certainly not. The aim is not to counter a one sided view that privileges culture with an equally one sided view that privileges practice. The core insight of pragmatism transferred to sociological debates is that this dualism between culture and practice (i.e. between ideas as pure ends and practices as pure means, to use Dewey's vocabulary) misses the point: the real action is to be found where these two things intersect and cannot even be meaningfully separated from each other.

Pragmatism is built on the insight that we lose something if we make these kind of analytical distinctions. It represents, as Lovejoy (1929) has put it, a revolt against dualism. In American philosophy, pragmatism was succeeded by analytical philosophy. From the vantage point of this school of thought, pragmatists in general and Dewey's version of it quite in particular looked like common sense philosophy that failed to draw sharp analytical distinctions. Yet it was the key insight of pragmatism that many of the analytical distinctions that are the central building blocks of Western philosophy cannot be made in a meaningful way.

For Dewey, it is the analytical distinction between means and ends that is untenable. Since this distinction informs much sociological theorizing – theorizing on morality included – Dewey’s ideas are readily transferrable to sociological debates. As Gorski points out, Dewey’s alternative conceptual vocabulary (such as “ends-in-view” or “procedural means”) is nevertheless not always easy to follow. One can, however, re-translate insights gained from his pragmatism into a more familiar analytical vocabulary: the relation between culture and practice as I describe it in *Moral Entanglements* is analogous to the distinction between complementary goods and substitute goods in economics. Complementary goods are goods that complete each other. This means that such goods have no value unless used in conjunction with one another, such as for instance a record and a record player. Substitute goods, on the other hand, are those goods that have an independent value and can be used as replacements for each other. An example are a radio and a MP3 player. The analogy is not a perfect one, yet it highlights the point that we have to think about the relationship between cultural values and practices as depending on the specificities of the values and practices we are talking about. Cultural values and practices, like economic goods, come in different kinds and the relations between them differ accordingly.

Dromi and Scoville both suggest that one can answer the question about the relation between practice and culture once and for all at the theoretical level, independent of the empirical case one is dealing with. The pragmatist approach that I propose, by contrast, suggests that analytical distinctions and assumptions about the causal relationships between the distinguished entities should grow out of empirical analysis, not proceed it. This is what the comparison of the two cases in *Moral Entanglement* achieves. It shows that in Britain, where the valuation of birds is entangled in play, the relation between practice and culture is complementary (i.e. moral arguments or justifications express existing practical experiences and reinforce them), whereas in Germany, where this valuation is entangled in work, the two form substitutes (i.e. moral arguments are put forward to counter existing practices, without being tied to specific guidelines for alternative lines action and thus produce an either/or relationship between action and moral discourse).

From an empirical point of view, the British case is by far the more counter-intuitive and thus more intriguing, yet the comparison to the German case pays off from a theoretical perspective. It shows that the relation between culture and practice differs depending on what kind of moral values one is dealing with. The separation between moral ideals as pure ends and practices as pure means that is part of many definitions of morality (including the structural-functionalist one) now appears as symptomatic only for the German case (i.e. an entanglement in the practice of work), yet not the British one (i.e. an entanglement in the practice of play). As such, the common conception of morality remains useful for specific empirical cases, but not as a general theory with universal analytical value. While it might sound paradoxical at first, pragmatism, albeit a philosophy, leaves more room to empirical investigation in the study of morality than many sociologists working on the topic have so far been willing to grant it.

Pragmatism and moral sociology

The previous essays have looked at *Moral Entanglements* as carrying the pragmatist argument too far. Gorski, by contrast, argues in his essay that there are also aspects of Dewey's work that speak to sociological debates, yet which I and other contemporary sociologists of morality do not pick up on. The sociological debate on value neutrality could, according to Gorski, gain from an engagement with Dewey. In the work of Dewey and other pragmatists, "is" (i.e. empirical facts) and "ought" (i.e. morals values) are not two separate domains. Gorski outlines four ways in which social scientists bridge the gap between the two, i.e. (1) the reconstruction of foreign life worlds, (2) the comparison of moral ideals with real life practices, (3) the reframing of the situation in which value judgments are made, and (4) the denaturalization of social constructs.

One should add to this typology the general observation that Dewey made not only an argument that science should be concerned with ethics (and be more self-conscious of the implicit value judgments in which it engages, as Gorski reminds us), but also the reverse argument that ethics should take note of science, or rather, of our empirical knowledge about the world. Ethics ought to be fact based. Dewey argued that ethical maxims and ideals that cannot be translated into practice will ultimately be self-defeating and lead to apathy and inaction. This, indeed, is an empirical statement about the relation between moral values and empirical facts that I adopt in my analysis.

Moral Entanglements is likewise a contribution to one of the four ways in which is and ought are bridged according to Gorski, although I do not follow his (or Dewey's) project of a normative social ethic. "[One] of the central tasks of a Deweyan social ethics is to reconstruct the many moral lifeworlds that people inhabit (...). This, in fact, is what a great deal of good social science does. When an ethnographer studies a "tiny public", or a cultural sociologist analyzes "money, morals and manners" in France and America, or a historical sociologists analyzes bird watching and nature conservation, they are engaged in a form of normative social ethics" (Gorski, 2022). According to Gorski, this aspect of my work remains implicit in the book. I would like to welcome the opportunity to make it explicit. In the presentation of my research results, I make a systematic effort to undermine depictions of nature conservationists as eccentric tree huggers, who think, feel, and act differently than the rest of us. Instead, I show that what they do is identical with the things other people do when they engage in work or play a game.

The central story told in *Moral Entanglements* is one of amateur bird watchers and professional field ornithologist who are playing a game that makes them fall in love with birds. This experience is not unique to bird lovers and other nature collectors. The social sciences offer equally prominent examples. Among cultural anthropologists, there exists the notion of salvage ethnography, which refers to the practice of collecting cultural artifacts and recording of cultural expressions that are in decline and threatened by extinction. Albeit frequently ill-conceived in practical terms and often tied to problematic assumptions about "primitive" people, it nevertheless accurately describes ethnographic field workers who have gone native and begin to emphasize with the well-being of their study objects (or rather subjects) and who

turn the problems and challenges of the latter into their own. The argument of *Moral Entanglements*, in a nutshell, is that bird conservationists are field workers who have “gone native” and turned into salvage ornithologists.

The historical narrative of the book begins with an account of the collecting practices carried out during Captain Cook’s voyages. The explorers on board (the name scientist was not yet coined) were collecting cultural and natural objects alike, yet subsequent scholars who wrote about these endeavors split the story up along the disciplinary boundaries of their day. Anthropologists wrote about the culture collectors on the voyages, while biologists wrote about the nature collectors. Revisiting this historical case shows how closely these scientific endeavors are aligned in their practices. Bird watching as a form of natural history data collecting, then, is much closer to the things sociologists and other social scientists do than we might expect at first glance. Bird watchers are not just *like* us, they *are* us, i.e. those of us who go into the field, collect data, and turn into advocates of the people we study. The equivalence is not to be found in a shared ethic of ultimate ends, but in the often very mundane research practices in which scientists are entangled. Looking at these practices thus helps us not only to better understand nature conservationists, but it can also provide us with a new perspective on our own sympathies and social engagements as sociologists.

Funding This work was supported by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 754513 and the Aarhus University Research Foundation.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

References

- Alexander, J. C., & Smith, P. (1996). Social Science and Salvation: Risk Society as Mythical Discourse. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 25(4), 251–262
- Alexander, J. C., & Smith, P. (2001). The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics. In J. H. Turner (Ed.), *Handbook of Sociological Theory* (pp.135–150). New York: Springer
- Bargheer, S. (2018a). *Moral Entanglements: Conserving Birds in Britain and Germany*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Bargheer, S. (2018b). The Sociology of Morality as Ecology of Mind: Justifications for Conservation and the International Law for the Protection of Birds in Europe. *European Journal of Sociology*, 59(1), 63–89
- Bargheer, S. (2018c). Apocalypse Adjourned: The Rise and Decline of Cold War Environmentalism in Germany. *Environmental Politics*, 27(6), 973–993
- Beans, B. E. (1996). *Eagle’s Plume: The Struggle to Preserve the Life and Haunts of America’s Bald Eagle*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press
- Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2006). *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Callon, M. (1984). Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. *Sociological Review*, 32(1), 196–233

- Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Dewey, J. (1896). The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology. *Psychological Review*, 3(4), 357–370
- Dewey, J. (1911–1913). Play. In P. Monroe (Ed.), *A Cyclopedia of Education* (Vol. 4, pp. 725–727). New York: Macmillan
- Dromi, S.M. (2022) Work and play as moral categories. *Theory and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-022-09492-2>
- Elliott, R. (2021). *Underwater: Loss, Flood Insurance, and the Moral Economy of Climate Change in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Elliot, R. (2022) Moral entanglements with a changing climate. *Theory and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-022-09495-z>
- Emirbayer, M. (1997). Manifesto for a Relational Sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(2), 281–317
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962–1023
- Fine, G. A. (1987). *With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Goffman, E. (1969). *Where the Action is: Three Essays*. London: Allen Lane
- Gross, N. (2018). Pragmatism and the Study of Large-Scale Social Phenomena. *Theory and Society*, 47(1), 87–111
- Gorski, P.S. (2022) Deweyan moral sociology: descriptive cultural history or critical Social Ethics?. *Theory and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-022-09497-x>
- Habermas, J. (1981). New Social Movements. *Telos*, 49, 33–37
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of the Functionalist Reason*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Huizinga, J. ([1938] 1944). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- IPCC. (2017). *Chapter Outline of the Working Group II Contribution (AR6)*. Geneva: IPCC
- Joas, H. (1980). *G.H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-Examination of his Thought*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Joas, H. (1987). Symbolic Interactionism. In A. Giddens, & J. H. Turner (Eds), *Social Theory Today* (pp. 82–115). Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Lovejoy, A. O. (1929). *The Revolt against Dualism: An Inquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas*. La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company
- Luhmann, N. (1989). *Ecological Communication*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Mead, G. H. (1896). The Relation of Play to Education. *University Record*, 1(8), 141–145
- Quéré, L., & Terzi, C. (2014). Did You Say ‘Pragmatic’? Luc Boltanski’s Sociology from a Pragmatist Perspective. In S. Susen, & B. S. Turner (Eds.), *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the ‘Pragmatic Sociology of Critique’* (pp.91–128). London: Anthem Press
- Rock, P. E. (1979). *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield
- Schaffner, S. (2009). Environmental Sporting: Birding at Superfund Sites, Landfills, and Sewage Ponds. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 33(3), 206–229
- Scoville, C. (2022) The means and ends of nature. *Theory and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-022-09496-y>
- Summers-Effler, B. (2022) The Morality of Birding: Aesthetic Engagement, Emotion, and Cognition. *Theory and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-022-09494-0>
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Tavory, I. (2022) Entanglements of experience: sketch for a sociological phenomenology of nature. *Theory and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-022-09493-1>
- Thévenot, L., Moody, M., & Lafaye, C. (2000). Forms of Valuing Nature: Arguments and Modes of Justification in French and American Environmental Disputes. In M. Lamont, & L. Thévenot (Eds.), *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States* (pp. 229–272). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Tilly, C. (1984). *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation
- Wagner, P. (1999). After Justification: Repertoires of Evaluation and the Sociology of Modernity. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2(3), 341–357

- Whitford, J. (2002). Pragmatism and the untenable Dualism of Means and Ends: Why Rational Choice Theory does not deserve Paradigmatic Privilege. *Theory and Society*, 31, 325–363
- Wuthnow, R. (1989). *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.