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Philosophy of the Social Sciences 2005 35: 20

DOI: 10.1177/0048393104271923

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How to Explain Oppression

Criteria of Adequacy for Normative Explanatory Theories

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This article discusses explanatory theories of normative concepts and argues for a set of criteria of adequacy by which such theories may be evaluated. The criteria offered fall into four categories: ontological, theoretical, pragmatic, and moral. After defending the criteria and discussing their relative weighting, this article uses them to prune the set of available explanatory theories of oppression. Functionalist theories, including Hegelian recognition theory and Foucauldian social theory, are rejected, as are psychoanalytic theory and social dominance theory. Finally, the article defends structural rational choice theory as the most promising methodology for explaining oppression.

Keywords: oppression; explanation; rational choice theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Oppression is a morally laden term. Oppression is necessarily an injustice; it is, to put it in a Rawlsian formulation, the fundamental injustice of social institutions. As with Rawls's treatment of justice, I maintain that oppression must be understood not only conceptually but also empirically. To understand oppression, we need an empirical, social scientific account of oppression that can tell us why it happens, how it is manifested in different times and places, and how it has been resisted or how it has proven resistant to reform. Thus, in

Received 3 September 2004

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, March 13, 2004; and the Philosophy of Social Science Roundtable in St. Louis, Missouri, March 20, 2004. I thank audiences and participants at both sessions. I am particularly grateful for suggestions for revision made by Alison Wylie, Paul Roth, and James Bohman.

Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol. 35 No. 1, March 2005 20-49
DOI: 10.1177/0048393104271923
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dealing with oppression, as with some other moral and political concepts such as justice, equality, welfare, and opportunity to name four others, we need an empirical theory of a fundamentally normative concept. This is not an unusual circumstance for a social scientist, but it is somewhat atypical, if not quite unique, for a political philosopher. I want to argue that the political philosopher studying oppression can gain from attention to goings on in the philosophy of social science, while at the same time arguing that the social scientist studying oppression can learn crucial lessons for her enterprise from political philosophy. My concern in the present article is to explore how the empirical theory of the fundamentally normative concept of oppression should proceed.

As I will use the term, “oppression” names a social injustice, which is to say that it is perpetrated through social institutions, practices, and norms on social groups by social groups. I call this the *group condition*. In this way oppression differs from many kinds of injustices that can be done to individuals as well as to social groups.¹ One can be enslaved as an individual or as a member of a social group, as one can be unjustly exploited as an individual or as a member of a social group, but oppression is a social injustice and happens to one only as a member of a group. Since oppression is a kind of injustice, an injustice suffered by whole groups of persons, it often wrongs widely and deeply. Although oppression afflicts whole groups of persons, it is fundamentally the individuals in those groups who suffer. As I shall explain shortly, social groups are aggregates of individuals, though of a special, nonaccidental sort. Thus, it is individuals who suffer the injustices of oppression, though they can only do so as members of social groups. It is because humans sort themselves into social groups and find it nearly impossible as well as undesirable to extract themselves from social groups that they can oppress each other.

Oppression is a harm through which persons are systematically and unfairly or unjustly constrained, burdened, or reduced by any of several forces. I call this the *harm condition*. Harms are inflicted by both psychological and material forces of oppression. Psychological forces oppress one through one’s conscious mental states, that is, emotionally or by manipulation of one’s belief states so that one is psychologically stressed, reduced in one’s own self-image, or otherwise psychologically harmed. Material forces oppress by harming one’s physical

1. I give a full account of this theory of oppression in *Analyzing Oppression* (Cudd forthcoming). See its preliminary version in Cudd (1994, 22-24).

being, or reducing one's material resources, including wealth, income, access to health care, or rights to inhabit physical space. Either force may be subjectively recognized or not by its victims. Psychological and material forces of oppression mutually cause and exacerbate the effects of each other.

Some contemporary accounts of oppression attempt to define it simply by the harms that oppressed persons suffer. But this will not work because of the third condition that I argue characterizes oppression, namely, the *coercion condition*. The harms of oppression are unjustly inflicted. Oppression is a normative concept that names a social injustice. Oppression is always wrong; one cannot coherently speak of justified oppression, though some forces that characteristically constitute oppression may, in some instances, be justifiable. For instance, degradation or humiliation is sometimes claimed to be the characteristic harm of oppression, but one might be degraded and humiliated by one's own actions while on a drinking binge, and in this case the degradation and humiliation might be entirely justified. Furthermore, although oppression surely is a denial of freedom, it cannot be just any denial of freedom, since some constraints on one's freedom are natural or even social but not unjust. (Think of someone justly convicted of a crime and then jailed for it.) The injustice of oppression, I claim, stems from a coercively enforced inequality or diminished choice. Thus, to make a claim of oppression is to show that the harms involved are unjustified, or correlatively, to show that some harms are justified is to show that they are not oppressive. But to see whether harms are unjust, one needs to examine the causal mechanisms by which the oppressed come to suffer them. A complete account of oppression has to characterize not only the harms of oppression but also the causes of those harms. Thus, my account of oppression concentrates on how the oppressed come to suffer inequality, limitation, and dehumanization, among other harms.

On my view of oppression, for every social group that is oppressed there are correlative social groups whose members gain materially or psychologically from the oppression. I will call the groups whose members gain from the increased social prestige and privileges that their membership confers on them "privileged" groups and, thus, call this the *privilege condition*. This term, rather than "oppressor group," avoids asserting that the majority of persons in those groups perpetrate oppression by intending to gain unjustly from their actions (or omissions). Even if one is a member of a privileged group, one need not oneself be an oppressor, on my view. One could, for instance,

struggle against the social system from which one gains through one's group membership, even if one is powerless to renounce that membership. To be an oppressor, one needs to be a member of a privileged group, to gain from oppression of another social group, to intend to so gain, and to act to realize that intention by contributing to the oppression of the oppressed group from whose oppression one gains.

Summarizing the definition: Oppression names an objective social phenomenon which is characterized by

1. *the harm condition*: individuals are harmed by institutional practices (e.g., rules, laws, expectations, stereotypes, rituals, behavioral norms);
2. *the group condition*: individuals suffer harm in (1) because of their membership (or perceived membership) in a social group;
3. *the privilege condition*: there is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice in (1);
4. *the coercion condition*: there is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.

The definition allows us to classify cases, although this is sometimes a tricky interpretive enterprise, which is loaded with normative claims. Nonetheless, this cannot be avoided because of the moral imperative to avoid harms of this type. We cannot avoid it just because it is hard or risky or unpopular. There clearly exist oppressed social groups. A short list would include women, blacks, gays and lesbians, transgendered persons, the disabled, the elderly, and children. The correlative groups, men, whites, straight persons, able-bodied and normally intelligent persons, and nonelderly adults are privileged persons and are not oppressed qua members of these groups.

Oppression is a puzzling phenomenon in several respects. Although individual humans differ considerably by size, strength, and innate intelligence, they do not differ greatly in these respects by social group. That is, within social groups there tends to be much greater variation than between social groups. This is even true between gender groups—the variation in size and strength is much greater within the group than between the means of the two groups. For both Hobbes and Rousseau, the rough natural equality of human beings made the existence of domination something of a puzzle: how, if we are roughly equal in natural endowments, could one person allow herself to be dominated or enslaved by another? Hobbes, for whom oppression connoted conditions of violence and enslavement, argued that in the absence of a sovereign power to keep the peace,

what he termed the state of nature, the rough equality of humans led to the war of all against all and, consequently, a "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" life. Thus, he argued, we must enter civilized society, that is, accept the domination of the sovereign, to avoid even more disastrous domination and violence. "Fear of oppression," he wrote, "disposeth a man to anticipate, or to seek aid by society: for there is no other way by which a man can secure his life and liberty" (Hobbes 1968, 163). Rousseau, who thought of oppression as conditions of enslavement and domination, specifically denied that oppression is possible in the state of nature, however.

A man could well lay hold of the fruit another has gathered, the game he has killed, the cave that served as his shelter. But how will he ever succeed in making himself be obeyed? And what can be the chains of dependence among men who possess nothing? If someone chases me from one tree, I am free to go to another; if someone torments me in one place, who will prevent me from going elsewhere? Is there a man with strength sufficiently superior to mine and who is, moreover, sufficiently depraved, sufficiently lazy and sufficiently ferocious to force me to provide for his subsistence while he remains idle? He must resolve not to take his eyes off me for a single instant, to keep me carefully tied down while he sleeps, for fear that I may escape or that I would kill him. (Rousseau 1987, 58)

For Rousseau, oppression requires the ability for one person to do the work of two and the artifice of money, or a way to store wealth, and these require society. Also, according to Rousseau, oppression could only exist when the oppressed was willing to give up his freedom for some merely apparent reward, a reward that only so-called civilized humans could see as better than freedom.

Citizens allow themselves to be oppressed only insofar as they are driven by blind ambition; and looking more below than above them, domination becomes more dear to them than independence, and they consent to wear chains in order to be able to give them in turn to others . . . inequality spreads easily among ambitious and cowardly souls always ready to run the risks of fortune and, almost indifferently, to dominate or serve, according to whether it becomes favorable or unfavorable to them. (Rousseau 1987, 77)

Oppression then becomes stable and accepted by the institution of laws: "it derives its force and growth from the development of our faculties and the progress of the human mind, and eventually be-

comes stable and legitimate through the establishment of property and laws" (Rousseau 1987, 81).

Though Rousseau thinks it a relatively easy matter to explain oppression as a result of cowardice and ambition, the depth of the harms and their long-standing nature suggest to me the need for a more detailed causal account. I offer the following as a list of the questions that an explanatory theory of oppression should answer.

- How does oppression originate?
- How does oppression endure over time (in spite of human's rough natural equality)?
- How do institutional structures of oppression form?
- Is oppression an inevitable feature of civil society?

And finally, if we are to have any hope for a better future for humanity,

- How can oppression be overcome?

The most difficult and interesting of these questions is the endurance question: how does oppression endure over time in spite of human's rough natural equality? An answer to this question, I believe, will lead to answers to the others. To answer this question, theorists have always had to show how the oppressed are made to participate in their own oppression rather than resist it. So, for instance, Rousseau claimed that vanity perverts persons' desires, so that they prefer material goods to freedom. Hegel claimed that it is capitulation in the face of death. Marx wrote about how the oppressed come under the sway of "false consciousness" and are motivated to participate in the economy out of fear of starvation. And Mill claimed that it is the force of social mores that indoctrinate us into our societies' traditions from childhood. I believe that none of these are adequate answers, though each contains a grain of truth.²

These questions all demand social scientific investigation to provide an explanatory framework that allows us to explain oppression and figure out how to overcome it. This is not a purely scientific enterprise, however. At minimum, what it means to overcome oppression is an exercise in the philosophy of freedom. Theories of oppression and freedom occupy a special place at the intersection of social sci-

2. In *Analyzing Oppression* (Cudd forthcoming), chap. 1, I take a detailed critical view of these historical theories of oppression.

ence and philosophy. They rely on social scientific theories of human nature, human capacity, and the limits of social engineering. They rely on empirical investigations of biology, psychology, anthropology, economics, politics, and evolution. They rely on the kind of conceptual work that Locke articulated in his famous underlaborer conception of philosophy. But they also rely on moral investigations and theories of human rights. Thus, the social scientist who eschews moral claims as simply out of her realm of expertise or even as inappropriate moralizing is not well equipped to investigate oppression. Likewise, the moral or political philosopher who thinks that conceptual clarification does not require deep empirical investigation of the social world is not well enough informed to make judgments about the possibilities of human social life. I will argue in the remainder of this article that philosophy of social science can aid in the project of finding an adequate account of oppression by specifying the criteria of adequacy that such a theory must meet.

Competing theories of explanation of oppression come from several social scientific orientations. Perhaps best known are the functionalist dialectical theories of Hegel and Marx and their intellectual descendants. Psychologists have offered a number of useful theories, the most comprehensive of which are psychoanalytic social theory, social learning theory, and most recently social dominance theory—a species of evolutionary psychology. In this article, I will argue that these theories fail to meet the criteria of adequacy I posit, that a structural rational choice theory can be constructed to account for oppression, and that it best meets the desiderata of such a theory.

2. CRITERIA OF ADEQUACY FOR EXPLANATION

In this section, I argue that there are four different types of criteria that apply to explanatory theories of normative concepts: ontological, theoretical, pragmatic, and moral. That there are moral criteria distinguishes this kind of explanatory enterprise from explanatory theories of purely descriptive concepts. However, moral criteria, and to some extent pragmatic ones, invite a variety of criticisms that the resulting theory will be too value laden to be persuasive. I respond to these criticisms, as well.

2.1. Ontological Issues

My concern in this article is with explanation, but this methodological concern inevitably raises ontological issues about levels of analysis and the ontological status of the entities that are posited by the theories. In my view, the appropriate ontology should be developed within the explanatory theory, that is, we should posit those entities needed for successful explanations. Still, some preliminary ontological principles can be discussed within those boundaries. I agree with the basic principle of ontological parsimony, that one's ontology should be as parsimonious as possible, consistent with the ability to answer the kinds of questions that the theory is devised to answer. The reason for this conservatism is that without it we risk making ad hoc explanations through the positing of extraneous causal forces and entities. Ontological parsimony refers to the types of entities and forces, and it counsels reduction when possible. This principle is also related to the principle of theoretical unification: that all other things equal, a unified theory with broad scope across a wide variety of phenomena is good. The ontological implication of this is that we ought to posit the same kinds of forces and entities for as broad a scope of phenomena as possible.

My definition of oppression might seem to imply a collectivistic ontology, because social groups are included in the definition as the subjects of oppression and the beneficiaries of oppression. It might seem that from the very beginning my account would violate the principle of parsimony if another definition can be devised that does not refer to social groups. However, I define social groups externally: social groups are composed of persons who share a set of social constraints on their actions. Social constraints help to explain individual actions by revealing the incentives that individuals have by virtue of their membership in nonvoluntary social groups.³ Because social groups are ontologically reducible to individuals and their mental states, social groups in my sense do not introduce any ontological extravagance.

A second ontological principle to which an explanatory theory should subscribe is causal fundamentalism. This is the claim that

3. Social constraints affect individuals' actions through the penalties and rewards that one can reasonably expect from them. Stereotypes, norms, rules, laws, and social conventions constitute the social constraints that individuals face, and they are in turn ultimately composed of the mental states of individuals. I defend this account of groups in Cudd (2001, 58-70).

the causal relations of macro-levels supervene on causal relations of micro-levels. Recent debates in philosophy of social science have focused on the question of whether causal fundamentalism has any implications for explanation, in particular, whether it implies some sort of methodological individualism. In my judgment, the debate confirms that it does not. Jon Elster argued for methodological individualism on ontological grounds.⁴ He begins by distinguishing among levels of explanation by the “fineness” of the grain of the causal structure proposed by a theory. A theory is said to be finer grained if the causal connections are closer in time (close grain) or among smaller objects packed closer in space (small grain). Jackson and Pettit summarize Elster’s argument for methodological individualism as follows.⁵ Premise 1: to explain is to provide information on the causal history of what is to be explained. Premise 2: we provide better information on causal history as we identify smaller grain and therefore greater detail in the relevant causal structure. Conclusion: as we identify smaller degrees of grain in relevant causal structure, we provide better explanations. Jackson and Pettit deny premise 2 by first showing that it is subject to a regress argument: if true, we should regard micro-physical level explanations as superior in all cases. But that means that there is no explanatory information that could be given by biologists or chemists, let alone economists or social theorists. Surely for questions such as “Why did the United States invade Iraq?” that is absurd. This objection needs to be expanded upon to show just what the absurdity is, and I shall do this when I come to explain pragmatic criteria, but it seems to me compelling. Second, Jackson and Pettit argue against methodological individualism directly by showing that social questions can require structural explanations, that is, explanations that refer to social facts. Their example is that to explain a rising crime rate by referring to rising unemployment rate is a better explanation (assuming that it is true) for some legitimate explanatory purposes than by looking at each criminal and explaining why he or she turned to crime. The essential information that the former gives us but the latter does not is the information that the conditions of unemployment give individuals a powerful motivation, which is overridden in some individuals but becomes activated in others, to turn to crime. Thus, even if a particular individual had not become a criminal, say because she was hit by a car just before the crime would have happened, enough others would be motivated to

4. See Elster (1983a).

5. See Jackson and Pettit (1992).

commit crimes to still constitute a rising crime rate. This macro-level explanation reveals the contrast between a high-unemployment and a low-unemployment society (all other things equal) to explain the higher crime rate.

Now it has been pointed out by Uskali Mäki that Jackson and Pettit's argument was made in terms of particular individuals.⁶ While it is true that the information about why a particular individual is not employed is not useful for making the essential contrast, the information about an abstract individual would be just as useful. Mäki concludes that we are therefore justified in requiring methodological individualism after all. But what is the information about an abstract individual that we require to make the right explanation? If it is the likelihood that the individual will be unemployed, then the reference to a macro-level fact comes in again. Is unemployment just a micro-level fact in shorthand? I think not. If it were, then the rise in individuals' likelihood to commit crime should be proportional to their likelihood of being unemployed throughout the range of probabilities. But I think it is rather a step function relation. If there is high unemployment, that is, high above a certain "step," then the general anxiety about unemployment will rise, and this will make for a greater motivation to commit crime. This does not make unemployment an emergent cause of crime; it is still composed of unemployed individuals, and it is a motivating factor that works through individual mental states. But there is a point at which unemployment becomes widespread enough in a society to play a direct causal role in individuals' mental states and not just a role through the likelihood of the individual's own employment status.

What then, is the upshot of causal fundamentalism for explanatory theories of social phenomena? I believe that it implies that any entities postulated must be seen to supervene on the causal connections of ever smaller and closer-in-time individuals. But that does not imply that only the micro-level entities can play a role in the best explanatory theories. Jackson and Pettit's arguments do not imply that we should seek out higher-level explanations at all times. There are many times when an explanation that reaches one level down in the causal structure is a better explanation in some of the senses that I will describe below. So individualism is to be valued where it is useful. I propose, then, the weaker regulative principle of causal level parsimony: causal connections posited by the theory should be as close in time as

6. See Mäki (2002).

possible and smallest grain possible consistent with meeting the other explanatory criteria.

2.2. Theoretical Explanatory Desiderata

The second type of criteria of adequacy for an explanatory theory are theoretical criteria, which I take to be well-traveled ground for philosophers of science.⁷ The first criterion is that of empirical responsiveness: scientific theory should be responsive to evidence, in the sense that it should be able to accommodate a wide range of evidence, but it should not insulate itself from all possible counterexamples. Now it is commonly held that there is no such thing as non-theory-laden data,⁸ and unexamined auxiliary assumptions may always be lurking that will either hide potential falsifying data or trick us into thinking that a good theory has been falsified.⁹ Given the complexity of the causal relations in and the multiple realizability of macrophenomena, falsification is even more difficult in the social sciences. However, if a theory simply defies falsification, making ad hoc adjustments at every turn to accommodate any possible evidence, then the theory is unacceptable. A theory that seems to explain all possible outcomes explains none. This criterion of adequacy cannot be considered an absolute rule, then, but only a guideline for theories, a desideratum.

The second basic theoretical desideratum is the idea that the theory should fit with nearby theories, that explanations of one level of phenomena should be consistent with, and mutually inform, levels of phenomena above and below it. I take this to be the principle of theoretical unification. For example, molecular geneticists attempt to make their theories consistent with both theories of population biology and organic chemistry. Aiming for unification serves both aesthetic and epistemic goals. When an inconsistency between levels is found, there is reason to believe that one of the theories is false. That gives us reason to look for a theory that can accommodate the phenomena in a seamless way with other theories.¹⁰ However, like the

7. A classic source is Hempel (1983).

8. For two quite different sources of the argument for this claim, see Sellars (1963) and Longino (1990, chap. 4).

9. This is just the well-known Duhem-Quine thesis. See Duhem (1954) and Quine (1961).

10. Dupré (1993), sec. II, raises a number of important objections to the idea of theoretical reductionism, by which he means something more encompassing than my prin-

empirical responsiveness criterion, theoretical unification can be considered only a defeasible desideratum. In many cases, nothing like theoretical unification is likely to be forthcoming. John Dupré argues, for example, that there is no reason to think that theories of ecology are likely to be theoretically unified with molecular genetics, let alone with quantum physics.¹¹ At best, we can insist that any positive inconsistency between two theories be considered a mark against both the theories until and unless they can be shown clearly superior to available alternatives.

2.3. Pragmatic Criteria

The third type of criteria of adequacy for explanatory theories are pragmatic criteria, which are the criteria that judge a theory by its usefulness. Under this category I include two different subcategories. First, there are what I will call theoretically pragmatic criteria. Explanations, as was emphasized by Bas van Fraassen, are fundamentally answers to why questions.¹² Why questions can only be parsed by paying attention to the contrast classes they presuppose. For example, the question “Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003?” might be parsed as at least four different questions depending on whether the relevant contrast class is the United States versus some other entity, Iraq versus some other country, invade versus some other action, or the year 2003 versus some other time. For some questions, determining the relevant contrast class will determine the appropriate explanatory theory to provide. For example, if it is asked, “Why did Ann go to St. Louis?” the relevant answer might require reference to philosophy conferences and the close relation between philosophers and social scientists—a high-level macro-social explanation. Or it might require an explanation of how cars work and what combinations of movements of pedals and levers and switches, and so on, caused the car Ann was driving to go to St. Louis rather than, say, Denver. The kinds of questions that I claim are important to ask

ciple of theoretical unification. The main difference is that theoretical reductionism is the claim that in principle there can be one unified theory of all phenomena. By contrast, I take my principle to be a desideratum for the aesthetic and epistemic reasons mentioned but not to be the claim that a single unified theory is possible or necessary for good science. Rather, my principle suggests that where it can be had it is a good thing, all other things equal.

11. *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

12. van Fraassen (1980, chap. 5).

about oppression will also have important implications for which theories will and which will not meet this theoretically pragmatic criterion, as I shall argue in the next section.

The second type of pragmatic criterion might be called axiologically pragmatic. It proposes that a good explanatory theory must offer techniques to manipulate the phenomena under investigation. This is a particularly important criterion for explanatory theories of normative concepts. A theory of oppression, I want to argue, must give us possible resolutions of oppressive institutions: either ways to alter or to eradicate them. This criterion differentiates theories of oppression from theories of many other social phenomena. For example, a theory of religion need not show us how to get rid of (or support) it; a theory of revolution need not show us how to avoid it; a theory of a particular social practice need not show us how to eradicate or support it. The topics that require social science explanation that must answer to this axiological criterion are the necessarily morally laden ones: justice, oppression, equality, welfare.

One might object that there will be disagreements about what counts as justice or oppression or equality, particularly the kind of equality that is normative. If there are disagreements about whether some state of affairs counts as normatively good or bad, then there will be disagreements about whether that state is to be brought about or eliminated. So, the objection concludes, the theory should simply tell us what it takes the concept to be and how the phenomena that fit under the concept come about, and leave the manipulation of the phenomena to social policy makers. That is, the theory should be insulated from and not required to offer policy recommendations. Welfare economists, for example, tend to take this approach.¹³ There are two responses to be made here. First, note that an explanatory theory of any concept should define the concept correctly to pick out the right cases. If it can be argued that the theory fails on this ground, then that is a serious objection to the theory. Yet it must also be remembered that a theory is useful in part because it allows us to see some phenomena as falling under a concept that might have been overlooked or categorized in another way. So in disputed cases it has to be decided whether the phenomenon falls under the concept. The dispute can be settled by asking whether including the new phenomenon allows one to make better explanations than those previously available, where better is judged in terms of the ontological and theoretical criteria

13. See Baumol (1965).

described above. Normative cases, it seems to me, are to be settled in a way similar to what is done when the boundaries of descriptive cases are challenged, and that is by appeal to a combination of the principle of theoretical unification and empirical evidence. But there is no way to say in advance which criterion should override: unification or the objections of those who point to the use of the term as their evidence that the concept does not apply in a particular case. The second response is that while there may be disagreement at this level of theory construction, once a theory has picked out a set of cases that it proposes as the right cases, it is making the claim that these states are necessarily bad (or good). Clearly, the theory that shows how the bad can be altered or the good encouraged is a better theory than one that merely tells us which is which.

To this point, I have said nothing about the relative importance of these criteria of adequacy. In the case of explanatory theory of descriptive phenomena, empirical adequacy is generally accepted as the most important criterion. Empirical theories should track the truth, and the best measure of whether the theory tracks the truth is whether it makes good predictions and generally fits the data. With normative concepts, however, I want to suggest that a good theory must track the good and the right to track the truth, and once the good and the right are properly tracked, there will inevitably be implications for action. What I mean by tracking the good and the right is that an explanatory theory of a normative concept should pick out the right cases to condemn (or support). This is as much an empirical as a normative task, because it must get the empirical facts right about states of affairs and their consequences for human life to determine whether states that can be described in a particular way are to be condemned or supported. But the normative task cannot be subsumed under the empirical because there are foundational normative premises to be supplied by the theorist. Once the right cases falling under the concept have been determined, there is a *prima facie* case for action. Since normative concepts carry this responsibility for action, a good explanatory theory of a normative concept should prescribe some action to perform. Normative concepts can compete with each other for priority, and so the responsibility to act in the way the theory describes may not override other, more compelling, normative concerns in some cases. Equality and liberty are good examples of such competing normative concerns. Still, the theory must tell us how to manipulate the states of affairs that fall under the concept to mitigate, alleviate, or

encourage them. This means that the axiological pragmatic criterion has the same sort of primacy as the theoretical pragmatic criterion—the theory is not worth pursuing if it does not meet these criteria.

An objection to the primacy of the axiological pragmatic criterion that will be offered is that the best explanatory theory on ontological and theoretical grounds might tell us that the states are natural or inevitable, and thus there could be no actions that could be pursued to end or encourage the states of affairs.¹⁴ I have three responses to this objection. First, the objection has to be put in a rather extreme form for it to tell against my proposal; that is, the theory must claim that there can be nothing done even to mitigate, alleviate, or encourage the state of affairs named by the normative concept. If it is possible to mitigate, alleviate, or encourage the state of affairs, then a theory that proposes mechanisms by which that can be done is superior to one that does not, for reasons I have previously given. Although this is a conceptual possibility for some imaginable concept, it does not seem plausibly to hold for concepts such as oppression, justice, or equality. So I will grant this exception for a conceivable case but not for the case of oppression. Second, if it were shown for this conceivable putative normative concept that the best explanatory theory of how the state of affairs comes about is inevitable, then I would argue that it has been shown that the concept is not normative after all. Hence, we would no longer apply criteria of adequacy for normative theories but, rather, for theories of descriptive natural or social phenomena. Finally, for a case in which there are competing theories, one that says the state of affairs is inevitable and the other that suggests that it is not and that such states can be mitigated, alleviated, or encouraged, I submit that there is pragmatic reason to pursue the latter theory even if the former ought not to be rejected on axiologically pragmatic grounds alone. Note also that the competing naturalist theory would have to say that there is no way to mitigate, alleviate, or encourage the state or it would also face my initial response to the objection. That is, if the theory states that there are some immutable natural causal factors that play a role in bringing about the state of affairs falling under the normative concept, but that those are not inevitable, and yet the theory

14. This objection has been raised to my views on different occasions, including by John Beatty, Allan Gibbard, and by several members of the audience at the 2004 Philosophy of Social Science Roundtable, as well as the guest editors of this issue. I thank all of them for helping me to see the difficulty of the objection, and John Beatty for helping to formulate one of my responses (even if I cannot claim he would endorse that response).

does not propose a mechanism by which they could be manipulated, then that failure is a serious objection to the theory as a theory of a normative concept.

We can sharpen the objection just a bit further, however. Suppose there are two theories, one, $T(d)$, which is an ontologically and theoretically good theory of a descriptive concept that has as its extension a set of states of affairs, call it S ; and another theory, $T(n)$, which is an ontologically, theoretically, and pragmatically good theory of a normative concept that includes under its extension a set of states of affairs, call it S' . Suppose that $T(d)$ explains S as inevitable causal outcomes of some natural or immutable features of humans. Suppose that there is considerable overlap between the extensions of S and S' . How are we to choose between S and S' ?

There is likely to be substantive disagreement on this question, but I am committed to the view that the normative theory is the better one to pursue. First, note that the defense is inevitably pragmatic, not epistemic. The example is predicated on the theories being roughly equal on theoretical grounds, and I argued earlier that these are not ever decisive. If we must defer to pragmatic grounds, then the normative theory offers some pragmatic success, while the descriptive one does not. Of course, one might argue that it is, pragmatically speaking, better to do nothing if there is nothing that can be done. But such a response begs the question of whether there is anything that can be done. If we pursue the normative theory instead, then attempts to manipulate the causal factors to alleviate, mitigate, or encourage the states of affairs that fall under the concept will provide us with further effective tests of the theory, which will then give us reason to continue pursuing that theory, pursue an alternative normative theory, or drop the normative project after all. Thus, the axiological pragmatic criterion has been shown not only to be lexically ordered above others when judging between competing theories of a normative concept but also when judging between two theories, one that offers a normative explanatory theory and one that offers a purely descriptive account of the same states of affairs, provided that they are roughly equally well supported on ontological and theoretical grounds.¹⁵

15. Kitcher (2001), esp. chap. 8, offers an argument for a related claim, that evidential standards should be raised for theories with grave moral consequences. His argument applies to what I am calling descriptive theories, whereas my argument here focuses on a situation where either a normative or a descriptive theory might apply.

2.4. Moral Criteria

The final type of criteria of adequacy of explanatory theories of normative concepts that I want to argue for is a moral criterion: theories of human social phenomena must treat human individuals as morally primary and the account of the normative concept has to be consistent with that assumption. In particular, they must not treat social groups as having a prior moral claim to the individuals that compose them. The justification of this tenet is that it is the human individual who ultimately lives, thinks, bears responsibility for action, feels pain, and dies. In short, only the individual can be a moral agent, and this capacity for moral agency makes individuals the primary moral subject. I take this criterion to be lexically prior to the others. This criterion will surely be controversial on at least two grounds. One might object to there being any moral criterion of adequacy for scientific theories at all. Second, one might grant that there could be moral criteria, but that this is not the right one. I take these in turn.

First, I claim that moral criteria are appropriate for explanatory theories of normative concepts. The basic reason for this is that just as the scientific requirements of the explanation of the empirical facts of the phenomena cannot be overlooked, so the moral requirements of the normative theory must be taken into account. One objection to moral considerations in scientific investigation is that they will infect observations with a particular normative perspective and may prevent the theorist from seeing a social practice as falling under the normative concept or trick the theorist into seeing a social practice as falling under a concept that does not belong. For example, it has been argued that Western feminist theorists misunderstand the nature of female genital cutting as oppressive, when in fact it is an expression of female solidarity in some cultures. The assumption that the individual has moral primacy has led feminists to take the girls' lack of free choice to refuse genital cutting as a sign of an oppressive practice. The Western feminists are mistaken, so the objection goes, since they fail to recognize the constitutive nature of the practice as providing an identity for the girls as members of their community and gender group.¹⁶ However, I grant that the practice provides identity and is a deeply embedded practice of the community, and I grant that the social theorist should observe this. The challenge posed by the moral criterion is rather to the value of that identity as opposed to the value

16. See Obiora and Johnson-Odim (1994, 10).

of the moral primacy of the individual. In my view, nothing can be of greater moral value than the human individual (except, of course, multiple human individuals) for the reasons I stated above. If it could be shown that the identity conditions created by female genital cutting are such that the moral primacy of the individual is upheld, then that practice could be seen as not oppressive by a good explanatory theory of oppression. The example shows that the question of whether the theory is right to treat this as an oppressive practice can only be answered by appeal to a moral criterion.

A more extreme version of this objection is that there can be no objective moral judgments, that all moral judgments are subjective or relative to a community. Some cultural anthropologists have claimed that moral relativism follows from the fact of cultural relativism, which is simply the fact that there are many different moral standards in different communities.¹⁷ Moral relativism, however, clearly does not logically follow from cultural relativism; it is perfectly consistent with cultural relativism to claim that all or most communities have the wrong moral standards. Furthermore, to infer from cultural relativism to moral relativism would license the inference of epistemic relativism, as well, and that would leave the theorist with no place to stand from which to make either epistemic or moral claims. This is an unacceptable position, in my view, for a scientist to have to take, since it is self-defeating.

The second objection is to the substance of the criterion. The moral primacy of the individual is the basic tenet of liberalism, and it would be beyond the scope of this article to provide a full defense of liberalism. I will offer just two additional considerations in favor of this criterion. First, human individuals possess special capacities, which Rawls called the two moral powers of personhood, that are morally special and justify our claims to equal dignity and respect. Human individuals are capable of forming a conception of their beliefs and interests, reflecting about those beliefs and interests, refining them in light of criticisms and higher order principles, and so on. Human individuals are capable of deep emotional bonds. Social groups do not possess these capacities, and the morally significant properties that they have are relative to the benefits they offer individuals. Sec-

17. See Salmon (1997, 49). Franz Boas and Margaret Mead have often been interpreted in this way; however, there is a considerable literature on the flaws in such inferences from their views to global moral and epistemic relativist conclusions. Moody-Adams (1997) assesses the bearing of moral/political on epistemic arguments and vice versa. I thank Alison Wylie for pointing me to this reference.

ond, although the requirement is substantial, it does not narrow down the list of acceptable theories unacceptably. Assuming the moral primacy of human individuals still allows many normative theories to compete besides liberalism (Marxism, for example, is not excluded), and there exist many competing varieties of liberalism that would imply different conceptions of oppression. What is excluded would include fascism, some forms of socialism, and a communitarianism that sets the interests of communities above the interests of their members.

Now we can summarize the criteria that I have argued for in this section that apply to explanatory theories of normative concepts:

1. Ontological criteria

Ontological parsimony: ontology should be as parsimonious as possible, consistent with the ability to answer the kinds of questions that the theory is devised to answer.

Causal fundamentalism: macro-level causes supervene on micro-level ones.

Causal-level parsimony: causal connections posited by the theory should be as close in time as possible and smallest grain possible consistent with meeting the other explanatory criteria.

2. Theoretical desiderata

Empirical responsiveness: scientific theory should fit data and should not insulate itself from all possible counterexamples.

Theoretical unification: explanations of one level of phenomena should be consistent with, and mutually inform, levels of phenomena above and below it.

3. Pragmatic criteria

Theoretical pragmatism: theory should provide relevant answers to the questions.

Axiological pragmatism: theory must offer techniques to manipulate the phenomena under investigation.

4. Moral criterion

Primacy of human individual: human individuals must be taken to be morally primary.

I argued for holding the moral criterion lexically ordered above the others, and that axiological pragmatism is of particular importance for theories of normative concepts. I take causal fundamentalism and theoretical pragmatism to be nonnegotiable requirements on all scientific theories, but that causal level parsimony may sometimes be loosened to meet the requirement of theoretical pragmatism. The other criteria are not lexically ordered, and the best theory may in-

volve making a trade-off among two or more of them. That is, a theory that meets the criteria of empirical responsiveness well may not be as theoretically unifying as another and yet still be a superior theory on other grounds.

3. WHICH THEORIES OF OPPRESSION ARE CONDEMNED BY THESE CRITERIA?

We now have a clearer picture of how to judge competing theories of oppression. In the remaining space, I will use the criteria I have developed to pare down the list of acceptable theories and to argue in favor of one kind of theory for explaining oppression, namely, structural rational choice theory.

Functionalist (but not all structural) explanations violate the ontological criterion of causal fundamentalism. A functionalist theory is a theory of social phenomena that claims that society is a system with some stable equilibrium state that returns the society to that state when forces act to move it away. The forces that move society away from and return it to that equilibrium state act on social groups but are invisible to or at least unintended by the individuals involved. Thus, the system is seen to have an internal logic that accounts for the explicandum, and the explicandum is both the cause and consequence. Jon Elster explains that functional explanations take the following logical form: An institution or a behavioral pattern *X* is explained by its function *Y* for a group *Z* if and only if (1) *Y* is an effect of *X*; (2) *Y* is beneficial for *Z*; (3) *Y* is unintended by the actors producing *X*; (4) *Y*—or at least the causal relation between *X* and *Y*—is unrecognized by the actors in *Z*; (5) *Y* maintains *X* by a causal feedback loop passing through *Z*.¹⁸ Elster criticizes most uses of functionalism in social science because the feedback mechanism referred to in condition (5) is typically just assumed and not shown. The main exception to this is the explanation of profit maximization among firms in the competitive market. In this case, the feedback mechanism is a social analogue of the feedback mechanism in evolution by natural selection: non-profit-maximizing firms are eliminated by the market as they either go bankrupt, get new management, or are taken over by more profitable firms. The feedback mechanism is the force that is

18. Elster (1983a, 55-68).

supposed to return the society to the equilibrium state. Thus, it is a critical element of the explanation.

An example of a functionalist theory of oppression is Hegel's (and more recent Hegelian) recognition theories.¹⁹ On this theory, oppression is the failure of a social group to be accorded the dignity and respect due to free persons. The struggle for recognition among social groups is played out on analogy with the master/slave dialectic, which has a common pattern. First a slave (dominated class) is exploited and treated disrespectfully, then there is a life-and-death struggle between the slave and the master (dominated and dominant class), and finally the struggle leaves the slave (dominated class) with the recognition of the master (dominant class) and the class structure is rearranged to form some new master and slave classes. Enduring oppression is thus functional for the progress of the development of society, which is progressive in the sense of increasing recognition of social groups. Now this theory violates the ontological principle of causal fundamentalism, in that it posits forces at the social level that are emergent from the individual level; that is, there is no posited causal connection between the social force of the struggle for recognition and the individuals that compose the society. The force of change is posited to arise from the mere fact of oppression.

Elster discusses the example of Foucault's explanation of social discipline by means of the penal system to illustrate another version of this problem with functionalism.²⁰ Foucault explains the maintenance of discipline in the society by reference to the penal system and its ability to divide the society into delinquents and normal persons, even after the prison sentence is served. However, there is no agent who is posited to have designed the system for this consequence; rather, the consequence is supposed to explain its own maintenance. Thus, there seems to be some lurking social force involved, yet of indeterminate origin and grain.

Can it be shown that all functionalist theories of oppression violate causal fundamentalism? I want to claim that they face a dilemma: either the functionalist theory can be shown to work through the production of a feedback mechanism, or it must postulate an emergent social force. For a functional explanation to explain the endurance of oppression, a feedback mechanism to maintain oppression must be one that either curtails resistance to it or replaces one oppressed

19. An example is Willett (1995). Another is Honneth (1995).

20. Elster (1983b, 104).

group by another, as would be required in the Hegelian case. Since social life does not typically contain the kind of selective feedback mechanism that evolution provides, it is hard to see what that mechanism would be. Although I cannot rule out all possible functional explanations, those that fall back on emergent social forces are ruled out by the ontological criterion of causal fundamentalism. When there is an identifiable feedback mechanism, it is this mechanism, rather than the function served by the explicandum, that should be pointed to as the explanation.

Psychoanalytic explanations violate theoretical desiderata: they are not responsive to empirical evidence and offer no fit with other social scientific theories. Psychoanalysis purports to explain behavior by invoking the psychic connections and mechanisms of the unconscious that are inevitably formed through the innately pre-programmed psychosexual development of the young child. All psychoanalytic schools thus attempt to explain the puzzling, apparently irrational, so-called pathological, features of our behavior by showing that repressed unconscious urges are being satisfied or unconscious fantasies are being played out through the behavior in question. Since oppression, if it is not rooted in clear hierarchies of ability, seems to involve social pathology on the part of both oppressed and oppressor, a natural application of psychoanalytic theory is to attempt to explain oppression.

Psychoanalysis has received so little positive empirical corroboration, however, that most philosophical defenders of the theory concede defeat here and now claim that it is a hermeneutic, not a scientific, enterprise.²¹ As Jane Flax, a defender of psychoanalysis, puts it, the goal of the therapist and patient “is not ‘truth’ in the empiricist sense of what ‘really’ happened to the patient, but rather understanding which includes a powerful affective and experiential component.”²² But even on these grounds the theory is in trouble. To take psychoanalysis seriously as a hermeneutic theory, we need to ask what criteria of adequacy it would offer as a defense of the claim that it is the best theory of behavior of its kind. I can see two such criteria being (implicitly) offered: First, the *resonance test*: does the story that is offered to the patient resonate with her experience, or does the theory offered to explain some cultural feature resonate with those who live in the culture (or its descendant culture)? Second, the *coherence test*:

21. A good example of this is Flax (1981).

22. *Ibid.*, 566.

does the theory cohere with the facts as it describes them; that is, can it weave together the facts in a plausible connected narrative? These tests are certainly necessary tests of the initial plausibility of a theory, but they are hardly sufficient to give us good reason to believe them. The resonance test applied by individuals to their own experience is quite subjective, as it asks one to introspect about intersubjectively nonverifiable aspects of one's personal experience. Hence, it is hardly a reliable scientific test, though possibly a starting point to test for initial plausibility. At the level of social theory, a psychoanalytic narrative seems to be open to intersubjective test, since there are so many persons in the culture who could pass judgment on it. But this turns out not to be the case if the theory is postulating some sort of general psyche of the culture, since in that case no one person is the subject, the culture is the subject. The coherence test is a more reliable test, however. Granting for the sake of argument that the narrative is coherent, that is, that it posits a narrative that plausibly ties the facts of psychological development together, the issue that one must address in assessing the theory is whether it is the best theory. Coherence is a thin thread by which to hang a theory; it does not restrict the range of competitors much. Are there other coherent narratives that plausibly explain the same facts? And if there are, do these theories have anything else going for them that the psychoanalytic theory does not offer? Are they empirically testable, coherent with well-tested or otherwise more acceptable theories of neighboring phenomena, more fruitful scientifically or for progressive politics? Do they rely on less dubious assumptions? Since I believe the answer here is a clear yes, I will move on.

Evolutionary psychology poses perhaps the most persuasive alternative theory of oppression. One recent version is the social dominance theory (SDT) of Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto.²³ I challenge this theory on theoretical, axiological pragmatic, and moral criteria. SDT claims that a person's social dominance orientation is the basic motivation to dominate others, and the social dominance orientation can be predicted from one's social group identity. Social dominance orientation is elevated in those groups that are dominant, because it helps them to legitimate their domination both within the group and to members of dominated groups. Social dominance orientation is also always elevated in men over women, and this is explained on evolutionary grounds: it is held to be adaptive for men to be dominant

23. Sidanius and Pratto (1999).

so that they can maximize sexual access to females, while females have no corresponding evolutionary incentive. Males will tend to display violence toward out-group males because it is evolutionarily adaptive to maximize sexual access of one's own group—a kind of sexual altruism. Thus, men will tend to form in-groups to monopolize sex with as many women as possible. Since violence toward women would be adaptive only as far as required to force her to submit sexually, the kind of social dominance that is displayed toward women by men is supposed to be less violent than that toward men not in the dominant group. Furthermore, since men have no incentive to treat out-group women differently from in-group women, the double jeopardy hypothesis of feminism—that minority women suffer a double dose of oppression—will be contradicted by SDT.

First, on theoretical grounds, it seems to me that the prediction that men will not be extremely violent toward women is falsified by the facts. Violence against women is severe and pervasive. The young women in the Thai brothels that Kevin Bales studied were severely beaten and then repeatedly raped.²⁴ This violence went far beyond what would be required simply to rape them; it had to be enough to terrorize them and put them in a state of permanent psychological submission to their sexual commodification. There are many more examples. Rape is a common weapon of war. Women in Muslim and Catholic countries are subject to “honor killings”; women in India are beaten and killed for failure of their families to pay adequate dowries; women all over the world are treated violently by their domestic employers to keep them under control. Amnesty International has recently proclaimed violence against women to be a plague on civilization around the world. Women are subject to different forms of violence than men are, not because they are potential sex partners but because they are more vulnerable, less likely to respond violently, and valuable commodities. The evolutionary explanation seems wanting on this score. Furthermore, the double-jeopardy hypothesis can be verified if it is viewed from the perspective of gender and race—in that order. Sidanius and Pratto argue that there is no double jeopardy because there is less dominance between dominant and subordinate females than between dominant and subordinate males. This comparison thus involves dividing first by gender and then by racial/ethnic grouping. But if the comparison is made in the opposite direction, first by race/ethnicity and then by gender,

24. Bales (1999).

the dominance reappears between males and females. One good example of this is the gender and racial wage gap in the United States: there is a greater gender wage gap than racial wage gap, although among subordinates the gender wage gap is smaller than among whites.²⁵ But this could easily be accounted for by the existence of a wage floor but no wage ceiling. Or take the example of Thai girls subject to being sold or kidnapped for work in the Bangkok brothels. Here it is the father-dominated families who are selling the girls or male pimps who are kidnapping and beating the girls. Both fathers and pimps come from subordinate groups in Thai society, yet it is clear that they are subject to less violence as a group than their women, whom they treat with extreme violence. So the SDT theory seems weak on evidential grounds.

I also challenge SDT on axiological pragmatic grounds. Since it explains oppression by reference to innately programmed tendencies to dominate, it is hard to see how that could be changed or eradicated. SDT proposes that oppression is a constant feature of human society. That may be the case, but it offers no prescription even for particular cases to end oppression. Even the appeal to justice or moral grounds for debate is seen on this theory as an attempt at a "legitimizing myth" which if successful would allow the dominated group to turn the tide against their oppressors, rather than as a truly progressive move beyond domination.²⁶

Finally, SDT violates the moral criterion because it does not assume any moral view. Dominance and social hierarchy are equated with oppression. As a result, SDT cannot distinguish between different kinds of social dominance, some of which might be morally legitimate. This failing is related to the one mentioned previously: if oppression does not carry normative force, then it need not propose any action to eradicate it. SDT cannot simply add a moral theory to it, however, that distinguishes dominance analytically from oppression, since the social dominance orientation that explains the maintenance of dominance is itself caused by dominance. That is, dominance in

25. The National Committee on Pay Equity reports the average earnings broken down by race and gender as follows: white men, \$38,869, 100%; white women, \$28,080, 72%; black men, \$30,409, 78%; black women, \$25,117, 64%; all men, \$37,339; all women, \$27,355; total gender wage gap 73% (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0197814.html>, accessed March 10, 2004). Since black men have a lower wage gap than white women, while black women have a higher wage gap than either white women or black men, it seems that there is clearly a double jeopardy for black women.

26. Sidanius and Pratto (1999, chap. 4).

the nonnormative sense is the fundamental explanatory feature of oppression. Thus, where SDT theory finds dominance, it posits oppression. Sidanius and Pratto are quick to note that their theory is not intended as an apology for oppressive behavior. But there is little doubt that it can and will be taken that way by those in power. Their theory appears to suggest that dominance of various sorts is inevitable, in particular, that there will be some arbitrary set dominance and that men will dominate women. In the minds of many, including policy makers, inevitability is not far from justifiability. As Philip Kitcher has argued, a theory with potentially grave moral, political, or social consequences needs even greater evidential warrant to justify it.²⁷ In the case of SDT, such evidence is not to be found. As Lynn Hankinson Nelson, who advances similar arguments, puts it, "There is no excuse for failing to meet standard norms such as explanatory power, for ignoring relevant and obvious counterexamples, and/or for misrepresenting the status of the hypotheses to which one appeals. . . . When the hypotheses generated carry significant implications for social policy and/or human self-understanding and aspirations, as do may of those advanced in evolutionary psychology, such research is appallingly irresponsible."²⁸

4. DEFENDING STRUCTURAL RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Finally, I want to argue that there is a theory of oppression that meets the criteria of adequacy for an explanatory theory of a normative concept. The structural theory of rational choice²⁹ assumes that the social environment systematically rewards and punishes behaviors by members of specific social groups and thereby induces a preference structure on (most) members. Thus, the structural theory of rational choice assesses the objective social rewards and penalties that are consequent on their (inter)actions and their social status and uses these assessments to impute preferences and beliefs to individuals based purely on their social group memberships. Stereotypical beliefs, which attach to members of groups regardless of individual

27. Kitcher (1985, 8-10).

28. Nelson (2003).

29. The structural theory of rational choice derives in the big picture, if not in the details, from the interpretation of rational choice theory offered by Satz and Ferejohn (1994).

characteristics, play an important role in the structural theory as imputed beliefs. For example, a norm of feminine passivity means that women are rewarded for behaving passively and penalized for behaving assertively, and thus these penalties and rewards are part of the outcomes of females' passive or assertive actions. Another example: the gender wage gap means that women can expect lower wages than men can expect, and hence the outcomes expected by women from market work are discounted as compared to those of similarly placed men by the degree of the wage gap. These expectations are constraints that motivate individuals' behavior in ways that tend to reinforce the expectations. Women tend to take more responsibility for unpaid domestic work, since the opportunity cost of paid work is lower than for men, but the result is a greater expectation that women will be less committed workers in the paid workforce.

The structural theory of rational choice assumes that agents behave rationally in the sense that they choose actions that maximize their (induced) expected utilities. In this theory, individuals are interpreted as abstract members of social groups, which are determined by the reward structures of laws, norms, traditions, and stereotypes that discriminate by group membership. Groups and the motivations they induce can be seen to supervene on individuals' mental states, thus meeting the ontological criteria. The structural theory of rational choice aims to examine how social structures motivate normal behavior and differentially reward individuals based on their social status. From such analyses, we can see how social structures might be changed to liberate persons from their ascribed, nonvoluntary, group membership, or how to make that group membership neutral with respect to their outcomes vis-à-vis other groups. In this way, the axiological pragmatic criterion can be addressed. Arguments for changing social structures depend also on moral and political premises that rational choice theory cannot provide. But rational choice theory can recommend the means to those ends.

The structural theory of rational choice suggests that *institutional stable strategies* are played out by social groups. This is a structural explanation, but not a functionalist one. Structural rational choice theory is a third interpretation of the mathematical model of game theory that is often referred to as rational choice theory by philosophers and social scientists. Under the individual psychological interpretation of rational choice theory, the mechanism that allows individuals to choose optimizing strategies is rational deliberation; in the evolutionary case, it is natural selection; and at the institutional level,

it is a combination of these mechanisms. In some cases, rational deliberation is the appropriate interpretation, such as collective action and conspiracy; in other cases, conventions can be seen to evolve by the fact that less successful strategies are selected out because enough individuals violate the conventions to cause them to change over time when the cost of violating is outweighed by the cost of maintaining.

Structural rational choice theory explains the maintenance of oppression as the maintenance of unjust social conventions and social practices by individuals who are motivated by those conventions and practices to act to maintain them. Yet these conventions and practices can change when enough individuals in the oppressed groups or the privileged groups are motivated by rewards external to the convention to violate them. We can supplement structural rational choice by a moral theory that allows us to pick out oppression in the full normative sense and that holds the individual to be morally primary. Thus, structural rational choice can both explain the endurance of oppression and give us a place to start to end it.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that certain crucial normative concepts, of which oppression is a paradigm case, require the political philosopher and the social scientist to engage in empirical investigation to construct an explanatory theory that is pragmatically and morally relevant. This implies that the theories of such concepts must be held to standards set by both the scientific/explanatory and the moral/political aims. I have offered four categories of criteria, including two, axiological pragmatic and moral criteria, that challenge the principle of value neutrality. Although many social scientists and philosophers of social science will want to defend that principle, work in normative political theory by Rawls, Habermas, Sen, Nussbaum, and many feminist theorists in the past 40 years makes clear the close intertwining of their aims and conclusions with work in economics, political science, anthropology, and psychology. While some social scientists may want to pursue work that is not relevant to such normative theorizing, there is clearly an important place for social science that is relevant to understanding normative concepts. The criteria of adequacy I have adduced are meant to apply to these theories.

These criteria of adequacy are then to be used to narrow the field of competitor theories in the explanation of the states that fall under

these normative concepts. In this way I argue that social scientific theory can most usefully inform normative political theory, and vice versa. The criteria of adequacy allow us to eliminate political theories of normative concepts that are based on social science that fails the tests posed by the criteria or comes up short in comparison with other social scientific explanations. I have illustrated this use of the criteria by showing how a number of popular explanatory theories of oppression can be eliminated from consideration, including recognition theories, psychoanalytic theories, and evolutionary psychology. Finally I argued that structural rational choice theory meets the necessary criteria of adequacy and, thus, deserves to be further tested empirically and compared with other theories that may meet the moral and axiological pragmatic criteria.

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