DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVITY

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Abstract

One crucial argument against the objectivity of the social sciences purports to show that the objectivity of the social sciences is compromised by the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena. The argument is that (1) if social science is objective, then the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena do not commit them to value judgments. But (2), since the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena do commit them to value judgments, then (3) social science is not objective. This argument is shown to be unsound. After distinguishing several senses of "commit" it is maintained that various arguments for the second premise fail. Furthermore, it is maintained that even if these arguments were successful value commitment could be avoided. Finally, it is shown that even if value commitment could not be avoided, the objectivity of the social sciences would not be compromised and consequently the first premise of the argument is false.
Description and Objectivity

One crucial attack against the objectivity of the social sciences is by means of an argument that purports to show that the objectivity of the social sciences is compromised by the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena. In this paper the attack will be critically considered. This argument can be stated as follows:

(1) If social science is objective, then the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena do not commit them to value judgments.

(2) But the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena do commit them to value judgments.

(3) Social science is not objective.

Now critics of the objectivity of the social sciences have held premise (1) because they have supposed that value judgments are not objective; that such judgments are not capable of rational defense. We will examine this assumption as we proceed. The evaluation of premises (1) and (2) will turn on the meaning of "commitment to value judgments." Consequently we will consider various interpretations of this expression.

First, however, an ambiguity should be noted in premise (1). The phrase "the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena" could refer to descriptions social scientists give any social phenomena or it could refer to the descriptions social scientists give some particular social phenomena, say social phenomena of type T. Once this ambiguity is made explicit we have two different arguments with different first premises:

(1a) If social science is objective, then the descriptions social scientists give of any social phenomena do not commit them to value judgments.

(1b) If social science is objective, then the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena of type T do not commit them to value judgments.
This ambiguity would affect the second premise of the argument and would yield:

(2a) But the descriptions social scientists give of any social phenomena do commit them to value judgments.

(2b) But the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena of type T do commit them to value judgments.

Clearly an argument containing premises (1a) and (2a) would be much more challenging than an argument containing premises (1b) and (2b). For even if (1b) were true, it would still be possible for (2b) to be defeated: social scientists could simply elect not to describe social phenomena of type T. Consequently (2b) would be false. There would be no commitment to value judgments since there would be no description of social phenomena of type T. However, such a result is achieved at a certain price. Phenomena of type T would be put beyond the pale of scientific investigation. Whether objectivity is worth this price is an open question.

An analogous move is hardly open to us in the case of (2a). Social scientists do not have the option of not describing any social phenomena unless they are willing to give up doing social science.

Commitment to Value Judgments

In order to evaluate the two arguments some spade work is necessary. What does it mean to be committed to a value judgment?

One thing it might mean is that a sentence used by a social scientist describing some phenomenon entails a value judgment. Suppose a social scientist S describes social phenomenon X as having property P. This could be stated as follows:

(A) X is P.

And suppose that (A) entails the value judgment:

(B) X is good.

Then one can say that S's description of X commits S to a value judgment. Let us call this "the abstract logical sense of value judgment commitment."
In general, descriptive statements of the form (A) do not entail value judgments of the form (B) unless it is implicitly or explicitly assumed that the descriptive terms used stand in some particular semantic relation with certain evaluative terms, e.g. "is good." For example, one might assume that "is P" and "is good" are identical in meaning, i.e. one might assume as a premise:

(C) "is P" means the same as "is good."

Or one might assume

(D) "All P's are good" is analytic.

If one assumes premises like these, (B) follows from (A); otherwise the move from (A) to (B) is logically illegitimate.

However, the abstract logical sense of value commitment is not the only sense in which social scientists might be said to be committed to value judgments. Let us say that a social scientist S has an actual cognitive commitment to a value judgment J because of a descriptive statement M where S's belief that M influences S (in combination with S's other beliefs and attitudes) to believe that J. It is important to see that a social scientist can be committed to a value judgment in the abstract logical sense without an actual cognitive commitment. Thus M may entail J and yet for various reasons S may believe that M and not believe that J. In such a case S would have an abstract logical commitment to J because of M, but not an actual cognitive commitment. The converse is also true. M may not entail J and yet S's belief that M may influence S to believe that J.

There is another type of value commitment a social scientist might have on the basis of descriptive statements. Let us say that a social scientist S has an actual affective commitment to a value judgment J when S's belief that M influences S (in conjunction with S's other beliefs and attitudes) to have a feeling of approval or disapproval toward what the value judgment J is about. As in the case of actual cognitive commitments a social scientist can have an abstract logical commitment to a value judgment J on the basis of his belief that M and yet have no actual affective commitment. The converse is also true.

Now some cases in which a social scientist has an actual cognitive or affective commitment to a value judgment because of a descriptive statement are cases of rational commitment and some cases are not. For example, suppose a social scientist S is committed in the abstract logical
sense to (B) because of (A). Suppose further that S believes that (D) as well as (A). Then S should have on rational grounds a feeling of approval towards X. If S does, then we can say that S has an actual cognitive and affective commitment to (B) which is rational; if S does not, we can say that S has no actual cognitive or affective commitment to (B) but S has both a rational cognitive commitment to (B) and a rational affective commitment to (B).

A social scientist S might not be committed to a value judgment in the rational commitment sense and still have an actual cognitive and affective commitment to the value judgment. Suppose that S's belief that (A) combined with S's other beliefs and attitudes influences S to believe that (B) and to have a strong feeling of approval towards X. However, let us suppose that in terms of (A) and S's beliefs about (C) or (D) there is not any reason for S to believe that (B). Then S is not committed in the abstract logical sense and yet has an actual commitment in the cognitive and affective sense.

For our purposes the abstract logical sense of commitment is the most important.

First, consider commitment in the actual cognitive and affective sense. Commitment in this sense is a purely psychological phenomenon. Whether social scientists are committed to value judgments in this sense is a result of their particular psychological make-up -- whether they are rational, whether they have certain beliefs about the semantic relations between descriptive and evaluative terms and so on. If we understand premises (1a) and (1b) to be about all social scientists, the truth of these premises becomes very dubious given this interpretation of commitment. Furthermore, even if (1a) and (1b) are true, commitment in this sense is subject to change. Given different social scientists, or the same social scientist trained or conditioned in certain ways the premise might be false. It is quite conceivable that with proper training no social scientist would be committed to value judgments in this sense.

But such an implication seems quite foreign to the spirit of the argument. Critics of the objectivity of the social sciences surely want to maintain that the lack of objectivity of the social sciences is not a function of the psychological make-up of social scientists; that objectivity is possible with different training. No, the problem according to the critic is much deeper. We can then ignore commitment to value judgments in the actual cognitive or actual affective sense of commitment in our discussion.
Next consider the rational sense of commitment in either the cognitive or the affective sense. This sense of commitment does not refer merely to psychological phenomena; it is concerned with what people should believe and what attitudes they should have. However, this sense of commitment is dependent on the abstract logical sense. For, as we have seen whether a social scientist S should believe that (B) given that S believes (A) is dependent in part on whether S is committed to (B) in the abstract logical sense, that is, whether (A) entails (B) given premises like (C) or (D). Thus, if we can show that there are serious problems with either (1a) or (1b), as interpreted in the abstract logical sense, we will have shown that there are serious problems with (1a) or (1b) when interpreted in the rational commitment sense.

However, whether social scientists are committed to value judgments in the abstract logical sense depends to a certain extent on what sort of value judgment one is talking about. For example, a social scientist who describes a legal system may be committed to certain judgments of legal obligation. But such a description would not necessarily commit him to any judgment of moral obligation. For, in general, judgments of legal duty entail nothing about moral duty. Moreover, a description of a particular act may commit a social scientist to a judgment of prima facie moral obligation without the social scientist being committed to a judgment of actual moral obligation. In order to derive statements of actual duty from statements of prima facie duty one must also assume that other things are equal. Furthermore, the description of an institution as having such and such a function may entail that it is a good institution for a certain purpose, i.e. that it has instrumental value in producing such and such results. But there is nothing in this description which entails that the institution is intrinsically good. Hence, a social scientist who uses such a description would not be committed to a judgment of intrinsic value. A social scientist may be committed to a hypothetical value judgment "If gratuitous suffering of animals is wrong, then vivisection is wrong" without being committed in the abstract logical sense to either the categorical judgment that vivisection is wrong or gratuitous suffering of animals is wrong.

The importance of the above point to our discussion of objectivity is this: What sort of value judgment one is talking about is crucial for the question of whether the judgments are capable of rational defense. For example, I will argue later that judgments of instrumental value are
capable of rational defense even though arguments of intrinsic value may not be; I will argue that judgments of legal obligation are capable of rational defense even though judgments of moral obligation may not be. I will maintain that certain hypothetical value judgments are capable of rational defense even though categorical judgments of moral obligation may not be. Thus, although a social scientist is committed in the abstract logical sense to a value judgment this does not by itself show that he is committed to a judgment that is rationally indefensible and consequently subjective. One must determine what sort of value judgment the social scientist is committed to.

One of the few philosophers of science to discuss the possibility that social scientists are committed to value judgment via their descriptions is Ernest Nagel. Nagel distinguishes between two types of value judgments. He argues that there are "two quite different senses of the term 'value judgment': the sense in which a value judgment expresses approval or disapproval either of some moral (or social) ideal, or of some action (or institution) because of a commitment to such an ideal: and the sense in which a value judgment expresses an estimate of the degree to which some commonly recognized (and more or less clearly defined) type of action, object, or institution is embodied in a given instance."\(^1\) The first type he calls an appraising value judgment; the second type a characterizing value judgment.

According to Nagel appraising judgments entail characterizing judgments but not conversely. Thus if one uses "X is P" as a characterizing value judgment one does not express one's approval or disapproval of X, that is, one does not use "X is P" as an appraising value judgment. However, if one uses "X is P" as an appraising value judgment, one also uses "X is P" as a characterizing value judgment.

Nagel's distinction is no doubt a useful one. However, it does not show, as he seems to think it does, that the use of descriptive statements (what he calls characterizing value judgments) by social scientists does not commit them to value judgments. For Nagel's major point seems to be that a social scientist can use a characterizing value judgment without thereby expressing any feeling of approval or

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\(^1\) Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961 p. 492.)
disapproval (without using an appraising value judgment). This, as we have seen, is certainly correct. A social scientist can use any descriptive statement without having — let alone expressing by the use of this statement — any feeling of approval or disapproval towards what he describes. However, once this is admitted it is still possible that a social scientist might be committed to value judgments by the use of his descriptive statements. As we have seen, a social scientist can use a descriptive statement (what Nagel calls a characterizing value judgment) and be committed to a value judgment in the abstract logical sense, in the rational cognitive sense and in the rational affective sense. This is perfectly compatible with the social scientist's not expressing approval or disapproval by the use of a statement; that is, with his not making what Nagel calls an appraising value judgment.

An Argument For Premise (2a)

So far we have considered a general argument that purports to show that social scientists are not objective because their descriptions of social phenomena commit them to value judgments. Under analysis this argument became two arguments depending on how one interpreted the premises. On the strongest interpretation of the argument, social scientists were committed to value judgments by their descriptions of any social phenomena. Thus, premise (2) of the argument becomes under this strong interpretation:

(2a) But the descriptions social scientists give of any social phenomena do commit them to value judgments.

An argument for (2a) can be derived from an example used by Max Black. Consider the premise:

(4) Vivisection causes gratuitous suffering.

This surely is a purely descriptive statement. Yet one can deduce from (4):

(5) If nothing that causes gratuitous suffering ought to be done, vivisection ought not to be done.

It should be stressed that (4) entails (5) (unlike the examples we considered above) without the addition of any hidden premises about the semantic relation between descriptive terms and evaluative terms; the entailment depends entirely on the form of the statement. Consequently any social scientist using a statement of the form "All actions A are actions B" is committed in the abstract logical sense of commitment to a statement of the form "If all actions B ought not to be done, then all actions A ought not to be done."

It is important to notice that by the same sort of argument one can deduce from (4):

(6) If anything causing gratuitous suffering ought to be done, vivisection ought to be done.

Consequently any social scientist using a descriptive statement of the form "All actions A are actions B" is also committed in the abstract logical sense to a statement of the form "If all actions B ought to be done, then all actions A ought to be done."

Indeed, a more general result is inferable. A social scientist who uses a sentence of the form "All A's are B" is committed in the abstract logical sense to a sentence of the form "If all B's are G, then all A's are G" where G is any evaluative term at all.

One might suppose that social scientists could avoid this abstract logical commitment by not using statements of the form "All A's are B" and restricting themselves to singular statements. However, this is not so. Consider a singular statement which says that some particular item a has property P. It can be shown that this statement entails "If all things which are P are G, then a is G" where G is any evaluative term at all. A similar result can be demonstrated for existential statements and statistical statements.

Thus Black's argument does establish premise (2a), for presumably any descriptive statement a social scientist makes will be either a singular statement, an existential statement, a general statement, or a statistical statement and all of these statements commit social scientists in the abstract logical sense to value judgments.

Black uses his example to show that, despite Hume's pronouncement to contrary, some ought-propositions can be derived from is-propositions. But he does not attach much importance to the particular example cited above, for he
appears to think that the derived value judgment is trivial. The significance of Black's example for the traditional philosophical question of whether ought-propositions can be derived from is-propositions will not be at issue here. We will show, however, that Black's example and the general result extracted from it have very little significance for the question of the value-free nature of the social sciences and the question of the objectivity of the social sciences.

First, although Black's argument shows that natural scientists as well as social scientists are committed in the abstract logical sense to certain hypothetical value judgments by any descriptive statement they make, the results generalized from Black's example are completely neutral with respect to what the descriptive statements are about. Consider the following descriptive statement from the natural sciences.

(7) Object a weighs three grams.

This statement entails:

(8) If everything that weighs three grams is intrinsically good, then object a is intrinsically good.

Thus, Black's example and the results generalized from it cannot be used to show any difference between the social sciences and the natural sciences with respect to freedom from value judgments.

Secondly, given Black's argument it is difficult to see how premise (la) of the argument could be upheld. This premise is stated as follows:

(1a) If social science is objective, then the descriptions social scientists give of any social phenomenon do not commit them to value judgments.

There seems to be no good reason why the objectivity of social science would necessarily mean not being committed in the abstract logical sense to the sort of hypothetical value judgments involved in Black's argument. In the natural sciences it would surely be implausible to suppose that propositions like (8) are not rationally defensible since they follow directly from propositions like (7) which surely are rationally defensible. There is no a priori reason to suppose that the situation would be any different in the social sciences than it is in the natural sciences.

What is needed in order to establish premises (1a) and (2a)
is some argument that would show that social scientists by their description of all social phenomena are committed to value judgments which are not rationally defensible whereas natural scientists by their descriptive statements are either not committed to value judgments or committed to value judgments which are rationally defensible. As we have seen, Black's argument does not show this and it is doubtful that any argument could. At least I know of no argument that attempts to do so. The usual procedure is to argue that descriptions of particular social phenomena commit social scientists to value judgments that cannot be rationally defensible. Certainly this sort of argument seems much more plausible.

Arguments for Premise (2b)

These considerations take us to premise (2b) which is stated as follows:

(2b) But the description a social scientist gives social phenomena of type T does commit him to value judgments.

It has been argued that the following sorts of descriptions commit social scientists to value judgments:

(a) Jones is authoritarian.

(b) Smith knows that Jones believes that he has been unjustly treated.

(c) Evans is president of the B-club.

(d) Jones uttered the words "I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars."

It is alleged that the commitment is due to the particular nature of the phenomenon involved. In what follows the arguments used to show that descriptions like (a) - (d) commit social scientists to value judgments will be critically considered. If any of these arguments are sound, they would seem to establish premise (2b). For any of the sorts of phenomena that (a) - (d) describe could be considered social phenomena of type T.

Strauss' Argument

The political scientist Leo Strauss seems to be arguing
for a premise like premise (2b) when he says: "We must not overlook the invisible value judgments which are concealed from undiscerning eyes but nevertheless most powerfully present in allegedly purely descriptive concepts. For example when social scientists distinguish between democratic and authoritarian habits or types of human being, what they call 'authoritarian' is in all cases known to be a caricature of everything they, as good democrats of a certain kind, disapprove."³

Strauss' argument seems to be as follows:

(11) If a social scientist describes a person or trait as authoritarian, then the social scientist disapproves of the person or trait.

(12) If the social scientist disapproves of a person or a trait of a person, then his description of that trait or person as authoritarian commits him to the value judgment that the trait or person is bad.

(13) If a social scientist describes a trait or a person as authoritarian, then he is committed to the value judgment that the trait or person is bad.

There is some serious question about the soundness of this argument. First, the truth of premise (11) is surely dubious. It is certainly not obvious that all social scientists who describe a trait or person as authoritarian disapprove of the trait or person. Certainly if one includes social scientists from countries (something that Strauss does not seem to consider) in which democracy is not the established form of government, indeed where democracy is frowned upon, it is unlikely that they would disapprove of authoritarian phenomena when they use the term "authoritarian."

Secondly even if all social scientists did disapprove of authoritarian traits or persons it would not follow that when they said "X was authoritarian" they were thereby committed to the value judgment, "X is morally bad or un-

desirable" in several important senses of "committed."

Consider the abstract logical sense of commitment. It is dubious that:

(A') X is authoritarian

as it is used in scientific contexts entails the judgment of moral value:

(B') is morally bad.

There is nothing obviously contradictory in saying "X is authoritarian and X is not morally bad." There does not seem to be any clear semantic link between an ethical term like "morally bad" and a descriptive term like "authoritarian."

To see this in greater detail let us take what social scientists mean by authoritarian and one common definition of morally bad. Social scientists distinguish between "authoritarian submission" and "authoritarian aggression." A person is authoritarian submissive when he has a submissive uncritical attitude towards the idealized moral authorities of the in-groups: a person is authoritarian aggressive when he has a "tendency to be on the look out for, and to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values." A common account of morally bad is a mixed deontological account. On this account to be morally bad would mean roughly "having the tendency to be either unjust or not benevolent." It is not obvious that one can infer from the mere fact that something is authoritarian submissive or authoritarian aggressive that it is morally bad in this sense. Such an inference could only be made with the added - presumably moral premise - that an authoritarian tendency as so defined is unjust or not benevolent. One might argue, for example:

(C') A tendency to be on the look out for, to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values is not benevolent.


Such a premise or one similar to it seems to be absolutely essential for the inference to succeed. However, this is just to say that (A') does not by itself entail (B') unless it is combined with a moral premise. Furthermore, premise (C') does not seem to be analytic. There does not seem to be any contradiction in saying that the tendency to be on the look out for, to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values is benevolent.

Consider now the rational cognitive sense of commitment. There is nothing in the nature of the case that would suggest that a social scientist who believed that X is authoritarian would fail to be rational if he did not believe that X is morally bad: For example, he might believe that there is no semantic link between "is authoritarian" and "is morally bad."

The same thing is true about the rational affective sense of commitment. A social scientist who believed that X is authoritarian would not necessarily be irrational if he did not disapprove of X. For example, he might not believe that there is any semantic link between "is authoritarian" and "is morally bad." Consequently, he would not believe that X is morally bad and thus not disapprove of X. Moreover, even if a social scientist did have a feeling of disapproval toward X, there might be nothing in his belief that X is authoritarian that made his feeling of disapproval a rational outcome of his particular belief. Consequently, it is not inconsistent for a social scientist who disapproves of an authoritarian trait or person to say "X is authoritarian: however, nothing I have said so far indicates whether I should believe that X is morally bad or whether I should feel disapproval toward X."

To be sure, if someone disapproves of X because X is authoritarian, then by definition he is actually cognitively or affectively committed to the value judgment "X is bad." But, as we have seen, this may be a function of his peculiar psychological make up and there may be no rational reason at all for him to be committed to this value judgment.

Strauss' Argument thus fails as an attempt to establish (2b) in any significant sense.

Krimerman's Argument

A different argument for premise (2b) has been given by Krimerman when he says: "To know whether Jones believes he
has been treated cruelly or kindly requires that I know what cruelty is - have some standard or paradigm to go by. But then to know whether Jones believes he has been treated unjustly requires that I know what just treatment is, i.e. have some standard or paradigm to go by. But employing such standards is clearly an instance of making or being committed to certain value judgments." Krimerman's argument at first blush does not seem to be directly related to our concern, namely whether a social scientist's use of a descriptive statement commits him in the abstract logical sense to a value judgment, for Krimerman's argument is that X's knowledge of Y's psychological state, i.e. what Y believes, presumes X's knowledge of a value judgment. However, Krimerman's argument can be construed as an argument that a social scientist's descriptive statement commits him in the abstract logical sense to a value judgment. Thus, Krimerman can be interpreted as saying that

(14) Smith knows that Jones believes that Jones has been treated unjustly.

entails

(15) Smith knows what justice is.

However, (15) combined with a purely psychological description of what Smith believes justice is would entail some statement of the form

(16) Justice is.....

Consequently (14), presumably a descriptive statement combined with another descriptive statement, entails a value judgment. Hence a social scientist who uses these descriptive statements is committed in the abstract logical sense to a value judgment. But if so, then (2b) seems to be established.

The trouble with Krimerman's argument construed in this way is the move from (14) to (15). I see no reason why Smith cannot know that Jones believes that Jones has been treated unjustly without knowing what just treatment really is, i.e. without Smith accepting any standards or paradigms.

of justice. Krimerman's argument has the absurd implication that a moral skeptic or a Socrates who is ignorant of what justice is could not know that other people thought they were unjustly treated.

Now there is another way of understanding the first premise of Krimerman's argument which does not make it seem so implausible. One might substitute the following for (14).

(14a) Smith knows that Jones believes Jones has been treated unjustly in terms of Jones' concepts of injustice.

Then one might argue that (14a) entails:

(15a) Smith knows that Jones means "......." by the term "unjust treatment."

One might argue for this inference by saying that in order to know that a statement is true one must know what the terms in the statement mean. Whether (15a) is entailed by (14a) is not obvious. It does not seem to be contradictory to say that "Smith knows that Jones believes that Jones has been treated unjustly in terms of Jones' concept of unjust treatment but Smith does not know what Jones means by "treated unjustly." In any case, interpreted in this way premise (15a) does not entail any value judgment. It merely entails

(16a) Jones means "......" by "treated unjustly."

But (16a) is not a value judgment on any plausible account.

Mackenzie's Argument

A different argument is given by Mackenzie. He argues that when one describes someone as president of B Club -- a club for collecting butterflies -- this entails that the person described has certain rights and obligations and this in turn commits the person who is describing to certain value judgments: "For to say that Jones is the president is to imply that Jones has certain rights and obligations since this is partly how the office of president is defined. And to say by implication, that one has rights and obligations is assuredly to make a statement that has value content."^7

Mackenzie's argument more formally stated is this:

(17) If a social scientist says "Jones is president of Club B," then the social scientist is committed to the sentence "Jones has certain rights and obligations."

(18) If the social scientist is committed to the sentence "Jones has certain rights and obligations," the social scientist is committed to a certain value judgment.

(19) If a social scientist says "Jones is president of Club B," then the social scientist is committed to a certain value judgment.

The important question in this argument is what sort of value judgment is being referred to in the premises. What one strongly suspects is that the value judgment is of a quasi legal obligation. However, as we have seen, nothing follows from this as to whether Jones has certain moral rights and obligations. Thus a social scientist who describes Jones as president is not committed thereby in an abstract logical sense to any statement of the form: "Jones has an actual moral obligation to ....."

Now one might argue that being described as president of a club does at least entail certain prima facie judgments of moral obligation. One might argue in particular that

(20) Jones is president of Club B

entails

(21) Jones has a prima facie moral obligation to carry out the (quasi legal) duties and fulfill the (quasi legal) obligation created by the position of president.

That this is not so can easily be seen if one imagines that Club B is a club - not for collecting butterflies - but for torturing old ladies. Surely in this case no prima facie obligation is created to carry out the duties of the office. Such prima facie obligation is inferable only with the addition of some other moral premise, e.g.

(22) The purposes of the Club are not morally forbidden.

Thus (20) does not by itself entail any judgments of moral obligation - actual or prima facie - unless combined with other moral premises. Hence, the use of (20) does not commit social scientists in the abstract logical sense to
any judgments of moral obligation. To be sure, use of (20) may commit the social scientist to value judgments of quasi-legal obligation. But as we shall see later there is no problem in rationally defending these judgments.

Searle's Argument

Another argument that can be used to show that the descriptions given by social scientists of social phenomena commit them to value judgments is that of John Searle. Searle argues that the statement:

(23) Jones uttered the words "I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars."

combined with only factual and analytic statements entails:

(27) Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars.

Searle first argues that (23) entails

(24) Jones promised to pay Smith five dollars

when combined with certain alleged purely factual statements about conditions prevailing at the time Jones made his utterance. For example, one must assume that Jones understands what he is saying, that he is not under the influence of drugs, and so on. Let us call these factual premises (23a). Thus, Searle claims that (23) and (23a) entail (24).

(24), according to Searle, in turn entails:

(25) Jones placed himself under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.

since, according to Searle, the following statement is analytic:

(24a) All promises are acts of placing oneself under an obligation to do the thing promised.

and (24) and (24a) entail (25). (25) in turn entails

(26) Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.

given the alleged factual premise

(25a) Other things are equal.

and the analytic premise

(25b) All those who place themselves under an obligation, other things being equal, are under an obligation.

Now (26), combined with the alleged factual premise

(26a) Other things are equal,

and the analytic premise

(26b) All those who are under an obligation, other things being equal, ought to perform their obligation,

entails (27). Consequently, Searle argues that (23) entails (27) when combined with only factual assumptions and analytic premises.

Doubts can be cast on this argument: The Thompsons have argued that Searle does not establish that (26a) when given a strong enough interpretation to entail (27) in combination with (26) and (26b) is a purely factual statement.9 The Thompsons claim that Searle interprets (26a) in the following way: Other things are equal when one knows no reason why Jones need not pay. They argue that on this interpretation (26a) does not entail (27) when combined with (26b) and (26a). This is because (26), (26a) and (26b) might be true and (27) false if there was some unknown stronger obligation that Jones had which conflicted with Jones' obligation to pay.

According to the Thompsons, what is needed to carry off the deduction of (27) is a stronger interpretation of (26a), namely: If other things are equal, then there is no conclusive reason to think that it is false that Jones ought to pay. But on such an interpretation of (26a), (26a) is not a purely factual statement; for there is no conclusive reason to think that it is false that Jones ought not pay just in case Jones has no stronger obligation that conflicts with his obligation to pay. However, to say Jones has no

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stronger obligation is to make a value judgment. Thus (26a) must not be interpreted in a purely descriptive way in order to deduce (27).

The Thompsons' argument is correct. But it does not show that some value judgments cannot be derived from (23). For example, their argument does not show that the prima facie obligation stated in (26) cannot be derived from (23). However, one can show by a different argument that (27) cannot be deduced from (23) combined only with factual statements and analytic statements. To see this, consider another case of promising. Suppose:

(23') Goebbels uttered the words "I hereby promise you, Hitler, that I will murder five million Jews."

By an argument similar to Searle's one could presumably deduce:

(26') Goebbels is under an obligation to kill five million Jews.

But such a result is surely absurd. Neither Goebbels nor any one else could have a prima facie obligation to commit an outrageous immoral act. This suggests that Searle's deduction of (26) goes through only with the tacit assumption that paying Jones five dollars is not an outrageously immoral act. However, once made explicit, this premise is surely not analytic: whether paying Jones five dollars is morally outrageous will depend in part on the consequences of so doing and these consequences are not known a priori.

Hence, Searle's argument fails to show that statements of prima facie duty can be deduced from purely descriptive statements.

The Avoidance of Value Commitments

Suppose we grant all of the above arguments. Perhaps value commitment could still be avoided.

As we suggested earlier there is no a priori reason why social scientists need to describe certain particular phenomena, e.g. the phenomenon of promise-making. Of course,

10 This argument was developed at greater length in my paper "The Deduction of Statements of Prima Facie Obligations from Descriptive Statements," Philosophical Studies 25, 1974, pp. 149-52.
if social scientists avoid such phenomena they do it at a price. They can no longer describe certain phenomena and this seems to conflict with an important maxim of scientific practice.

M₁ All phenomena should be open to scientific investigation.

Nevertheless, maxim M₁ seems to be in conflict with another reasonable maxim.

M₂ Avoid procedures which result in lack of scientific objectivity.

M₁ seems to urge that, e.g. promise-making behavior not be avoided in social science investigation. M₂ urges that it should be. If one does not avoid certain investigations one forsakes objectivity, if one does avoid these investigations one seems to forsake the spirit of free inquiry. Neither course of action seems desirable. The question seems to come down to which alternative is the least undesirable. But this question, it should be noted, is a value question. Whether it admits of any rational answer will depend on whether value judgments can be rationally defended.

However, so far we have taken it for granted that the only way to avoid value commitment in the abstract logical sense was to avoid description of certain kinds of phenomena, e.g. the phenomena of promise-making. Indeed, the above discussion of the price involved in avoiding this commitment presumed this. However, this presupposition seems to be mistaken. For one is not committed in the abstract logical sense for example simply because one describes a particular kind of phenomena. Rather one is committed because one describes it in a certain way, using one mode of description rather than another, words in one sense rather than in another and so on.

Consider, for example, the phenomenon of promise-making. Searle himself points out that an anthropologist "observing the behavior and attitudes of the Anglo-Saxons" might use language in the inverted comma sense, in what he calls oratio obliqua. Instead of saying "Jones promised to pay Smith five dollars." he might say, "Jones did what they call promising Smith five dollars" and instead of concluding with "Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars" he could say "According to them, Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars."

Searle argues that this point fails to damage his argument (that one can derive ought from is) because "what it
says is only that the steps in his argument can be reconstructed as oratio obliqua..." Searle is correct. But this point although irrelevant to Searle's argument is not irrelevant to the present thesis that commitment to value judgments can be avoided by alternative description. Indeed, Searle's example of alternative description shows how one can describe the phenomenon of promise-making (or rather what is called promise-making) and avoid value commitment.

Some of the examples considered above could be handled in a similar way. The description that Smith is President of Club B could be reformulated in oratio obliqua: "Smith is what is called president of Club B." One could conclude that according to their concept of president Jones has certain rights and obligations or what they call certain rights and duties.

To be sure, the use of the oratio obliqua way of describing may have certain disadvantages. But if the alternative is to use language that commits one to certain value judgments and thus to lack of objectivity the disadvantage may be worth the price. In any case, using this mode of description certainly seems preferable to not describing the phenomena at all in order to avoid lack of objectivity.

The use of oratio obliqua is not applicable to all cases where value commitment threatens. Consider the description "Jones is authoritarian." One does not want to say that Jones or his peer group calls Jones authoritarian. On the contrary, Jones and his peer group do not call Jones authoritarian; it is social scientists who have used this terminology. And it would surely be perverse for a social scientist to say "Jones is what social scientists call authoritarian."

Nevertheless, other alternative ways are open to social scientists to avoid value commitment. Instead of using the oratio obliqua way of describing social phenomena, social scientists can use the standard way of describing social phenomena but change the meaning of the terms they use. For example, we argued above that the use of oratio obliqua could not be plausibly used with the description "Jones is authoritarian." However, social scientists could change the meaning of authoritarian so that "Jones is authoritarian" does not entail "Jones is morally bad."

Now, it may be objected that although this move is

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possible it is made at a great price. For if social scientists change the meaning of the term "authoritarian" in order to avoid value commitment this means that they cannot talk about what they want to talk about; they must necessarily be referring to different phenomena from those which they usually refer to when they use the term "authoritarian." However, this objection is mistaken. A change in the meaning of a term does not necessarily entail a change in the referent of the term. It is possible to change the meaning of "authoritarian" yet keep the same referent the term had before the change.

For example, suppose "authoritarian aggressive" is redefined as having a score in the 80th percentile or above on test T. Suppose that the referent of authoritarian aggressive so defined is co-extensive with the referent of authoritarian aggression given earlier, i.e. the tendency to be on the lookout for, to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values. Presumably under the new definition "Jones is authoritarian" would not entail "Jones is morally bad" and yet by hypothesis it would have the same referent as the original statement. It is an empirical question whether such a test T could be constructed. But if it could, and there seems to be no a priori reason to suppose it could not, the objectionable value commitment of "Jones is authoritarian" is avoided.

In any case, the above considerations suggest that (2b) as it stands is false and needs to be changed. (2b) should be replaced by:

(2b') But the descriptions social scientists give of social phenomena of type T commit them to value judgments if they describe this sort of phenomena in a certain way.

One can escape from value commitment not only by avoiding the description of certain social phenomena but by avoiding certain ways of describing them, avoiding certain meanings of terms, and so on. This suggests that the price that one pays for value freedom and hence objectivity may be much less than we originally supposed. For objectivity is not necessarily bought at the price of forsaking M. One can investigate all social phenomena without fear of value commitment in any important sense of commitment if one uses only certain modes of expression and terms understood in certain ways. Thus principle M and principle M2 are compatible. One can avoid procedures that lead to lack of objectivity and still be able to investigate all scientific phenomena so long as one describes them in certain ways.
The Rational Defensibility of Value Judgments

So far we have considered ways in which a social scientist might avoid commitment to value judgments. As a result we have seen how premise (2b') can be defeated by different descriptions. The time has come to challenge premise (1b). As suggested earlier this premise rests on the supposition that value judgments are not capable of rational defense. We need not argue here that value judgments are always rationally defensible. Our argument will pose a dilemma for the advocates of the argument considered in this paper. Social scientists either are or are not committed in the abstract logical sense to certain value judgments because of their descriptions: If they are committed, the value judgments are rationally defensible; if they are not committed, then even if the value judgments cannot be rationally defended, the objectivity of the social sciences is not affected. In other words, I will argue that the critics cannot have it both ways. They cannot maintain that social scientists are committed to value judgments via their descriptions and also maintain that these value judgments are not rationally defensible.

Certain types of value judgments can be easily shown to be rationally defensible. For example, consider judgments of legal obligation and quasi-legal obligation. Someone might argue that the descriptive sentence:

(29) Jones signed a contract to do the job.

commit the social scientist who uses the description to the judgment of legal obligation,

(30) Jones has a legal obligation to do the job.

However, as long as (29) is rationally defensible, (30) is also since (30) follows directly from (29). Moreover, there is every reason to think that (29) is a rationally defensible statement. Whether it is defensible to claim that Jones signed a contract will depend on various legal factors, e.g. the number of witnesses, whether Jones has not been drugged, the age of Jones and so on. But all of these factors are capable of rational determination and indeed are arguable in courts of law.

The same sort of thing is true in quasi-legal contexts. Recall that Mackenzie argued that

(20) Jones is president of Club B.
entails

(21) Jones has certain duties and obligations.

because being president is partly defined in terms of having certain rights and obligations. If Mackenzie is right, one can establish whether Jones has certain obligations merely by determining whether Jones is president. There may be nothing difficult about this. How someone becomes president of a club is often specified in the by-laws of the club. Suppose that Club B's by-laws state that someone is president of Club B if he is elected by a majority of the members of the Club who are present at the Summer meeting of the Club. Then we could well claim that Jones has certain obligations connected with being president of Club B if we had good grounds to suppose that Jones was elected in the manner specified in the by-laws.

Judgments of instrumental value seem to pose no particular problem either. For these kinds of value judgments are really empirical statements: they say that something X is good for a certain end Y. This can be translated to mean (and hence is directly derivable from) X is helpful in doing Y or X brings about Y. But whether something is helpful in bringing something else about or whether something brings about something else seems to be a straight-forward factual question which can be answered by appeal to evidence, argument and the like. For example, the claim that a particular psycho-therapy is good presumably means good with respect to getting cures, given some definition of cure. The person who makes such a claim need not suppose that cures are good or desirable or even that cures when defined in this way are good or desirable. But this claim is just to say that this psycho-therapy is helpful in bringing about cures. Whether it is or not is a difficult but rationally determinable question.

It has been argued in recent years that functional statements in the social sciences commit social scientists to certain value judgments, in particular, that functional statements commit social scientists to the desirability of the status quo, the present make-up of society. The analysis of function statements is a difficult topic. Fortunately,

it will not be necessary to discuss this here. For functional statements, whatever they mean, at most only entail judgments of instrumental value.

To say that the function of magic is to preserve tribal harmony may entail

(31) Magic is good for preserving tribal harmony.

Furthermore, it might be argued that when correctly understood, (31) may entail

(32) Preserving tribal harmony is good for maintaining the status quo.

But neither of these judgments presumes that preserving tribal harmony is intrinsically good or that the status quo is intrinsically good. They only say that magic and preserving tribal harmony are useful for bringing about certain ends. Whether these ends are good intrinsically or even instrumentally good for other ends is not presumed.

However, the traditional concern about the rational defensibility of value judgments has not focussed on judgments of legal obligation or judgments of instrumental value. The crucial question has always been the rational defensibility of judgments of moral value, judgments of intrinsic non-moral value and judgments of moral obligation – especially the latter two types of judgments.

Traditionally, the dominant objective position in ethics has been naturalism, the view that value judgments, e.g. judgments of moral obligation and judgments of intrinsic value are derivable -- usually via definitions -- from factual descriptive statements. Critics of naturalism have admitted that if these sorts of value judgments could be derived from factual descriptive statements, they would be rationally defensible and objective. But critics of naturalism have argued that such statements could not be so derived.

One of the major ironies of the present discussion is that the critique of objectivity in the social sciences under consideration seems to be committed to a form of naturalism in ethics. The claim is that social scientists are committed to value judgments via their descriptive

13 Frankena, Ethics, Chapter 6.
statements; it is concluded from this that social science is not objective. Naturalists in ethics, on the other hand, concluded that because value judgments can be derived from factual ones, ethics is objective.

When viewed in this way there seems to be something very strange about the basic argument against objectivity in the social sciences that we have just been considering. How can the traditional and seemingly plausible view of naturalism have become so inverted as to show that social science is not objective?

One explanation is this: Two different and incompatible views of value judgments are being conflated. One traditional view -- a view coming down from at least Max Weber -- is that value judgments are subjective and arbitrary and are not derivable from factual statements. This is surely the view presumed in premise (lb). The other view coming down from Mill, Dewey and other naturalists in ethics is that value judgments are rationally defensible since they are a type of empirical descriptive statement. This latter seems to be the view assumed in premise (2b') -- if one interprets "commit" in the abstract logical sense. However these two views are incompatible. One cannot suppose them both to be true.

One might still attempt to defend premise (lb) in the following way. Although judgments of moral obligation and intrinsic value are derivable from descriptive statements such judgments are not defensible because the descriptive statements from which they are derived are not rationally defensible.

The trouble with this move is that it must be shown that the descriptive statement from which the value judgments supposedly are derived are not rationally defensible. But this is difficult to show. Consider, for example, some of the descriptive statements we have considered so far.

There does not seem any particular problem in establishing whether a person is authoritarian either in the submissive or aggressive sense used by social scientists. It seems to be a question of observing the person's behavior under certain conditions, asking the person certain questions and so on. To be sure, although in any particular case one's judgments about whether someone is authoritarian may be wrong, the judgment is defended or refuted by empirical evidence.
The same thing seems to be true in the case in which someone utters the words "I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars." Again, establishing this statement seems to be a matter of empirical evidence -- not whim or caprice. This is so also for the other descriptive statements which are alleged by Searle to be needed to derive a judgment of prima facie moral obligation or a judgment of actual obligation. For example, (26a), one of the "other things are equal" premises, as interpreted by Searle is a descriptive statement. Although (26a) is open ended and the things included under this premise are not completely specifiable the sort of things Searle has in mind are straight-forwardly empirical. For example, other things are not equal if Smith says "I hereby release you from your promise, Jones" provided Smith is not drugged, knows what he is saying and so on.

As we have seen, there is serious doubt about whether Searle can derive either a judgment of actual obligation or a judgment of prima facie obligation from the description he considers. However, the question now is: if he can, is there any particular problem involved in establishing these descriptive premises such that one might be inclined to say that they were not rationally defensible? The answer to this question seems to be "no."

Conclusion

We may conclude (a) that the usual arguments given to show that social scientists are committed to value judgments via their descriptions are unsuccessful; (b) that even if these arguments were successful, value commitment could be avoided; (c) that even if value commitment could not be avoided the objectivity of the social sciences would not be compromised thereby. Thus, premise (2b) can be defeated and premise (1b) is false.

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